

# The Garments of Weaver Nigh

THERESE SCHROEDER-SHEKER

**B**Y FOOT, BY CURRAGH, AND BY horse-drawn wooden cart, Roams-the-World had been to many lands. She met, lived with and had broken bread with the peoples of a dozen different tongues. After she came to the isle, Our Lord decided to christen her longing with a new name, hidden from view. She lay the celebrated one down and inhabited something unfamiliar, though it remained unknown to us. By the time we met her, as a solitary crofter living on the west side of the isle, she had years approaching four score. We nodded easily when she walked by, and, if we spoke of her, we called her simply “the Weaver Nigh.” The name was apt and true.

When not digging, pruning, or coaxing a bit of moss into a chink here or there, the Mistress Nigh would work at her loom, weaving strange and wonderful cloth, praying and humming with each sail of the shuttle. Years of harmonious friendship with creatures of every size and shape had gradually forged a golden chain. With time, all chose to become each other’s relative. In this case, membership in the great chain of being meant that each friend intentionally approached the garden gate with offerings of their most essential being. Creatures and growing things freely gave of their wool, flax, feathers, and shells, all for the making of this cloth. The fabric knew no coin, and the golden thread of the chain of being anchored itself into warp and weft.

For hearts attuned to the compass of longing, the golden light of Nigh Cloth could be heard crooning and thrumming airs from the Far Country. The people say that in this old way, a natural

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way, the way of heartbeat and breath, the Weaver Nigh's croft gradually became some sort of people's priory. No gatekeeper, scribes, or drawbridge: the Holy Rule was written into the human heart. How often Time's most modest works are open secrets, invisible to crush and clamor, yet plain as day to the child, the widow, the leper, the wounded. Whoever needed an hour or a day in the shelter of this priory found it.

Once a year on Easter morn, the Weaver Nigh could be found with fingers flying more intensely than usual. Facing East and working from dawn till high noon as the Sun rose in the sky, she cut the cloth from the loom and then began the work of stitching and connecting. Ever since Our Lord's Resurrection, each garment formed in this way emerged as a mantle of light, laced with melodies given from longing's farthest shore.

On the shoulders of bards, Nigh Cloth streamed. It was alive like water or starlight. If lost when a bard was slain in battle, the mantle seemed to go mute, but was really only resting. The angel of the loom carried the mantle aloft for safety up into the heavens until it was safe enough to descend again and be placed on new bardic shoulders. So this is how the ancient wisdom of the Far Country—songs of riddle, poem, prayer, and story—alighted from the isle of North Uist and traveled the world over, moving from throat to heart the way that true longing always does. This is the path of cherishing. It knows nothing of possessing.

The throngs said Weaver and Cloth were just up yonder hill, across a wide glen and two crofts over. "A bit like a *tinker*," Tanner Aemulor sniveled, "always out of reach." But this was not so. The shepherd, the gardener, the wheelwright, nursemaid, cobbler, knee-woman, and farrier all knew the opposite. Mistress Nigh received young and old, rich and poor, lettered and unlettered, the fallen and the rising, the beautiful and the disfigured, and in our hours of greatest need, this allowed her to be closer to us than we were to ourselves.



My name is Pearl, and I first heard the Nigh Cloth sing when I was a child standing close by the Weaver's side. The Cloth's longing sealed and formed me though I uttered not a word of this investiture to those at home. Like Lady Nigh herself, my infancy mantle sang in many tongues. This Nigh Cloth bore the name Alethia; its compass was true and oriented towards the Sun. Over time, I learned by heart the threads and strands of Alethia's white lightning love songs and summer star hymns. I even grew to remember the hymn makers and troubadours themselves, not only their melodies. How I treasured their finely sculpted faces and warm voices. But let me describe something of the crofter and the priory sprung from this longing born aloft by Our Lord's free wave and rippling current.

Weaver Nigh's loom sat near a deep opening in the wall, one that faced an enclosed garden. We called this enclosure *the oratory* because you couldn't help but pray in awe once you arrived. Plum, pear, apple, cherry: all manner of sweetness fruited there. The oratory visitors came by air, land, and water to pray, to share, to recover, and to offer themselves: they were winged, two-footed, and four-footed. Lady Nigh recognized and received them all: jet black, midnight blue, burnished gold, soft grey, acorn brown, mottled or dappled, iridescent green, ruby red, snowy white.

Some were on fire, flames born of spirit; some were world-weary, lukewarm and in tatters. Each arrived in their own way and condition, some at dawn, others at dusk. Some nestled quietly in the leaves of the ancient willow whose soft and tender boughs rustled in the breeze. Others sat at the foot of twin olive trees, gnarled and rugged as sentinels often are. And don't forget! There were those who came from the region of the summer stars! They would arrive wordlessly, though their garments would shimmer in continual movement. *I heard the bell, they said, and have come to help.*

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I saw and heard elders, siblings, cousins, and strangers come to her: pilgrim-bards of every tongue, sharing so fully that their communion is inscribed in *The Book of Life*. Years later I learned that the Priory Nigh was only one of a string of hermitages dotting a forested path leading back to La Verna. Beyond La Verna, the curving path spiraled to a region within circling stars—the land of the cherubim. It took many years for me to grow enough to perceive the material, open secret priories, those physically positioned close to footfall, as well as the invisible ones that hovered above the trees, above the hills, and outside of time. The mystery is that everyone who ever needed to find a physical priory did and could. This was true back then and it is still true today. *I have no courage*, said one pilgrim-bard. *I cannot cry*, said another. *I know not forgiveness*, said the third. *I've lost my heart*, said most. Home, child, dream, land. Leg, foot, eye, hand. Mother, father, spouse, friend. Many were missing some deeply human essential. The robbing came in several ways: fire, flood, snow, war. The wounded grieved losses of every shape and size in order to heal and live again, eventually becoming stronger than they had been before. Those who could not grieve stumbled.

The wounded would first shelter in the priory's tranquil silence, then bathe, sleep deeply, and awaken hearing a single potent word. A sip of the coolest spring water helped the word germinate within, as prayer and praise, mystery and sacrament. Herbal broths were offered followed by fresh bread and a morsel of honeycomb. All these helped body, soul, and spirit. The fruits from the oratory garden were served only after the tear and the word had been recovered and listening had been restored. These had to happen before one could sing. The Weaver Nigh had allowed me to be something of an apprentice, and so I began to learn some of the ways of cherishing.



One autumn Sunday, long ago in the past, a village maiden about to become bride came calling on Weaver Nigh who, remember, had once roamed the world in longing. The Mistress knew well what it was to inhabit beauty of face and form, beauty of heart and soul. It was a joy for the white-haired elder to receive the beautiful young girl whose dark brown hair, streaked with copper, fell to her waist. The two basked in each other's company and smiled. Arm in arm, they walked a path between the trees and spoke. They recited and sang special lines back and forth to one another, and then sang them again together, first in unison, then in harmony, weaving arbors of sound throughout the croft and inside the cottage.

*I was that bride*, or maiden soon to become bride, and my name was still Pearl, daughter of Cuimhne. I arrived wearing the infancy mantle of Alethia, the one the Weaver Nigh had bestowed on me in childhood. But I also moved in the echo of an inherited one: the way of Cuimhne was in the blood, rather than across my shoulders. It was always right below the surface of my skin. I asked Lady Nigh questions that were natural for a young woman and knew enough to trust her flame. But I was flustered, aware of my own shortcomings. My ability to recover, hold, and remember certain kinds of buried threads was only starting to bud. I was a younger in the presence of an elder, and she was wiser than I would ever hope to be.

The beauty of youth isn't just that you know not the height of the ledge to which your soul has been called, nor the depth of the fall required of you in order to break the old form and become truly new. You don't yet recollect what will be asked of you in order to grow and to serve, nor how to be anything but open regardless of the pain about to accompany the human-making curriculum. But there I was, all fresh and lovely, eager and hopeful.

After a silence, Lady Nigh dug deep into the folds of her linen habit and extended her right hand. A new fabric: a second garment of light! I was shaking. No longer a child at her feet, I

accepted the mantle placed on my shoulders now as only a young adult can. Fervor, awe, trembling, earnest recognition. “Your confirmation name is from the stars, Pearl, now Pearl Bernadette, Pearl Little Bear, and today you receive a new mantle: Tímè. She placed the Cloth on my shoulders. Remember to follow the spring when you walk on land, and when you walk in the dark, remember to orient yourself by the light of the Northern Star. With these two, Pearl Little Bear, always in movement, whether going or coming, you shall always find your way.”

Many long moments passed before I could speak.

“I’ve brought you a gift, too,” I said, blushing, handing the Lady Nigh a basket overflowing with what seemed to me to be a wealth more beautiful than gems. The basket held countless small rolls of parchment, each inscribed with a single word or phrase, even brief tincture poems, and below the rolls were flowers, pebbles, and grains, each exuding fragrance.

“I stood out in the field during seven spring rains,” I said, growing bright, “holding my apron open each time, receiving these beautiful words as they fell from the sky. I *knew* they were yours.” Pearl Little Bear’s voice echoed off the cliffs as she spoke to Lady Nigh.

In this moment everything shifted, and Roams-the-World turned Weaver Nigh spoke solemnly and lovingly. “I have been waiting a *long time*.” I didn’t yet have the capacity to understand what had just been uttered and held my breath. She let the air pulse, and years later I looked within and understood far more than I did that golden autumn day.

This was a Sunday of the old ways, and the Prioress received the basket, looked into my bridal eyes and said, “It will require a month of Sundays for me to weave these treasures into this particular kind of mantle. Yet weave I will! Come back when you are ready to receive the garment. You chose a path when still a star in the sky. All who walk the path you have chosen need this garment of the future. It, too, will sing in a new and living way and will be ready for you on the very day you return.”

How happy I was. I didn't yet know what Weaver Nigh knew and basked in these moments. We walked slowly through the oratory garden.

"Teacher," I asked suddenly, full of concern, "why do you let the creatures eat your berries and lettuce greens? You have so little!"

"Oh, my dear," the Weaver said, beaming, and gesturing to the west with something faintly more wing than arm. "It's not like that at all. The creatures are my family, they are my friends and teachers; we are all related, and their visits are sources of joy. Of their own covenant, the golden chain, they eat only from the eastern rows near Willow. I've never seen them eat more than they need, and I love to watch them take turns and share with one another. They've nibbled these shoots down to the nub—but look! There is still plentiful miracle remaining for me on the west, past the olives. I need nothing more."

A sudden gust of wind arose, and I realized it was time to return to my own life back in the village. After all, someone waited for me in the country of marriage. Roams-the-World turned Weaver Nigh blessed me, but I noticed the flash of an unspoken sadness streak like lightning behind her eyes. One who has mastered the living word practices containment, so she did not speak to me about what she saw though it was coming toward me. She only nodded. Immediately, hoot owl, mourning dove, blue jay, raven, northern flicker, goldfinch, cedar wax wing, monarch, honeybee, and kestrel all assembled. They accompanied me to the garden gate and then went no further. So this is how I walked away, listening to the echo of all that had occurred.



Time passed like sheet rain. Life and home as I knew them were swept away in several seemingly arbitrary turns of Dame Fortuna's wheel. Though the plague, the invading horde, or the insane liege lord can and do maraud with equal brutality, it is the individual who determines what she shall do with what has arrived and

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with what remains. Still newly bridal, I once staggered from a burning rubble, howling, filthy, shriven, unrecognizable and in shock. A blind man drew near, guided by his own internal light, and whispered, "Clay is molded into a vessel, and because of the place where there is nothing, you can carry water." Was he the mirage that accompanied the fire or the visitation of an angel? It took months, but slowly I recovered from the burns, was reborn, a water-bearer of sorts, though for years my hands, arms, breasts, and legs were streaked in the scripts the flame had incised on my flesh. Even my hair grew back, though never again with streaks of copper. I began to streak gray early.

This is how I too began to roam the world as did my wise mentor, the Weaver Nigh. By coracle and on foot, stopping in villages and cities near and far, what had been left of me after the fire had been formed into a new vessel. Because of the place where I had nothing and was nothing, I sang. I sang in the way of the Nigh Cloth, retelling stories and reciting the poems and hymns that had always been there. Now songs poured like water from hidden springs, quenching something of the longing men and women inhabited in their hearts and souls. There were days and hours, too, when the songs came from the stars.



So many miles! So many lands and peoples! I met others who also wore Nigh Cloth; they, too, bore the mantle, the garments that streamed. But until I stood with them in the royal courts, I had not fully understood that neither kings nor courtiers experienced Nigh Cloth. They couldn't see the light or hear the humming of the bardic fabric. Amongst those in our order, some wore one garment, others two, a far-flung circle of noble elders wore three. Once I met a bard with four; he stood in the form of the fourth and his face hid nothing.

As we crossed paths, the members would nod to one another in immediate recognition, but not display outward jubilation.



Communion happened through the eyes, the heart, the soul, the Cloth, and in quiet moments of privacy and prayer, not in crowds. After this, I grew to love Roams-the-World turned Weaver Nigh even more, and in meeting her cherished cup bearers, her spiritual children, her many bairns, I saw more clearly than ever that she was the Master's own Knee-Woman and He, the Weaver of Eternity.



Eventually I traveled so many miles that I sadly witnessed the wars that disfigure the human spirit rather than the wars that ravage the land. Courtly manners expressed in the city centers often relied on cunning, deception and greed. It was the way of the world.

There came a day when I sought out both mountain peak and shifting sand. I, Pearl Little Bear, she who long ago willingly donned homelessness, now sought shores and trails lost in time and bridging into the future. I yearned for and began to re-enter the prayer and solitude that would re-awaken springs and call upon angels. I walked along shores of thundering waves, and cliffs where the body is held aloft by winds. I climbed mountains where the air is brisk and the spirits of place are palpable. In a forest of ash, I saw fish leap from a brook. Their vaultings cut narrow and bright undulating ribbons in the air. Even so, I could walk an entire day without encountering man or woman. I found myself mirrored back in cloud and tree, firelight and dew, book and chalice, echo and cave, meadow and seed, hare and stag, lily and rose.

One morning after walking steeply uphill in silence for some three hours, a Nigh Cloth companion and I watched as a tall, slender, radiant, blue-eyed man walked toward us, downhill, extending his hand in greeting. He was gleaming. This shining conveyed a condition of a being vividly awake, clear in warmth and deep of tranquility. He moved gracefully, with noble bearing and

countenance. "I've walked this path daily for thirty years and never encountered one of you till now," he said. Then the oddest thing occurred. "I think you'll find what you are looking for if you go in that direction," he said, pointing. My friend and I both turned to see, looking away from his shining face only briefly, and upon turning back to thank him, discovered that he had vanished into thin air. He was gone without a trace. Had I not been walking with a companion who verified this event to me that night and again, several more times over the years, I might have doubted that it had ever happened in this world. Perhaps it was a dream; but, no, it happened while walking, tracing the footsteps of beloved singers, bards, monks, and minstrel souls of old. My companion bid me her *Adieu*, and continued on her way, knowing that I was about to encounter a very personal destiny corridor.

With pounding heart, I walked into the dense thicket, recognizing each boulder, tree, and crevice. How could this be? A simple sign said *Termes*. Soon, a number of small huts or structures came into view, each dwelling contained, separate from the other, yet each joined to the other by virtue of small connecting footpaths on both right and left. The signage they chose over their enclosure conveyed a particular reality: *Priory Terme*, and their motto carved in a distant tongue translated into my own as: *Together Always*. I learned that a communion of hermits gathered here; it seemed that most were Cistercian, two were Franciscan, and several wore garb unknown to me and about which I would be introduced in the coming days.

Each was a living book, each had a different gift or charism, and each had a special tool at his or her disposal and a symbol over the threshold of their hermitage rather than a personal name. I saw a small forge, a tiny anvil, an awl, a trowel, a quill, a psaltery, a door, a rose, a lily, a lantern, a loom, the Sun and Moon. Over the next three months, the twelve hermits, men and women, ministered, taught, anointed, and blessed me. They did what they did in the manner of healing rain rather than

classroom or court, and though they knew and embodied the stories, myths, and scriptures of all time and all lands, they spoke of the necessity of two books, the *Book of Nature* and the *Bible*, which they called, lovingly, *The Good Book*. In the moments when they were the most deeply moved, the most full of hope for humanity, they called the *Bible* the *Greening Book*. They advised time with each book, daily. They advised me to work in their garden each and every morning, weeding, watering, pruning, caring for the fruits and vegetables, and drinking in the Terme beauty. It was a beauty beyond compare. In the afternoons I met or walked with them, learned about their botanicals, their way of prayer, the human soul and spirit, their way of tracing the stars, and particular elements of their individual charisms.

On the morning of my departure, they gathered as loving relatives, and, at the same time, it seemed that each reflected the most cohesive combination of nobility and humility. They bequeathed to me a bundle which I initially imagined might be kindly provisions of bread or water for the next steps, the return to Priory Nigh. But wait! I heard something like small jingles or a rattle, but they would surely not use coin. What could it be? Yes, a kind of bread, meant to sustain, but not the kind one eats. They asked me to place everything on their altar, and, under the gaze of their loving eyes, I discovered four of the most beautiful buttons imaginable, each forged of an amalgam of silver and gold, and each engraved with a single word on the front. *Alethia*, *Tímè*, *Cuimhne*, *Christus*. When I turned *Alethia* over, it bore an engraving of a rose. *Tímè* was incised with the lily. *Cuimhne* revealed a harp. *Christus* was engraved with a chalice. My eyes were wet. This was more than enough for several lifetimes, yet the satchel was still not empty.

I found a silver needle, larger than normal, engraved with the name *Sophia*. With this came the commission to continue connecting and sewing together all manner of realities, especially

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those at which the world or her experts scoffed or snickered. There was a silver comb, engraved with the name *Maria*, with which to smooth and untangle every snarl and kink in the golden chain, in human lives and especially those springing from human hearts. And last, twenty-four small metal pins which I didn't recognize. Perhaps they were nails to help me build a hermitage? They each had a small hole drilled into them on one side. The Elders smiled: *Soon, you will understand, Pearl Little Bear.*

The Sun was already approaching noon, and they instructed me that to return to Priory Nigh, I would first need to journey further up the mountain for the rest of the day and then move north and finally west. "Follow the path up, it is sacred but difficult, not often tread. Continue until you arrive at the crest, after which you will know joy, yet be tired and thirsty. Only then, and not a moment sooner, turn around and bid farewell, wave to us with both arms. We will receive your love, and you will receive one additional gift from us. After receiving our seal, you will find a crystal-clear pool in which to bathe. It is no ordinary water. It is a slipstream. Enter it while holding the satchel close to your heart. We are Together and with you Always."

I didn't want to leave them or their home and yet knew that this departure was not quite the same as a farewell. Bowing deeply, it was time to walk away without leaving. I might not have been strong enough to climb the rocky terrain on my own, but they sang me up. Their voices began in unison, echoing off the cliffs, then grew into two-part harmony, evolving to three-part harmony, then all twelve, as if a cosmos of voices were their own system of transportation. When I reached the top, as instructed, I moved the satchel from my back to my heart. With arms free and hands raised over my head, I turned to face them. Their twelve stars seemed to enter the palms of my two hands, right and left. But there is more.

I saw Priory Terme anchored on the ground amongst the stand of pines in that beautiful forest below surrounded by their

cascading garden, but I also saw the Priory's archetype hovering high in the sky, clear as day. The voices of both were filling the heavens with the Chain of Being hymnody. No longer a showing of huts woven of twigs and fragrant boughs, their hermitages were composed of something luminous. Could their building blocks have been the Master's Love? I stayed this way with them all, the priory above and the priory below, anchored and elevated, receiving their hymns, singing with them too, till the Sun set.

There was a moment when I realized that at least part of the song experienced that hour had been because the communities of elders had given a transmission. A third Nigh Cloth! I was wearing a third garment of light along with the first two! All three were streaming, and I understood the name of the third because I heard its voice resound inwardly.

Unspeakable humility, gratitude, awe.

I turned then and dove into the liquid slipstream with arms crossed over my heart, protecting the satchel of gifts. It was as if every drop of water was a pearl.



Although it took many months on foot, and three separate sea voyages, the day came when I returned to the island again, by way of a small curragh newly woven of willow branches. Years had passed, yet it was not difficult to wind my way to Priory Nigh and to the Mistress's garden gate. The question was: Would she be there? Would she still be alive? My own hair had gone white though I had been renewed and strengthened by the hermits of Terme. I walked slowly and placed my hand on the latch of the gate, ready to accept any new condition.

"I've been expecting you," Lady Nigh smiled, speaking slowly, lovingly, and clearly. Each word was alive and enlivening. "The promised garment has been waiting in readiness for you for years. Come, Whitsuntide still fills the air. Comb your hair, in

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the name of the Mother; take the buttons from your satchel; sew in a new and living way; continue to make every possible connection; find and live the Eucharist anew. Today, in the form of the fourth, you don the final garment for this cycle and weave forevermore on behalf of the Master. In His Name, all who stand in the form of the fourth weave for Our Lord and Our Lady. Weave the fabric bridging past, present and future, and with harp and voice, tend and serve the garden that grows to and from and with the stars.”

By this greeting, permeated with Love, I, Pearl Little Bear, understood that from afar, however great the stretch, Elders recognize, know, and cherish one another, reaching beyond miles, reaching beyond time, caste, pedigree. The discipleship of cherishing is new in form; it knows no possession; it asks and offers new capacities of the human heart, whether the bardic hermit is cobbler, nurse, scribe, or scholar.

Roams-the-World who became the Weaver Nigh had witnessed the entirety of my bardic apprenticeship. This includes the stream of risks, painful failures, sorrows, afflictions, consolations, hopes, joys, overflowing faith and, yes, even moments of transformation, when the pearl emerged from the transformed sorrow. There are conditions when the bridge between Heaven and Earth becomes tactile, audible, visible, fragrant, and the hermit elders everywhere bow to serve the Beauty, Truth, and Goodness of the angels ascending and descending on our behalf. The Weaver Nigh witnessed my rebirth and the freeing-up of a living streaming memory, the kind that makes weaving, sewing and connecting strands and fabrics newly possible. The gifts of the Nigh Cloth are many and elevate the work of the angels in timeless service to all.

Like a being of the ladder, the Weaver Nigh disclosed just how harmoniously Priory Nigh and Priory Terme confirm two of the many links in the chain of being. As the motto said: *Together Always.*

So, I, Pearl Little Bear, with Nigh Cloth, needle and comb, begin life anew, companioned by some of the most sacred, rose-gold links. I trust that my companions will teach me about the twenty-four pegs in the Terme satchel in the days and nights to come.

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