



POMES PENYEACH

by

JAMES JOYCE

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James Joyce's *Pomes Penyeach* (1927) was his second published collection of poetry, following *Chamber Music* (1907). While *Chamber Music* was composed primarily during Joyce's early years in Dublin and shortly thereafter, *Pomes Penyeach* gathers poems written over two decades from 1904 to 1924, during his time living in Dublin, Trieste, Zurich, and Paris.

The collection was published by Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company bookstore in Paris, a crucial venue for Joyce's work during a period of literary innovation and censorship.

James Augustine Aloysius Joyce was born on February 2, 1882, in Rathgar, a suburb of Dublin, Ireland. He was the eldest of ten surviving children born to John Stanislaus Joyce, a bank clerk, and Mary Jane Murray Joyce, who came from a middle-class family. Joyce's early life was marked by both privilege and hardship; his family experienced financial decline during his childhood, forcing them to move frequently and attend various schools. Joyce was educated by Jesuits at Clongowes Wood College and later Belvedere College, before studying modern languages at University College Dublin. His upbringing in Dublin deeply influenced his later literary work, especially his intimate depictions of the city's streets and inhabitants.

Nora Barnacle was born on March 21, 1884, in Galway, Ireland, into a working-class family. Her background was quite different from Joyce's middle-class upbringing. Nora worked various jobs, including as a chambermaid, before meeting Joyce in June 1904. Their meeting is famously commemorated as the starting point for Bloomsday, June 16, the day on which *Ulysses* is set.

From 1904 onward, Joyce and Nora lived primarily outside Ireland, initially settling in cities such as Trieste (then part of Austria-Hungary), Zurich, and Paris. During this period, Joyce developed his major literary works, including *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*. Nora managed their household and cared for their children while supporting Joyce through periods of financial difficulty and ill health. By 1927, when *Pomes Penyeach* was published by Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company in Paris, Joyce had established himself as a key figure in modernist literature, with Nora as a central presence in both his personal and creative life.

Joyce wrote this poem just before leaving Dublin in 1904. "When I leave Dublin, I hope never to set my eyes on it again," he said, and he didn't.

The poem was originally called *Cabra*, after the district of Dublin where the family was living at the time - *An Chabrach*, 'the poor land'.

The 'tilly' of the title - *tuilleadh* in Gaelic - refers to an additional small measure given to customers. Pomes Penyeach was originally sold for one shilling (twelve pence - or a 'penny for each poem'). *Tilly* was the little extra, the thirteenth poem - yet placed first. Shades, then, of *Finnegans Wake* and Giambattista Vico's theories of recurring cycles.

A pastoral, the poem describes a journey into exile - the speaker 'above' Cabra, leaving to go to a warmer, better place. Whereas we should normally take care when assuming if a poem is autobiographical or not, with Joyce we can be fairly sure it is. His art was very much his life, each illuminating the other. This is Joyce leaving Ireland, driving his homestead, his everything, to new lands with promises and smoke.

Joyce's mother May had died in August 1903, and the underworldly imagery upon which the poem ends tells of the burden the poet brings with him to the new place. The "torn bough" and "black stream" allude to classical mythology, particularly the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas must present a golden bough to enter the underworld and cross the Styx. As we know from his other works - written during exile - Mary's death weighed incredibly heavily upon his soul and he constantly addressed the pain.

TILLY

He travels after a winter sun,
Urging the cattle along a cold red road,
Calling to them, a voice they know,
He drives his beasts above Cabra.

The voice tells them home is warm.
They moo and make brute music with
their hoofs.
He drives them with a flowering branch
before him,
Smoke pluming their foreheads.

Boor, bond of the herd,
Tonight stretch full by the fire!
I bleed by the black stream
For my torn bough!

In October 1904, Joyce and Nora Barnacle left Dublin and travelled by train and ferry - first from Dublin to Liverpool, then across the Irish Sea to England, and onward by rail through Europe - arriving in Trieste, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the middle of November.

Joyce composed *Watching the Needleboats at San Sabba* in 1912 during his residence in Trieste. These days San Sabba is better known as the site of a former Nazi concentration camp, complete with cremation facilities, but here Joyce is describing a view of narrow rowing boats at sea, juxtaposing the vibrant energy of youth with the transient nature of human experiences and emotions. He uses personification, attributing emotions to the boats and grasses, to suggest a universal experience of bittersweet impermanence.

Unsurprisingly, the poem has inspired several musical settings, most notably by Arnold Bax, who included it in *The Joyce Book* (1933), a collection of musical compositions based on Joyce's poems.

WATCHING THE NEEDLEBOATS AT SAN SABBA

I heard their young hearts crying
Loveward above the glancing oar
And heard the prairie grasses sighing:
No more, return no more!

O hearts, O sighing grasses,
Vainly your loveblown bannerets mourn!
No more will the wild wind that passes
Return, no more return.

This pretty piece, composed in 1913 during Joyce's time in Trieste, offers a meditation on fragility, innocence, and paternal love. The term "rosefrail" is a Joycean neologism, blending "rose" and "frail" to emphasize fragility. The "blueveined child" refers to his daughter Lucia, born on July 26, 1907, in Trieste, following his son Giorgio, in 1905. Lucia would go on to have a complex and tragic life, with early promise as a dancer but later struggles with mental illness. Her relationship with her father was intense and deeply influential on his life and work.

A FLOWER GIVEN TO MY DAUGHTER

Frail the white rose and frail are
Her hands that gave
Whose soul is sere and paler
Than time's wan wave.

A wonder wild
Rosefrail and fair - yet frailest
In gentle eyes thou veilest,
My blueveined child.

Joyce composed *She Weeps over Ragoon* in 1913 while living in Trieste. It's a dark, gothic poem, steeped in melancholic imagery.

Critics have noted that the poem's setting of Ragoon Cemetery (now Mount St. Joseph Cemetery in Galway) and its themes of mourning and lost love bear resemblance to Joyce's short story *The Dead*, where the protagonist's wife grieves for a deceased lover. This parallel suggests that Joyce was exploring similar themes across different works, reflecting on the complexities of love, memory, and loss.

Most probably, Joyce is referring to his wife Nora's feelings for Michael 'Sonny' Bodkin in the poem - a teenage student who was Nora's first love.

According to Nora, Bodkin insisted on coming to her window one cold night in the pouring rain while he was already gravely ill, to say goodbye and see her one last time.

This incident deeply moved Joyce when Nora told him about it years later. Richard Ellmann, a Joyce biographer, notes how Joyce seemed simultaneously fascinated by and resentful of his wife's emotional attachment to this ghost of her past - his rival from beyond the grave.

Michael 'Sonny' Bodkin's grave is located in Row 25 of Ragoon Cemetery.

SHE WEEPS OVER RAHOON

Rain on Rahoon falls softly, softly falling,
Where my dark lover lies.
Sad is his voice that calls me, sadly calling,
At grey moonrise.

Love, hear thou
How soft, how sad his voice is ever calling,
Ever unanswered and the dark rain falling,
Then as now.

Dark too our hearts, O love, shall lie and cold
As his sad heart has lain
Under the moongrey nettles, the black mould
And muttering rain.

Joyce composed *Tutto è sciolto* on 13 July 1914 in Trieste. He was teaching English, working on *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and nurturing his young family. The poem was first published in the November 1917 issue of *Poetry* magazine.

The title *Tutto è sciolto* translates from Italian as "all is lost now." The phrase is taken from an aria in the second act of *La Sonnambula* (*The Sleepwalker*), an opera by Vincenzo Bellini, one of Joyce's favorite composers. In the opera, the character Elvino sings this aria upon believing he has been betrayed by his fiancée. Joyce's choice of this title suggests a parallel between the opera's themes of love and betrayal and the emotional landscape of the poem.

The poem's opening mirrors the speaker's internal emptiness and longing. The second stanza recalls the beloved's features - her "silent eyes," "foam-white brow," and "fragrant hair" - which, like the falling dusk, evoke a sense of fading beauty and lost intimacy. The final stanza confronts the futility of clinging to these memories, questioning why the heart "repines" over a love that was "never thine." This progression from vivid recollection to resigned acceptance encapsulates themes of unrequited love, memory, and the pain of emotional detachment.

This resonates with a prose work, *Giacomo Joyce*, we now know he was writing at the time. Part love letter, part literary experiment, part dream fantasy, it was unpublished until 1968. *Giacomo Joyce* reads like a feverish notebook kept by a teacher helplessly in lust with one of his students - which is exactly what it is. The student was most likely Amalia Popper, a Jewish lady who was taking classes with Joyce at the time. As Richard Ellmann put it, *Giacomo Joyce* is "Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Lecher*". Perhaps this poem is drawn from the same source material, though filtered through a softer frame of mind. A description of an emotional affair, we might say these days.

TUTTO È SCIOLTO

A birdless heaven, seadusk, one lone star
Piercing the west,
As thou, fond heart, love's time, so faint, so far,
Rememberest.

The clear young eyes' soft look, the candid brow,
The fragrant hair,
Falling as through the silence falleth now
Dusk of the air.

Why then, remembering those shy
Sweet lures, repine
When the dear love she yielded with a sigh
Was all but thine?

This vivid poem, composed in 1914 in Trieste, portrays a synaesthetic seaside scene, with a whining wind blowing, pebbles crackling and the pier legs groaning. As a foul sea crashes and writhes, a dark, ominous sky glowers down from above.

The speaker - Joyce! Why wouldn't it be? - hugs his young son - Giorgio? The only one he had - and feels the child's vulnerability (and his own) in the forceful presence of the elements. It is a human being's acknowledgement of their own powerlessness before a 'nature' which is unaware of them, though they are part of it, and their reaction to it, which he describes. Normally we are unmoved by anyone's fate but our own but love and family change this: we fear for them too.

Giorgio, the only son of James and Nora, lived in and under the long shadow of his father's fame. Handsome, urbane and gifted with a fine baritone voice, he aspired to a career in opera, but - despite a promising start - never quite escaped the role of struggling son of a well-known writer. His relationship with James was affectionate but strained, particularly as Giorgio's drinking intensified and his marriage to Helen Fleischman - an American divorcée - further frayed family ties. While Joyce once referred to him as a "ne'er-do-well" with some bitterness, there was also a mournful recognition of shared frailty.

ON THE BEACH AT FONTANA

Wind whines and whines the shingle,
The crazy pierstakes groan;
A senile sea numbers each single
Slimesilvered stone.

From whining wind and colder
Grey sea I wrap him warm
And touch his trembling fineboned shoulder
And boyish arm.

Around us fear, descending
Darkness of fear above
And in my heart how deep unending
Ache of love!

Simples was composed in 1914 in Trieste. The title refers to medicinal herbs used in traditional remedies. In the poem, a child gathers "simple salad leaves" in a moonlit garden, symbolizing innocence and the natural world's healing properties. This act serves as a metaphor for purity and the untainted aspects of love and life.

The Italian quote at the beginning, from a song which the child is singing, is rendered in the poem, by Joyce, as "Fair as the wave is, fair, art thou!"

The poem's ambiguity and indeterminacy allow for multiple interpretations, blending external observations with internal emotions. The most likely explanation is that it's a meditation on watching a young child - his daughter, or a friend of theirs? - at play amid the adult world of fear and stress. There would have been many times when Joyce had time to dwell upon his children, to sit and think...

SIMPLES

O bella bionda, Sei come l'onda!

Of cool sweet dew and radiance mild
The moon a web of silence weaves
In the still garden where a child
Gathers the simple salad leaves.

A moondew stars her hanging hair
And moonlight kisses her young brow
And, gathering, she sings an air:
Fair as the wave is, fair, art thou!

Be mine, I pray, a waxen ear
To shield me from her childish croon
And mine a shielded heart for her
Who gathers simples of the moon.

Joyce composed *Flood* in 1915 Trieste. It is another observation made on a beach, of a sight in water - this time floating plantlife whose 'vast wings upon the waters brood'.

Joyce employs a lyrical structure of three quatrains with an ABAB CDCD EFEF rhyme scheme, creating a rhythmic cadence that mirrors the poem's emotional waves and the lilting element he's describing.

For Joyce, his own life was marked by pivotal moments near the sea: his first date with Nora Barnacle, on June 16, 1904, included a walk near Sandycove, an event immortalized as Bloomsday. The same shoreline became the setting for the opening of *Ulysses*, where Buck Mulligan descends the stairs of the Martello tower (where Joyce once lived) to shave by the sea. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, young Stephen Dedalus experiences a moment of epiphany watching a girl wading in the surf, her posture "like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird" (something else Joyce had seen in real life).

Yes, he is easily pictured looking out to sea in Trieste - almost finding answers.

FLOOD

Goldbrown upon the sated flood
The rockvine clusters lift and sway.
Vast wings above the lambent waters brood
Of sullen day.

A waste of waters ruthlessly
Sways and uplifts its weedy mane
Where brooding day stares down upon the sea
In dull disdain.

Uplift and sway, O golden vine,
Your clustered fruits to love's full flood,
Lambent and vast and ruthless as is thine
Incertitude!

Nightpiece was composed on 22 January 1915 in Trieste, a nocturnal vision which transforms the night sky into a vast, cathedral-like space. Joyce employs religious imagery, depicting stars as "ghostfires" and the night as a "sindark nave," a neologism combining "sin" and "dark". The "seraphim" angels awaken to perform a ritualistic service, swinging a "thurible" (incense burner), symbolizing a celestial liturgy. The tolling of a "starknell" (a coined term blending "star" and "knell") resonates through this cosmic cathedral, signifying an acknowledgment of the void.

Nightpiece reflects a lonely, spiritual soul searching for and finding some and no meaning in the glory and magnitude of the heavens, and perhaps not caring. Perhaps it is just enough to be able to see the universe and understand some of it.

The poem is a none too distant cousin of Vincent Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*.

NIGHTPIECE

Gaunt in gloom
The pale stars their torches
Enshrouded wave.
Ghostfires from heaven's far verges faint illumine
Arches on soaring arches,
Night's sindark nave.

Seraphim
The lost hosts awaken
To service till In moonless gloom each lapses, muted, dim
Raised when she has and shaken
Her thurible.

And long and loud
To night's nave upsoaring
A starknell tolls
As the bleak incense surges, cloud on cloud,
Voidward from the adoring
Waste of souls.

James Joyce wrote *Alone* in Zurich in 1916. It was published in *Poetry* magazine in 1917. With Trieste increasingly unstable under Austro-Hungarian rule and Italy's entry into the war, Joyce had sought neutral ground. Zurich offered him safety, proximity to publishers and a steady job teaching English at the Berlitz School. Here he began work in earnest on *Ulysses*. Zurich also gave him access to strange expatriates - Lenin, Jung, and a Dadaist or two among them.

This short poem describes a solitary soul ensnared by nocturnal reverie. Via "greygolden meshes," "shorelamps" and "sly reeds" he makes the external world mirror internal longing. The poem culminates in a "swoon of shame," suggesting a complex interplay of desire and guilt.

Scholars like Norbert Lennartz argue that Joyce's poems like *Alone* reflect "the ache of modernism", revealing existential wounds and illustrating a departure from Romantic idealism. Ezra Pound, meanwhile, rejected them for publication and suggested they belonged in a family album.

The truth, at this distance, is more prosaic: these are pretty sketches which seed what we know grows next. Dark poems like this one, and others in the collection, also, paradoxically, throw light on Joyce's mood during these times in his life. They make him human.

ALONE

The noon's greygolden meshes make
All night a veil,
The shorelamps in the sleeping lake
Laburnum tendrils trail.

The sly reeds whisper to the night
A name - her name
And all my soul is a delight,
A swoon of shame.

Another Trieste poem, this one reflects Joyce's fascination with theatricality and performance, motifs that appear throughout his prose works such as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. It's perhaps the most Joycean in the collection, idiosyncratic as it is, the language characteristically sculpted to its creator's tastes. Though personal, there's more distance and artifice to it - which isn't to say it isn't more true. As the title suggests, this is a mind's-eye memory described, but described in a way that is very much Joyce's own. It's a performance, of a performance, glimpsed in a mirror. It's not hard to see why he loved it.

Critics interpret this poem as a meditation on the fluidity of identity and the fragmented nature of modern selfhood (Attridge, *Joyce Effects*, 2000). The theatrical metaphor resonates with Joyce's broader modernist project, where life itself is a stage and identity a series of enacted roles - though Shakespeare and others might have mentioned that earlier. The poem anticipates themes developed in *Finnegans Wake* about the multiplicity and mutability of the self (Maddox, 1989). Although less frequently set to music than other *Pomes Penyeach* poems, *A Memory of the Players in a Mirror at Midnight* has inspired experimental compositions reflecting its ghostly, elusive tone.

A MEMORY OF THE PLAYERS IN A MIRROR AT MIDNIGHT

They mouth love's language. Gnash
The thirteen teeth Your lean jaws grin with. Lash
Your itch and quailing, nude greed of the flesh.
Love's breath in you is stale, worded or sung,
As sour as cat's breath,
Harsh of tongue.

This grey that stares
Lies not, stark skin and bone.
Leave greasy lips their kissing. None
Will choose her what you see to mouth upon.
Dire hunger holds his hour.
Pluck forth your heart, saltblood, a fruit of tears.
Pluck and devour!

Bahnhofstrasse captures an evening walk along a bustling Zurich street; an ageing man knowing he's only heading in one direction with no way back and no way home. Written during Joyce's stay in Switzerland, the title references the Bahnhofstrasse, Zurich's main thoroughfare, the poet walking balefully towards the end of bright modern commerce, through movement and cosmopolitan 'life'.

Scholars have interpreted *Bahnhofstrasse* as emblematic of Joyce's engagement with modernist urban spaces as sites of both vitality and alienation (Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative*, 1992). The poem is also said, like Eliot in *The Waste Land*, to capture the ambivalence of early 20th-century European cities as centres of progress but also dislocation and fragmentation - now such a tired observation. But who or what is the trysting, twining, star of evil and of pain? Literally Venus in the purple dusk sky, or Nora at home, or some other object of the poet's love or lust, who has done him wrong. Is he too old for this? Does everyone know he's been cheated on? Is everyone feeling sorry for him, mocking him? Is this a poem to his paranoia, to his fears?

BAHNHOFSTRASSE

The eyes that mock me sign the way
Whereto I pass at eve of day.

Grey way whose violet signals are
The trysting and the twining star.

Ah star of evil! star of pain!
Highhearted youth comes not again

Nor old heart's wisdom yet to know
The signs that mock me as I go.

Joyce moved to Paris in 1920 with the vague plan of staying "just a few months". This turned into nearly two decades. Paris, buzzing with artists, anarchists and avant-gardists, offered Joyce a publisher with guts (Sylvia Beach), a crowd that spoke "stream-of-consciousness" fluently and enough white wine to keep the ghosts of Catholic guilt quiet. In short, he came for the culture and stayed for the censorship-free publishing deal - a literary layover that became a lifelong haunt.

Critics view *A Prayer* as an expression of Joyce's complex relationship with faith and spirituality, highlighting his ability to convey profound emotion in concise form (Ellmann, 1959). The poem's natural imagery aligns with early 20th-century literary movements seeking spiritual solace in nature amid modern upheaval (Harpham, 1992). Some interpret the poem as a counterpoint to the intellectual and often fragmented style of his prose, showcasing Joyce's lyrical and contemplative side (Kenner, 1978). Is he addressing God, his muse, Nora or all of the above? The unspeakable, perhaps?

Joyce placed it as the last poem - does it signify his deepest thoughts? The last thing he thinks at night? Thank you for whatever terrible thing this is, whatever terrible, unknowable place? For my work, my life? A simple, muttered, drunken *Go raibh maith agat*.

A PRAYER

Again!

Come, give, yield all your strength to me!

From far a low word breathes on the breaking brain

Its cruel calm, submission's misery,

Gentling her awe as to a soul predestined.

Cease, silent love! My doom!

Blind me with your dark nearness,

O have mercy, beloved enemy of my will!

I dare not withstand the cold touch that I dread.

Draw from me still

My slow life! Bend deeper on me, threatening head,

Proud by my downfall, remembering, pitying

Him who is, him who was!

Again! Together, folded by the night, they lay on earth. I hear

From far her low word breathe on my breaking brain.

Come! I yield. Bend deeper upon me! I am here.

Subduer, do not leave me! Only joy, only anguish,

Take me, save me, soothe me, O spare me!

James Joyce and Sylvia Beach first crossed paths at a Parisian dinner party in 1920. Intrigued by her, Joyce visited her bookstore Shakespeare and Company the next day, sparking a partnership that would shake the literary world. Beach didn't just champion Joyce's groundbreaking novel; she risked scandal and censorship to publish *Ulysses* in 1922, turning her shop, which she'd opened in 1919, into a legendary haven for modernist rebels. By 1972, it had sold over 880,000 copies in the United States alone.

She published *Pomes Penyeach* in 1927. The collection was initially printed in a limited edition of thirteen copies on handmade paper before its broader release. Despite its modest reception at the time, *Pomes Penyeach* has endured, with several poems continuing to appear in anthologies today. In 1932, a special edition featuring illustrations by Joyce's daughter, Lucia, was published by Obelisk Press, reflecting Joyce's hope that artistic engagement might aid her mental health.

Despite battling failing eyesight and enduring a dozen eye surgeries, Joyce stubbornly dictated the closing passages of his last book (for a long time known only as *Work In Progress*), *Finnegans Wake*, before passing away in January 1941 from a perforated ulcer.

Nora Barnacle chose to remain in Zurich. She lived modestly and continued to manage the affairs of Joyce's estate, maintaining a low public profile. In 1951, she died of acute kidney failure at the age of 67. Initially, she was buried in a separate grave at Zurich's Fluntern Cemetery. However, in 1966, her remains were exhumed and reburied alongside Joyce and their son Giorgio, who had passed away in 1976. Nora's childhood home in Bowling Green, Galway, has been preserved as a small museum dedicated to her life and legacy



