

## James, Giorgio, and Georges

Koen Peeters

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## James, Giorgio, and Georges

From the novel *Georges* (De Bezige Bij, 2023) by Koen Peeters.

Translated by Helen Simpson.

*Georges* by Koen Peeters (b. 1959, Belgium) was published by De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, in 2023. In this creative blend of fact and fiction, Peeters travels through time and plays an ingenious game with a cast of characters both real and imagined. Writing about Ostend, he introduces James Joyce – who spent a well-documented family holiday in the city in 1926 – to a charming postal clerk named Georges. Who happens to resemble Joyce’s own son, Giorgio.

The first chapter of the novel, reproduced below, offers plausible solutions to several Joycean riddles: what prompted the writer to publish *Pomes Penyeach* in 1927? And where, how and with whom did Joyce follow the forty-three language lessons that he is known to have taken in Ostend? Together with professor emeritus Geert Lernout – former president of the International James Joyce Foundation – Peeters went in search of a gripping story.

*Georges* received glowing reviews in the media but is currently only available in Dutch. The chapter on Joyce has been translated into English especially for the *James Joyce Literary Supplement* by Helen Simpson. Based in Ostend, she is a translator who specialises in literature and art.

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*'I could walk forever along a strand.'*  
James Joyce

Ostend, the summer of 1926

It is the summer when Georges changes to his very core, because nothing changes. And all because of the Irish tourist who steps into the Ostend Post Office on 5 August 1926. The holidaymaker looks around. He surveys the hall with an eagle eye. In his right hand is a dark walking stick, made of ash, which he taps on the floor three times.

Like a little orchestra conductor.

A momentary hush descends, enabling the tourist to hear a postal worker across the room call out, 'Georges, a letter for you.'

A young clerk looks up from counter number four. His name is Georges. He nods.

Which prompts the Irish tourist to join that particular queue. It is Georges Vermeire's Foreign Correspondence desk. He is twenty-eight years old, clerk first class, and responsible for international post, including dead letter mail.

'Ah Georges, George in English, Giorgio in *Italiano*, Jiří in Czech,' laughs the tourist. The visitor is tall and slim. With a small, pointed beard and a solid, dark moustache plastered just below his nose. He is sporting a light summer hat with a dark band, a black jacket and a loose-fitting white shirt. Plus an eye patch.

In English, the tourist asks Georges for his name in Flemish.

'Joris,' says Georges, pushing aside his heavy stamp folder. He gazes at the tourist: 'And my little daughter's name is Georgina. Can I help you?'

'Damn, you really must be a happy man,' says the tourist. He is not just happy, he is *geravisseed*. He finds the young postal clerk very congenial, not unlike the city in which he has just arrived.

The visitor is forty-something, clearly well-to-do, with sleek, combed-back hair. He stands out due to the black, plectrum-shaped patch on his left eye. Eagle eyed? Injured ones, at any rate. His right eye is also playing up. He will later give Georges a detailed history: glaucoma, green star. He calls it the Greek poet's disease. He adds: 'I'm a tourist with iritis, irritation due to a recent iridectomy of the right eye. Furthermore, a cataract, otherwise known as grey star.'

It sounds like an excerpt from a medical record. Which it is. Why is he sharing all this? Because he wants to sample the wondrous, hard-to-pronounce words, to test his linguistic dexterity. Not to mention the art of rhyming.

The Irish tourist's name is James Joyce. None other than the greatest writer of all time has arrived in Ostend. Direct from Paris. He is a literary celebrity, a star. His masterpiece, *Ulysses*, is four years old. A scandalous book, complex and perverse by all accounts, because it even features masturbation, menstruation and shit. It is a deeply controversial tome. It is not freely available but is already being hailed as a work of fundamental importance to world literature. He is the Einstein, the Freud of literature. Joyce is barely forty-four but already the subject of a biography.

Georges in the Post Office knows none of this, of course. And nor might anyone else in Ostend, for that matter. Joyce does not flaunt his celebrity.

At least, not from day one.

Or from the first hour.

But Joyce takes an immediate shine to the young, fluent polyglot clerk at counter number four. Is it because of Georges' name?

It sounds banal, but that is effectively why. Moreover, the Flemish equivalent of the French Georges or English George – Joris – sounds a bit like his own name, Joyce.

The writer is in fine spirits. 'You may call me James, provided that I can call you Georges.'

'My pleasure, Mr Joyce,' says Georges politely. Georges has read the sender's name on the envelope that has been pushed towards him. A regular letter, destination Paris. Georges enquires if he is English.

Joyce shakes his head: *Pourquoi?*

'Because St George is the patron saint of England.'

'No, I'm not an Englishman, I am an Irishman,' says Joyce, greatly appreciating the young postal worker's curiosity and panache. He pushes another postcard through the slot. Also for Paris. Joyce, who is about to change hotels, wants his correspondence to be held at the Post Office.

'Poste restante,' nods the clerk.

Joyce agrees. Then mumbles in Italian: *'E' piu facile, piu sicuro per me.'*

Georges nods. He practices his languages every day at the counter.

Apropos of nothing, Joyce elaborates further: the family spent their first night at the Hôtel Littoral Palace, on the corner of the Promenade and Hertstraat. But the lodging is expensive, more than 60 francs per room. His wife and daughter are currently looking for another hotel.

Georges makes a suggestion: Hôtel Royal du Phare, also on the Promenade.

Joyce thanks him, pays, and takes his leave. Thus concludes the introductory, lively but somewhat wearisome chat between a tourist with airs and plenty of feathers in his writer's cap and a cheerful postal clerk.

The Joyce family had travelled to Ostend by train, from Paris, in early August 1926. The three-member party comprising James, his wife Nora Barnacle and their nineteen-year-old daughter Lucia. Their twenty-one-year-old son Giorgio, who still lives at home, is not amongst them. It is high season and tourism in Ostend is flourishing. After a long hiatus following the First World War, the city is now *très à la mode* throughout Europe.

The Queen of Seaside Resorts! Its streets echo with a multitude of languages, but English dominates. The Shah of Persia, an Indian maharaja and several other blue-bloods stroll along the Promenade. Old Russian aristocrats, fleeing the communists, gamble away their last remaining jewels in the casino.

Ostend is cheerful, well organised and cosmopolitan. Something that even extends to the street names. As the city embraces tourism, it drapes itself in the aura of other metropolises. The Ostend locals have a Petit Paris and a Petit Nice, a Romestraat, Caïrostraat, Amsterdamstraat... International entertainment abounds: Russian ballet at the Casino, the much-discussed operetta *Pas sur la bouche* at the Scala Theatre, and performances by sopranos, pianists and violinists. Foreign newspapers gush about the fine sandy beach, the seafront hotels like royal palaces, the endless dunes on the east bank and beyond Mariakerke.

'Book early! The weather is always good on the Belgian coast!'

Joyce peruses the leaflets with delight. He wants to know how people write about seaside resorts, the adjectives and metaphors therein.

Georges also adores tourism. He is mad about foreign languages. French, this is a given in Ostend, but the language he likes to speak the most is English. He also knows German and Italian, a smattering of Spanish and thirty words of Russian. Every conversation is a chance to guess a person's nationality. His customers are forever different, yet always the same.

Take the Irish tourist. He is mondaine yet a man of the people, unpretentious, always at ease. A jovial type of show-off, yet unlike most tourists, his mannerisms are neither sluggish nor lazy. He is busy, he boasts, is occupied with correspondence and publishing matters. Discussions about royalties, pre-publications and translations. He spontaneously imparts all this to Georges, fluttering his right hand a little as though tinkling on a tall piano.

Georges studies the letter his colleague has just passed him. Undeliverable missives are one of his professional sub-tasks. Difficult cases from non-European countries are Georges' speciality. This letter hails from Tiflis, capital of Georgia, in the Caucasus, below Russia. He can tell by the stamp and the frank. The envelope has *Belgique / Ostende* written on it, but the addressee and the street name are elaborated in strange letters: the Georgian alphabet is different, more like Hebrew. Comparing it with examples in his personal notebook, Georges translates the address: the recipient simply lives on Berlijnstraat.

On 10 August, the Joyce family decamp from the Hôtel Littoral Palace to the Hôtel Royal du Phare on the Promenade. It is cheaper, closer to the fishing port and not far from the small lighthouse. On his second visit to the Post Office, it's the first thing that he imparts to Georges. From then on, Joyce visits on a daily basis. If he fails to spot Georges at counter four, he goes back later.

Joyce will spend a month in Ostend. Paris was too hot for him, and besides, an Irishman longs for the sea. He asks Georges if there is an international bookshop in Ostend.

'Round the corner,' says Georges. '44 Adolf Buylstraat, Mathieu Corman recently opened something there.'

Uninvited and with no detail spared, Joyce now wants to tell the story of how, just yesterday, he'd run into an old friend in the pharmacy on Square Marie-José.

Meanwhile, Georges organises the sheets of stamps in his folder.

'Oh yes, what?' asks Georges.

'Well yes, I bought *ouattes* to take care of my eyes.'

It appears that the pharmacist recognised the author. And it turns out that he's huge admirer, the proud owner of several first editions of Joyce's books. The pharmacist couldn't believe his eyes at the sudden appearance of his greatest idol. Greatest idol? It sounds arrogant the way Joyce put it, but perhaps it was meant ironically.

'So you're a writer then?' enquires Georges. His question has a more matter-of-fact ring to it.

'I'm the author of *Ulysses*,' says James Joyce, sticking his writer's nose in the air.

It is also incredible. The writer was spotted the minute he exited the Post Office the day before. A man was standing in the doorway of the *Pharmacie anglaise*, basking in the summery morning sunshine. Plump, fifty-something, moustachioed. He broke into a broad smile. He was beaming. Speechless, he scrutinised the gentleman who approached him, the writer as a *deus ex machina*, whereupon Joyce, muddled by the unexpected attention, entered the pharmacy. He needed medical-grade cotton wool for his eyes.

The man darted in after him, donned the white pharmacy coat and positioned himself behind the shop counter.

'*Ouattes*,' said Joyce in French.

'*Wadde?*' the man enquired in the local dialect.

'*Ouattes*.'

'*Cotton wool*,' corrected the man behind the counter. In fluent English, he introduced himself as Patrick Hoey, assistant pharmacist.

'Um,' said Joyce. Could he also buy some lemon soap? Tiny, elegant packages of soap were stacked in a pyramid beside the till.

'I'm Patrick! Patrick Hoey! You know me!'

Did Joyce know him? This distinguished fellow, this stout, apple-cheeked man? Perhaps he did. Vaguely. Was this Patrick one of his earliest fans? Patrick Hoey lost no time in recounting the multiple meetings that had long since melted, dissolved and disintegrated in Joyce's cosmopolitan mind. Joyce murmured his excuses: famous writers do not commit the faces of their dear readers to

memory. Besides, Hoey is a common-or-garden Irish name, rather like Murphy and O'Brien. Rubbing his painful eyes, Joyce said, 'I'm looking for medical-grade cotton wool. Iritis, irritation from recent...'

'Twenty-four years ago,' Hoey insisted.

Joyce tentatively nodded his head.

'When you left Dublin for Paris?' added Hoey. 'We sat diagonally across from each other at the farewell dinner.'

Yes maybe, yes, well, now that Hoey put it that way. Their paths seemed to have crossed once more at a dinner party in Dublin. This Hoey, with his gift of the gab, was a cultivated bibliophile, an autograph hunter to boot, far too pushy and sociable for Joyce's liking, who preferred to seek out his own interlocutors.

The adulation sometimes gets to him. Writers just want to write and be read, leave them alone. Joyce would rather natter to doormen and postal clerks.

But the writer was flattered. The more sophisticated the city, the greater the chances of being known and recognised, surely? He felt that he was expected here, as though he was coming home to Ostend. Besides, Hoey's an Irishman. His manner of speaking made Joyce feel as though he was listening to himself: an Irishman in Ostend.

'He's as garrulous as me. Just as jovial and just as joyous as myself, *I, io, moi*, like I, I'll call myself Shem in my next book.'

Joyce tells all this to Georges, who is utterly baffled. The queue grows ever longer. Joyce persists, tries again and explains: '*Joyeux, Joyes*, Joyce in Irish is Sheehy or Hoey. The Irish change *j* to *sh*. For example, James is Sheumas, John Shaun. Hoey is Shaun and that's me.'

He asks if Georges understands him.

It's early, but Georges wonders if the Irishman has been drinking.

But in the writer's defence: it's hard to recognise people when you can't see properly. Joyce is increasingly thrown into a panic by his failing eyesight. Four years ago, an ophthalmologist in Nice had used leeches to remove the blood from his eyes. The one in Paris had suggested surgery. Joyce had prevaricated. His left eye was eventually operated upon but the right had fallen prey to conjunctivitis. Joyce mutters: 'Conjunctivitis is an infection of the conjunctiva, blepharitis is an inflammation of the eyelid, retinitis is...'

The extent of Joyce's interest in the city is a moot point. He is famous for *Ulysses*, with its meticulous hour-by-hour description of Dublin on 16 June 1904. In it, he conquered time like no other. Joyce is merely a tourist in Ostend; he is on holiday. He strolls while he forgets. The tourist is indolent, wealthy and happy when the sun shines on the beach and terrace.

But it pleases him to stay in the young, prosperous city. Joyce takes a daily walk. It does him good. He buys a new hat in Jacqueloot on Rue de la Wittenonnen. A *chevalier* or Paris hat, also called a *canotier*, fashioned from rice straw with a silk or satin band. The straw hat reminds him of the Italian rice fields.

Oh Italy, oh Trieste, where he'd taught before leaving for Paris.

The Joyce family has a flutter on the horses at the Wellington racetrack. Joyce, the father, gambles to satisfy his daughter Lucia's whims. They lose in spectacular style but, heads held high, thoroughly enjoy themselves. There's no need to watch the pennies due to the low rate of the Belgian franc. James has been drinking too much. They dine out every night and don't hold back on the wine. Nora red, James always white. It's better for his eyes.

They walk past Fort Napoleon on the east bank. It reminds him of Dublin, especially the Martello tower, but perhaps it is just his watery eyes. Every image, everything he sees, is blurred and magnified, lacking in depth. Meanwhile, his wife and daughter take family snapshots by the sea, on a terrace, in the dunes.

'Do you ever take photographs yourself?' Georges asks him at the counter.

Joyce taps his eye patch. 'It's not easy for a semi-blind person to focus.'

'Or do you swim?'

'I still need to purchase a swimming costume. Blue or red is all the rage in Ostend, so Nora tells me, but *all the shups waare to*.'

Surprised, Georges looks up. Has the Irish tourist already picked up the local dialect, after just a couple of days?

'Well, all the shops were closed,' Joyce translates. He had recorded *the shups* phrase in his notebook.

Joyce presents his jotter. He has been transcribing all kinds of Flemish words, with French translations alongside, from the moment he arrived. Words such as *kalvers, blood, somtijds*. And *geëten*. The latter ought to be *gegeten*, but they actually say *hebëten* in Ostend, which the writer finds highly amusing, *vrië heistig*, and he leans towards the counter in an appropriately loud and expressive manner.

Georges is convinced that every new batch of tourists includes at least one buffoon. This time, it happens to be a writer.

'So, there's something wrong with your eyes, Mr Joyce?'

'Yes, I can see that myself.'

'Was it the war?'

The writer shakes his head and adjusts the black patch on his eye. The misery started ten years ago. Green cataracts, like those of the poet Homer. It was an insidious phrase the doctor bestowed upon him: 'The operation on the iris is a success, but with a permanent reduction in vision.'

Georges Vermeire swallows. He'd assumed otherwise. He'd been in the trenches himself, '14-'18, a war volunteer in the Westhoek. At night, he can still see the men staggering around with wet linen cloths over their faces. Gas, an Yperite attack, the German mustard gas. Joyce's war was very different. When the conflict had started in Europe, he'd been teaching in Trieste. His students were conscripted, the city was under siege from land and air, and Joyce had moved to neutral Switzerland. He wrote romantic poems. Under no circumstances did he want to die for a fatherland. Which fatherland, whose fatherland anyway?

'No, let Ireland die for me,' he mutters.

The conversation stalls. High time too, as the queue behind him is getting longer and longer. Joyce leaves the post office. That afternoon, he takes a long walk to Mariakerke with his family. The pharmacy assistant, Patrick Hoey, has invited himself along. He talks nineteen to the dozen, but Joyce wallows in the endless stream of banter. The Irish love that kind of thing. Life is a theatre, with plenty of singing and hollering, and he feels at one with his tourist status in Ostend. Tourists are like flocks of birds. They are flighty, easily distracted, and forget tomorrow what they wax lyrical about today. At the same time, something happens because of that distraction. It triggers Joyce's memory, his sensitivity to atmospheres. Something approaches and appears, a sliver of real life. Joyce calls it, at best, an epiphany, as in religious experiences and writings.

The family return to the racetrack. Once again, they lose in jubilant style. They gaze into the shop window of a jeweller on Kapellestraat. James Joyce listens carefully to Nora and his daughter's conversation with the shopkeeper. The writer keeps schtum, doesn't interfere. He simply jots down a few words and their translations: 'cheap' and 'bought' are *pas cher* and *acheté*.

And also: *La bague est précieuse*.

That's to say: the ring is precious.

All three delight in the colours of a picture-postcard sunset. Joyce notes: this is by far the best place we have been in for a summer holiday. He writes this on a card to his publisher. He also sends a telegram and letter, the latter on Hôtel Royal du Phare stationery.

'How do you say *postman* in Flemish?' Joyce asks Georges in English.

'Also postman,' Georges replies in Dutch.

‘Then you are Georges-Shaun-the-postman and I am Jim-Shem-the-penman.’

‘*Rarentist*, that Irish artist,’ thinks Georges. An Ostend tourist who won’t even go for a swim.

In the meantime, the Joyce family has moved again. They exchanged the Hôtel Royal du Phare for Hôtel de l’Océan, also on the Promenade. Nora had been harping on about the recalcitrant staff. She’d done the same job herself back in Dublin, as a young girl. The new hotel was another of Georges’ tips: L’Océan might cost more but it has a beautiful, quiet and secluded garden. From their third-floor room, the Joyces have a panoramic view of the sea.

Joyce sleeps late and lingers in bed. Lazily, from his place of repose, he asks Nora about their evening plans. Something at the Scala, at the Théâtre Royal? After breakfast, he passes the time in the hotel garden. He peruses the English and French newspapers. They even have the Dublin press. He plays the piano in the lounge. It is allowed, he didn’t even need to ask. When the phone rings, Joyce pricks up his ears. The receptionist at the desk says: ‘*Ici le portier de l’Océan.*’

Joyce is enraptured when he hears the words.

Who wouldn’t want to be one, a porter to the ocean? Face-to-face with the sea each day, guarding its comings and goings. It has been twenty-two years since James left Ireland with Nora. With a touch of heroism, unironically, he describes it as a voluntary exile. On the run from Irish poverty, Catholics and Home Rule nationalists. They have roamed Europe ever since, as expats: Rome and Trieste in Italy, Switzerland’s Zurich, holidays in Locarno and Nice, domiciled in Paris for the past six years. With varying degrees of success, he teaches English to wealthy businessmen for Berlitz.

Joyce survives between homesickness and antipathy towards his homeland. He describes himself as a hunted animal. In reality, he enjoys the sense of betrayal. Unable to contain his restlessness, he likes to impart it to other susceptible souls.

He stares at the sea. He imagines it through his afflicted eyes: Ireland on the far horizon. It’s geographical nonsense of course, because England lies in between, but the salty sea, yes, the snotgreen, scrotumtightening sea, and the pungent, rank stench of fish all evoke his homeland. He didn’t leave Ireland, he boasts, Ireland spat him out.

In Ostend, he likes to walk alone on the hard sand along the waterline. Like a Ulysses, he watches the sea, the women, the seashell hunters. Children sell paper flowers on the beach in exchange for shells. Flowers, *des fleurs, bloemen*, the simple German *Blum* or English ‘bloom’, meaning blossom.

As he walks, his consciousness flows. Everything plays freely through his mind. He occasionally sings on the beach. Sometimes quietly, sometimes with gusto, in his beautiful tenor. He had been taking lessons, but stopped when the money ran out. Joyce sings something by John Dowland, *Weep You No More, Sad Fountains*.

He suddenly finds himself humming a short poem. A piece he’d written in Trieste over a decade ago, ‘Simples’, because in English, ‘simple’ also means a medicinal plant. A healing herb. Joyce has never been fond of flowers, he prefers greenery, trees, grass. Flowers are boring, overly explicit.

This is how his consciousness flows when he walks.

Tiring though it is.

Back in Ostend, Joyce visits the Post Office to ask about his post. It suddenly dawns on him: he, the writer, is asking precisely the same question as his character, Bloom, in *Ulysses*. Chapter Two, Episode Two, halfway down the second page. It leaves the writer ambivalent; he is repeating himself. What on earth is he doing in Ostend?

He is playing the tourist. A tourist is a contented person on the move.

Joyce once again submits a few words for Georges to translate. Language lessons for a tourist. When Joyce had been teaching himself, in Trieste or Paris, he’d done much the same thing. Small conversations, learning word lists by heart. Joyce leaves and immediately vanishes from sight.

The postman looks after him, follows him in his mind’s eye.



Can you step outside yourself, simply by taking an imaginary walk with someone? Be someone else, live inside another? So that your soul departs and takes up temporary residence elsewhere, like moving into a hotel room, experiencing another soul in its lightest form, without anyone ever knowing. Just a name in a hotel guestbook. The thought appeals to the postal worker.

Georges suddenly recalls the Georgian letter for Berlijnstraat. He'd simply written Berlijnstraat on it, although the street had changed name. It wasn't like he didn't know. Berlijnstraat had been renamed IJzerstraat. Just as Wenenstraat is now Kemmelbergstraat, and Duitslandstraat is a very neutral, ordinary even, Acacialaan. He'd slipped up, and all because of the Great War.

On 16 August, A severe summer storm sweeps across large parts of Europe. The violent thunder keeps the Joyce family awake all night. James Joyce sits at the window, as though in a theatre box, while his wife and daughter try to sleep. It is a ferocious and voluptuous spectacle, Wagnerian even, when viewed from the third floor.

Joyce has always been afraid of lightning. He creeps downstairs and nervously asks the porter whether the hotel is fitted with a lightning rod. Affirmative. But this doesn't stop him jumping out of his skin with every thunderclap. He mutters *jeeshee* as the hotel quivers with lightning, *kaminari* as it thunders. He is speaking in Japanese: *jishin* is earthquake, and *kaminari* means thunder, God only knows where he picked up such expressions. The writer plays with words even when anxious.

The following day, he takes a solo trip to Middelkerke on the tram. He walks back, making a note of all the flotsam and jetsam. Heaps of wreckage, and all kinds of seaweed, from rockvine and bladderwrack to dabberlocks. Green bottles, rare shells, a whale bone. He recites the names of everything he spies. Words accumulate, like waves crashing over each other, and he scribbles a few down for his next book. It will be even more playful than *Ulysses*, fantastical, devious. His next work will be magisterial. But right now, it's just a mess.

On his way back, he enters the church of Our Lady of the Dunes. He studies the miniature boats gathered around the Virgin, who is clothed in a fabric gown. They are fishermen's offerings for protection at sea, popular devotion. As he takes a seat, the organ surges into life from behind. Joyce recognises the refrain. It is Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck's *My Young Life has Ended*.

Joyce sings it aloud, *Youth has an end, the end is here*.

There is no denying it. His youth is spent, he has a family, he is finally an adult. He is missing his son, he reflects. Giorgio, in *Italiano*, because he was born in Trieste under the Italian sun. Nora calls him Georgie. The boy is named after Joyce's brother, George, who died young.

After the long walk, he takes a couple of letters to the post office.

Georges has grown accustomed to this daily visit. He is intrigued. Mathieu Corman thinks that Joyce is an anarchist, a godless socialist, who bows before nothing and no one. Georges has spotted him on Sundays at the Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Joyce saunters down the aisle during the service. Always the tourist. He inspects the queen's mausoleum, hands clasped behind his back. His voyeuristic eyes linger on the white Carrara marble. Georges is startled when Joyce slides in beside him. Joyce shows him his notebook of verbal discoveries.

Written inside: *Dien est partout*.

Georges nods: 'God is overal.'

Joyce makes a note.

Meanwhile, back in the hotel room at L'Océan, Lucia takes a snapshot of her mother with a wastepaper basket on her head. It's funny what the two women get up to while Joyce is wandering around Ostend, jotting down words. He does it systematically. He pronounces them, savours them. His ears are sharper than his eyes.

Joyce speaks French to Georges, and Georges speaks English to Joyce. While Joyce offers up a postcard for franking, Georges translates a few words for him: nobody is *niemand*, basket is *maand*, ribbon is *lint*.

Joyce scribbles the words in his notebook and leaves. Georges glances after him, once more following him in his mind's eye. Metempsychosis, the migration of the soul, a subject on which Joyce has also written. Spontaneous reincarnation, neither carnal nor personal, but just as elastic, ephemeral. Merely the fleeting banter between a postal clerk and a writer. At work, Georges likes to talk to strangers, no two are ever the same. But he is the silent one at home. He has a gloomy side, he needs distractions. And both gentleness and peace to drive out the old demons.

Georges Vermeire, 3rd Regiment of the Line, has kept some bits and pieces from the First World War: two Yser Medals and his red 'Fire Card'. For him, they still mean flashes of agony, a constant mourning for fallen friends. Not to mention a distrust of humanity and survivor's guilt. And his lungs are playing up. He cannot breathe deeply, yet another daily reminder. It becomes chronic when the coastal city is enveloped in fog.

And yet he is healed by the sea air and the refuge that is counter number four. At the end of the day, he returns home to Plantenstraat and his young family.

He thinks of Joyce and his family outing to the war memorial in Nieuwpoort, which lies on the Yser estuary. It is where King Albert I sits solidly on his horse. Joyce loathes all that patriotic stuff and nonsense. He scoffs at it. That evening, Georges argues with his wife Solina. It's trivial, over the food again: Georges is still revulsed by sight of red meat. Images of the war haunt his nocturnal hours. Which explains the postal clerk's devotion to his job. Letters travelling between countries, the coexistence of languages, their ingenious confluences, the orderly presentation of envelopes at his counter: it is the pinnacle of civilisation. The genius of the postal system. From behind his desk, he answers benign questions about letter size, weight, postage rates. In between translating innocent words for an Irish writer, day after day. What more could a man desire?

Joyce also asks him linguistic questions in reverse: 'How do you say *partir, là-bas, ami, tort, vieux* and *dommage* in Flemish?'

As Georges tears a long strip of stamps from his sheet, he replies: '*Vertrekken, ginder, vriend, ongelijk, oud* and *jammer*.'

Joyce takes meticulous notes. The queue behind him is lengthening, but he doesn't pay the slightest heed.

'And how do you say *faible, reposer, tartine, beau livre* and *quelle heure est-il*?'

Georges once again translates each word. Concluding with an off-the-cuff remark about the late hour, as a friendly hint to let others have their turn. Joyce doesn't hear it, doesn't want to hear. Georges thinks that he's a *franke schoe*, a *foefelaar* and a *tsjaffelaar*, but is charmed by the writer, nonetheless.

Back at the hotel, Joyce pesters the *portier de l'Océan*. He wants to extract a few culinary words from him: *noten, room, melk, erwten, eieren*.

After which, he takes a seat on a terrace, all by himself. He drinks and listens, filching words and scribbling notes. That's the trick: listening to an array of voices, following every utterance, attentive to the echoes, understanding even the murmurs, and watching what transpires. Transcribing it all. It is part and parcel of his restlessness. That evening, he visits a bar with Hoey. They talk about astronomy, Ireland and the Jesuits. They drink, sing and hurl themselves around; Joyce does his spider dance. Upon his return, it is the *portier de l'Océan* who opens the door. Joyce extends a limp hand.

A brown-paper parcel, addressed to Joyce, arrives in Ostend on 24 August. It is the 900-page, German translation of *Ulysses*. Georges deposits it in his hands. Joyce immediately sends a telegram to confirm its safe arrival.

Georg Goyert, the German translator, appears a few days later. Joyce scrutinises the text with him. They work from dawn to dusk in Georg's hotel room or the Hôtel Helvetia's lounge. Joyce has but a single reprieve: he is permitted to send a birthday card to an acquaintance in Paris.

'It's drudgery,' Joyce sighs at the counter. 'Eighty-eight pages in four days. We'll never finish at this rate. By the way, do you know my German translator's name?'

Georges does not.

'Georg, *ja wohl*, Georg Goyert. And my French translator is Georges Pelorson. Their names do something to me. As does yours, and my son's, of course.'

Joyce sighs. Here in Ostend, he is missing his son Giorgio, who is slightly younger than Georges and can sing beautifully. He recently resigned from the bank, yet his superior won't grant his last few days of annual leave.

'Ah, Giorgio, George, Georges,' sighs Joyce.

It's simple: Joyce has a soft spot for anyone called George, irrespective of spelling. The reason: it was his younger brother's name, his favourite one, who died young. Not even fifteen. James, the elder sibling, sang him a Yeats poem when he was on his sickbed. He intoned *Who Goes with Fergus* in a mellifluous tenor. Everyone started to weep, it was so sad, so terribly sentimental, but it comforted his brother. He died of peritonitis not long afterwards.

Joyce quickly and quietly sings the song to Georges behind the counter.

*Who will go drive with Fergus now,  
And pierce the deep wood's woven shade,  
And dance upon the level shore?  
Young man, lift up your russet brow,  
And lift your tender eyelids, maid,  
And brood on hopes and fear no more.*

*And no more turn aside and brood  
Upon love's bitter mystery;  
For Fergus rules the brazen cars,  
And rules the shadows of the wood,  
And the white breast of the dim sea  
And all dishevelled wandering stars.*

It never fails to move the writer, which compels him to sing it, and Georges is also touched. There is a lull at the counter and Joyce spontaneously explains the verse: 'It is the forest god Fergus, who rides out with him, to go deep into the forest, where they will dance on the floodplains, yes, dance on the floodplains. And the young man must raise his bronzed brow, and the young girl open her tender eyelids, and they must cherish hope, fear no more, no, fear no more, and cherish hope.'

'Nor must they turn away or doubt love's cruel mysteries. For Fergus is driving the brazen car, yes Fergus is driving the brazen car, and he rules over the forest shadows, over the white breast of the hazy sea and over all the confused wandering stars, yes, stars that wander in confusion.'

In *Ulysses*, Joyce wrote that he had sung the song to his dying mother. But he lied. It was to his beloved brother. Even his deepest sorrows are woven into the book. Something happens to his memories, they become convoluted, unreliable, sometimes even shameless. He nurtures his animosities just as

meticulously. Perhaps the quiet, wily exile wouldn't be who he is without the rancour. So it would seem. He had even learned to sin so that he could quit the church. While he is thinking all this, Nora is visiting the Capuchin church on the Mijnplein. She loves the gloom and the sailors' ex-voto ships. She lights a candle for her husband's afflicted eyes, one for her son's singing career, and two out of general unease about their daughter. There is something amiss. Did they raise her well, in their artistic household? Nora feels guilty. But not her husband, who believes that everything will be fine, which is what he invariably thinks.

When Joyce stops at the post office a few days later, he addresses Georges as Giorgio by mistake. Wiping the perspiration from his forehead, he smiles shyly, yes, the illustrious writer, can you imagine? 'It's too hot in Ostend,' he says. He has been slaving away on the German translation.

Joyce sometimes calls his son Oigroig, he says. The backwards spelling of his name, which makes him, in turn, Obbab, which is *Babbo* in reverse, Italian for Daddy.

'But just ask your son to come, Ostend will do him good,' says Georges.

Joyce looks up. Georges' remark has caught him off guard. Naturally, Joyce hastens to a writing desk to pen a note.

*Caro Giorgio, secondo me hai gran bisogno  
di cambiamento total di vita. Dunque viene qui,  
non necessariamente per restare  
ma almeno per un po' di giorni eppoi si vedrà.*

Yes, his dear son needs to change his life, ideally completely, and he should come to Ostend, not necessarily for an extended stay, but at least for a few days. And after that, we will see.

'My son is a good swimmer, a two-mile champion,' Joyce boasts. 'And he has a beautiful bass voice. He is destined to sing *Il Trovatore* or *Rigoletto*.'

Joyce extends his deepest thanks to the postal worker. It appears that Georges must personally oversee this communication, which he does. Georges drops the letter into the postbox.

But as he does so, the clerk thinks: what a likeable but strange creature that Joyce is. The *snateraar*, the *wroetelaar*, that *babbeltote*.

The Georgian dead letter has reappeared on his desk. Had he not forwarded it, then? Well, well, well, of course. It had slipped his mind: Berlijnstraat no longer exists in Ostend.

Everyone does their best to forget the Great War. He crosses out Berlijnstraat and writes IJzerstraat. He tosses the envelope into the outgoing mail, but the postmark catches his eye for a second.

The Georgian stamp is simple, monochrome and states its country of origin: *La Géorgie*. It resembles an oriental carpet in miniature. A knight on horseback stands in the centre, Saint George of course, his horse rearing up below a canopy of sun, moon and stars. Georges has always been sympathetic to this small, far-flung republic in the Caucasus, located somewhere between Europe and Asia.

Why? Because of the name, of course.

As the evening sun sinks towards the horizon in a majestic gold and red flourish, the three Joyces sit on a bench on the Promenade. The two women natter as usual; their male companion listens with half an ear. He drinks in the surroundings. The twilight hues weigh heavily on his closed eyelids. Sometimes, he is choked with fear at the thought of losing his eyesight. The children call him blind man, and *il cieco*, but it's meant to be funny.

Joyce stares vacantly at his distant, invisible homeland. It is almost within touching distance, but out of sight. He strains his eyes to see, just briefly. He hears Yeats' song in the dark forest again.

Joyce walks along the beach by himself. He knows it better than anyone. He is a word thief. Nothing is sacred to a writer. The sound of someone singing an Ostend song, over and over again, reaches his ears. He is sharing the beach with a father and his infant son. Joyce pricks up his ears. He recognises a few words. The local dialect sounds, now and again, a bit like Anglo-Irish. Joyce loves its throaty, common, somewhat vulgar sounds.

*Je kad hem zien ol woar je blénde...*

Which sounds like:

*You'd have to be blind not to see it...*

It seems to be a song about blindness or blinding. Which speaks to a writer with deteriorating eyesight. The song comprises two or three melodious verses, each followed by a short refrain, which is rattled off at the top of the voice. A boisterous argy-bargy of words, totally unintelligible, but Joyce records a few anyway: *maan, suiker, zee* and *dansen*.

The song swallows Joyce up, with his sticky, puffy eyes. So this is how an Ostend father in Ostend teaches his Ostend son to sing, in the Ostend dialect. It warms his heart.

Yes, his son must come here, urgently. Abandon the prim-and-proper bank job. Why not launch a singing career, or embark on something just as artistic?

Later that evening, back in the hotel room, Lucia absentmindedly picks at a floral blanket. James watches her pale, nervous fingers. It is sweltering out outside. He is thirsty, which was also his father's trouble, an Irish foible. At 10.30, when his wife and daughter are fast asleep, he slips out of the hotel room. He tiptoes down the stairs, as quiet as mouse, feeling his way by touch.

'Goodnight, Mr Joyce,' whispers the *portier de l'Océan*.

Joyce walks along the promenade in the direction of Mariakerke. The air is noticeably cooler. He has found the solitude that he has been craving. The moon sits high in the sky, the waves rush ashore. Here in Ostend, the city borders the sea, it has its feet in the water, not unlike Trieste. From the terrace of the *Hôtel de l'Océan*, he can step straight into the waves, revisit his time in Italy. Well, in a manner of speaking. It sends him into a tailspin. The poems he'd written in Trieste were deeply personal. Sentimental and, unusually for him, sincere. They concerned his son, his daughter, even a dalliance of his own, 'but don't blow it out of proportion, it was innocent and it ended.'

He strolls along the barely illuminated promenade in the moonlight. The air is still, which soothes his painful eyes. And is also good for his rheumatism, which is exacerbated by wind.

Joyce croons and hums. He sings. The promenade is deserted, except for a perfumed painter with stomach ache. Joyce watches the small, moonlit waves lapping onto the beach, which reminds him of the poem about his daughter. He casts his mind back to Lucia, in the garden at night, just an innocent young girl. Singing while picking herbs. Holding a white rose.

He is surprised at his near perfect recall of his decade-old poems. The reason: they're doggerel, and a singer automatically remembers such things. In Ostend, they return to him one by one. His children were eight and nine at the time. Something compelled him to bare his soul and turn it into poetry. Well, everything is art, anything can be transformed into art.

Is it because of the moon? He is convinced it has changed its position since last week.

Moonlight, moon dew, moongrey.

*Moongrey*, a word of his own invention.

He'd not been embarrassed to use romantic words in his poems. He had not even noticed them until much later: all those endless variations on hearts, moon, stars, night and darkness. Not to mention multiple allusions to love, loveward, loveblown, beloved and even more references to passion and heartbreak. Remarkable: he was unafraid to call a spade a spade back then.

He finds himself singing a poem on the Promenade, about his young son on the cold beach at Fontana. Giorgio was nine. Joyce had felt the weightless, fragile bones in the pale, shivering boy's body. That his old poems and memories can summon time back, reopen it: he is amazed at his conjuring abilities. It is akin a cupboard; in which everything is stashed, neatly arranged or in a jumbled mess, but all of which now connects effortlessly with the seaside walk.

He also sings the poem for his daughter. It begins with an innocuous hit song from way back then, *O bella bionda, sei come l'onda*. As he sings, he listens to his own sweet, contemporaneous words. Does he doubt them? Is he embarrassed?

Surely you never doubt yourself, Jim, he thinks. Or are you getting old, Jamesie? Joyce is forty-four. He is the same age as when his mother died, too young, and after eleven pregnancies. His best book is already behind him, or so they say. See, you're running out of time, Jim. By the way, what about that next book of yours, Jamesie?

Again, he sings the poem to his daughter. He is often consumed with love for Lucia when they are apart. There is something about her, which he is reluctant to name, especially when Nora brings it up.

The following day, the trio pay a visit to the airport at Stene. They spectate. Crowds of well-dressed people from Ostend but also some of the polder farmers come to gawp, their big hands behind their backs. Joyce dislikes planes, all those dangerous landings and take-offs, all that bouncing across the airfield. Lucia shoves the camera into her father's hands and issues commands. Brutally: 'And please don't move the camera.'

James Joyce presses the shutter.

She complains: 'Not again, not another blurred picture.'

Joyce feels a brief flash of resentment towards his mature but immature daughter. Her staring at the clouds isn't normal. It's as if she's listening to them. She says the clouds speak to her.

He pleads with her: 'You can see that I can't see properly, can't you?'

When the Ostend locals gather at the lighthouse, they often sing the aforementioned song. It's about the phare, which even a blind person can see, which shines brighter than the moon or a bald head in flames or some other type of lantern. In the local dialect it goes like this:

*Leve de torre van Osténde,  
je kud hem zien ol woar je blénde.  
Kloarder of de moane, of e kletsekop in brand,  
't Er is hijj ijn lantijm die an uze torre kant.*

The chorus follows, which is rattled off at the top of the voice:

*Hoane moane suukerde kroane piempaljoene lijze,  
oender de zjij, potjekarij, daansn de piempernelletjes.*

What exactly are they singing about? Joyce noted the words to the best of his ability on Hôtel de l'Océan notepaper. He submits the lyrics to Georges at the counter.

Georges shakes his head: he considers it impossible to translate. It's a mish-mash of words, which only make sense individually.

'Let's try anyway,' says Joyce. 'For a start, who or what is Shoane?'

'It is not *shoane* but *hoane*, a rooster.' One by one, Georges explains the different words. It's about a rooster, the moon, *sucre de canne*, which is cane sugar or a sugar stick. Joyce meticulously notes *sucre de canne, piece of sugar*.

According to Joyce, this means, thus far: 'The moon, as red as a cockscomb, hangs there in a red or rosy glow.'

'*Piempaljoene*,' says Georges, 'is dialect for ladybirds. And *lijze* is probably boots.'

'And what is *potjekarij*?'

'A child's game, like Kick the Can. But it can also mean apothecary. In Ostend, we use it for pots and pans. *Piempernelles* are confetti, but at the same time: *nelletjes* are girls, and *piepers* are kisses.'

Word for word, Georges elucidates the chorus to the best of his ability.

Joyce summarises: 'A blood moon. Red as a cockscomb. Booted ladybirds, playing tag under the sea, *potje carré*, and dancing confetti. Something like that?'

Georges shrugs his shoulders. It is gobbledygook. Untranslatable. To his mind, it's just a string of words that sound good together.

Two days later, the Ostend postal clerk meets the Irish writer on the Klein Strand, near the lighthouse. Joyce sits on a rock staring out to sea. Homesickness: that's the name of the land that shines blue on the horizon, and which no one else can see. Always and everywhere, everyone comes from elsewhere.

Georges Vermeire happens to be on the beach with his young family: his wife Solina and the two children. Georges, in a bathing costume, will go for a swim. But he first comes to say hello to Joyce, his young daughter on his arm. He presents little Georgina, an adorable child, but he feels exposed and uncomfortable in his costume. Possibly because of the scar. It looks as though someone has taken a pencil and drawn a long, thin line down his leg. Another souvenir of the war.

The postal worker swims, while the writer reclines on the sand. Joyce refrains from bathing. Under no circumstances does he want to get sea water in his eyes. Occasionally he scribbles something in his notebook: words that he overhears. Relaxing, closing his eyes again, soaking up the warmth of the sand, like a stone in the sunshine.

The little girl, barefoot, toddles towards Joyce. She removes shells from her red-and-white checked apron. One by one, she slips them into Joyce's coat pocket. The writer doesn't protest.

Little Georgina is tireless. She runs to collect more shells, which she also hands to Joyce. He is not quite sure what to do with them.

He seems to have forgotten how to deal with little girls. Is it because of his ailing, watery eyes that he finds this so deeply moving? She only desists when he gives her a coin.

It is a long, hot afternoon. The tourists pack up again and head back to their rooms.

Later that evening, Joyce rediscovers the shells in his jacket pocket. He arranges them on the windowsill. Twelve, no thirteen, as many as he has old poems lying around. Couldn't he publish them? Aren't there enough for a little book? For a writer, time is measured in finished works, so the time is right for a slim volume, an attractive little *libricciattoluccio* of classic poetry, replete with personal sentiment. Anything can be art! He immediately comes up with a title, *Pomes Penyeach*, like green apples, but equally *poèmes* or *poems*, a penny each. Such a book is bound to find a readership. To be discussed in Paris with his publisher. He will write a note about it, no delay.

Lucia hums something he can't quite put his finger on.

'Sing it a bit higher, sing it falsetto,' he advises.

She sings it higher. It sounds better. It is curious the way his daughter looks at him. She has always had a slight squint. She hates the little scar on her chin. And suffers from sudden mood swings, but isn't that typical of all young women? Will he buy her a fur coat? Or something else?

At night, when she feels bad, he sings her songs or rubs her feet. Lucia dotes on her father and sometimes mimics him, perfectly capturing his haughty way of speaking. He listens, intrigued, when she utters such inanities. He thinks that can foretell things. Is she as much of a genius as himself?

The Georgian letter has landed back on Georges' desk for a third time. It had been refused on IJzerstraat. The addressee has disappeared without a trace, and there is no return address on the back of the envelope. Georges re-examines the stamps. Besides the Georgian one, there is another that looks Russian, he hadn't noticed it previously. Sepia-coloured, hammer and sickle, and Lenin's bald head. Georgia has recently been conquered. It is now called Transcaucasia.

Since the Great War, Georges knows exactly what that means. It is unending.

If only he could live a more carefree and cheerful life, like the writer. That Irish tourist who is having a whale of a time in Ostend and sings his way through life.

You can stroll and saunter along the Promenade without getting sand in your shoes. But walking on the beach is an altogether more superior experience. You just walk ahead, straight into the void. All your darkest desires are blasted forth by the wind. Joyce closes his fragile eyes to the sun.

He is walking with his daughter, while Nora takes an afternoon nap in the hotel room. His daughter: already a strong young woman of nineteen. She is standing on the breakwater. Bored or dreaming, her gaze is fixed. She sighs. He must photograph her, she says.

'Rather not, Lucia, I don't take good pictures, not with my bad eyes.'

Lucia insists: 'Take your time, Daddy.'

James sulks. He can't and he won't.

Nora worries about her. Lucia is erratic, unpredictable. She has a slight squint, yes, and never stops moaning about it. When strolling around town, she is forever checking her reflection in shop windows, like all girls do, and yet Lucia is riddled with self-doubt. She takes after her father, who also talks to himself.

'Just take a picture,' she says.

Joyce is distracted by a young woman on the beach at some remove. She resembles someone he once knew. Joyce feels, yes, what did he feel back then? An old flame from a decade ago, in Trieste, has reappeared in Ostend. Just before the war, he had been a private English tutor to Amalia Popper. At her home, in Via Alice 16. Her father was an insurance broker, her mother a painter, and she hung on her teacher's every word. She was twenty-two to his thirty. He had even admired and analysed her handwriting. He remembered the words of the poem she had inspired. How she had moved like a foal, the lady goes apace, apace, apace... He can recite that poem in the blink of an eye.

Time is a strange plaything; it is different for everyone. Einstein already knew that time is relative to speed and position. Everyone is nostalgic, slowly moving towards non-existent sources or something that is irretrievably lost or broken. A poem even allows you to travel back in time.

Joyce wasn't a teacher who drilled inflections and conjugations into his pupils. He used conversational techniques, dictated word lists. Sometimes, he would fall silent for what felt like an age, staring at his students before suddenly thrusting his hand in the air.

Joyce is confused by the memory. 'A curious thing,' he calls it, that early poem, as he dabs his eyes with a handkerchief.

He cannot discern the Amalia lookalike clearly, it is too windy, the sand is flying everywhere. She sits quietly. She is frail and pale, seems shy. He loved her. He was obsessed with her eyes, but now his own are failing.

Once he has drunk his fill of the image, he doesn't need to look further. He sees an scene from *Ulysses*, Episode 13, Leopold Bloom as the mysterious man on the beach.

The Amalia casts a fleeting glance at him, or that's what he likes to think. Limpid, antelope eyes. She walks towards the sea. As her feet sink into the shifting sand, his writer's eye absorbs her beauty.

He has recited the entire poem in his head. It was the language tutor's secret pleasure: watching Amalia complete her thematic exercise, bathed in the resplendent light. One day, she gave Joyce's six-



year-old daughter, Lucia, a rose. A gesture that immediately made him feel old on account of being the child's father.

His daughter notices him staring. She presses on, impatiently. The wind takes pleasure in ruffling her hair. 'Now take that picture, Obbab,' she says.

Joyce, a half-blind man with an eye patch, quickly takes the snapshot. Too fast, of course. He has jerked the camera again, much to Lucia's chagrin. She refuses to smile in her father's photographs.

'Shall we have a cup of tea, Obbab?'

On the way back to the hotel, he buys a novel by Turgenev, a French edition, at Cormon's bookstall. He suspects the bookseller recognises him, but Joyce does not strike up a conversation. He has no desire to make small talk about fine literature. And yes, let's publish those tender, muddled poems next year.

Giorgio Joyce, his son, arrives at the Ostend railway station on 4 September. Tall, lanky and 1 m 80 in height. He is a serious boy in a three-piece suit, shirt and tie, pocket watch, wearing light summer shoes and a jaunty cap. At last, a fashionable Parisian dandy. An employee of the Banque Nationale de Crédit. Joyce is not impressed. His son should look for a decent job, 'but welcome to Ostend, dear boy'.

First, they walk together to the post office. In the main hall, Joyce shouts: 'Georges!'

With paternal pride, he introduces Giorgio: a bespectacled writer's son. Piercing blue eyes, a younger version of his father, but minus the cane and faulty vision.

'My father needs attention,' his son apologises in a whisper.

The postal clerk introduces himself: 'Georges Vermeire, first-class Post Office clerk.'

'What a coincidence,' says the young man. 'I'm also called George.'

Giorgio has taken to calling himself George these days, in English.

'Do you know my father well?' asks Giorgio. 'Has he taken a dip yet?'

It is a balmy, still day. And a delightful one for the Joyce family, all four of them, because they are reunited. They walk towards Mariakerke and chatter nineteen to the dozen. Lucia plays Schubert on the piano in the hotel lobby, pounding the keys with boisterous energy. Giorgio sings the Fergus song in his angelic voice. The Joyce-Barnacle parents are moved. Joyce enjoys the togetherness.

They eat together on the terrace, the sun having just set. A pinkish, almost reddish film is playing on the water. Joyce walks barefoot on the beach, shoes in hand. And then it happens: the sea sparkles. *Noctiluca scintillans*, *des noctiluques* or *Meeresleuchten*. A rare, natural phenomenon that never fails to enchant, no matter how often it has been witnessed. An ethereal swarm appears just below the surface of the trembling waves. A golden body that simultaneously swirls and floats on the water.

There is a rational, scientific explanation, of course. Sea sparkle is caused by single-celled, spherical, armoured dinoflagellates. A transparent alga no more than a millimetre in size. Neither plant nor animal. This is the source of the bioluminescence that makes the sea look blue.

Joyce is adamant that the moon invokes the sea sparkle. He has seen it in Trieste too, when the moon was visible, red as a cockscomb. Joyce looks back: time flows to the rhythm of the waves. Deep inside his soul, a stream of warm, irresistible melancholy bursts its banks. The luminous, fluorescent ebb and flow is hypnotic, and he can't help but think of his children, who are nearly grown-up.

Which only makes him feel older.

He isn't jealous, he obviously loves them, but there is life in him yet. He is far from finished. It is enough to make the sore-eyed man weep. He returns to the terrace of the Hôtel de l'Océan. His wife, son and daughter are sitting and waiting for him, but they decline his offer to see the sea sparkle. Joyce returns alone.

*Haan, maan, suikermaan.  
Alsof lieveheersbeestjes met laarzen aan tikkertje spelen  
onder de zee – potje carré –  
en kleine lichtbolletjes dansen op het water.*

Look back, he sees his family sitting on the terrace. Vaguely. It pleases him to silently watch them from a distance.

He stares. He is a man of bits and pieces, especially words, lots of words, but he only speaks when it suits him. Is his family a consequence of his yearning for a nest, for a house in which people can gather? To be able to stand at its heart, to hear every word that is spoken, to watch the words dance around him. Luxuriating in its cool silence, listening and gathering fragments, yes, having every right to be there, even when mute. His head is a chaotic diary. He cannot stop repeating his thoughts to himself. ‘Be quiet,’ he says. His fumbling, his writing, it is an endless striving.

‘You be quiet,’ he retorts back.

The ordinary can be extraordinary, thinks Georges, standing behind his post office counter. Nothing is a given, and yet life goes on. We are all heroes, doomed to fail. He is prone to melancholia, especially in summertime; he knows that by now.

Once more, in all earnestness, how do you deal with the loneliness of a dead letter? The rules state: in such circumstances, it is permissible to open the correspondence and seek the sender’s identity. Georges lifts the envelope flap carefully to preserve the contents. The missive is written in those illegible Georgian characters. An address is not apparent.

In most cases, the letter is usually destroyed. Georges places the missive back inside the envelope, glues it shut, and strikes through the Ostend address. But isn’t the name of the recipient still visible?

He hands the letter to Joyce on his next visit. He tells the story. Perhaps the letter will reach its destination in Paris? The city is full of Georgians, or so he’s been told. Why not simply drop it in a post box over there. ‘Will you do that for me?’

Joyce slips it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

The Joyces are a magnificent bunch. They are all slightly eccentric in their own unique way, but all in all, they are just like any other normal family. James watches while men ogle Lucia and Nora on the Promenade. He wants to study their faces, while puffing away on his Virginia cigar.

The quartet burst into song during their walk in the dunes, English and Italian songs, a veritable medley. Giorgio has the sweetest voice and they sing, in unison, the lullaby that Joyce once sang to Lucia:

*C’era una volta, una bella bambina,  
Che si chiamava Lucia –  
Dormiva durante il giorno –  
Dormiva durante il notte*

They revisit the Hippodrome. Horse sweat, clods of earth flung in the air by galloping hooves. Booze aplenty and the promise of quick wins. They lose again.

They swim. Nora is especially fond of swimming and suddenly emits a piercing shriek. She has a vulgar streak, as she’d be the first to admit, but nor is she ashamed. She keeps a watchful eye on her

daughter. James reads Turgenev on the beach, without completely folding the book open. He simultaneously watches them. Joyce never wants to be parted from his family. They are at their strongest when a foursome.

The end of their holidays is fast approaching. The melancholy deepens as September turns the summer to autumn. The Ostend streets grow chilly. You can sense it in the mornings: everyone is much more serious.

That afternoon, postal clerk Georges, ever so slightly tipsy, clutches the railing on the Promenade. He had escaped to the Irish pub during his lunch break. Georges lights a cigarette. He had hoped to run into the writer. He is not to be found. Nor does Joyce stop at the post office on any of the following days. Georges misses their little chats, however futile.

Did Joyce leave without saying a word? Are tourists so thoughtless, so unsophisticated, that they simply settle their hotel bill on the last day of their holiday and just disappear? It's their prerogative.

Georges cannot rationalise why it matters so much. A tourist doesn't owe anything to anyone. Joyce has transcribed Ostend's vocabulary and taken the words with him, which is something, but he seems not to have noticed Georges' actual presence. The stakes were too high.

Still, the postal clerk had expected a final goodbye.

That *galjaar*, *kastaar*, the *droevaar* from Ireland, Paris and Italy. The buffoon who lived in a hotel in neutral Switzerland while Georges was in the trenches.

Georges has a few other sobriquets: the *rare palodder*, the *piezewiet*, that *zwikzwak* is a real *totentrekker*.

But it is all too easy to jump to conclusions.

On 13 September, fifteen minutes before closing, the Joyce family materialise in the main hall of the Post Office. Joyce wants to send one last telegram on the way to the station. Father and son in pole position, mother and daughter bringing up the rear. Joyce taps on the floor with his ash cane once more. Like the conductor of an orchestra.

The two women watch from a distance. In his powerful tenor, Joyce bursts into song, then Giorgio joins in, and they sing a self-translated stanza and refrain from the Ostend ditty. Melodious and wanton, it reverberates around the room. They look like drunken, hollering Irishmen.

*Long live the Ostend lighthouse,  
You' d have to be blind not to see it.  
Brighter than the moon or a baldhead on fire,  
No one can hold a candle to our tower.  
    Rooster moon candy cane,  
    ladybirds in boots,  
    under the sea playing tag  
    the confetti's dancing.*

Georges stands at his counter, perplexed. The duo, father and son, repeat the song, this time with the father singing in English and the son attempting the local dialect. They revel in their audaciousness. Joyce even does a wild, whirling dance. Georges springs up and sings along at the top of his voice.

*Leve de torre van Osténde,  
je kud hem zien ol woar je blénde.  
Kloarder of de moane, of e kletsekop in brand,*

't Er is hij in ijn lantijrn die an uze torre kant.  
Hoane, moane, suukerdekreane,  
piempaljoene lijze,  
oender de zjij, potsjekarij,  
daansn de piempernelletjes.

The Joyce family, the quartet, leave Ostend on 13 September 1926. They take the train to Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels, spending a few days in each of the cities. After which they wend their way back to Paris.

As for the enigmatic Georgian letter: Joyce studies the missive on the long train journey home, having found it in his jacket pocket. Shamelessly, he opens the envelope. The writing leaves him stumped. It is an unintelligible letter, and Joyce can't wait to get rid of it. He yanks the window open and, somewhere between Brussels and Paris, releases it to the wind.

Joyce will later claim that he took forty-three language lessons in Ostend. These were undoubtedly the conversations he had with Georges. Or the occasional chat with an ocean porter. A handful of Ostend words ultimately reached the pages of *Finnegans Wake*. Published in May 1939, it was his last book. Joyce died two years later, aged fifty-nine. The tome is often described as unreadable. It is the fruit of his almost pathological compulsion to find and collect, translate, narrate and connect.

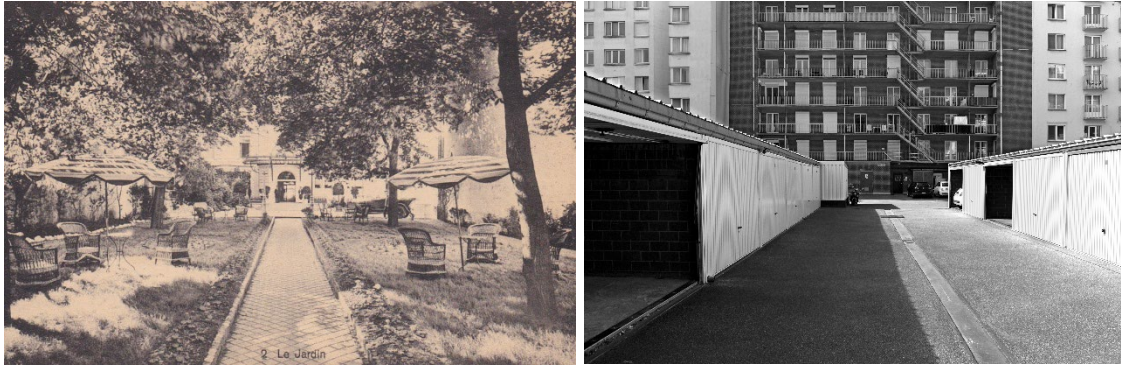
Take, for instance, the word *gorgios* on page one, eighth sentence. Is it a reference to his son? Or is it there because there is also a Dublin in the American state of Georgia? Or could it be the last vestige of the unread Georgian letter that Joyce discarded en route to Paris, and which probably landed in a French ditch?

And what of the postal clerk himself? Georges often recalled the famous writer. Such a bustling, jovial man, carefree and liberated. Always singing. Georges felt light-hearted at the very thought of him. If people can live without country or region, and still feel at home, then it might even be possible to forget the war.

It is not known whether Georges Vermeire ever read any of Joyce's books. The chances are slim, of course. But Georges did buy a book by P.G. Woodhouse from Corman in 1931, a far more cheerful tome than Joyce's indecipherable experiments, with the delightful name *If I Were You*.

Could there be a more beautiful title: *If I Were You*. A guileless, simple statement about an imaginary displacement. Georges likes to imagine this when dealing with interesting people at his counter. In his mind's eye, he accompanies them out of the building.

## Only fifty-three



Every time I visit, a slight sadness overwhelms me. There is hardly any trace of James Joyce, the illustrious writer, in Ostend. The courtyard garden of Hôtel L'Océan on the Promenade, where he buried himself in his newspapers, is now a bare, gloomy car park. No more trees, grass or umbrellas, just private garages for tourists and people with holiday homes in the city. The grandeur of the belle époque and interwar years has been pulverised.

And yet. When I pass the restaurant L'Océan, I always proclaim, even when I'm alone: '*Allô, ici le portier de l'Océan.*'

Joyce's poems were published in July 1927 under the title *Pomes Penyeach*. A small booklet measuring 12.5 by 9.6 centimetres with a pale green cover. This classic, personal, even familial anthology was published twelve months after the Joyce family holidayed in Ostend. Joyce wrote no further poems. With one exception: *Ecce puer*, a charming ode to his newborn grandson.

Seventeen photographs taken by Lucia and Nora have been preserved. Together with my Ostend friends, I have researched the locations in the images. An occupation like any other, as though we can evoke time via places: at the Ostend lighthouse, on the pier and beach, in the city park and the garden of Hôtel L'Océan. We were even able to pinpoint the interior shots, taken in the hotel, thanks to the furniture on a historic postcard. Only two of the locations in the family snapshots cannot be identified: they were taken in the dunes and merely show a handful of houses in the background.

Did everything unfold in Ostend as described? In any case, the story corresponds to all the known sources. There is nothing to say otherwise. The Joyce tale also accords with Richard Ellmann's acclaimed biography, which is considered 'definitive'. Ellmann talked to countless people, and visited numerous locations, but to the best of my knowledge he did not come to Ostend.

Coincidentally, there is more to recount about Georges Vermeire, the postal clerk. I must confess: Georges Vermeire is my wife's grandfather.

I recently visited Georges' house in Plantenstraat. No longer in family ownership, it is currently occupied by a young couple and their baby daughter. They purchased the property several years ago, it still needs a lot of work, but is full of potential and the location is perfect.

On 16 January 1951, twenty-five years after Joyce's visit, Georges Vermeire was walking home from work. He was later than normal. Georges had attended a meeting, as vice-president of the Christian Post Office Association. As I can personally vouch, it takes twenty minutes to walk from the Post Office to Plantenstraat, a route that takes you past the park and the statue called *Het paard*, over the crossroads at Petit Paris, and through the neighbourhood that sprang up after the Great War.

Georges' wife Solina had died unexpectedly the year before, in 1950, but he'd held everything together admirably. He returns home. His four adult children are waiting. They are named Marcel,

Georgina, Paul and Lea. It is cosy, laughter is in the air, and they are drinking port as an aperitif. The conversation turns to names. With his passion and talent for languages, they have always fascinated Georges. He lists all the variants of his own name: Georges (French), George (English), Joris (Flemish), which is also Sjors (the Netherlands), Jiří, (Czech), Georgios (Greek), Georgy (Russian) and even Georgi (Georgian).

‘The last two sound the same,’ daughter Georgina remarks.

‘Yes, but written differently.’

Georges puts pen to paper: Γεωργιῖ and გიორგი.

He also adds the Greek: Γεώργιος.

He informs Georgina, whom everyone calls Jetta, that her name is really an amalgamation of Georges and Solina. Still in thrall to names, Georges decides to draw St George. He is a good draughtsman and likes nothing more than to show off to his children.

Talking away, they follow his hand on the page. First, he sketches the knight, then the horse, before finally adding a long lance. Slightly jerkily, he slowly traces a line to the edge of the paper. It starts out straight, deviates, sweeps into an arc, and the paper shunts out from under his hands in short, sharp jolts, until the line runs over the edge and across the wooden tabletop before momentarily rebounding. His torso slumps over the drawing. The children are aghast. Georges Vermeire’s heart has given out. He had just turned fifty-three.