

THE PORTHOLE

Adriano Spatola

Trans. by Beppe Cavatorta and Polly Geller

*Morals and idealism are the best ways to fill
the great hole we call our soul.*

-Robert Musil

RECAP OF PREVIOUS INSTALLMENTS

Sitting in a chair, her right elbow propped up on the table (pencil in her hair), his mother was tallying up her grocery bills, repeating all twelve numbers. From top to bottom, from bottom to top: Total. From bottom to top, from top to bottom: Total. That's when they broke down the door and entered. They killed his mother right there, and he hadn't been born yet. Next they waited a while for his father before he came back home: they killed him late. But he hadn't been born yet.

At the time, his father worked at the stud-farm behind the old cemetery, where the train now passes through, a little less than a mile from the tollbooth. And the daughter of the custodian was an easy lay, especially during the air raids, when they would turn off all the lights and her father ran to calm down the bull while the two of them would take care of the cows.

On an even darker night, during a longer air raid, Guglielmo Sr. chose the wrong hole. His son was born from the mating of a man and a cow. And he was born at the very end of the war, amid the confusion of those days, avoiding by sheer luck a static destiny of preservation in formaldehyde. "*Monstrum*," his classmates would say to mock him.

His mother was crossing the street running to catch the street-car when she was run over. And he had not been born yet. And his father, by then keeper of geese, was impregnated by a crow and dropped a deformed and phony egg, which a toad decided to hatch.

In the spring, from the egg in the mud of a flowering ditch, Guglielmo was born during the other war, just in time to see Caporetto.¹ Web-footed, he was turned down at the physical, thereby avoiding the defense on the Piave river.² He would relieve himself by squatting as women do, but spraying it out in mid-air.

“I, too, was born,” he says about himself. “I had to learn how to read and write pretty much on my own. I grew up alone, a rebel, a loner, a sentimentalist, an introvert. My father destroyed himself with alcohol, as did my grandfather and all my ancestors and their descendants. For me, precocious encounters with women, friends, and art.”

Our friend was born in an XVIII century attic, dark and with a low-ceiling, without windows, walled up during a heaven-sent restoration required by the Board of Cultural Affairs. It was there that he grew up by candlelight, eating mice and turtle dove chicks, with literature and spiders as his sole companions. Saved by dust and neglect, thanks to the interest of a connoisseur of antiques and collector of marble statues, we bumped into him again a few years later, on display in the wine shop of an old dear classmate. We know little to nothing about him; certainly the work on the manner of.

“Son of a bitch,” he moans. “Son of a bitch, they call me. But work in the manner of means something else.”

At the time his father worked as a gay hustler. His mother liked cars. She truly had a passion for automobiles. Ever since she was a child. “You’ll end up marrying a car and giving birth to a scooter,” her mother would always tell her. (At the time automobile was still a masculine noun, and one would write *un’automobile* without the apostrophe). Her passion degenerated into vice such that at 100 miles per hour, his mother became impregnated by a passing truck. This was how Guglielmo was born, by accident on the side of the freeway to the right of his mother’s smiling face, aided by patrol of-

¹ The Battle of Caporetto was a defining battle in the First World War between the Germans who on October 24, 1917, in one day, advanced twenty-five kilometers into northern Italy. Caporetto was the weakest point in the Italian frontline. The Italians lost 300,000 men, 270,000 of which were captured and imprisoned.

² After the Battle of Caporetto, the Italian Army retreated to the Piave River located in the northeast of Italy. The Italian front held their own until October 1918, until the Austrians were deterred by another allied attack.

ficers who acted as midwives and took stock of the disaster. The next day the following article appeared in the *Corriere della Sera* complete with a photograph it read:

OUT OF DEATH COMES LIFE

AMONG RUINS, IN THE SUN, A FLOWER IS BORN AGAIN

Baptized with gasoline, Guglielmo set himself on fire in the piazza, protesting against society, remaining horribly burnt.

Guglielmo was born when times were not yet ripe. A precursor and an innovator, a genius of an inventor, Guglielmo starved on more than one occasion though his friends never abandoned him. A reckless gambler, a pimp, a smuggler, a thief: these were some of the insults thrown at him by his worst enemies. He would eat wherever he was invited to lunch, moving in all social circles.

Guglielmo was born from the crossbreeding of a Samoyed and a Belgian sheepdog on an island in the Dead Sea. The newly found scrolls, currently in the process of being transcribed, are a possible proof of this. He became a monk in order to isolate himself from the world; but the few who knew him well could see him go to the village on Mondays to buy groceries on his Guzzi motorcycle, where he took part in large-scale maneuvers with the prophets of the desert. Impaled in Constantinople, he took revenge by becoming a stylite and sweeping his excrement onto the large, jammed-together crowd below.

This is what we know about Guglielmo. Looking at him splits rocks and his stare burns pastures.

His father was, without a doubt, a demon in the shape of a goat and his mother an ant. He spent his childhood inside an anthill, his eyes fixated on the hole of the wall—a visible opening that could be seen by looking straight up from the dark bottom of the well—an opening through which he was not allowed to pass until he was of age. Because of a physical dysfunction, his mother had reproduced herself in the shape of an earthworm and was taken apart by him on his first hunting expedition. You could see her, long and whitish, trembling in decreasing spasms under the heavy hits by the soldiers under her son's command. Natural law didn't permit delays, shortcuts, or appeals. With tears in his eyes, Guglielmo was merciless

with the carcass and, up until his last days, couldn't stand this memory.

This was Guglielmo. And he is (if he is still alive) a body, made up of and living solely by the unique force of adhesion of the letters that make up his name. Hence the impossibility of defining him once and for all, and his transmutation from word to word. I don't know of a more affectionate dog than Guglielmo.

The least one could say about the birth of Guglielmo is that it wasn't an occasional event, rather the achievement of an objective that was clear in his mind since the morula had formed.

"It was all about," he says, "yes, indeed, it was all about needing to be born. My mother had conceived me without any clear ideas as to what my destiny might be and, the three abortions, which I deftly thwarted, are further proof of her mistrust. I don't mean that it was uncomfortable in there. It was warm for sure: a little humid, perhaps. And one sure could eat! I knew well that life on the outside wouldn't be this easy. But I had to make up my mind, get out, break the spell, and face reality. I couldn't risk a fourth attempt as one isn't always fortunate in such matters."

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: "It was all about needing to be born. From the bottom of the well, hanging by my feet like a monkey, I could see beneath me the hole in the wall. The world passed by as if through a magnifying glass, its disconnected sounds, impossible to interpret, would become objects and words only if seen against the light through my vellum."

"The big day," he says, "the big day came almost unexpectedly. I had been ready for quite some time, I was on the alert. But as we know, we think we are ready for anything and then it happens that we are born in a cab, on a bus, or on a train. While traveling, it is troublesome."

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: "I opened the hatch, cut the cord, put my feet together, clenched my teeth and jumped into the abyss. I watched her become more and more distant in the dark sky above me, up north, with her spotlights turned on."

Hence, Guglielmo was also born.

Guglielmo was born of the sea—"like Venus," he loves to brag. He was born on an August day in Riccione on the Adriatic Riviera (and he could have been born on the other bank, a socialist country). He appeared like a wet cat among the waves some fifty yards from

the shore. As if in a mirage, he could see the crowded beach, the small shapes of those coming and going or motionless under the sun, the ordered and multicolored rows of the beach umbrellas, the shining silhouettes of the skyscrapers, the white sails to his back. He almost cried tears of joy.

Shipwrecked from another planet, he had landed there from nothingness, materializing upon the hard contact with the element of water. A fish wrapped in wax paper, a red shrimp in blue and green sauce, a slice of salami on the edge of a greasy plate: this is how he came into the world, split between the essential lines of his natural and original parallelism. Armless and legless, poisoned by rotten and fetid water, a canal on its way to putrefaction. Eberth's bacillus, itch mite, Nicolaier's bacillus.

IN PRAISE OF THE HOLE IN THE WALL

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: "Oh hole, comfort of my life, great bestower of the purest worldly joys I've experienced. I wish to make you better known than the hole of Saint Alô³ into which he who would stick his eye whenever he needed to stick a nail in so as not to ruin the wall with too many holes from which came the proverb to do as Saint Alô who stuffed the nail always in the same hole. Hole, mirror of the soul, acquisition of the mind, deterioration of the senses, standard-bearer, messenger, mounted guard. I sing the hole in the wall so that the hole shall sing for me."

Chorus: "I sing the hole in the wall so that the hole shall sing for me."

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: "Bright and clear hole, three-dimensional panoramic hole, colored hole. Hole with windshield wipers, hole with curtains, peephole from which to look at the night visitor. I sing the hole in the wall so that the hole shall sing for me."

³ Saint Alô—from Italian Baroque painted Giacomo Cavedone's (1577-1660) religious masterpiece it.[Sant'Alo's Altarpiece] (1614, Pinacoteca Nazionale of Bologna), or from the Master of Sant'Alo, medieval artist and maker of reliquaries found in Spoleto from the thirteen hundreds.

Chorus: “I sing the hole in the wall so that the hole shall sing for me.”

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: “Hole of Mount Palomar, hole of the poker player who wins a pot three times bigger than usual. Hole of the chicken’s egg from which one sucks and sucks the polio of the human race. Round, square hole, flower-shaped hole, seated and standing hole, millimeter sprinter hole. Hole straight and with soda water, hole with whipped cream, *semifreddo*⁴ hole, hole with zabaglione cream. I sing the hole in the wall so that the hole shall sing for me.”

Chorus: “I sing the hole in the wall so that the hole shall sing for me.”

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: “Four-cylinder hole and Pinin Farina⁵-designed hole: nevertheless hole on Monza’s track,⁶ iron hole.⁷ Hole of the oil well, hole of the pipe which runs gas into the kitchen. Hole in the head, hole, holes of the nose. The relation between the outside and the inside, between being and nonbeing, between champagne and the day of the dead.”

Chorus: “I sing the hole in the wall so that the hole shall sing for me.”

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: “Decameron hole, hole of miracles, hole out of which jumps the risen Lazarus, hole with notes, well-connected hole, hole in a hundred copies. Hole in cash with a discount or leased in installments with interest, an affordable hole. One hole among many.”

Chorus: “I sing the hole in the wall so that the hole shall sing for me.”

⁴ Italian dessert served cold.

⁵ Pinin Farina—after Giovanni Battista “Pinin” Farina (1893–1966), automotive designer of fine post-war Italian automotives, including the 1600 Duetto for Alfa Romeo and designs for Ferrari.

⁶ The well-known Formula 1 track in Italy.

⁷ The Iron Crown of Lombardy (Corona Ferrea), both a reliquary and one of the most ancient royal insignia of Europe, is kept in the Cathedral of Monza. Its name derives by a narrow band of iron about one centimeter within it, said to be beaten out of one of the nails used at the crucifixion. Since the tenth century, the Roman-German Kings travelled to Rome to be crowned Holy Roman Emperors, and on their way, they would traditionally stop in Lombardy to be crowned as Kings of Italy with the Iron Crown.

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: “Holes in hands and feet, holes in the grate, holes in the ceiling of the bombed-out church, sin-hole that can be confessed, hernia of the hole, hole in a shirt. Competition of holes.”

Chorus: “I sing the hole in the wall so that the hole shall sing for me.”

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: “Hole on strike, fired hole, hole in the piazza, hole charged by the police, hole with a club: photographs of holes. Silver hole, Ceylon hole, up-and-down hole, introversion of the hole. Silk hole, enlisted hole, sugarcane hole, decorated hole. Hole with pedal.”

Chorus: “I sing the hole in the wall so that the hole shall sing for me.”

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: “Holes of Venice, *Grand Bucal* Hole,⁸ insipid hole, hole of the Louvre, school hole. Solemn declaration of the hole in the wall. Worldly hole, holy mockery Del Bucari,⁹ 45 rpm hole, to always have a pain in the hole.”

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: “No hole can deny all of this.”

WHAT ONE SEES

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: “Pay homage to the head of the dog that barks and bares its teeth on the enameled altar, in the room with white painted walls.”

In the room with white painted walls, on the enameled altar, amid silent men hung by their feet on hooks in the white painted ceiling, are men dressed in white, a thick spider web of very fine strings of blood covers their hands, spider webs over their eyes and nostrils, spider webs over my ears.

I, pure, without sin, clean, not guilty. I, a dog’s head hanging on the hook in the white painted ceiling. I look at them while they excite your diencephalon with electric current (your pupils dilate, you cry, you sweat, your bladder contracts).

⁸ Play on words from Venice’s Grand Canal rendered by Spatola with Grand Bucal.

⁹ A daring raid on the harbor of Bakar by the Italian navy on February 10–11, 1918 (known in Italy as *La beffa di Buccari*, literally the *Bakar Mockery*), which despite being militarily irrelevant, helped to raise the morale of the Italian public, still battered by the Caporetto disaster.

I watch them while operating on your brain, they make you laugh, dear Guglielmo, cry, experience joy or sadness: I watch them while they deprive you of your testicles. I look at them while, with an injection or conducting electrical current into the hypothalamic region or touching the third ventricle, they put you to sleep. I watch them while they inject into your brain drop by drop a solution containing calcium chloride.

I watch them watch you.

I watch them watch you while you live, sleep, scream, jump, laugh, pant, arch your back, try to bite, stretch your hands to scratch, dilate your pupils, sweat, raise your blood sugar level, open and close your mouth, cry, fall asleep, wake up, growl, spit, breathe, piss, remain still, move, scratch yourself, fart, open and close your mouth, stretch out your arms, your nails grow, swallow, grope, blow, choke, digest, sweat, your hair bristles, cry, pressure builds up in your arteries, vegetate, look, sigh, beat your head, drown, turn over, faint, come to, fall, get back up, are sad, are happy, get yourself fired, remain still, move, experience hatred, rancor, affection, love, respect, pity, noble sentiments, desire, contempt, disgust, have heart disease, liver disease, headache, read, go to the movies, insult, write, paw the ground, plant a tree, shave, brush your teeth, drive, change your socks, underwear, thermal undershirt, shirt, jacket, swear, are full of life.

I watch them watch you while you play cards, have a drink, pay a fine, buy a suit, love and are loved, open an umbrella, fall in a ditch, jump over a brook, smoke a pipe, put on your hat, pray to Jesus, beg Rita, run up and down, shave, slam the door in someone's face, sweep your room, drink a beer, make the bed, hang a painting, listen to Mozart, dance with her, shake hands, ask for a raise, run to the bank, write a check, arrive at the office, read the paper, pay the rent, put on a record, undress Rita, unmake the bed, close the door, eat cake, scratch your chest, take down that painting, dance with her, take a shower, brush your teeth, smoke a pipe, run to the bank, write to friends, sweep your room, spit in the toilet, change clothes, scratch the door, move your tail, paw the ground, make your bed again, read the paper, eat your soup, leave the house, spend the night, open your umbrella, close the door.

As Guglielmo would say, he would say: "What's left if not this

hope?” he would say: just as the birds would start to sing and the promise of a new day tinged the sky.

UNEARTHED POTATO

And I brought her to the potato field, under the spring rain which came down to hit the barracks’ roofs. It came down to hit the back, eyes, hair, and belly, hitting the lungs and the white teeth in the red incision. In the middle of the potato field I undressed her. Once naked, I had her lie down on the wet earth. The rain came pounding down.

Her naked body swelled up under the rain: as if Guglielmo blew air from a tube into her skin. Her skin stretched like the pork bladder that Guglielmo blew up to fill with lard. Stretching out, it lost its thickness, thinning itself out until it became translucent and transparent.

The naked body swelled up like this, the skin began to crack. It opened at the belly with a dry sound, like a torn canvas. The flesh fermented in the great heat of that spring rain.

Roots sprouted. Went into the ground. Her spread legs sprung roots, and her open arms sprung roots (arms of tender mercy). And her uterus grew roots into the wet earth under the spring rain. Unearthed potato, proliferating white tentacles swollen with pus searching for a place to stick to, for fear that his name would be invoked loudly.

“A biblical comic book,” said Guglielmo.

FAMILY SECRET

Her white jellyfish arms. Jellyfish, clinging to me, injecting me with its poison. “I want a cigarette,” I said. A doorbell rang.

A Japanese boy appeared: an ugly face RUINED by some skin disease.

She gestured to him, quickly said: “Little boy, go and buy some cigarettes.”

The little boy went out. “You should see how quick these Orientals understand,” she said, naked, white, exhausted, her legs gracefully spread slightly apart, her small feet, her long blonde hair spilling over the rosy pillow.

They knocked. It was pitch black. The sea rumbled in the harbor against the city.

She got up, covered in a draped long pleated robe: a tiara on her head, holding in her extended right hand a flaming torch (the sailors' freedom light), and she neared the creaky gate and opened it.

The little boy entered cautiously, holding a pack of Camels in his outstretched arms. He didn't deign to so much as look at the provocative lady of the house, he appeared blind.

"Little boy!" I called out.

In small steps, he moved toward the giant bed I lay in, tired, sweaty, filled with a creeping languor.

Only then did I become aware of a particular oddity: yes, indeed, he was blind: no, he wasn't alone: he wasn't alone, no: there were two of them. Two heads, two bodies, four legs, four arms, four hands, four feet, twenty plus twenty, forty fingers, four still milky white eyes, two noses, two mouths, sixty-four teeth, two tongues.

I started laughing: "What did you do to yourself?" Could they hear me, understand me?

I looked them over, one by one. Again I was shocked. Because the second one wasn't alive, no: well-preserved, an enormously valuable mummy, an embalming done to a T, but in fact dead, was hanging from his shoulders. Flesh of his flesh, the little boy carried him unable to undo the bond that united them.

"But what did YOU do to yourself? But what did YOU do to yourself?" she asked, holding her torch so high as to light up the scenery: her left hand open in a sign of mercy, and at the back of her head a little halo of electric lights. I looked at her indulgent image, and felt a vague sense of remorse growing in me.

"Pika-don," the little boy stammered: "Pika-don," he stammered: and the mummy nodded with his wrinkled face, he murmured "Pika-don": his head, no bigger than an apple, nodded, swaying "Pika-don."

The bells rang, there was a market behind the church that day. You could already hear the cries of those displaying their goods, the hammering of nails and boards. The birds had awakened, happily and madly, they traveled the clear blue: a crackle of trills, whistles, flutter of wings. "Pika-don," said the little boy, enthusiastic for the mummy's consent. "Pika-don," said the two, between the reoccurring wave of bell tolls, the hammering of boards and nails, the birds'

chirping. The sunlight-flooded room was filled with trills, whistles, flutters of wings.

Pika-don, I said, looking at the little Janus: Pika-don, said my statuesque lover: Pika-don, said the kneeling people: Pika-don, said the bishop to the flock: Pika-don went the merry bells: Pika-don went the hammer beating the nail: Pika-don went the deep sound of wood: Pika-don went the car horns: and all of us nodded yes yes, staring at the apple.

GUGLIELMO'S EYE

In the river, the eye that the fisherman pulled to shore. The fixed eye that the fisherman pulled to shore. And when it was on the shore, the eye fixed upon the fisherman and recognized him.

Against the red sky, the blind fisherman, with long white hair down to his shoulders.

The fisherman's sensitive fingers caressed the eye: the fisherman's right hand thumb and index finger squeezed the eye, that slippery bulb, until it was mush. He threw the eye turned mush to the river: and the fish fed on it.

In the river, the words of Dr. Pietro fell and, in falling, dragged the eye along, and the blood of the great menstruation: and the fish fed on everything the river gathered.

FROM THE HOLE IN THE WALL

From the hole in the wall, I see the boy with the limp playing ball in the courtyard: from the hole in the wall, I see the green valleys, the silence of a dark sky (the wine ferments in the cellars): from the hole in the wall, I see the river which crosses the endless plain, river swollen with water: and from the hole in the wall I see: and I see: images, characters.

From the hole in the wall, I saw: at seven p.m., Count Alvise Giustiniani, accompanied by a woman: Barbaran, who yesterday at six p.m. stayed for an hour to talk to Prospero Renieri: Savorgnan, who passed by with another rider at five p.m.: Memo, who talked with Prospero Renieri, accompanied by a woman: a woman with Lorenzo Memo, accompanied by a woman for an hour: someone called Giacomo and someone called Angelo: Barbaran with a woman accom-

panied by Francesco Querini: a rider with Lorenzo Memo: Angelo, talking about licentious books (my job is to report them): Savorgnan together with Alvisè Giustiniani, talking about forbidden things for half an hour: and I saw others gossiping, one of whom I recognized to be Giacomo without permanent home and without work, a libertine of the worst kind, who makes a living doing unnamable things: he lives with public prostitutes: arrogant: I saw said Giacomo, a man of violent manners: a communist: he makes a living doing violent acts: a man of violent manners: said Giacomo with Angelo, they remained at the corner for half-an-hour together, speaking against the State (and as it is my duty, I will report them): and I saw others and still others I saw gossiping against the State and against: but small fish, the unemployed, thieves, prostitutes, communists, and others who hate humankind: and I saw others like these, gossiping against the State: from my hole in the wall I saw others gossiping against the State, in the city's piazza, in the city's main piazza. Small fish, but still thieves and prostitutes: people who hate humankind and, it is my duty to report them. ■

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