

The Porthole

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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 the 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 streetcar 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 a work in 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 officers 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 in 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