The postcard

Di **Tom Gidwitz**

Incontrai Gidwitz per caso. Cercavo in rete tutti I possibili link al 1906 a questa grande ed importante eruzione. Vidi subito in www.tomgidwitz.com la qualità e la preziosità del testo riferito al Vesuvio. Poi un breve scambio di mail e cos'ì oggi abbiamo la possibilità di incontrare uno dei pochi che ha studiato quell'evento da vicino.

Grazie. Grazie molte.

A.L.

On an April day in 1906, a photographer snapped a picture at the Mount Vesuvius Volcano Observatory. The building's front steps were lost under mounds of volcanic ash; on the ground it lay two foot thick, and it coated the boots and trousers of four men standing before the camera, their eyes dark with fatigue. A mile and a half away, behind the photographer but in plain view of this fatigued quartet, a thin column of ash rose steadily from Vesuvius's crater, the tail end of a violent eruption that killed hundreds and set tens of thousands in flight.

The picture survives as a postcard titled "Heroes of Duty." Three of the men are Italian, turn-of-the-century Neapolitans with handlebar moustaches arching skyward. Brigadier Migliardi of the carabinieri, the Italian military police, stands ramrod straight in his gold-buttoned uniform. Signor Mormile, a railroad telegrapher and stationmaster, holds a sheet of paper, perhaps his latest telegram ready for dispatch. Professor Matteuci, the Observatory's chief, is a pillar of calm. With his hands behind his back, his jacket drawn open across his waist-coated belly, he is strong and undaunted but looks ready for a beer and a bed.

The fourth man is smaller than the others, and although he stands in their midst he is undeniably apart. He is slender and narrow-shouldered, with a Vandyke beard, a wing collar, and a crisply knotted tie. One hand is in his pocket, the other grasps his lapel, a stance supremely confident, cocky, even, as he looks out at us with a clear-eyed grin. This slender, stylish man is an American: Frank Alvord Perret, a gifted thirty-nine year old engineer and inventor from Brooklyn.

Two years before the eruption Perret had arrived in Naples to recover from a crushing mental breakdown, a man exhausted, depressed, and depleted by his demons. But now, his fortunes have decidedly changed. For two weeks, while Vesuvius pushed a column of smoke and fire miles into the sky, tossed gigantic boulders aloft as if they were pebbles, and swamped towns in rivers of red hot stone, Perret, his three companions, and six additional carabinieri stood watch in the Observatory, high on the volcano’s slopes. Through it all, in the depth of night and at high noon when the volcano’s ashy plume plunged day into darkness, the Observatory was a tiny pinpoint of light, its lanterns a spark on the knee of the colossus.

The eruption was deadly, but it saved Perret. In photographs taken in the 1890s, when his innovative electric motors were in demand across the country, he presented himself in profile -- inaccessible, distant, and unsmiling. But in pictures after 1906, when he risked his life and emerged unscathed, he posed with the panache of a showman. In Hawaii, he and a colleague rigged an ingenious overhead cable-car to scoop a blob of fresh lava from the middle of Kilauea's 2,200 degree lava lake, and we see him carrying his prey dangling from a chain, gleaming, in its slick glassy coat, like a trussed stag skinned on the trail. Whether he's shrouded in fumes while sampling volcanic gas, confronting flowing lava with a folding camera, eavesdropping on the earth through a three-foot metal horn planted on the ground, or in a pith helmet as he nobly watches a smoking peak – he is supremely confident, as if master of the forces of the earth.

Perret found salvation in volcanophilia, the human species' often irresistible urge to march toward volcanoes. Sometimes we're there for survival – we farm their fertile soil, quarry their stone, and drink the water that drains from their porous slopes. But when they erupt they hypnotize us with a suicidal spell. We

turn toward them like plants summoned to the sun. When a volcano erupts – be it Etna, Pinatubo, Mount St. Helens, Popocatepetl – police, national guard, and military troops vainly struggle to block the flood of spectators who rush to the site, slip through road blocks, creep through forests in the dead of night to stand at the crater's edge and gape. We have a need to bear witness to their power and grandeur, to be awed, scared, belittled, put right.

Perret was neither geologist nor chemist. He was a crackerjack observer and poetic writer, but above all he was a gifted inventor, wise in the ways of energy and matter. Volcanology provided him with a mission. While watching volcanoes for countless hours he could challenge his intellect and indulge his need for solitude, yet play a role on a global stage. He stepped into volcanology when the field was ripe for a mind like his; he brought simple new technologies to the field's young toolkit, and described wonders never seen before.

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