

The Cult Of Volta Temple

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In the picturesque town of Como, on the shore of Lake Como, sits a massive stone temple dedicated to the inventor of the battery, Alessandro Volta. A native of the city, Volta is rumored to have been a brilliant energetic dark-haired child who would scale the drainpipe of his home during storms to watch lightning flicker above the mountains beyond the lake, his jaw clenched tight in a fierce expression, his fingers gripping the terra-cotta roof tiles for traction as the rain drenched his shirt and the wind lashed his hair. The electrical unit of measurement, the volt, is named in his honor. I first read about the cult of Volta Temple in a cryptic entry in an anonymous diary, an ink-smudged leather volume discovered in the archives of the Biblioteca Vallicelliana, in Rome. Intrigued, I decided to travel to Como, hoping to make contact with the cult if the cult still existed. I arrived by train the following day, stepping out of the station into a cityscape of colorful buildings and burbling fountains, where bells were clanging in the towers of the stained-glass duomo. After securing a room at a hotel, I headed straight to Volta Temple, a neoclassical masterpiece shimmering on the harbor. Part monument, part mausoleum, today the temple primarily functions as a museum, featuring a single circular hall with gigantic marble pillars rising into a vaulted dome. That morning the rose-colored curtains drawn over the win-

dows in the hall glowed with sunlight, while sunbeams glimmered on the skylight in the dome. I wandered around the edge of the hall, where artifacts pertaining to the invention of the battery were displayed in glass cabinets between the windows: petrified frog legs, ancient voltaic piles, corked vials glittering with crystals, electroscopes and electrometers, and other bizarre instruments of brass and wood. On the balcony were other artifacts pertaining to the life of Volta. I was disappointed to find, however, that while the artifacts were interesting, the exhibits in the museum made no mention whatsoever of a cult. I spent the afternoon roaming around the rest of the town, querying shopkeepers and vendors, looking for somebody who could tell me about the cult, but nobody in town seemed to have heard of the cult either. By then the sun was sinking over the mountains beyond the lake. Discouraged, but determined nevertheless, I drank a cappuccino at a cafe in a nearby piazza before returning to the hotel to continue the search the next day. Over the following months, that became my routine: visiting the museum each morning, interviewing the locals each afternoon, all in hopes of finding some new evidence or clue, and yet after all of that time, I still could find no trace of the cult. After a summer of searching, I was broke and defeated and felt forced to accept that the cult no longer existed, if indeed the cult had ever existed at all. Filled with a profound sense of failure, frustrated at having wasted so much time, I took a final stroll along the harbor, and then walked to the cafe in the piazza for one last cappuccino. I sipped the foam without pleasure, staring at the piazza in a daze. At the center of the piazza was a marble statue of Volta, and as scarlet leaves floated down from the trees onto the cobblestone, a pair of figures in straw hats approached a bearded figure standing near the base of the statue. The trio began making a series of subtle hand signs. I had noticed people exchanging similar hand signs by the statue before, and watching the trio from the cafe, I realized with a sudden shock that each of the hand signs resembled a different symbol from a circuit diagram: flat hands making

a cross for a positive sign, flat hands stacked together to imitate a negative sign, fingers forming a box for a resistor, fingers clawing into loops for an inductor, clenched fists pressed close together with the knuckles mimicking the bumps of a transformer. After the hand signs had been exchanged, the trio began murmuring together. A faint tingle passed down my spine. A sense of understanding. My heart was beating in a frenzy. I stood. Pigeons scattered. Seeing me approach, the pair of figures in the straw hats hesitated and then hurried off toward an alleyway, but the bearded figure turned to face me without fleeing.

I fumbled through the hand signs.

“You wish to be initiated?” the bearded figure said.

Giovanni worked in a gelateria by day, heaping scoops of pistachio and hazelnut and milk-cream gelato into fluorescent cups, wearing a bright smile and a clean white apron, but by night he was a brooding priest of the cult of Volta Temple, draped in a dark cloak in the shadows between streetlights. As we drank cappuccinos together at the cafe, he spoke freely about the personal details of his life. He was fantastically depressed. His wife had died in childbirth the winter before. He would never love again. His mother babysat his infant on nights that the cult held ceremonies. The cult wasn't a secret, he said, just exclusive. He liked me though. He wasn't sure why. Maybe because we were a similar age, late twenties, early thirties. He liked to imagine us being born in opposite hemispheres, me and him, and growing older and getting smarter and developing personalities and having experiences and making choices, some seemingly trivial and others obviously significant, some seemingly beneficial and others obviously terrible, an immeasurable number of individual choices that when combined would eventually lead us to meet there that very day in that very piazza, a foreigner and a local, exchanging secret hand signs. Also he liked that we listened to the same music. Anyway, the cult was meeting that night, and he would

take me.

We met that night at his apartment, where his plump gray-haired mother sat with a fizzing soda in the breeze of a swiveling fan, keeping watch over his infant, a nine-month-old in a lavender onesie who was asleep under a tinkling mobile in a crib. A soap opera played on mute across a mini television. Giovanni lent me his spare cloak, a tattered wool garment that smelled faintly of deodorant and aftershave and was spattered across the chest with crusted yellow speckles, which he explained with some embarrassment were petrified drops of spilled baby food, probably mashed carrots. We departed from his apartment just after midnight, walking together along the harbor toward the temple in the distance. I was usually asleep in the hotel that time of night. I had never been out in the city so late before. By day the temple shone in the sunlight, surrounded by people relaxing on benches, people pushing strollers along the waterfront, people pedaling bicycles through the gardens, people napping on colorful blankets in the grass, people sunbathing on towels on the rocky beach, people splashing around together in the shallows of the lake, but in the hours after midnight that stretch of the harbor was desolate and empty and seemed to possess a horrifying otherworldly energy. Gulls cawed from boats, waves lapped against piers, and a pale wispy fog drifted across the blackened surface of the lake. Giovanni too seemed to have transformed, as if a flip had switched and some current had suddenly reversed direction inside of him. The sunken bags under his eyes that by day seemed like the badge of honor of an overworked gelateria employee now appeared darker and deeper and seemed to possess an almost frightening quality, as if all of the shock and the grief and the sorrow that he felt at seeing a world in which his wife did not exist had drained down from his eyes into those pouches of puffy skin. As we passed through the temple gardens, he was telling me about the cult. The cult was as old as the temple, he said, had existed for nearly a century. I had assumed that the cult worshipped Volta, the inven-

tor, but as we climbed the steps of the temple, Giovanni explained that the cult worshipped electricity itself.

“The creator and destroyer. The source of life, and all of our modern sorcery, from lightbulbs and refrigerators to automobiles and computers. The one true god,” Giovanni murmured.

As he knocked on the doors of the temple with a coded signal, I thought about the electrical charges all around us, in the leaves and the limbs and the trunks of the trees, in the grass and the stones and the sand on the beach, in the fabric of the flags fluttering from poles and the sails fluttering on masts and the awnings hanging over doorways, in the slats of the docks, in the cars of the funicular, in the garbage rotting in trashcans, in the benches and the railings and the fountains and the bicycles, in the fibers of the pillows and the threads of the sheets and the mattress and the headboard and the telephone on the nightstand in every room in every hotel where all of the tourists were sleeping peacefully, in the tremendous amount of water that the lake contained. I felt terrified suddenly. I believed in no god. I believed in electricity though. The towering doors of the temple creaked apart, a hooded figure peered out at us, then the hooded figure beckoned us in, and we stepped into the hall as the doors shut behind us with an echoing boom.

Above an iron table lined with electric votive candles in colored jars loomed a decrepit bust of Volta, flickering with shadows that splintered across the marble like jagged bolts of lightning. Ominous opera music crackled quietly over the speakers of an ancient boom-box. On the balcony, a masked figure with a glowing tablet read aloud from scientific scriptures in a thunderous voice. The other cultists had already arrived, clustered throughout the hall below the dome. Most were draped in dark wool cloaks, while others had disrobed for cult rituals, bare flesh gleaming in the strange light. The rituals didn't seem to be happening in any organized fashion, but rather were all happening concurrent-

ly, in a chaos of movement and noise. Scowling figures in hooded cloaks were shocking groaning cultists with sparking prods. Wires hanging between pillars sprayed sparks onto crouching figures in dazzling bursts. At the center of the hall, nude cultists with sagging jowls and wrinkled skin were writhing on a wooden platform, foreheads sprouting electrodes, wails muffled by rubber mouthguards, ankles and wrists lashed in place with leather straps. Near the staircase, a naked teenager with matted hair and a paunched belly sat licking the nubs of a nine-volt battery.

Standing there in the borrowed cloak, sweating from the heat and the fear, I marveled at the bright flashes of light across the temple as electricity poured into human bodies. From my daily visits to the temple, I recognized a freckled cashier who sold tickets to the museum, along with the gigantic janitor who periodically swept the floors. The cashier and the janitor gazed at me with horrible smiles.

“Although we may seem harmonious, there is a division among the worshippers,” Giovanni whispered. “Some find great pleasure in the rituals, but others find great pain.” He ran his hands over his mouth with a serious expression, as if struggling to find the words to express an idea that was profoundly important to him, and then turned back to look at me. “All of us agree that electricity is the one true god, the supreme force in the universe. What we disagree about is the nature of this god. Whether god is a force of good, of happiness, or a force of evil and suffering.”

Beyond the skylight in the dome, stars glimmered in the darkness, massive bodies of electricity drifting through space.

“What do you believe?” I whispered.

But though he spoke freely about the secrets of the cult, Giovanni would not tell me which faction he belonged to, and when he stripped naked and writhed on the platform in the throes of the current, I could not tell whether his screams were of agony or relief.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

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