

ALDO

By Michael Ventura

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"Christ dwells in cancer cells." My brother Aldo wrote that many years ago. He died last week, of cancer – or, more accurately, of a hellish reaction to the chemo. Many of Aldo's lines exist only in my memory, for almost all his poems vanished along the way, lost or destroyed on the streets of New York, in mental hospitals, "assisted living" apartments, welfare hotels, even the occasional jail cell. After our childhood of poverty and chaos, Aldo took a lot of LSD during his 18th or 19th summer and went insane. He careened ever after between tumultuous instability and flat-out madness, until his death. He was 54.

"Christ dwells in cancer cells." Al meant: The Catholicism of his childhood, brutally beaten and molested into him by nuns and lay brothers, operated in his life like a malignancy. But Al also meant that in horror, even in horror, lives something divine.

His feelings toward the divine were as paradoxical as the divine. For instance, there was a tornado warning on Staten Island (where he spent the last years of his life). His roommate, terribly afraid, said, "Al, I've prayed to God to protect us from the tornado." "You're praying to the same guy who sent the tornado," laughed Al. But he also said to me, "I've always thought there's a drummer behind the drumbeat. The Universe, imagined, imagines you."

From another of Aldo's poems: "Battles rage long after wars end./If skeletons could fight they would." Al knew all about rage. In his youth a fearless street fighter, all his life he raged against society, authority, and anything else he could find to rage at – including me, now and again. Yet his was no simple rage. He told me once, "You have to allow for the gentle – even in what you despise. Especially in what you despise. And that protects the integrity and dignity of your own soul."

His obsession with the nature of the Universe expressed itself in suggestive fragments that never quite cohered. "Mike, I'm sure there's not just one reality. There are fragments of reality that run by their own rules and regulations. Reality is not just one thing." And: "Life is finite, but its rhythms are endless. There's a quality in life which *suggests* eternity." And: "I want to know what's true about reality – because in not saying what's true about reality, we cheat reality." And: "The truth always imbues meaning into anyone who tells it or listens to it."

He was medicated with every psychochemical in the book. They didn't work. "Chemicals don't have problems, people do. Chemicals don't hate or love each other, people do." And: "The knowledges we have now conceal rather than reveal." And: "I am the monster I see in the mirror – and I have sympathy for the monster. And I try to get along with the monster – and that's how I stay alive." And, of he and I both: "You and life, intimate lovers but never friends."

We both wrestled with demons on the other side of sanity, and Al said something about that which I found very useful: "Demons don't show you their faces when they wrestle with you. You kind of conjure up their image. They don't give you information, you *take* the information."

From his vantage point, deeper into craziness than mine, he often helped me stay sane. Once, during an especially tough passage in my writing life, he said: "There's

always a part of you that is separate – and even if they're making you pay for it now, that separateness is what you have to offer. That person at the typewriter, when you're doing that, that person doesn't belong to them – that's not a negotiable part. That's why you're an artist. That's what makes you an artist."

And his romantic advice sometimes came in quite handy: "Mike, listen to me. When you approach Cinderella in her gown, and it's one minute to midnight, you'd better approach carefully." (I wrote *that*, in that gal's lipstick, on my bathroom mirror.)

And one night he saved my life. Mama was dying and I could not bear it, I wanted to die with her, I did not believe that I could make it through that night, I sat very still on my bed in L.A., maybe if I sat still enough I wouldn't kill myself ... then the phone rang, I picked it up, a collect call, Aldo on a pay phone in a mental ward in Brooklyn. Al asked how I was and I told him and he focused and spoke from a deep clear place in himself. Reflexively, in a journalist's shorthand of my own invention, I wrote what he said as he said it (as I so often did when he spoke):

"Mike, your wings have melted and you're on the ground and you don't like that. That doesn't mean you're having a nervous breakdown. But then you begin the merciless appraisal of all your faults. Yours and everybody else's. And that'll kill you, the ruthless eye of honesty you have. That doesn't mean it's *truth*. I think there's a difference between truth and honesty. There's cosmic truth – and our petty little honesty. And when you look closely with that so-called honesty, there's the danger that you can magnify distortion. You look in the mirror, you see dark eyes, you see stubble, one too many drinks, one too many cigarettes. I suggest that, instead of turning all the arrows inward, you recognize that you *need*. And instead of punishing yourself, which you do, explore having people take care of that need. I don't mean like a baby looking for a mother. I don't mean anything out of the ordinary. I mean people taking care of business with people they love. The mistake you're making is isolating yourself. Grind your teeth, but don't do it in the dark. 'Cause part of what you are, you do not own, you can't condemn. And that's why it's good you don't own it. And if you think your ruthless eye of honesty is seeing what you are, you're wrong. It's ruled by a coded pattern, it's selective, it digs into your weakest part. If you feel like digging a knife into your gut, realize: There's a part of yourself you do not own, you merely visit, and that's the part unsullied by the hand of man – which your ruthless selective honesty knows nothing about. You look at the decay, and you think you're looking at the garden. But the decay can be washed away. And then there's that part of yourself that you do not own, and it's *beautiful*. It's like meeting the most beautiful woman – but it's you."

A brief silence, then: "And Mike, I need you – so don't fuck up."

Another pause, then: "You son of a bitch, you fucked muthafucker, I learned from *you* that life is sacred. Realize that. That's what keeps me going. Life is sacred and you are not its steward. You have stewardship over it but you don't own it. You're making a choice to go through this, it's not just happening to you. You're inviting it, and in some ways delighting in it. It's not accidental or coincidental. You're choosing it. You have to realize you've made choices."

Well ... Al ought to know.

His great fear, these last couple of years, was that he felt his mind dimming. "Your mind manufactures ideas, my mind manufactures amnesia."

Ten years ago he sent me one of his rough desperate poems, a prayer to God: "Lost in the thunder within/the sky black and ominous/I want to feel Your presence/after my fall ... make me aware of my soul/Master who is high and low/where emptiness drills

its hole/weary and tired and weak of spirit/let me dine and visit/away from eyes/that flail/away from voices that growl/away from myself and into You/so that You may again become alive/in my memory so that I in my journey/may find a home in Thee/and once again taste what it's like to be free/... I beg Thee become closer to me/reality is filled with ruins/I am buried beneath the dust/my soul decays and rusts/in a kaleidoscope of distortions ... Father who understands my beasts/let me love and let the wars cease."

He did find love with a good woman the last year of his life. There's that at least.

The last words Aldo spoke to me, a day before his precipitous, unexpected slide into unconsciousness and peace: "I'll face whatever I have to face. I love you, Mike."

My kid brother. My comrade. Sometimes almost my son. Often my teacher. Often my student. Often a royal pain in the ass, as I often was to you, you crazy fuck. My friend. My friend. A continent separated us, but there was your voice on the phone, at least once a week, often more, for so many years. Your unrelenting struggle. Your final peace. No one like you. I can't call you anymore, Al, but I'll always be talking to you. And as for you ... I can't help it, I will always be awaiting still another call.

And I remember a line from one of your many vanished poems, poems you'd recite to me on the phone and then lose or destroy, a line we'll engrave on your stone:

"My love is an imperfect thing but it sings."

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