

He must have told me fifty or more times as we talked deep into the night, maybe not exactly the “story,” but the scenario. Wartime Lucca. Scarcely fourteen years old, still living the innocent life of a child, he’s riding his bicycle home from school, absorbed in his thoughts, when a rapidly intensifying whistle descends through the evening air almost on top of him and he’s thrown to the ground, his ears suddenly ringing in the aftermath of explosion, unintelligible screams and clouds of smoke rising from shattered, flaming buildings, debris lashing his back like rain. Now sirens amplify his confusion as he struggles to get his bearings and make his way home to his mother, night falling, his bike half-submerged beneath rubble, their neighbors’ house obliterated, this boy suddenly catapulted into the world of pain and horror that men have made.

His beautiful mother, the reader, lover of poetry and music – a photograph of native son Giacomo Puccini prominent on their wall – is terrified, trembling in fear for her son’s life, out under the bombs. He is an artist, already enrolled in full-time art school at the age of ten – a boy artist, but an artist nonetheless. Like Leonardo, there was never a question, it’s just who he was, a fact. The same primordial energy flows through him.

Neither son nor mother will ever be the same. He dates her mental illness, eventuating in electro-shock therapy, by the prospect of which he will therefore always be panicked, from that day, whose events will haunt him for the rest of his life. I can believe that no day passed in which he didn’t relive them.

He is an American, though he doesn’t know what that is or speak the language of its people – he came to Italy at the age of eighteen months following his parents’ divorce – and Americans have dropped these bombs that killed his neighbors and would steal the spirit of the mother whom he loves so dearly. A Catch-22: they bombed the region in order to save it.

In the months that followed he sees *partigiani* led away by the fascists to be shot against a wall, most of them communists or anarchists, of course. He knows some of their sons and daughters. He and his mother flee to the countryside.

Americans with black skin, Buffalo Soldiers, almost mythical beings, would liberate Lucca. Serious men doing serious work, but with compassion in their eyes; he will never forget them.

To say that the elements of his life’s work have already laid siege to his soul in these moments and days may be glib, and yet, though Aldo was a restless genius, his mind always racing ahead of the ruins that progress is so intent upon piling up in its wake, he was a fixated genius as well. In work that seems resolutely abstract – the films, the paintings, the sculptures, the lumagrams – it is impossible not to read their narrative: violence rending and gouging the skies, eddies of confusion, fear, and outrage, larums and searchlights, the terror flickering in his mother’s eyes, the transience of all things, the human rage for destruction, the tenacity of hatred, the

triumph of night, through rents in the backdrop of which the listless deceitful embers of hope expire and coalesce into cold distant space.

And yet, slowly, even when using the same materials, the same palette, the same tactics, as the wisdom, the profundity, of black – invisible reality, cauldron of being, the true face of light, as Tesla called it – emerges in his work, he becomes that wide-eyed “primitive of a new era” that he celebrated as the only rational understanding of man’s place in the universe, looking outward in awe and hope and inward in humility, a leap of trust into a dark that is in the deepest sense unknown, where being and nothingness are one and cosmos is the moral order.

He was a partisan in the battle against fascism in art, as in life: the power of the institution, the regimentation and debasement of the creative spirit, the manipulation of art’s reception and meaning by cynical propaganda, the dominance of power and money. He gave his life for art. I see him standing defiant against the wall, transmuting into black.