

Alcira in Yellows¹

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Translated from Spanish by David E. Davis

For all those who emerge from themselves with
respect and attachment to their origins

Yellow, the cadmium sun as the summer of '58 waned, that sun, a March spotted with dark moles, when Alcira, in some part of her brain in the process of understanding, has placed the certainty, the conviction of her five years of age; *I can feel them, all of them, all five of them, they say I turn five, and I believe it.* The air, scumbled by the reek issuing from the far from abstract smokestacks, slathering mustard heat across the industrial and fugitive Rosario sky, watches Alcira. It examines her closely, describes her for itself, and tries to understand her. It dares to question her and to analyze her parts, and to return her intact to the way she began. Thanks, Alcira must be feeling without really having any other choice, *thanks to this air I'm still whole, thanks to the moving air, that comes and goes,* that circulates through the neighborhood of her five years of age, thanks to this air she is able to recognize herself, form a certain idea of herself, despite the ambivalence, despite the streams of messages, stories and signs.

Alcira looks among the darkened and parallel lines that spool through the sky from one street corner to street corner, she looks among those lightwires *that scare me when it starts to rain, that get me excited, that make me want to laugh, jump for joy, since they're staffs, musical score, the last one they bought me, those electric wires are a great big musical score surrounding me, whirling around me, going crazy and wrapping me up, making me all dizzy, the wires that carry the movement, the speed my ten fingers run across the piano with, they put that craziness in my hands and make them shake, letting the music spill forth.* The scores that Alcira loves because they are music, the scores she can't stand because they are the tool her piano teacher flaunts, waves in her face, so she can't play her own tunes. The ones Alcira makes up in the middle of those nights when a sound can't be heard.

Alcira looks. She looks for moments, situations in her neighborhood sky, moments that might bear some resemblance to the words she hears everyday: from her father's mouth, her mother's eyes. From the food she eats and the meals she loves. From her cousins' seemingly always round faces. From the mother's insistence on drowning her meat with several ladlings of curdled milk and under her father's satisfied eyes, while her grandmother's pupils lower and tense, flickering down to neutralize confrontation, to

distance effects, to alter the train of thought, during the long dinner at the long dining room table in their home.

Alcira looks between her two feet pressed against the grooves of the wide pavement, which stretches into the shadows cast by the tall trees that flare out, she looks for *why, why did grandma sink her finger of rings into my tummy, by my bellybutton, and she told me part in Spanish, part in her Aleppo Arabic, and part in Yiddish*: “Now you listen good, Alcira, don’t you go concerning yourself with your father’s ridiculous notions, he’s a meshuggene. His ideas don’t have anything to do with you. You have to marry a Jew, you understand? A Jew. Alcira, no answer. Marshaling a little effort, she studied the eyes of the old lady, and with more of an effort she followed the movements of the old ringheavy finger to make sure that it wasn’t going to poke through her empty, defenseless tummy again, and she hurried off to the table already set with food.

And on the following day she made the mistake. The mistake of the word. She made the mistake of those who have the words and who use them: she went up to her mother and asked her the meaning of the episode and why her grandmother took such a spirited interest in her. Alcira’s mother, Raquel, every bit of her Raquel and fearful, planted upon Alcira a dry and concerned look, like somebody who has words but who doesn’t always use them, and with a measured slowness she approached the father. And after mulling it over for a few minutes, she decided to be straight with him, choosing not to keep her daughter’s cleverness from him, nor her mother’s wishes (although she kept them hidden, tucked away among the walls of her most personal openings, her secret but never forgotten feelings), and she related to him the whole story, not sparing any of the details. She declared: “My mother told Alcira that she has to marry a Jew when she gets older. How can she not be grateful for everything you’ve done for her, letting her stay here with us for all this time, here in our home. She’s trying to fill her head with all sorts of notions and right behind our backs. What do you think about that?” And Alcira’s father had a very clear idea of the facts. He said to Raquel, the so Raquel: “What do you think I think? This is all your doing. Your mother’s trying to get Alcira to listen to all her crap because you let her get away with it. Because you’re as big a Jew as she is. Harpies, the both of you. Filthy Jews. That’s what you are. Now get out of my sight before I toss the three of you out on your asses.”

Like tempera paint, the clabbered sun melting all over the city, overpowering, overrunning the grooves, clotting the openings. Injecting its way into the breathing of those that rush about, those who shuffle along, those who sit back and wait and those who work on only a few hours of sleep. Into the breathing of the plants. Of the insects. Of corpses stretched out in a mighty dermic sheath of unharnessed fluids and energies, the varied nature of the earth’s crust rippling with vitality.

It’s killing me, Alcira feels. It’s the mattress stuffing that’s killing me. Making me think the gray pile in the middle of the street, where cars go by every now and then, is a dead cat, a furry little dog hit by a truck or motorcycle. That’s why I hate the trucks that carry the stuffing to the mattress factory, that dump it all over the street. Because my thoughts are jumping from my grandmother and my Jewish husband to my fear of what that stupid stuffing could be instead of just stuffing and then it’s too hard for me to go back. What I really want to do is to think about what my grandmother said with her finger of fat rings poking through my bellybutton, going where all the food settles and going all the way down to what my mommy calls the

intestines, where my pooh-pooh waits to come out. My grandmother's finger growing and coming out with the pooh-pooh when I go potty, even though I don't know what might happen, because either she snaps her hand back, pulling it out, then washing it off, I mean, before she cooks mahmules and mehche uaraa enab for me, or her arm and head and body come inside me, and then like that she falls in one piece into the toilet.

I wonder what she meant by the Jewish husband. Maybe it'd be better if she didn't fall into the toilet, because my grandmother's a good person, and sometimes I think I even love her.

The air, that's still looking at her, examining her closely, the winds of Rosario and its surroundings pressing against the surfaces of Alcira's every day more filled out body. Against her arms. Her feet, which support more weight and too much mental energy, when around the winter of 1965 Alcira fought with her almost twelve years and her father's different voices being dished out, penetrating every last interstice, like the sun does, hard and steady, chrome yellow, beating down. Her father's voices launching a "This one's changing schools right now. You pull her out of that public school and get her enrolled in one where there's nuns. Today. A boarding school. Board-ing. None of that coming home every day. Monday through Friday she stays inside. Starting today." And another voice, the voice of the every day more Raquel, gingerly attempting to ascertain "And what's wrong now? Why is she going to Catholic school, and as a boarder? And the exasperation of that father, of that father and no other, *how come not another one, why can't you switch one father for another one that's better suited for the needs of each kid*, sinking into the pores and hardening like cement, paralyzing any attempt to run away, giving off a "Because I say so. Because every time she visits it's always the same story. She comes here and butts into our private life, trying to change the decisions we've been making for years. She still doesn't understand you got married to a Christian in a Catholic church. They rejected you, they would never let you back into their home again, they wished all of your kids dead or born sick. That's what they screamed in your face. That family isn't yours anymore. You're Christian, not Jewish. In this house there are no Jews. Alcira is baptized. She's catholic. But of course, the old woman keeps up with it. I heard her talking to Alcira in the kitchen, going on about that same crap of having to get married to a Jew. Tell me, what for? Why do they call her names out there on the streets? Why do they call her a dirty Jew, which is what you and your mother are when you get right down to it. This is not a country for Jews. Let the Jews look somewhere else. My daughter is not Jewish. And tomorrow she's changing schools, so there won't be any doubt about it. And talk to the nuns about getting her to take communion and giving her a bed. And don't come to me with that bit about communion being taken when you're eight. You do it at any age. Go down there now and get her enrolled. Now." And a string snaking in the air, in front of Raquel's face, a string that is a series of her words. "And you, since when did you become a believer? From the very first day I met you I heard you say that you don't believe in God. What made you a Catholic all the sudden? I think the only thing you're looking to do is to mortify us all. You'll have to be a little more rigorous, as much rigor as you demand from the rest of us, and follow along with what the Greek Orthodox Church tells you to do, your family's church. And leave the rest of us alone." And not a string, but a rope snaking in front of the face of Alcira's father, one that is a series of words: "I want them to let us live our lives,

That's all. That nobody single us out. That nobody consider us different. We're already the neighborhood Anti-Peronists. We don't need anything else to make us the target of all these fools. And then you go playing the Jew. Please, just do me a favor and get out of my sight."

All the energies, the antagonistic forces have been shaping, reorganizing themselves in the air that Alcira is still breathing. Her bronchials become increasingly blocked, with asthmatic bursts in her big eyes, which begin clamoring for new airs. Aires less populated with caustic, divisive sounds. Irritant free airs, airs that don't produce a phlegm build-up in her breathing passages, in her will. Airs just for Alcira. That only Alcira can breath. On a yellow afternoon that winter. Chrome sun.

That's what I think. I think that you aren't what others decide you are. You are what you are. If I was born with curly, chestnut hair, why are there people who would try anything to make me a straight-haired blonde? What happens if the grandson of the woman on the corner, who everyone says is Muslim, asks me out? What will my grandmother say? And my father, what's he going to do? Will they wish I was dead? Are they going to kill me? Because I think a person who isn't this or who isn't the other, is nothing. They're nobody, I mean. And if you're nobody you're dead. Or something close to it. At least that's what my mother's father told her when he found out that the reason why she'd run away from home was because the next day she was planning on getting married to a goy: that from that moment on she was nobody. She was nothing. And that's why to him she was dead. And to the whole family.

When you are twenty in a year like 1973 in Argentina, when all you have is a country awash in social injustice, a city with ochre skies, a Semite-Jewish-anti-Semite family, an experience of long adolescent years spent with nuns gamboling about within a set of limits drafted by ambition and the absurd, a few very discernable artistic inclinations and an ever increasing sense of justice, you are what you must be: young and sensitive to everything and completely disposed to giving your own life for an equitable country, an equitable world. Or at least a livable one. Or whatever.

Ochre the sun, the skies of the first half of the 70's in the cities, amid the hurry-scurry, in the deserts, the ones on the outside as well as on the inside, in the mountains. Flammable and ochre, lucid and primed for the big fight. And for the illusion of possible survival. The sun.

You'll always have to defend something. That's why we're here. That's why we are. Because there's always somebody who needs to take away something from somebody else either to protect what they've got or to add to their own holdings.

Defend. That idea enters me, to defend, enters me, spreads through me. I feel it take over and it makes me feel good. To defend what keeps me settled in one space in this world. To defend the right to follow my urges for Edgardo Fridman, who is two years older than me and has a set of green eyes I just can't stop looking at. To defend my right to him without my father going down that same old road, always redundant, slapping me, yelling "You're not Jewish and you're not going to get mixed up with that Jew bastard," the ochre sun, low, each time lower and on the verge of spilling onto the world, choking it with its mustard tastes and breaths. Egg yolk. Mud. Clagging and hardening in every opening for life.

If Edgardo were the grandson of Siddharta Gautama nothing would be different. When I met him and liked him nobody knew anything about him. What's the big deal? We talked and I told him the truth: that I'm an atheist. I don't see God anywhere and I don't go looking for

him either. And he doesn't look for me. What am I? Am I not a human being? Isn't that what I am? I think that's good enough. The responsibilities are many, and I don't think all our energies should be invested in hitting children so they won't get married to someone of a different religion. I don't think so. That fanaticism. Like they had a magnet in some area of the body that moved to the other person's movement. They don't use their rational force to step back, to get a little distance, to see what's going on around them. To ask themselves if the reasons why they moved to that rhythm were their own, or if they were coming from the other side. To ask themselves about that inscrutable authority deciding for you who you belong to. You don't ask any questions. I don't know if they give you an answer.

What I really feel like doing is crying.

What's the difference between coming to the aid of a Jew in some accident and helping out a Buddhist. I need an explanation. In myself. Only in myself will I find it. And I've come up with one: there is no difference. And to spend any more time on the matter is to waste the few minutes we have available in this life. Minutes that won't come back.

Now I feel there could have been other discrepancies. It would have been a lot more difficult for me to help out an Argentine, or a Chilean or a Uruguayan milico, who may or may not have tortured or murdered any of my friends with his own hands. That's where I sense the contrasts. That's where it all starts for me. Where the different roads begin, the ones each one of us chooses to take or not to take. The road to destroying our own kind or the one contributing to their fundamental happiness at being alive. To being for or against humanity. What reason would I have for favoring the ones depriving others of nourishment, of freedom or life?

There's a lot of sense to what the newspapers write when they say that forty percent of the left in this country are of Jewish origin. Why not, I ask myself. To oppose the military is to fight against a repeat of the Holocaust. Now sure, the neat little statistics are about the least subtle way of setting up two targets, two in one, with the repression that's closing in on us.

For me it's overwhelming to be defined in terms of being a human, to have that clarity all over me. And it's such a liberating feeling not to have to worry about what the origins of my compañeros might be. Or any of the millions of people in this country for whom I'm pursuing something that first you have to sense, then find, then learn to shape, then firm up and what seems to be called equality.

Take a deep breathe. That's what I need to do. Deep. So the air will push against my throat. And my stomach. My organs, my body parts. My very own air.

Ochre the yellow that invades and defines everything. Not cadmium, not chrome. The years pick up the speed, and existence becomes steeped in history.

"In this house we eat pork. Pork. And it is mixed with milk. Milk. And whoever doesn't work Saturdays is a good-for-nothing bum. Good-for-nothing. And if you don't like it go back to your family. Nobody's forcing you to stay here. And don't think I'm so stupid as to think that what you want the most in what little life you have is for me to drop dead, so you can hurry off to the synagogue with your sisters. Jew. That's exactly what you are: a Jew.

The will always be Raquel absorbs the sounds, the halting timbers, throaty from the emphysema of the one from whom the words issue. She does not ask anymore: Since when have you become a practicing Catholic? She doesn't ask questions like that anymore. Or any other kinds. But she absorbs, internalizes the sounds in which the old stubbornness

becomes tangible. And she knows that the words stacking up and suffocating at the end of the sentence and the sides of the half-cocked mouth must have some meaning.

Burnt sienna the sky that Alcira has no way of looking at for herself. The prison basement turns everything to sepia, to browns that miss those old yellows, those afternoon jaundiced tones. The afternoons of Rosario forging ahead, the city of sulphur clouds, the industrial Rosario, the one never completely free. The one crawling with family, the one full of the golden ringed grandmother. The one replete with insults and demands.

Dark burnt sienna the air that presses against Alcira's physical surfaces, that studies her, observes her, describes her, and tries to understand her, that analyzes her parts, to return her intact to how she was before. The air that shapes her and puts her right in front of herself. And puts her with the past, which is nothing more or less than the present. The prison of her twenty-two years, the prison of her five years, the prison of her twelve. And always, before and now, the same need to leap into the unforeseeable in order to set yourself free. The sepia air of enclosed dampnesses and circular movements lends her form within the space of the cell and she tries to impose memories, images sometimes mutilated by their history. Of a lengthy and layered movie already twenty-years long, uncut and unmuddled. Of an unmistakable loyalty to the first model, to the first figure of the series from a long sheet of paper, folded and superposed, cut with precision and care, so that all the paper dolls remain identical and conjoined.

It's so repetitive, every single day experience is something else and the same, there's a kind of directive planted in so many minds, it should belong to somebody, to something, it's necessary in order to be part of a whole. The idea scares me. And seduces me. But I want to be able to forge my own independence. And to have the inner strength to jump aside and step away, without having disappeared from history. And to watch my movements from the outside, my growing dementia, everything in and around me. I want to be me and to be her, I want to be that one who I talk to every day, who is my you, my her and my own myself.

And who else am I? Besides being Alcira, I'm the obsessive one, the curious one, the one relentlessly searching for justice, the Pollyana, the crazy one, the impossible one, the one with that thundering laughter, the obstinate one and the curly haired one. I am what I want to be. I am Alcira.

The dusky air in the cell observes her; it quarters her; it studies her closely, and it does not forget the order in which she was conjoined at the start. It studies every last element that conforms her, it introduces itself in her most minute corners. It analyzes her, reads her, interprets her. It reorganizes her in different orders, it observes her from afar. It tries out different approaches, and none of them seems to satisfy it. It seems to think long and hard. One by one, it rejects discards all options. It searches. It is trying to find her eyes. And it finds them: brown, full of life. And then it begins putting her parts back together again. The reconstruction down to the last detail. That a little at a time it returns Alcira, in tones of yellow, to her true and complete forms.

Notes

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