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From Catalonia

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From Catalonia

WHEN YOUR WANDERING EDITOR went to València last year, to teach North American literature and to *profundizar*, as they would say there, his knowledge of Spanish, which is, after all, as much the language of the Americas as English, he found himself amidst a renaissance of Catalán. Or Valenciano, or Mallorquín, as natives of areas within larger Catalonia might say, acknowledging variations they cherish; though to the linguistically less chauvinistic, it is all Catalán. This renaissance comes about partially from an even stronger repression of Catalán, and all its variants, during the years of Franco, a repression so exacting that even Jordis had to call themselves Jorge, Llúcias Lucia, and Joans Juan, at least in public, as when they went to school. The acknowledgment of politically distinct regions in Spain under the present constitution has underwritten a resurgence of suppressed languages and leads occasionally to street signs in Barcelona that a speaker of Castillian might not understand, or to the labelling of things in a museum as if all visitors were local. This linguistic balkanization of Spain is exacting; a letter writer to a national paper, *El País*, might remind readers in Madrid that it is as foolish for a representative of the central government to come to Barcelona and state his business in Castillian as it is for one from Barcelona, or València, to go to Madrid and insist on carrying on public business in Catalán. But it is not violent.

All this made my own progress in Spanish problematic, teaching as I was in the University of València, where each official notice is written in Valenciano, though I never encountered the least resistance to my choice of tongue. In València, Barcelona, or on Mallorca, if I spoke in Castillian, I would be answered in the same. Spaniards had no expectation that I would venture beyond the imperfect Spanish I had come prepared to use and were generally relieved that I could survive beyond English. Still this regional renaissance impressed me, and so the selection here, of writing in Catalán, including poems by Vicent Salvador, this year's winner of the October Award, an annual award for poetry in that language. It is at least worth noting that at the award banquet in València, police and security guards were pointedly evident, in spite of this not being a violent matter.

For there is a government in València of a more chauvinistic bent that would insist on Valenciano's being distinct from Catalán, a language all its

own. *Nostra llengua, nostres normes*, which according to our translator basically justifies many misspellings, is a graffiti one notices around, and there was at least the thought of bombs. Nothing destructive happened. The evening, conducted in Catalán, was gala, and the writers returned to their work.

As with poetry everywhere, that work is individually varied. Still one detects a strong longing for homeland in it, a longing that echoes Zionist, or Palestinian desires. Older writers often characterize their people as the Sephardim—Jews who came to, then were driven from Spain. As in medieval lyrics, love poetry often tips toward allegory, at least for a few lines, though with political rather than spiritual leanings. Here and there also, one detects an image from Hollywood.

Our translator is Adela Robles Salz, a native speaker of Catalán and a recent graduate of the University of València, with degrees in English and linguistics. She has also studied at the University of West Virginia. I offered some help and more interference.