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—Enrique Vila-Matas

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LAST WORDS ON EARTH

JAVIER SERENA

Translated from the Spanish
by Katie Whittemore



LAST WORDS ON EARTH

I

I'LL CALL HIM RICARDO, Ricardo Funes, although that isn't his real first name, or last. I won't reveal any factual details about him, except to say that he was from Peru and never forgot that he was an exile, not even after three whole decades in Spain.

Funes resided in Spain for thirty years: in Barcelona, at first, and then other Catalan towns during his nomadic phase, in which he devoted himself to selling leather goods at flea markets, repairing watches, and performing stunts as a night watchman at various campgrounds, until finally settling in Lloret de Mar.

Now that statues have been built in his honor and he is universally admired after his untimely death, Funes the

man has been obscured by the towering shadow of his legend, his history appropriated and fetishized, his works quoted and beloved by all. But his literary triumph couldn't have seemed more unlikely when I first met him, when he was just a poor, twenty-something immigrant silenced on the margins. A true outcast.

That's what I thought that first day: here was a lunatic or hermit, a pariah forced to live on the village outskirts. I've never forgotten the impression he made. I met Funes at the invitation of a mutual friend, a fellow writer who taught at the Universitat de Girona and had discovered Funes the previous summer at a campground near the coastal town of Castelldefels, where Ricardo Funes's mother temporarily set up a notions shop, selling bits and bobs until the day she decamped for yet another inland town, driven by the habitual, ingrained nomadism that defined their little family of two. I decided to accompany my professor friend to Castelldefels after several phone conversations during which he described Funes with an intriguing mix of skepticism and appeal. According to my friend, Funes was more familiar with certain periods of Latin American literature than even some of his department colleagues, but the man expressed himself with declarations so provocative it proved impossible to invite him to give a lecture. "It's like he has to argue until the other person is offended," he said, explaining that Funes had recently been fired from the campground because, while an inebriated English vacationer almost drowned in the pool, Funes was reading instead of making his nightly

rounds. Finding himself without a job and with a bit of money, Funes had apparently decided to spend all his savings on a shack near the beach rather than follow his mother out of town.

I had heard so much about him from my friend that I decided I would join him on a trek out to Funes's hut. The May day was so cold and rain-swept that it seemed to exaggerate Funes's status as an exiled resistance fighter living in poverty. It's strange to think how forsaken he was back then given the commotion caused, decades later, by any old manuscript found on his computer. But back in those days, Ricardo Funes was so far removed from ordinary life that he was characterized as somewhat of an outlaw who harried the other villagers: "Watch yourselves now, the Peruvian's mutt probably hasn't eaten in awhile," a neighbor advised us, peering out from under the hood of his raincoat when we stopped to check our directions.

Such a warning would later prove unnecessary, as I never sensed even the slightest hint of a threat in any of Funes's gestures, not that day nor in any of the years to come. It did, however, serve to amplify the mysteriousness of the scene in which we found ourselves. After the neighbor's ominous words, we pressed on down the dirt road for several minutes, through tree boughs clawing the windshield and muddy patches where our tires spun, until we finally reached an empty clearing.

And there, for the first time, I was met with Ricardo Funes's extraordinary presence. I saw him from the car, a hundred meters away, planted in front of the house like

a sentinel guarding his homestead in the Old West. The shack was a rustic, single-story construction with a haphazard tin roof, and Funes stood outside with his dog, clutching not a shotgun, but a stick, surrounded by shirts and pairs of pants strung on a line, flapping like flags in the breeze.

We got out of the car, and as my friend and I walked toward him, I sensed his endearing amiability, which I would come to know as one of Funes's characteristic qualities. He donned a summer shirt with green and orange flowers, more appropriate for Caribbean isles than our European latitudes. His hair was long and curly and he wore the round metal-framed glasses he would favor until he died. Rounding out his general appearance as a stray tourist-cum-novice farmer were a pair of sandals entirely ineffectual at protecting his bare feet from the mud.

"Welcome, professor." Funes greeted my friend ironically, shaking his hand with sincere affection.

Then he turned to me. I took in his open shirt, unbuttoned to reveal a patch of chest hair and a silver chain. He was thin as a greyhound and in his unmistakable, hoarse voice—perpetual rumble, incurable lament—addressed me in a way that immediately won me over:

"And you are also very welcome, *señor* Vallés, sir," he joked. "I've read all of your books."

In time, I would come to learn that two of Funes's most emblematic behaviors were to read everything and declare it publicly, and to express his opinions—whatever they were—with total sincerity and no reservation whatsoever,

devoid of any strategy to advance his own interests. Pretense was not to be found among his defects.

That afternoon, however, I was less taken with his literary reflections than with the spectacle of neglect in which he lived.

The house struck me as so chaotic, so unsuitable for habitation, that it was a wonder he had already been living there for months. The first jolt was the strong smell permeating the place: the odor of a closed, musty pantry, or of the thick air of an unaired bedroom. It smelled as though Funes lived on nicotine and caffeine and wore his clothes so many times in a row that he didn't remember how to wash them to expunge the pervasive stench.

In the main living area—the only room besides the bedroom—there was a kitchenette and sink piled high with plates and pots and pans, a couch covered in an array of blankets, clothing strewn across the floor, and books stacked in towers on shelves and atop the television. My friend and I sat down at a small table pushed against the wall that appeared to be used both for eating and working at his typewriter.

We sat quietly, taken aback by the shambolic state of his quarters, as he showed us the folders where he kept his manuscripts organized by year and genre—poetry, short story, or novel—in a meticulous color-coded filing system completely at odds with the rest of the house.

"Your first book is your best," he said, crossing his legs and establishing the candidness that would govern the terms of our future friendship. He lit his first cigarette

before my friend or I had even ventured to try the coffee he offered.

The rest of the conversation unfolded along those lines, a succession of erudite comments and rash declarations. Funes didn't hesitate to show contempt for acclaimed writers or extol the virtues of others we hadn't even heard of, all with a confidence in his own judgment that I had rarely seen in anyone else. "His writing will be completely outmoded before you know it," he said about a popular prize-winning novelist. Or, in reference to a poet he had always admired who lived as a recluse: "He's one of two or three who will actually last," calming his dog with a pat. The animal hadn't stopped yipping, whining, and sniffing our legs under the table.

The situation was an ironic one, since by that time I had already published several books and had a weekly column in *La Vanguardia*, as befit the profile of the sort of writer I represented, vaguely bohemian but from a well-to-do Barcelonan family, and my beguiled professor friend balanced his own writing with teaching at the university in Girona, and yet here was this man, tucked away in a peasant's shack, lecturing us with his strident, melodramatic opinions.

Eventually, the professor redirected the conversation toward more exotic subjects: he asked Funes to tell me about *negacionismo*, a poetic movement Funes had apparently founded as an adolescent in Mexico, where he went into exile during the Peruvian dictatorship. The movement's literary tendencies embraced a puzzling appetite for

rebellion: Funes claimed to have sabotaged readings given by the most renowned poets of the day and published irreverent pamphlets railing against the dominant national canon.

Funes drained his black coffee in a single swallow and lit a second cigarette using the first; behind his thin lips, I noted the teeth destroyed by lack of oral hygiene and many years of dental neglect. As he started to speak, his eyes shone. He was abidingly proud of his turbulent teenage years.

He spoke enthusiastically about the magazines he published with his handful of co-conspirators, and evoked the years that immediately preceded his departure for Barcelona: vibrant days of his youth in Mexico City, an adolescence in which he must have felt that the city streets had been paved expressly for him to roam at dawn with his silhouette shining nobly, unstained by disappointment; a time when he yearned to wield language as a tool for destroying all the barriers built with apathy and all the traditions he wanted to shatter.

By then, the room was filled with smoke—tobacco smoke and the turgidity from the conversation, which had become a monologue, replete with names of streets and old Mexican associates and obscure books of poetry. While outside the rain fell with increasing force, inside intimacy reigned, accentuated by the sound of the raindrops pattering on the metal roof.

Funes waxed poetic about his minor feats, reminiscing about his years of excess and even alluding to the

punishments meted out when a member crossed over to the ranks of the powerful, punishments that called to mind the rituals of masonic sects or other insurgent cabals. After a brief pause, he reached for a knife stuck through a newspaper clipping into the wall, pulled the weapon out, and viciously stabbed the same piece of paper again.

“Traitor! Sold. For a chair and an office.” He explained that the figures in the photo were an old *negacionista* comrade and a powerful literary critic, one who had apparently taken the poet under his protection for some future gain.

Between threats directed at the man in the picture, Funes detailed the scope of the knife-pierced individual’s unforgivable sin: that of putting his own future before his loyalty to the group, of abandoning his tribe of aspiring-poet friends who read each other’s scrawled verses, all in exchange for an institutional fellowship, or inclusion in some anthology. There was no graver offense in Ricardo Funes’s mind, as I would observe over and again throughout the years. He clung to that peculiar poetic cause sparked in the Americas and protected its distant flame like it was his only source of warmth, the final thread connecting him to his origins.

Present in those accounts was his closest friend from his Mexico days, Domingo Pasquiano, whom I would never have the chance to meet, although Funes would speak of him so often over the years that the stranger would become dear to me. “The world’s greatest poet,” Funes said in a hyperbolic claim, reiterating Pasquiano’s genius as he glared at the picture from the paper.

Then, Funes went on to pay further homage to his friend Pasquiano, with us as audience. In my view, it was his way of telling me who he was, and who I would be dealing with. As the rain intensified on the flimsy metal roof, Funes took an envelope from his pocket, an unopened letter with a noble-looking red wax seal, a replica of a love letter of yore, and soberly revealed that the envelope held Domingo Pasquiano’s latest poem.

“From April,” he said, slitting the seal with a dirty knife and showing us a page of type-written lines. He held them in such a way that suggested they contained sacred verse.

Funes then leapt to his feet, exalted. My friend and I were left at the table, dumbstruck and motionless in our seats, as his cigarette burned away in the ashtray, the thread of smoke rising in a thin, perfect column. We watched him descend the front steps onto the lawn and come to a stop several meters from the house. Our view was framed by the open door: we could see the clothes out on the line and the two dark grooves of the lane leading to the house amid the green expanse of patchy grass and weeds left to grow knee-high, and farther out the trees and turbulent gray sky that steeped the afternoon in premature darkness. Had lightning flashed in the background, we might have been observing an El Greco painting; and yet the scene before us was actually a serene one, more apt for private confession than that sort of mystical or tragic excess. And yet we were witnessing a miracle, the miracle of Funes’s surrender to the dream born in the dusty streets of Mexico City and the miracle of his unbreakable friendship with Pasquiano

and the miracle of the vernal oaths he'd sworn as a young Negationist poet, vows he bore as if they had been branded with fire on his chest and to which he remained loyal, despite distance and the passing years.

"A single copy, one reading ere the flames: that's what Pasquiano's poems are for," Funes said suddenly, addressing us through the doorway, grateful that, for once, his friend's work would enjoy a small audience before falling into eternal silence. That was the purpose of the correspondence they kept up for many years, despite the Atlantic Ocean and thousands of kilometers between them: a text written for one ephemeral reading, a ceremony celebrated in a distant country in the strangeness of the afternoon, no pretense of permanence, no expectation for how the lines might resonate. What seemed to matter to Pasquiano, the only way he deemed his message heard, was knowing that somewhere, someone fervently read his words for a brief moment in time.

Funes performed his ritual and I considered what kind of madman we had met deep in the woods. He held himself with the gravitas befitting a liturgy: his sandaled feet were planted firmly in the mud, hair plastered with rain, and, through the wet shirt, his skin had taken on an amphibious quality, a hybrid texture. The dog barked as she leapt around him, and we strained to hear the beginning of Pasquiano's verses.

The poem was short, no longer than a minute or two, but it was raining hard and the paper disintegrated so

rapidly that Funes barely had time to finish reading it. When the page was a crumbled mess in his hands, the only copy of the poem gone forever, he looked up at us, as if some type of consecration had taken place.

"That's it."

Funes let the pieces fall to the ground, untroubled when the dog trampled the inert page. I studied the perfect tube of ash the cigarette had become.



The theatrics of our first meeting very well could have given me an inaccurate impression of Ricardo Funes. But although he was fond of controversy, there was genuinely nothing artificial about him. He wasn't one to chase recognition for his literary merit through such extravagances, unlike the many other aspiring poets I had met by that stage who—despite a lack of both talent and a minimal foundation in literary studies—performed their circus antics in the Raval, rending their T-shirts or dumping buckets of red paint over their heads, desperate in their attempts to draw an audience.

In contrast, Funes never came up with ways to flaunt his uniqueness; instead, he constructed a fictional universe all his own, with its particular symbology and myths. There was a basis for his peculiarity: he lived an isolated life, obsessed with literature and a past he tended to idealize, forever unsuccessful in his bids to establish a connection

with others who shared his angst. He was marooned on an island without peers to serve as mirrors and reflect his potential feats or failures.

After the day I watched him read Pasquiano's fleeting verses in the rain, it was a long time before I saw Funes again. In fact, five years passed before our paths crossed, this time in Barcelona, at the launch of my latest novel at what was then the most popular bookstore in the city. Given that I hadn't extended him an invitation, I took it that Funes had turned up on his own accord to substantiate our friendship, which had been deferred as soon as it began.

I noticed him only after I had finished speaking, when I looked up and recognized him at the back of the store. He stood apart from the little cliques that had formed, leaning against a shelf stacked with books. At the time, he would have been thirty-five and I forty, though with Funes age was a paradoxical phenomenon: sometimes he seemed like a teenager, with his playfulness and bursts of enthusiasm and ability to keep his oldest fantasies intact, and other times he gave the impression of being much older, perhaps because he had peered into more abysses in fewer years than most. And though he didn't have his farmer sandals or noisy dog, he presented just as odd an image, conspicuous in his round, Victorian clerk's glasses, bony jaw, and scrawny mien. He wore a long gabardine coat, a style that might have suggested capitulation to the tritest of literary stereotypes: the austere writer, the self-serious novelist—one of those sad sorts who delights in his own failure—or

worse still, the melancholy Parisian poet; in Funes's case, however, it was simply that he had gotten it on sale for next to nothing.

I started toward him, and before we'd even had a chance to say hello, I watched him demonstrate the same spirited disposition he'd shown years before when, as he stepped past a critic who had written several articles about my work, Funes got in one of his unexpected barbs: "I have tried, you know. But it's impossible: you talk about literature and it's like reading an appliance manual—half the words are incomprehensible." Before the man could react, Funes reached out and shook my hand warmly, not at all bitter about the years-long stretch of silence between us.

I quickly learned the reason for the long hiatus in our communication: he had been writing to me at the wrong address, I didn't know in which remote, provincial village he had landed as a traveling peddler, and our mutual professor friend had also lost track of Funes's trail.

Whatever the reasons, that was how Ricardo Funes and I found each other again, and how I discovered that he was living in Lloret de Mar, where he had been drawn to settle after so much drifting around. He promptly invited me to visit him in the coastal town, promising me that—as far as he was concerned—nothing essential had changed: "The same coffee and cigarettes, Fernando," he said.

I accepted, of course, in part because I was intrigued by Funes's near visceral dedication to literature, despite having never reaped any reward whatsoever for his concerted efforts, and in part because I felt obliged given my

bad manners of having let five years go by without a single word.

And so, years after visiting on some long-ago family vacation, I returned to Lloret. I took the train from Barcelona, a trip I would repeat on innumerable occasions over the course of the next fifteen years. He asked me to meet him in a café in the center of town, La Fundamental, an establishment with no aspiration other than to supply office workers with their morning coffee and serve tea and pastries to elderly ladies in the afternoon. I quickly surmised that the café also served as Funes's usual stomping ground.

For the first few minutes, we retraced the terrain of our conversation in his cabin on the outskirts of Castelldefels, but he also confessed that he rarely wrote poetry anymore, concentrating his efforts on the genres of short fiction and novel instead. And smiling broadly, he revealed that he had gotten married and was unimaginably happy: "She tends the garden and I try to beat the house," he said, underscoring the gratitude he felt for his wife's confidence in him. She worked at the Lloret de Mar town hall, while he dedicated himself exclusively to chasing sporadic income with his stories.

He was, he said, a very satisfied man. And yet, he had already begun to be afflicted by the pain that would pursue him until his death: the awareness of growing old, that our days are numbered and seem to accelerate with the passage of time. I was surprised by the prophetic nature of his musings, which seem to represent a kind of regret foretold.

A cigarette dangled from his lips as he spoke, the ember slowly consumed, the ash falling under the burden of its own weight: "Every written page is a gamble—hit the jackpot or lose the bet." The cigarette burned and the smoke rose toward the ceiling as Funes pondered the number of hours he had spent in the libraries of Mexico City, marveling at the ease with which he used to memorize whole pages by the authors who most excited him, and deriding the other drivel on which he had squandered precious hours of his youth.

Rough-shaven, his curls cropped shorter than when I first met him, Funes moved and expressed himself with natural elegance, the result of an unshakeable confidence in who he was and what he was capable of. He gave an account of his exorbitant reading habits, sighing in conclusion: "I am an uneducated and very well-read man."

Funes had received me with a file folder and folded newspaper at his usual table by the wall. Over the course of the two hours we were there, I noted that the waiter brought him coffee without being asked. When Funes went to pay, he handed the man a paper napkin with a few scribbled lines instead of reaching for his wallet. This unusual form of payment was a running joke between them.

"Hey, it's like we've told you: we might serve the coffee but we're nobody's patron," replied the veteran waiter from behind the counter. He was over sixty, at least, and struck me as vaguely paternal. "How about a few coins instead?"

Funes laughed, protesting that the obligation to pay with actual money constituted an insult, given that he was