

La Vergüenza

One book will be the last book. Tolstoy used this metaphor in *Anna Karenina*: “And the candle by which she had been reading that book that is filled with anxiety, deceit, sorrow and evil flared up with a brighter flame than ever before, lighted up everything for her that had previously been in darkness, flickered, dimmed, and went out forever.” But we were speaking of the real act of reading. What will the last book be? If I’d been struck by the bus yesterday, the one that careened into the crosswalk almost against the driver’s will, if his face was any indication, the last book would have been *The Invention of Solitude*, in my bag at the time. A weekend of autumn in midsummer. I was walking to the beach to eat paella with some people from work. I knew I’d be the first one to arrive, and I worried that the turnout would be disappointing, since the whole thing had been my idea to begin with. The beach was ugly and urban; a group of shirtless men occupied the nearest restaurant terrace. Music blared across the sand. I have tried to write a few novels, and I must admit I’ve never been able to finish any of them. My resistance consists of... Well, it would be easy to say a delicacy of shame, an embarrassment, the same impulse that makes me look away from the Englishmen with their blue tattoos and pale skin. But they are not ashamed. My students say this is a culture in which shame has value: it tempers one’s behavior. Allegedly the fear of ridicule, of appearing ridiculous, still keeps one in check here, and makes foreigners stand out. A long time ago, looking through old souvenirs together, I found a note my grandmother had written to my mother in anticipation of a Thanksgiving visit to her sorority sister’s home in Chicago. Apparently the family was quite wealthy, and the note was full

of practical advice, conveyed in a rather urgent tone, about what to pack and how to prepare for the visit. My grandmother, who had never been to college, and whose prior education is unknown to me, had written “be sure” as one word. This word, full of concern and written in her distinctive hand on a company memo pad, was repeated many times.

Retrato Imaginario

In the few days left before my untimely demise, I find myself making lists. My categories are simple: things I will have time to do and should do (burn certain papers) and things I will now never do (learn Catalan, make a soufflé, travel to Istanbul). The second list seems nearly endless; at some point it will have to list itself as one more unattainable desire, formed earlier by a consciousness which will soon cease to exist. The first list is quite short; after all I haven't lost my reason. Three days' time (less, actually) is hardly enough to do more than re-read Archilochos, *The Pleasures of C*, "Funes the Memorious," and a few choice pages of *Anna Karenina*; to eat ice cream (fortunately it's summer), walk about the neighborhood, and sort through the detritus of my life. And of course, sleep. If only I can sleep very well, and visit the theater of dreams a few more times. My sleep was a source of conflict throughout childhood; my parents were unable to understand my insomnia. Did they know how I would lie awake, counting to infinity, unable to float freely into dreams until the morning hours? Now I will never perfect the art of sleeping, for death is no sleep as far as I can tell. The dead I've encountered have lacked everything save a mysterious cellular activity of decay. No, my sleeping days will soon be over and the cities I visited in my dreams will pass to others, or die with me in a single exhalation. Also my ability to fly and my happy meetings with those long dead. Will I be asleep when it happens? The hour hasn't been predicted. Would I prefer to be at home or in the park? Would certain streets be preferable to others? I want to add some item to the list, such as "plan last day," but even as I write this, surrounded by children and people not much younger than myself, the hopelessness of such a task is

overwhelming. My last day will surely be like any other. The world will continue, completely indifferent to me. I'm inclined to stay at home, so as not to trouble anyone. List 2: visit the sea one last time, travel through France by train, read Homer in Greek. The sun has sunk behind the roofs that form the western edge of the square. The cafés are filling up. Soon I'll ask for the check in the language I've started to learn. I'll pay my bill and start for home. The wind is cooler now. I'll open all the windows.