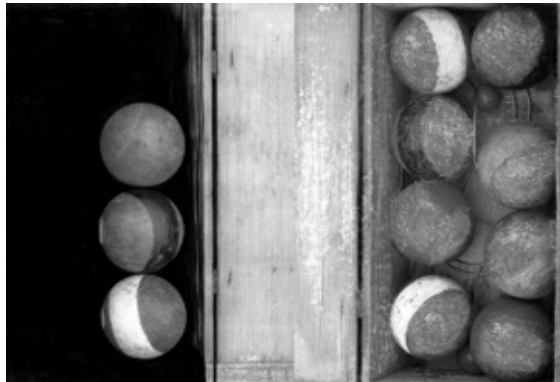


Eleven Short Stories by Karlos Linazasoro



Translated by Sarah Turtle



ON RETROACTIVITY

I have a friend who has achieved immortality. Achieving it has been his one and only goal in life. I don't envy him. Good for him. I've done the complete opposite: I wanted to be retroactive, and after much effort and fatigue, retroactivity is what I've achieved. Now I'm writing my own past, I'm sprinkling all the days of my childhood and youth with indescribable happiness, I'm resurrecting my dead, I'm giving myself the most delightful of professions... The power (gift?) lasts until yesterday, it's always the day before, the present is a frontier or exile, and yesterday's memory and fragrance, despite being untouchable, are still very close. My friend tells me maliciously that I, too, will die one day, and I tell him, with a touch of wickedness, that there's nothing better in the world than to die in complete happiness, and I ask him what he intends to do when his life becomes unbearable, meaningless and loathsome. What on earth is he going to do then?



THE SIGNATURE

The old shepherd did not know how to read or write. When the notary handed him a pen for him to sign the document, he gazed out of the window for a brief instant. Then, very gently, he milked the pen with two fingers and drew a wonderful flock of sheep.



AT THE HOSPITAL: CROSSWORDS

Whenever I'm waiting for someone to die or for someone to be born I do crosswords. They calm me down, and undo the tight knots inside my head. I sit down next to the operating theatre on a little wickerwork chair and stare at the ceiling in search of a lost word. A colour, nine letters. They've got to change the child's heart, it got damaged while he was at school in the playground wood. Turquoise, tangerine, harlequin. I gaze at the ceiling, yet I'm thinking about the child's arteries weakened by woodworm, their weary systole-diastole. I am the king of the crossword. Byzantium, vermilion, persimmon. It's nearly four hours. The letters settle down in their places on their own, only a few gaps left to be filled now. All of a sudden I hear footsteps inside, the proximity of some warm words. They're coming. They've finished. Raspberry, goldenrod, malachite. I can't guess the word, I've never guessed a single word correctly, but I can hear the new heart feverishly jumping with the joy of a wild horse, as if wanting to burst out of the operating theatre. And now I know the nine-letter word which is the colour of the new heart with nine lives.



AT THE HOSPITAL: MISSINGED PERSONS

By now I know the hospital's corridors, floors, rooms and everything with my eyes closed. Every single corner. That's why when I decide to go missing, there's no way I'll be missing for ever. If you want to remain missing for ever, you have to know every spot very well, and even so it's quite a job going missing for ever. I know patients who went missing for ever, two or three, maybe a fourth one, too, within the hospital's walls. They were never found again, even though people looked for them everywhere. But I know where they went missed, because they didn't just go missing or settle down somewhere or hide somewhere, they went *missinged*. What's that? It's achieving a kind of invisibility, a status that can only be achieved in a hospital, and it's halfway between life and death. That's why whenever I go around muttering to myself or as I wander along the hospital's long, sterile corridors, someone might think, might dream, that I'm talking to or chatting to the missed persons, and not engaged in an alarming, demented monologue with myself.



SOMEONE ELSE'S PARANOIA

I suffer from paranoia, other people's paranoia. What's it like? Well, I always have someone ahead of me. And they follow me. They follow me from in front, so the paranoia isn't mine but someone else's. To a certain extent someone else's paranoia is nothing to get worked up about, it doesn't make you afraid: you always have the enemy in your sights. So in that respect there are no surprises, because I always hold the initiative. But you never know. What is more, even if they maintain a safe distance from you, privacy, internal balance, is lost. As I have them in front of me, I am the pursuer, so I'd better keep quiet. People can't understand why I get ruffled, why all of a sudden I start hurling terrible insults without any apparent reason. The person you have in front of you isn't going with you; in actual fact, it will be the other way round. And I have tried to catch them, so it's the other person who is paranoid. Anyway, I've never managed to catch them: our lives slip along the same track, at a certain fateful, constant distance.



WHERE IS IT?

And her hands in my hair were rockets or snow, a sleigh moving forwards, which slid in a smell of cologne to the port of my eyes, to take a ravishing pause, a kiss until later. Mother's hands, I say, curls and sea each morning, removing the traces of dew, the cloudy thorns on my pillow. And what a journey they danced as they lovingly watched over my portion of milk, what entertainment they needed so blue and so beautiful, where did all those moments go to die, the sleeping faithful. Where are the smiles of those hands as they open the cage of my hair, letting the birds fly away, and the ribbons the cornfields the pirate ships the caresses the birches the nightingales, everything that was lost with my coming of age, where is it.



SOME MORNINGS

Some mornings I'm an enjambment, I am a peg, pincers, a stapler and I grab things firmly between my legs. I spot my neighbourhood and I grab it by the shoulder, my thigh next to its ribs; I come across a massive oak tree and with the skill of a monkey I get hold of its trunk; I pick out something standing upright (a lamp post, post box, human being or municipal policeman, road sign), and I am compelled, against my wishes, (I'm sure you'll understand), to grab it between my legs, with agility, power, but with wickedness, until I cause the person pain, in a powerful, wicked way, and one day, of course, something is also bound to befall me because of my unkind, uncontrollable habit.



FILTER MAN

I'm a filter man. I find gold in thoughts, words, ideas, in everything that exists. I take the pollution out of the air, the virus out of the disease, the lie out of the truth. Everything I absorb through my pores (a sound, a lost smile, the pollen in someone's eyes) emerges clean, pure and virgin, innocent. I expel waste and dirt, lies and maybe loathing, tricks and tyranny through my kidneys and lungs along with the carbon dioxide. With each breath I clean a minute part of the world, only a few molecules perhaps, but around me all is a spotless forest, poetry and paradise, the harmony of the beginning. I don't get tired any more in the filtering process, I do it automatically; no worries, no suffocation, no fuss when I breathe. And people live happily beside me, because they notice such clean, genuine peace, the one that existed before paradise was lost, baptised with divine light, one of such unspeakable joy.



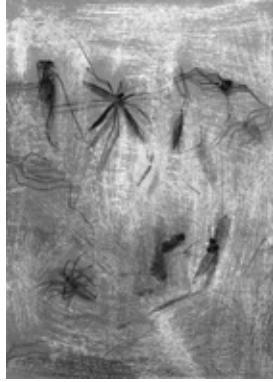
THE CRUDEST ARROW OF THE INSULT

I do everything sideways: walking, speaking, loving, sleeping, living. Of course, we don't choose these things, just as we don't choose the colour of our eyes. At the bottom of all this is a kind of not fitting in with the world that I know, cosmic suffocation that walls of air have produced in me. I cannot live side by side, opposite, face down or face up: these characteristics are forbidden in my case. I observe my best friend sideways and he looks like an enemy; I speak from one side and traces of anger can be found in me; I walk the streets sideways, and people find my behaviour insulting; I fuck sideways and no love is visible in my passion. But although I look sideways, I can see the world face to face and in its fullness, not in profile or from one side, and I know what insult's crudest arrow is.



RIP

I'm holding father's ashes. An ugly urn. And I don't know what to do with father's ashes. I'd like to toss them up in the air, but the wind is asleep; I'd like to scatter them on the ground but I realise I have nothing on my feet. I'm in a small, red wood and I can see pillows in the oak trees, and a cuckoo has shat on me, and I can even hear the sea, so far away. I've written a poem to read during this moving moment, I've copied an eight-lined verse from an old Basque verse maker, from Ataño, Polipaso, even though I've always liked Machado, Antonio Machado, and in Spanish. But in Spanish. And father would always say in Basque rest in peace, and until the great day, or I am your friend in grief, and God willing, but not all being well. And it was in the factory that he learnt to say *finis coronat opus*, death finishes the work, the journey ends in death, and the earth will make us all equal. In the end, earth to earth. The factory owner and us, everyone. And that is exactly what my father wrote in big green letters on the side of the gumming machine. *FINIS CORONAT OPUS*. I sit down on a tree trunk. I can smell candle wax, light's reflection woven by abyssal fish. I look at father and I can't see the wood for my father. If only there were the slightest puff of wind. Or if only father would not look at me like that, so defeated. But it is clear that today is not the day. I'll come another day, another time, weather willing, God willing, to perform *finis coronat opus*, or, as father used to say, to finish the job you've begun.



ANTHROPOPHOBIA

I regard myself as an anthropophobe. I don't like human flesh. I've tried it of course, but I don't like it. Neither the taste, nor the texture or anything else. Now anthropophagy is fashionable and it is almost *de rigueur* to like human flesh, to think that it is the most delicious meat possible. Humanity moves under the dictates of fashion, and is dominated by manipulating messages. First of all it was beef; then oily fish; then the vegetarian diet, naturism, organic food. Now anthropophagy has arrived by land, sea and air: nothing has the proteins, vitamins or calories that human flesh has. Moreover, it is a sign of finesse, a cutting-edge symbol, and an indication of modernity. Ethical prejudices are interpreted the other way round now: it is immoral not to consume the flesh of your relatives, friends or enemies, when that is *precisely* what they would do for you. But I can't bear the spectacle: the Head of the Packaging Department, the one who died of a heart attack yesterday, was eaten up by my colleagues, just like they were vultures, their working clothes drenched in blood, they feasted on him, legs and thighs, the sweet, soft marrow, and thoroughly sucked the bones of his hands and feet, the poor corpse, there is nothing left of that big guy who until yesterday was handing out humbugs to us, just a femur, just an ulna and a radius, just a skull, you can make use of the whole human being, as you can a pig, that's what they said, and how they kept the poor creature's blood to make sausages and

black pudding, how they devour the body even before you know it, in honour of the body itself, anyway, lads, let no traces of poor Herman remain, let us be generous and kind with respect to his life and his death.

Yesterday it was Herman, and the day before yesterday a cousin of mine, the one who drowned at sea; and three days ago, a ragged old man who was run over by a lorry; and then you have the arguments that go on in the queues at the butchers' shops for a bit of hip bone, or brain or testicles; and particularly the bodies of the younger ones, the freshest, most tender meat, or the little bodies of new-born babes, grilled on smoky home barbecues, on red summer evenings, as if it were the food of the gods, the most wonderful gourmet food ever.