

Darkride

A Prose Sequence by Taeho Choi

Part of The Filament, a sequence of prose pieces exploring the subtle layers beneath waking life.

There was an order to the rides the boy liked at the amusement park.

His friends always looked for the tallest ride as soon as they entered. They talked about how high it went, how fast it dropped, and who would scream first. The boy was with them, but when it was time to choose a ride, he always looked somewhere else.

The darkride.

Its entrance was quieter than the others. People disappeared into the darkness almost as soon as they went inside, and from the outside there was no way to know what they were seeing. The boy liked that. There was no need to throw his body around like on a roller coaster, and no need to decide what to do. Once he sat in the boat, the boat moved on its own, and the story appeared in a fixed order.

There was no smell when they first got into the boat.

His friends pushed each other around as they chose their seats. The tall boy pulled at the safety bar a few times. The small boy asked how deep the water was, and the big boy kept asking how far the boat would go.

As the boat slowly moved inside, the bright light at the entrance receded behind them.

That was when the smell began to appear.

At first, the boy thought it was simply the smell of the water. It was the cool, slightly fishy smell that belonged only to water that had been flowing for a long time. But the farther they went, the more it mixed with the smell of wet wood and cloth that had been folded away for too long. The air had the damp stillness of a storage room that had remained closed after days of rain.

It was not a pleasant smell.

But he did not dislike it either.

The boy knew he had entered the darkride when that smell appeared. He could not remember where he had smelled it before. Perhaps it was an old towel, or a staircase after the rain, or the inside of a cupboard that had never been opened. He could not tell. The smell always returned before the memory did.

As the boat passed from one scene to another, the smell grew stronger. Somewhere, water was dripping. Red light lay across the surface of the water, stretching out and trembling whenever the boat moved. A low mechanical hum continued overhead, while unseen mechanisms moved at regular intervals inside the walls.

The boy breathed a little more slowly than usual.

It was slightly unpleasant.

He liked that it remained unpleasant.

Inside the darkride, the smell mingled with the sound of water and machinery, with the darkness, the red lights, and the unmoving figures. None of these things was particularly pleasant on its own, but together they became something else.

That was what the darkride was to him.

A place that was slightly unpleasant, but one he wanted to enter again.

His friends kept talking.

The tall boy said he was not scared of any of this. He always said that on the bigger rides too. He was the first to check the safety bar, but once the ride started he always insisted that he was not afraid.

The small boy kept looking around. He needed to know in advance whether water would splash or something would suddenly appear.

The big boy thought about everything inside the darkride in simple terms. Something frightening was frightening, and once it passed, it was over.

"How far does this go?"

The boy did not answer. The boat moved deeper into the darkness, and a large face appeared beneath a red light before slipping past again. A wash of blue light spread briefly across the water.

Nothing inside the darkride needed to be explained. Everyone sat where they were supposed to sit, and the boat moved in the direction it was supposed to move. The lights came on at the right moments, and the next scene arrived without waiting.

The boy liked that. His friends' voices grew quieter while the sound of the water grew louder.

Then the boat stopped.

It rocked a few times but did not move again. It had drifted out of the channel and caught against a low ledge of rock, sitting apart from the current while the water continued to flow around it.

"Do you think it broke?"

The tall boy laughed. The small boy grabbed the arm of the person beside him, while the big boy looked down at the water.

"Can we get out here?"

No one answered.

The boy looked outside the boat.

Only then did he notice a place he had never seen before. Beyond the low ledge was a narrow patch of ground, and behind it the walls of the darkride continued into the darkness. It was a place that would normally have passed like any other part of the scene.

Something knocked beneath the boat.

Tok.

The boy leaned down and looked into the water, but there was nothing to see. A moment later it came again, tok, and one of the figures ahead moved once. A small mechanical sound came from inside its open mouth, then stopped.

The space behind the figure, normally hidden by the boat's movement, remained there.

It was dark.

Small lights continued through it. One led to another, and between them a thin line stretched into the distance. The boy began to think that the lights were not there to illuminate a scene. They seemed to be marking a way somewhere.

The ceiling was the same. Between the lights, a black gap extended in one direction, then bent away from the direction in which the boat had been traveling.

"What's that?"

The tall boy looked up.

"Where?"

The boy pointed, but the tall boy stared for a moment before looking ahead again.

"It'll start moving soon."

The big boy pointed toward the water.

"We could just get out there."

There was nothing there but water.

The small boy grabbed the boy's sleeve.

"When are we getting out?"

The boy did not answer.

The three boys looked back in their own directions. The tall boy looked toward the front of the boat, the big boy looked at the water, and the small boy looked down at his own hands. To the boy, they looked like one of the scenes they had passed a moment earlier.

The boat was no longer moving, so neither was the scene.

The boy stood up.

The boat was still caught against the low ledge, tilted slightly to one side. When he leaned toward the wall, his fingertips touched it. He placed his palm against it and felt a very faint current of air.

The damp smell that remained inside the boat seemed weaker there. Instead of the mixture of water, wet wood, and folded cloth, a dry, light air was coming from somewhere beyond the wall and brushing against the back of his hand.

The boy followed it with his eyes.

There was a place the lights did not reach. The darkness elsewhere seemed designed to conceal something, but this darkness felt as though it had never been meant to show anything at all. After staring at it for a while, he noticed a very thin line where two walls met. It looked like a crack, but the closer he came, the more clearly it extended all the way down, and only around that line was the sound of water absent.

The boy placed his palm against it. A narrow gap shifted inward, and only then did he realize it was a door. He looked back. The tall boy was still facing forward, the small boy had his head lowered while holding onto the boy's sleeve, and the big boy was still looking down at the water. None of them was looking at him. He opened the door a little farther, and air slowly came through from the other side.

The smell from the boat thinned as it passed through the gap, replaced by a light current of air carrying the faintest trace of earth. There were stairs beyond the door. There was no railing, no emergency light, and the width of the steps varied slightly from one to the next. They looked less like part of a ride than stairs that had always belonged inside an old building.

The boy stepped down. Something was being said behind him, but it already sounded as though he were hearing it underwater. After a few steps, the light above disappeared, leaving only a thin brightness rising from below.

It was too thin to be called light.

The boy followed it downward. At some point the sound of water and machinery disappeared, and the voices of his friends faded with them. The stairs ended in a wide space. It was too large to be a room and had no direction that made it feel like a corridor. Even the boundary between the walls and the floor seemed unclear.

The air was light. **Something cool slowly moved through it and brushed the back of his neck.** The boy turned, but there was nothing on the stairs behind him. Somewhere in the distance he sensed a very faint presence. It was too faint to be called a sound and too definite to be called wind. It reminded him of summer nights when he was little, when something seemed to be moving somewhere in the darkness even though nothing could be seen.

The boy looked toward it.

There were stairs there again.

The first step was almost indistinguishable from the floor. When he placed his foot on it, the air became lighter once more, and the last sound in his ears and the edges of his vision seemed to recede together.

Only what lay ahead remained strangely clear.

There was a faint brightness below.

The boy went down one more step.

Then another.

There was no one there.

The boy kept going down.

End.

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A revised and expanded version will be prepared for publication.

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