

sick bag'

A Prose Sequence by Taeho Choi

This is an English translation of *sick bag'*, a prose sequence about movement, distance, and the quiet disruption of a life measured by constant motion.

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Every time he flew, he took a sick bag from the seat pocket in front of him.

It was not because he was going to be sick.

Sometimes he wrote on it. He would write after takeoff, once the seatbelt sign had gone out, or just before landing. Sometimes he wrote a single line. Sometimes nothing at all. When he was done, he usually put the bag back in the seat pocket.

That was simply what he did.

On the flight to New Orleans, he took one out as usual.

This time, he wrote nothing.

In New Orleans, people moved slowly.

He noticed it over the next few days. He could not tell whether people were actually moving slowly, or whether he had simply begun to see them that way. They lingered over meals. They did not hurry down the street. There were people sitting around with nothing in particular to do.

Watching them made him feel slightly superior.

He did not live that way.

He was always busy. He moved from one better place to another. He knew how to find the better hotels. It was not difficult for him to tell who had a good job and who did not.

He thought he was somewhat different from other people.

He had thought that for a long time.

He had never been particularly good at fitting in. He did not mind being alone. In fact, he preferred it. He did not have to explain his pace to anyone, and no one asked where he was going.

He thought of it as independence.

Sometimes he thought of it as taste.

He thought of it as a life.

One night, he went into a small jazz bar.

A man was playing the mandolin.

He was not very old. His hair was a little long, and his shirt looked well worn. He smiled sometimes while he sang. He smiled even when there was nothing to laugh about.

He sat at the bar and watched him for a while.

After the set, the man sat down beside him.

"Where are you from?"

"Wales."

"Wales?"

"Yes."

"Why New Orleans?"

The man thought for a moment.

"I don't know."

He laughed.

"That's it?"

The man smiled.

"I suppose."

He did not like the answer.

If it had been him, he would have known how to explain where he was and why he was there.

He told the man what he did. It took a few sentences.

The man from Wales nodded.

"Nice."

That was all.

He was slightly disappointed.

The mandolin started again.

The man from Wales sang and smiled.

He kept watching him.

He could not tell whether the man was happy.

He had not seen many happy people.

The man simply seemed to have no reason to hurry.

He found that strange.

And slightly irritating.

He wondered where the man lived. He wondered what he did for a living. He probably did not make much money. He had rent to pay. He had to keep the instrument somewhere.

He drank his beer and thought that perhaps the man became someone else when he went home.

Perhaps he needed money. Perhaps his rent was late. Perhaps he had been fighting with someone.

Looking happy and being happy were not the same thing.

That was what he thought.

The thought seemed reasonable enough.

And yet, strangely, when he was with that man, he did not have to explain what he did.

It did not matter where he had come from or where he was going.

He did not think about that for very long.

When he left the bar that night, the streets were quiet.

He walked slowly back to the hotel.

The next morning, he checked his email over coffee.

There were several messages.

One of them was good news.

It made him feel good.

A little later, for no particular reason, he thought of the man from Wales.

He could not remember his name.

He returned from the trip.

After the plane took off, he took a sick bag from the seat pocket in front of him.

This time, he tore it open immediately.

Printed on one side, in small letters, were the words:

FOR MOTION SICKNESS.

He looked at them for a while.

Then he wrote on the back.

Wales.

Underneath it, he wrote one more line.

I don't know.

He looked at the two sentences for a while.

Then he wrote one last thing.

He could not remember the man's name.

The plane was passing above the clouds.

He folded the bag.

And put it in his pocket.