

Nicole Flattery

Pigeon.

Written in response to
Vivienne Dick, Sarah Pierce, Marcel Vidal, Eimear Walshe
Wayward Eye

Nicole Flattery's story collection *Show Them A Good Time* was published by The Stinging Fly and Bloomsbury in 2019. She is the winner of An Post Irish Book Award, the Kate O'Brien Prize, the London Magazine Prize for Debut Fiction and The White Review Short Story Prize. Her work has appeared in The Stinging Fly, the Guardian, The White Review and the London Review of Books.

Flattery is working on her debut novel *Nothing Special* forthcoming from Bloomsbury. She lives in Dublin.

The **Temple Bar Gallery + Studios Writing Commission** aims to expand ideas around writing about art by inviting Irish authors to create a series of pieces inspired by the exhibitions at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios. In 2021, TBG+S has commissioned Nicole Flattery to make a piece of writing inspired by each of the exhibitions in the gallery programme.

Previous TBG+S Writers include Sara Baume (2015), Claire-Louise Bennett (2016), Gavin Corbett (2017), Doireann Ní Ghríofa (2018), Annemarie Ní Churreáin (2019), and Ian Maleney (2020).

The texts are available to download from www.templebargallery.com and printed copies are available in the gallery.

Temple Bar Gallery + Studios is supported by:



Pigeon.

It must be hard to read the expression on a pigeon's face, not that anyone is working towards it anymore. People are instead: walking the streets with hot beverages, they are typing into tiny, little keyboards, they are slowing down at the traffic lights, they are thinking about all the duties they have to perform in their lives this week. They are listing them, and they are overwhelmingly numerous. They are thinking: they would like to stop thinking. They would like someone to cover them in warm, comforting oils, or to be laid on a relaxing machine, or even to eat a grapefruit on a tropical beach, undisturbed. They would pay for these experiences, and perhaps in the future they will pay for them. That is an option for a special number. They remind themselves of these particular options when their jobs require them to bend and contort themselves into meaningless positions. When they walk around the city they can forgive the decay because: the comforting oils, the relaxing machine and even the possibility of the grapefruit. They are risk-averse. They make decisions in skilled ways. Their attention has shifted entirely inward, they do it automatically, no concentration needed. They don't say it aloud but they feel a certain disdain for people who've made less skilled decisions than they have—students, loafers, people who have not focused quite as intently on their progress. They think about themselves as they walk. Their walks are quick, unvaried strides. They are their own full-time projects. The city reminds them that they are right to live this way. There are people sitting outside bars they haven't got around to trying; there are people sitting inside candlelit restaurants and they've heard good things. The level of enthusiastic chatter is unbelievable. They should think about themselves, yes. This belief is reinforced by the chatter, every billboard, every screech of ambition; the thrumming motor of joy of which only a certain percentage is available. The city is filled with the sounds of desire, of wanting. That's what the city has always been built on, and even if we promised afterwards it would be different nothing has really changed. Only: the bus timetables are less frequent, there are different and strange items available in the vending machines, there is a new way of wanting.

It must be hard to read the expression on a pigeon's face, but it's worth persevering. People are noticing: birds, trees, the varying designs of the city's buildings. They are finally regarding the city like they would the interiors of a breathtaking restaurant. They are being forced to participate in the city amongst the other main participant: the pigeon. And now they are thinking: I was misguided about the pigeon, perhaps life isn't only about beautiful objects and thrilling experiences, perhaps now they should reevaluate the unpleasant and ugly. They are getting fond of the pigeons' short necks and alert, beady eyes. Here: something in common. They themselves are perching, like pigeons, on every available public surface. They are impressed by the bravery of children who run into crowds of the birds, laughing. They are no longer that invested in their own appearance and so the pigeon becomes a symbol for them. They ask themselves: do even the pigeons know we are living a different sort of life? And there are things they've forgotten: their own notable achievements,

what to do with money, the name of the bar they wanted to go where you press a button and champagne appears. And the sounds they have forgotten: the plastic being ripped off a take-away sandwich container, coffee hitting a styrofoam cup, people drying their hands with paper towels in office bathrooms, the exasperated sighs of a long and difficult day, the clatter of the computer, employees chewing on snacks, conversations happening side by side, constant motion. Here are the new things they are noticing now that layers of city sound have been peeled away: the shimmering of the clouds moving across the sky, the scavenging and resourcefulness of the seagulls, the low, persistent cooing of the pigeon. Was that sound always there, was it hidden? Their resistance is being worn down and they are becoming part of their environment in a way that didn't seem possible before. There is no more forward progress, nothing to work towards; they are aimless and adrift as the pigeons. And when things return to relative normality, they really feel they've exhausted their capacity for the natural world. They've seen the tress; they've stood in front of the sea. Now they're ready to demonstrate their ambition, they are clipping back on their ties, they are hearing the soft shoo-shoo as they move across the office carpets. And what they felt during that period of silence—that can be chalked up to childishness. They will never find the exact source of their disenchantment. But, occasionally, underneath the heat of the city, and human conversation, they will still hear soft, cooing sounds, and remember a time when a different life seemed possible.