

Nicole Flattery

Legitimising the Dread.

Written in response to **Agitation Co-op**

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 2019, TBG+S has commissioned Annemarie Ní Churreáin to make a piece of writing inspired by each of the exhibitions in the gallery programme.

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

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

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She noticed it first in one of her watchful eyes. She did know her, like you would know a person—her sighs, her special kind of distress. What was the point in getting to know an animal in this way? She couldn't pay you back and wasn't that the point of all human transaction? You owe me. Lately, it felt like that. Lately, when the days were like moving through heavy, wet sand, it felt like that. She'd once been a cheerful animal, content in front of an audience. Now, when she went to her, she was cold, unyielding. Some days, just a trickle. Other days, none at all. Well, that's not an argument you can make in a court. One of my cows isn't happy. Imagine the laughter she would receive. The thought amused her, and on her way back to the house, she leant up against a tree, trembling slightly, manic slightly. The ground underneath her feet was arid, covered in a thin red dust. It hadn't been a good year by any measure.

She noticed them when she was standing in the bath, drying her body with a towel. Her first thought was: I hate this bath. The house like his mother's. An exact replica. Her second thought: I'm covered in red lumps. It was her legs, her torso, miraculously not her face. It was all manageable if it wasn't her face. That was mitigation: the legs, but at least not the arms, at least not the face. That was how she got to sleep at night. In the mornings, she craned her neck around and watched the lumps in the mirror, as if they were going to attempt to move. A mystery illness, and her own life a mystery to her too. They were itchy and sore, so she took anti-histamines, silver foiled packets she kept by the bed and popped discreetly. They were inexplicable, the doctor said, they would pass. One morning, she would wake up and they would be gone. One morning, he'll wake up and I'll be gone, she said. The man consulted his chart. She didn't know why she even tried. All the interactions here depended on something she didn't understand, rules that escaped her; every joke told was long and had an ugly punchline. It was her accent, the big impediment to friendship. There was something unconvincing about the doctor anyway, like there was about anyone professional in this town. She figured it was because she saw them so often doing normal things. One minute, obediently listing cures. The next, buying toilet paper. In the bath, the red welts were there; her body, a red lake. When would the amazing morning be, the morning she woke up and there was no ugliness? They faded during the day; they disappeared when she pressed her thumb against them. It took all her discipline, that American discipline, not to dig into her skin. At night, when she undressed in front of her husband, there they were. Sorry, I know I look shocking. She had a lot to apologise for all of a sudden: I'm sorry your wife's closest relationship in this town is with a cow. At night, she tells her. She strokes her head, and says, cow, I'm ill too. She is wheezing, and has new lumps on her hide. Don't examine that area too closely, her bent head says, it's undignified.

In the pub, she used to try and guess which of the girls her husband had slept with. They wore puff-ball sleeves, florals in all weather. Now, she wanted to know what was underneath their clothes for other reasons. She was naturally competitive. Maybe, their welts were small and lady-like. She knew now that nearly everyone had them, or worse. She knew now that cows were becoming infertile. And women too, although it wasn't as discussed. It couldn't be as discussed. Everyone got quiet. When the calves began to die, everyone got mean. That was the worst of it, she thought, the way nobody would look at each other, not in the shop, not on the street. That, and the dread.

Nausea, aching joints, unexplained pains, irritated nose, burning throat, persistent cough. The doctor ripping page after page out of his notepad.

There was no evidence. She knew people, only passingly, who worked in the plant. In the town, there was sudden mention of carcinogens, caustic mist, alkaline dust: all these terms that sounded wrong in their mouths. Bloody noses, dizziness, disorientation. People were angry. They started saying things they had only heard on television, things like: we deserve answers. She had never looked directly at it, an aluminium factory in the middle of a field. Well, it hadn't been of much interest to her until now. They had put up a bench, some trees; an attempt to make it less of an eyesore. The trees would die, nobody would sit on that bench. Sometimes, she felt like a thick, grey cloud was entering her body, making her sicker and sicker. She bought a new cardigan when she got pregnant; she rarely allowed herself new things, but she liked the buttons. Women stopped her on the street to tell her how beautiful she was, friendly finally. When she lost the baby, she knew she'd been a beautiful pregnant woman. She'd been quite far along. She'd done beautiful work. There was still a feeling, like constant mist in her body. When she got home from the hospital, the cow rested her head in the woman's hand as if to say, I'm sorry, here's a little piece of me instead.

Beyond this town, there is an office. It is standard. The people in this office spend their days emailing, composing creative subject headings. They are like anyone else. They throw balled-up pieces of paper at each other. The girls complain at the Christmas party because the lighting isn't good enough for their photos. When they go on dates they say things, 'my work is boring, it doesn't matter.' Every so often, one of them sends an email containing information, information that if you examined closely, you would never be able to let go of. The emails have the subject line: Sickness. Their back and forth is mainly strategic in nature, because they are in the business of strategy, of mitigation, of public relations. The email reads: in the face of indisputable evidence
we should do our homework on how to best communicate this.