

I got up the following morning after eleven. I felt stupidly hungry. I went looking in my fridge and found some potato farls in the Paul Rankin range.

I'm going to be very specific here.

I put the farls in the toaster, pushed down the lever, and it was a quarter to twelve when I went into the sofa to put on the telly. BBC One came on. Prime Minister's Questions. A Tory member of parliament stood up to rah-rah cheers and waving of paper boats and said:

"It's good to be back. Although, to be honest, it's good to be anywhere."

More cheering mixed with howling laughter from all around the house.

He proceeded to tell a tale. In January he had almost been dead, eaten out from the inside by a hospital bug.

And rah-rah... the NHS... rah-rah-rah... the NHS... rah-rah.

He was a husk of a person. He was so fragile. Why were all these people laughing at his every word?

My farls were taking a long time. Something was wrong here.

I went in to check. I peered into the slots of the toaster. Felt the fluff curl on my cheeks and nose. It was a tight squeeze – there were only a few centimetres between the back of my head and an overhanging cabinet. The heat was relaxing.

And chung! and the toaster popped.

In a split second I knew that that was it. I say split second because it takes an ending to cut short a second. And that split second itself seemed to lie suspended in time. But it was enough time to know.

Temple Bar Gallery + Studios New Writing Commission 2017

The TBG+S 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 2017, TBG+S has commissioned Gavin Corbett to write a piece of short fiction inspired by each of the exhibitions in the gallery programme. This piece was written in response to *The living and the dead* by Mark Swords.

Gavin Corbett is from Dublin. He has published three novels: *Innocence* (2003), *This Is The Way* (2013) and *Green Glowing Skull* (2015). *This Is The Way* won the 2013 Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year award and was shortlisted for the Encore Prize. He has been published widely as a journalist, and has written and broadcast for RTÉ Radio. Last year, he was Trinity College Dublin's Arts Council Irish Writer Fellow.

TBG+S WRITING COMMISSION 2017

Gavin Corbett

Essay #2 *James Last*

A response to 'The living and the dead' by Mark Swords

This reminds me of the time I started going to the gym, and a few weeks in, the Techie guy produced a helmet. You plugged the cable into the treadmill, you put the helmet on to your head, and it was a virtual reality helmet. You picked your setting. I picked Nordic Biathlon. And lo, I was running on the treadmill but I was shooting targets in the snow. The problem was, I started to engage my hands a bit enthusiastically, my feet lost balance, and I shot backwards. The helmet almost killed me but if it hadn't been for the helmet I'd have been dead. But I was seeing stars, and every damned setting for the treadmill.

And now.

Now?

Here I am, animated; look it. I move about my kitchen, my flat – the kitchen isn't really a kitchen, it's conjoined with the living area – and it feels like one last walk in the place. I don't know if I'm dead. I think I am. My bare feet sense absolutely nothing. It takes me an aeon to walk my tiny flat. When I'm done I sit back in my sofa. It's good to be back. Although it's good to be anywhere.

Like here. There. And right over there: I was lying on the floor with my blood overflowing and warming and dampening the back of my head.

Or I could be lying on the floor with my blood overflowing and warming and dampening the back of my head.

Or I am lying on the floor with my blood overflowing and warming and dampening the back of my head.

I don't know which.

I could be living this right now, I could be looking back on all of it.

There was a night where I was somewhere else. It was definably somewhere else, in that definably – quite definitely – I was alive, and the place had physical walls, an atmosphere. It feels like decades ago now, but. To pin it in time – to fix it on some gauge – it was last night. It was last night where I was in this somewhere else and where something happened. As in definably happened.

I was a disc jockey. Am still a disc jockey, am I? Always will be a disc jockey, maybe, revolving on a locked groove. I don't mean to use metaphors; that's silly. I don't mean to trip over and over on the one word or phrase. I'm still coming to terms with this new state of existence, if existence it can be described as. I'm trying to find a way to describe it. But yes, perhaps I'm just going around and around or am stamped out black and flat one after another after another.

Alright –

To use specifics. I was in this place. I had a gig. I have a regular gig. I have a gimmick. My gig is called This Is Your Lives. And I use, for this, as a disc jockey, only 'found' vinyl records – found in charity shops, flea markets, skips, etcetera. That's my constraint. Only what people donate, or get rid of, am I interested in. My set-lists are entirely dictated by what turns up. The records come in scratched and cracked, with chips broken out of their

sides. They've been really kicked around. I find them coated in grease – the ambiances of kitchens, atomised and dried-up perfume, dirt off the street, fingerprints all over. I don't mean 'coated'. More usually it's encrusted, impossible to remove, but what's there I let be anyway, coated or encrusted. There's dust and ash on them, petrified or ossified. People loved and mistreated their records.

So you see the idea.

I don't care about the music.

But people really go for it. They keep turning up. "This Is Your Lives". It's a catchy name.

I suspect that all the beats become mush after a while. All those crackles and pops, received in earholes with the musculature in them dead weight from alcohol and fatigue. Everything gets distorted. The regular jumped needles don't matter. I knew this would happen. That was the plan; I just didn't expect folks to return again and again. I suppose they hear bits of their grandads in there – there's lots of showbands, Frank Ifield, loads of Cliff – or the woman in the basement flat who eats fish food or whoever. Or they hear their big sisters in the Strawberry Switchblades and the Duran Durans.

I don't hear any of that. I can't hear bottom. A life's exposure to loud noise has done for my hearing. I only hear the very top – all the damage. The so-very physical – all the blips – sat in there among the virtual, strafed in and finally sprayed out.

They hear the life and death in these records. Meta-narratives, I suppose you'd call them. Stuff that gets put in from the outside, then gets completed in someone's brain. As I say, you see the idea.

Sometimes I wish I could eat everything I see.

So.

What's that? I said to the Techie man last night.

It's a monitor, he said. So you can hear back what you're playing out.

I know what it is, I said. I know what it does. But I didn't ask for it. I've got by the last six months without one.

But on with the show.

For the first time, I felt embarrassed about how much they were enjoying it. They were going mad to Richard Clayderman. To see their faces. And all the, not just crackles and pops and warp-wobble, but the aggregate of their laughter and chatter and screaming, coming back through the monitor. I had to turn that damned thing off. And then I enjoyed it as it had always been. Enjoyed it more than ever maybe. It was a spectacle. Skin was blue and lips were green. I wish I'd had a foam machine.

Techie came up to me in the booth and tapped my shoulder. Mass had ended, I could go in peace.

"And maybe think about it the next time."

So.