

TBG+S WRITING COMMISSION 2017

Gavin Corbett

Essay #5 *Bogopolis*

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 Breath From Fertile Grounds* by Otobong Nkanga.

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.

A response to The Breath From Fertile Grounds by Otobong Nkanga

We live in the Bog Metropolis, though we're in denial. Backs turned, we face the sea, other civilizations, markets, but the bog will not be ignored. It rolls up to the walls. You'll see the mass of it, blanketed on the hills not far away – near enough that a bristly treeline, of pines set into the ooze, is clearly visible against the sky. In the light of summer evening it looks like a palisade.

We make new surfaces of seamless glass and polished terrazzo; no purchase for invaders, and nice try, but nature must and will find a way. A climb to the roof reveals the extent of colonisation. Hopper make nice throne for Buddleia the kahuna. Further along the system the channel is choked with furry forms. Where has the soil that supports it come from? You scoop the stuff up in fistfuls, fudgy; squeeze it in disbelief, wringing out the rain. All across the rooftops too: botanical curiosities squat in chimney pots and any little crack. They probe the newest buildings for joins, and find them, hidden around corners, up here, past the line of flashing. Seizing on weakness – widening cracks to grikes, making follies of any structure. And not even cracks – the smooth slates are a camouflage of lichens and mosses. The walls are ruined: white is stained green, concrete streaked black. The fashion for wood is mocked. We're in denial, but the bog cannot be denied.

In the country there's a lack of sentiment for the bog. You 'fight it', the turf cutters say. The tools of their trade are 'weapons'. We curse this heaviness on – not heaviness of – the land, and hack at it to make some kind of advantage. It's the aftermath of an apocalypse, that's what it is. Calamity and rot. Something happened to our forests and this is what's left. Our ancient forebears understood it better. They fed the organism with offerings – metal and food. Butter wouldn't melt in the maw. They gave themselves too. Cutters still turn up the pickled bodies of chieftains.

War cut the fuel supply from across the water, and some of us in the city went into the hills and sued for peace. Now we knew where to go in hard times. You buy a plot past Kippure, and when oil is expensive, when living is expensive, and even just for leisure, you go up and dig your own turf for fuel. We depart from our gardens in the foothills – gardens that turn to Wicklow wildflower meadows if left alone for long – with the weapons for the job: sleans, forks, shovels and hay knives. The open plateau is dotted with blips of blue, red and green – city folk like us, padded against the weather, ripping at the ground. Estate cars, Saabs, banana-coloured Cortinas, rocking in the wind, are lined up along the four arms of the crossroads.

The wet turf in the hole is black. Seeing it, touching it, enacting the ritual of harvesting it, you become part of something bigger. The bog itself, and bigger still. You think of: rank potatoes, the trudge of fleeing rebels, the bloodletting Celts, people on the News that went missing. Most days are a good day's toil. Sitting up on the bank with the drying sods and your flask of tea you feel like a lord on the hunt. The reddish-brown tea in the beaker

transubstantiates to bog water. You think now of black pudding in the pan. Bird song comes to the fore. It's possible to see a beauty in the place. The reds and browns and the sun picking out the tufts. And the industry, the beauty in that, a weird kind. The cars and the television mast. Charred battlefield of a future war.

The bog lark. He goes up, up, up, and if he goes up any further the weather will stay dry. He starts to hover and quiver. He must be higher than the summit of Kippure at this point. What does he see? It must be spectacular. He sees nothing. He sees his predator is all, or else he doesn't see his predator. He's a bird. What is it to him the city over the hills? The Military Road cut into the moor the better to root out the bandits? The pathetic wire fences? It's all part of the same mush. Time and place fused and become one under pressure. His panicked eye. You keep your eye on him. Down he comes. You're lost in the sky and the light. He's a warplane. Plummeting to neutral territory, if the bog doesn't have other ideas. It'll swallow him up, and one day it'll be a fun job to number the wreckage. He pulls out of his death spiral, stretches his belly, and makes a gentle upturned arc. It's a sure sign that rain is on the way, and time to get down from the mountains.

Another deluge to top up the great cistern. You pass the tiny bridge that marks the source of the Liffey. The rains of which of our yesterdays are released? The bog holds so many. When by the bog's grace the water reaches the city it's ancient and tainted. Only just can you make out the debris of civilization in the brown beats and glides. Dark piss of a very thirsty being. The pint of stout you sup you think: bog water. What exactly am I drinking here? From which period? A pint of the plain is right. I was a boy when the rain fell and look at me now. You are quite drunk you will later admit as you weep for the television mast far off in the night, mistaking it for the ghost of an exploded star. Its blinking light is the last moments of its long-ago life, only now just reached you. Only now! Only now! Boo-hoo.

When today's rain comes back to us, maybe then we'll have remembered the importance of ritual. Another body slid out from the bog and laid out on the banquet table. This one clearly a high-ranking nobleperson. Observe the nature of his injuries, the manner of his murder. He is so brown and wrinkled he looks cured. Out with the gleaming meat slicer. Everyone gets a thin strip of him. And round we go again for seconds.