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In my head I start the sketch of a story that will be my response to *Prime*. It's a fictional story half-inspired by the true story of a man with no identity found wandering England in the noughties. My story will feature a girl in a coma of possible southern Asian appearance and the attempt to revive her with whispers and music. In an appeal for information, her face and the facts of her discovery will be put out in the media. In a last-ditch effort to spark her into life a seashell will be held to her ear, the thinking being that every child has a memory of hearing the sea in a shell. At this point I realise I've taken up the threads of a story I had rightly abandoned years ago and had forgotten about. Inexorably my mind turns towards the same disgraceful ending. The appeal for information finally yields the fact that the girl is from Bhutan, a landlocked country hundreds of miles from the sea. The doctor who had proposed the seashell idea feels embarrassed. I feel embarrassed. I feel embarrassed at this: a male nurse tells the doctor not to feel bad about the idea, indeed it was actually a good idea, as no matter how distant from the sea was the girl's homeplace, every woman has a connection with the tides. The story outline seems terrible in my head, a mess, and is terrible also in writing, relieved only by the coherence that pinning it down in words gives it. I even add a bit about it being a much older story in order to blame the idea on my younger self, and make the nurse male to make myself not feel so bad.

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What of the sounds that are audible but that I don't hear? These are the most interesting to me. Every membrane and tubule of my body right now is crushing the sound from the bench into something new. Perhaps it is parsing and splitting the chorus into its constituent elements, some drowning in liquid, some beating on bones. The wound-up fractals of my cells are twanging like jaw harps. My entire body is an auditorium. I don't know. All I can do is feel it, the totality of it. In my ears the purer version of it lulls and calls. It is all times, many people. It is gendered, maybe. I think it is female.

I get up to go. The sound loses something of its physical dimension with the loss of contact with the bench. The buggy wheels glide on the smooth stolid floor, and my boy, calm as he's ever been, moves through the fluid of space.

### **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 *Prime* by Camille Norment.

**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 #3 *Hertz*

*A response to 'Prime' by Camille Norment*

On a weekday afternoon, when it's not so busy, I sit on one of Camille Norment's humming, crooning benches. I take in the shape and construction of the room and consider how it might affect sound. The room is concrete, except for the side that's glass. There's a pillar and there are open doors, and there are apertures, cubbyholes, cut into the walls. An audiophile will tell you never to assemble your expensive hi-fi system in a room with windows and random openings. Sound is radiation. It's unpredictable and volatile. It must be tightly controlled, corralled, put in a silo. Audiophiles usually have horrible taste in music.

The week before, at the launch of her exhibition, I got talking to Camille about how different acoustic environments bring out different qualities in her art. I asked her what the gallery space in TBG+S had done for Prime. She told me it had spirited something new and beautiful, something that was hitherto hidden. It was a note or a tone, formed by the journeys of soundwaves around the space, the intermingling of invisible shapes.

It's in regarding how a room is constructed that I become aware that 'space' and 'room', in the context of galleries, are not interchangeable words. Room is the negative of space. I often talk of a nice or great 'space' when what I really mean is 'room+space', and when I do so, I think I am only talking about the 'room' element – crisp matt-white painted walls, ceiling heights just so, polished concrete floors, and so on.

Looking around the gallery here, I am never so conscious of what 'space' means. Normally space, in a gallery, is the place we bring our thoughts, the ether into which we recede as we stare at the wall-hangings, the pedestal-offerings; the place to where we zone out, where some conversation is started, even a balance is reached, between the ether and what is inside our heads. It is that, too, here, in this gallery space, as I take in Prime. But there is an extra charge in the space, that utterly fills it, and that doesn't wait for thought to meet it part of the way. It is inside my body before thought has even begun.

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A cascade of sibilance begins, quietly, somewhere underneath the chorus of diaphragmatic moans and chants. Soon it has risen to be as loud as the sound in the space and is identifiably coming from outside the space. It's the sound of a street-cleaning truck. It's akin to white noise; I guess is a type of white noise. It's abrasive where the sound in the space is relaxing, but then, I suppose, one person's abrasive is another person's balm: I have a friend who used to make tapes of vacuum-cleaner noise to help him to sleep. He reckoned his mother did a lot of Hoovering when he was baby. I thought of him only this morning as there's been talk in the news that the Manchester United footballer Wayne Rooney is on his way back to Everton, the club he started out with and supported as a boy. Wayne Rooney, too, has this Hoover 'fetish', it emerged some years ago; I joked about it with my friend at the time. It's obviously a not-unknown thing, this need in later life for the comfort of white noise seeded by the sound of white noise in infancy. The news of Wayne Rooney's return to Everton is spoken and written about in terms of a homecoming, of the revival of an uncomplicated love.

I thought of my friend this morning for another reason too: he is due to become a parent any one of these days. It'll be his and his wife's first baby, and I've told him everything will be grand. I have my baby with me now, in the gallery, and he's not a bother. I thought the sound might freak him out – and I've had no option but to bring him with me, as I'm minding him for the day – but he's as calm

as you like. Swaddled in the thickness of it, it seems, his eyes sleepy and mellow. I unbuckle him from the buggy, lift him out by the armpits, and hold him standing on the seat of the bench. He looks down at his feet. His pink jelly toes waft gently up and down like the villi of some sea creature in the ocean current. Then I have him 'walking' across the bench; each of his steps he watches closely as the sole of his foot makes contact with the vibrating surface. The mellowness has been joined by wonder.

When he starts to get restless I put him back in the buggy. I sit for a while longer, absorbing the sounds. It is a mellow experience, certainly; the mix of sounds is rich and bassy, and it moves through my body like something warm and physical. While I was writing my last novel, *Green Glowing Skull*, I became interested in the action of sound on the human body. The book was about the stuff of life that isn't material: music and sound, memory, thought, information, consciousness. The three main characters are tenor singers. At one stage, opining on the effects of an electronic mouth-held singing aid, the oldest of them says that "the fronds of my oral device touch certain membranes, softer palates, the same that these Irish nose and throat singers use to send vibrations out into the body, like a sonar to find the soul, or the omphalos". I think of the sound waves around and inside me now, stirring the sediment of feeling. But after a few minutes, something starts to catch. The effect of the sound goes beyond a soulful stirring to a profound disturbance, a violation. It's in the rhythms that are beginning to form, I think; the inconstant rhythms inside me.

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In one of my favourite films, Mike Leigh's *Naked*, the character of Johnny, apropos of nothing in particular, says, "You know what frightens me about the human body? It's like the most sophisticated mechanism in the entire universe and yet it's so fucking quiet, isn't it?" Quiet as in conspiring, I guess Johnny is suggesting; conspiring against the self, the soul, the anima & co, whatever you want to call it. In 1974, the French composer Gérard Grisey tried to create a sort of sonic analogue for this quiet and mysterious machine. *Périodes* is deliberately murky and sluggish for sections, before the instruments gather and crest, then dissolve again – and so the cycle goes on. In his preface to the score, he writes that "[an] element essential to this piece is what I call the 'soft periodicity'. Our heartbeat, our breathing, the rhythm of our walk and doubtless many other unknown rhythms (our nerve impulse, for example) are never as rigorously periodic as a clock; they vary around a time constant." It's curious that he doesn't mention another rhythm connected with the human body. Above all else, his slow and irregular symphony strongly suggests for me the menstrual cycle, which, of all the bodily rhythms that fall out of step with cosmic and calendar time, is the most easily noticeable.

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From what I know about sound, there's sound you hear and there's sound you don't hear. I look it up and I discover that anything registering at a frequency lower than 20hz is inaudible to human ears. That's known as infrasound. Infrasound can have very real psychological effects. In the early 1980s, a British engineer called Vic Tandy was building some medical equipment in a small makeshift lab when he found himself gripped by a sudden terror. He started to sweat inexplicably, and he thought he might be sick. Then he saw, in the corner of his eye, what he thought was a ghost. The next day he noticed a fencing foil he had been mending was wobbling violently of its own accord. Being a man of science, he resolved to find the cause of these seemingly paranormal events. He discovered that a newly installed extractor fan had been flinging a soundwave from wall to wall and that the soundwave was crashing in on itself, creating a 19hz concentration of energy in the centre of the lab.