

Dear *The Letters Page*,

Not the least of our problems on setting up home in an 1840s constabulary barracks in a remote district of County Sligo was the fact of the crows in the bedroom. This made for an especially demonic scene on Sunday mornings – nothing quite gives an existential frisson to one's hangover like a crow beating its wings above the bed. The problem was the cracked old chimney pots. The crows were in and out of the place at will. In truth, I did not cover myself in glory when the crows appeared. My tactic was to put my head under the duvet until my girlfriend had handled the situation. She kept a bath towel by the side of the bed for the purpose of catching the crows and bundling them out the window. It was quite a traumatic period in my life and even now, eight years later, I'm not sure I'm the better of it.

I told the writer Dermot Healy about the crows and he said well, in all fairness to the girl, you'd want to sort that out. He sent us down a builder from his part of County Sligo and the chimneys were quickly and efficiently repaired – there hasn't been a crow seen in the bedroom since, except for the ones that haunt my dreams.

Mr Healy went down the road last summer, and as is the way when a writer dies, the critical evaluation of the work immediately and somewhat rudely enters a summing-up phase. I am constantly astonished that his name is not more widely known outside Ireland. Novels like *A Goat's Song*, *Long Time No See*, and *Sudden Times* are the equal of anything that has come out of this country in the last thirty or forty years. They are spare and effortless but at the same time intensely worked, and they are extremely wise, passionate and emotional books.<sup>1</sup>

The accents and humours of County Sligo are captured precisely in his pages. It's an odd kind of place. When we first set up here, I called it *The Land Of The Pregnant Pause* – conversations seemed to enter frequently into these black oily periods of repose, and you were never quite sure what was being said while the talk was resting. The humour is bone-dry and

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blackish and inclined often towards the surreal. I have the sensation wandering around the country lanes among the squadrons of black dragonflies on these evilly cold spring days that the past has not properly been tamped down in this neck of the woods. It is eerily beautiful and has a kind of hauntedness to it and sometimes you wouldn't know where you are nor when.

It's crawling with writers. You'll see Leland Bardwell<sup>2</sup> on the train often, headed to Dublin on unknowable escapades in her late 80s. Eoin McNamee<sup>3</sup> is writing his splendid noirs and policiers up on the coast. DBC Pierre<sup>4</sup> continues his own wonderful project somewhere over that way, about twenty miles east in the Leitrim hills. Most days I pass by Lough Key on my bike – W.B. Yeats<sup>5</sup> wanted to set up a commune dedicated to free love on a little island out there. He used to purchase tincture of cannabis from the chemist shop in Sligo town and roll naked by moonlight on the beach at Rosses. I had never been to the county before the morning we first viewed the barracks and I knew instantly that I was at home.

- kb <sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> If this letter is starting to take something of the flavour of a book review or critical essay then let it be noted that the editors are most pleased at the turn of events. We feel that a good literary journal should always carry a critical essay or two in its closing pages, and will welcome future letters which take a notes-from-the-reader tone. Thank you, Kevin. Carry on now.

<sup>2</sup> The writer is here referring to the Irish poet, novelist and playwright, to whom *The White Beach: New and Selected Poems* would be a very good introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Awarded the Macauley Fellowship for Irish Literature in 1990, McNamee's novels include *Resurrection Man*, *The Blue Tango*, and *Orchid Blue*.

<sup>4</sup> DBC Pierre won the Man Booker Prize in 2003 for *Vernon God Little*. His most recent work is *Breakfast with The Borgias*.

<sup>5</sup> Dude wrote some poems.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Barry is the author of two collections of short stories, *There are Little Kingdoms* (2007) which won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, and *Dark Lies the Island* (2012). He has also written a novel, *City of Bohane* (2011), for which he won the 2013 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. He currently lives in County Sligo.

