
The Larkin and East Riding Poetry Prize: 2011

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Full details: <http://www.bridlington-poetry-festival.com/competition.php>



In the sun-filled orangery of Sewerby Hall, and to the muted sounds of ball on bat from the nearby cliff-edge cricket ground, the celebrated poet Douglas Dunn awarded the prizes in this year's Larkin and East Riding Poetry Competition. Out of a record 1600 entries from the UK and Europe, the field had been whittled down to fourteen, of which eight were able to take up the opportunity of reading their winning poems to a warm and eager audience of friends, family and poetry lovers.

The sense of concentrated listening was palpable as Douglas went through his adjudicator's report and spoke about the importance of finding a balance between craft and innovation. Of course, he said, poems cannot truly compete with each other, as each operates according to different rules. But while his choice of winners was inevitably very personal, it was informed by years of reading and writing poetry. His comments on each winning poem were generous and detailed. It was an exemplary act of adjudication, leaving everyone clear about the reasoning behind his choices. The overall winner, Gwen de Mel, had travelled over from Switzerland with her family to receive her prize and was elated by her success, enjoying a glass of champagne in front of Sewerby Hall's elegant Georgian portico.

The prize for best poem from the East Riding of Yorkshire went to the local poet Toni Sweet for her balanced tribute to Larkin, 'Hull's Chosen Son', a fitting reward for a writer who has attended many of the poetry events that have taken place in the East Riding of Yorkshire in recent years.

From the perspective of the Bridlington Festival, the competition was a resounding success, enabling it to clear nearly £2000, which will go towards poetry events at the Festival in 2012. The Philip Larkin Society's substantial contribution to the competition was no doubt behind the doubling in the number of entries from 800 in 2010 to 1600. With continued support from the Society over the next two years, we look forward to the further growth of the competition, which will allow us both to award money to deserving poets and invest significantly in the growth of Bridlington Poetry Festival.



Gwen de Mel and Douglas Dunn
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Prizewinners

- 1st** Gwen de Mel: *What is This Life?*
2nd Josephine Abbott: *Spell Against Sadness*
3rd Mike Barlow: *From the Cabinet of Idioms*

East Riding Prize: Toni Sweet: *Hull's Chosen Son*

Highly Commended (in chosen order)

C. J. Allen: *Starlings*; Susan Grindley: *New Reader*; Esther Morgan: *The Dew Artist*; Stuart Henson: *A Room at the Back of the Palace Hotel*; John Elinger: *Utility*; Julia Lewis: *Sweetheart Come*; Alan Buckley: *The Abbots Bromley Horn Dance*; Simon Curtis: *Gym*; Joanne Hill: *The Last Gloves My Sister Touched*; Giles Newington: *Please Forward*

What is this Life?

When matters airier than sky
Require attention in my life,
My efforts to seize, to capture them
Serve only to squeeze and fracture them,
To bring to earth what is fine and high:
What is love?
'Please pass the knife.'

Neither lunch nor dinner is the time
For matters of existential weight:
'more tea darling?'
'Please pass the cheese.'
'are there any cleaner plates than these?'
The kitchen butchers the sublime:
What is death?
'These chops are great!'

If I were Aristotle or Pliny,
Shakespeare, Donne or a new Locke,
I'd toss up thoughts, not healthy salads,
Write, not school notes, but prose and ballads;
I'd wield my pen, throw off my pinny:
What is this life?
'Have you seen my sock?'

Gwen de Mel
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By Jean Hartley

Spell against Sadness

You could call upon the rain –
invoke is better – invoke the rain

to rinse the trouble off you. Sadness
though, doesn't wash off easily. Or say 'sadness'

three times, then throw salt in its face
(that over-your-left-shoulder gargoyle face)

or make that gesture against the evil eye.
There's a charm you can use: close one eye,

stand on one leg, recite backwards the words
of the charm. I don't, myself, know these words

but you're welcome to have a go. At night,
under a full moon, summon the mare of the night

and ride away from sadness. Leave behind
all the darkness, all things you hide behind.

You could carve runes into the bark of a tree,
smear them with your own blood and tears, and
beg the tree

to drink your sadness like rain. Grow
it far out of your reach. You can watch it grow

but this takes time. Be warned. Incantations
can raise storms, quench fires. There are
incantations

to make armour soft; to make weapons powerless:
against flood; against hunger; against pain.
Powerless,

all of them, against sadness. Call upon the rain,
all the rivers, the sea, to wash it off you; call
upon rain,

wind, snow, ice, to numb you. Sing against it
if you like. Nothing to stop you. Sing against it.

Josephine Abbot
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