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**Announcing the First Annual Fiction, Poetry & Non-fiction Contest**

**Three Categories, Three Guest Judges, Three Prize Packages**

Fiction: Short story (maximum 3,000 words)  
 Guest Judge Gwendolen Gross

Poetry: Poem (maximum twenty lines)  
 Guest Judge Ellen Bass

Non-fiction: Personal memoir essay (maximum 2,500 words)  
 Guest Judge Kathleen Flinn

**THE WRITE PLACE AT THE WRITE TIME ©**

### ***Our First Annual Fiction, Poetry and Non-fiction Contest***

We present both the winners and finalists of the First Annual Fiction, Poetry and Non-fiction Contest. There was a great deal of quality material submitted. We thank all entrants for the privilege of being able to read

their work and become acquainted with them. We appreciated the opportunity to read each entry and were charmed by much of what we read. It was a journey of discovery, an opening of many doors, to see the perspectives of so many different voices and see views into so many different lives. Many of the entrants were new writers that we had the pleasure of coming in contact with. The categories that received the most entries were poetry and non-fiction; you will see that these categories have four finalists each to allow for the diverse themes. Fiction, a category whose entries had moving emotional qualities and revelations, had three clear finalists. We are grateful to everyone who entered this first large-scale contest of ours, touched by your participation and excitement. It was not easy to narrow down the entries. Finalists are listed alphabetically by last name. Winners are organized by category. A special THANK YOU to our fabulous guest judges (Gwendolen Gross, Ellen Bass and Kathleen Flinn) and to our participating sponsors (Bank Square Books, Bartelby's Books, Tattered Cover Book Store and New York Writers Resources). The three winners, Mark Barkawitz (fiction), Chanel Brenner (poetry) and Anita Solick Oswald (non-fiction) have their bios, brief interviews and their winning submissions below.

Fiction Finalists: Mark Barkawitz, Nancy Cook, Patricia Daly-Lipe

Poetry Finalists: Lynda Bahr, Chanel Brenner, Peter Franklin and Cheryl Sommese

Non-fiction Finalists: Kate Bailward, Rachael Ikins, Anita Solick Oswald and Melissa Pheterson

First prize winners will receive the following:

Fiction~ A one year subscription to *The New Yorker*, a hard cover copy of *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing* by The New York Writers Workshop, a \$25 giftcard to Bank Square Books redeemable online.

Poetry~ A one year subscription to *Poetry* magazine compiled by the Poetry Foundation, a hard cover copy of *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing* by The New York Writers Workshop, a \$25 giftcard to Bartelby's Books redeemable online.

Non-fiction~ A one year subscription to *Newsweek*\*, a hard cover copy of *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing* by The New York Writers Workshop, a \$25 giftcard to Tattered Cover Book Store redeemable online.

All giftcards are redeemable online for the convenience of the winners so they are not location-specific. The Portable MFA in Creative Writing is an in-depth, comprehensive craft guide with detailed sections on fiction, poetry, personal essay and memoir, magazine writing and playwriting.

\*As *Newsweek* announced that they are going fully digital, another option was given to the winner in the event that they preferred to have print editions. Ms. Oswald opted for *Time* magazine (this will include a digital version and print editions as she enjoys donating the latter). We continue to enjoy and recommend both publications. We congratulate *Newsweek* on their pioneering decision and as we've treasured their evolution in fine journalism, we can't wait for what their future horizons will bring.

## Contest Winners

### **Mark Barkawitz,** Fiction Winner

Mark Barkawitz has earned local and national awards for his fiction, poetry, essay, and screenwriting. His work has appeared in newspapers (*L.A. Herald-Examiner, Pasadena Star News & Weekly, Conscience*), magazines (*Arroyo Seco Journal, University Mag., Simply 4 Pets, Senior Class, Our USA Mag.*), literary journals and anthologies (*Abraxas, Sojourns, Zyzzyva, Blank Gun Silencer, Fingerprints, Paws & Tales, Sport Literate, Mediphors, Me Three, Illness & Grace-Terror & Transformation, Unhoused Voices: Granting Change for the Homeless, And We Write: Surviving Cancer; Let the Healing Begin*) as well as

### **Chanel Brenner,** Poetry Winner

Chanel Brenner is a writer living in Los Angeles with her husband and their four-year-old son. She studies method writing with poet Jack Grapes and is a member of his Writers and Poets Collective.

Her work has been published in *Cultural Weekly, Forge, L.K. Thayer's Poetry Juice Bar, The Coachella Review* and *Memoirs Ink*.

She has written a collection of poems and essays about the death of her six-year-old son, Riley, called *The Christmas Boy Will Not Disappear*.

She won a nationwide contest for her poem "What Would Wislawa Szymborska Do?" and, as a

### **Anita Solick Oswald,** Non-fiction Winner

Anita Solick Oswald is a Chicago native. She's written a collection of essays, *West Side Girl* (working title), that are written from the point of view of her younger self and chronicle the colorful, diverse and oftentimes unpredictably eccentric characters and events that populated Chicago's West Side neighborhood during the 50s & 60s.

Her essays have appeared in *The Write Place At the Write Time, The Faircloth Literary Review, Fullosia Press, The Fat City Review* and *Avalon Literary Review*.

She studied journalism at Marquette University, earned her B.A. in Economics from the

underground 'zines (*Inky Blue*, *Monkeywire*).

His work has also been featured on dozens of websites.

He has IMDb feature film credits as writer, actor, & associate producer for *Turn of the Blade* (NorthStar Ent.) and as supporting actor in *The Killing Time* (New World Pictures).

He lives with his wife, has two kids, and occasionally breeds a litter of golden retriever puppies (Woof Goldens) in their Pasadena, CA backyard.

[www.markbark.org](http://www.markbark.org)

result, it was displayed at the James Whitcomb Riley museum in Indianapolis, Indiana.

University of California at Los Angeles and her M.S. in Management and Organization from the University of Colorado.

She is a founding member of Boulder Writing Studio, where she has been generating and editing essays over the past 2 years.

Anita lives in Boulder, Colorado, with her husband, Ralph, and her cats, Figaro and Clio.

### **Interview with Mark Barkawitz, Fiction Winner**

1) One of the age-old tenets of writing is to "write what you know". Of all your mediums (poetry, fiction, non-fiction and screenwriting), talk to us about how drawing on your experiences infuses the writing and acts as a muse.

***I agree—write what you know—or those who know will know you don't. Most of my writings—regardless of genre—have connections with life experiences. Like the protagonist in "Bicycles", for a time I was the bicycle repairman on our block. Around the same time in my life, I chased a purse thief—it became "Watch Dogs," the first short story I sold, published, and produced as a graduate film. I coached kids for nine years, so my novel manuscript, GIANT KILLERS, is about a bumbling little league team, two single moms, and a mysterious coach. A young reporter once asked me, "Why do you write what you write?" I told him I was compelled, which appeared to confuse***

**him.**

2) Your wise use of brief flashbacks in this piece establishes a meaningful connection to the protagonist's past and these flashbacks also serve as pivotal motivating factors in his present. Writers often struggle with the use of flashbacks and though they are often cautioned against using them in short fiction, when used in moderation flashbacks can, as in this instance, be powerful elements. How would you describe assembling the chronology of this story and advise on how to know how much to delve into the past while keeping the story focused in the present?

***The whole story is a flashback for me now. (Flashbacks within a flashback?) That's why I changed the opening when I rewrote it for your contest. But originally, the story grew out of a real-time experience. I don't remember struggling with the flashbacks. But I had a great teacher at the time (John Hermann—co-founder of LBS Creative Writing program), who probably helped me incorporate them. Without the flashbacks—protagonist's psychological baggage—the story loses its karma, a recurring theme in many of my stories.***

***I usually don't think about assembling a short story when I start. Sometimes I think about it afterwards. I just start and try to keep up. If my momentum holds past a page-and-a-half, I figure I'm onto something. At the end of my short stories, I'm usually somewhere back at the beginning again—cyclical.***

3) You mentioned that "Bicycles" was a short story you'd written for a college class many years ago that was discovered last summer and rewritten for the guidelines of this contest. Talk to us about the evolution of the story- the differences in location, characters, dialogue, scenes and what you liked about each version of it.

***I'd been meaning to rewrite "Bicycles" for thirty years! It got good reviews when I read it aloud in a mythology class at Long Beach State. But then there's a lotta stuff I've been meaning to do and only so much time. Your contest provided the impetus. I needed a good, unpublished story that fit your guidelines. So I checked an old, metal file case. Alphabetically, "Bicycles" was near the front of the SHORT STORIES drawer. But it was a***

***little too long—too much mechanical minutiae. Location and characters were fine, but the storyline needed to progress faster. So I cut what wasn't absolutely necessary, tweaked the dialogue, and after twenty or so drafts, submitted it to your fiction contest. Then my computer crashed and I was back to the metal-file-case version again. Like I said—cyclical.***

Bicycles

By Mark Barkawitz

It all happened such a long time ago. I was a young man back then, and had rented one side of a duplex near the city college. I was watering its yellowed lawn—it had been a hot summer—when Bobby, one of the neighborhood boys, came running down the street, rolling a bicycle wheel alongside himself.

“Where’re you going so fast, partner?” I asked.

“Hi, Marty. I have to see my friend, Eric, and find out if he has a tire, I mean tube, for my bike.” He was puffing from running.

“Got a flat?”

“Yeah.”

“I think I have a patch kit in the house. Wait a minute. I’ll go look. Here.” I handed him the hose. “Water the grass.”

I went into the kitchen and started hunting through my junk drawer, where I found the patch kit. It was the good kind, with hot patches, the backside of which lit up like a flare, instantly melting the patch to your tube. My dad had showed me how to use the hot patches when I was a boy. I thought it was really neat the way the patches flared up and smoked when you lit them. And it seemed as though I was always getting a flat, so my dad and I were always fixing my bike. I took the patch kit outside and gave it to Bobby.

He opened it and looked inside. “I don’t know how these work.”

As I explained, he nodded. He only lived a few doors up the block, in a rear house with his mother and younger sister. Bobby was ten or eleven at the time, tall for his age and a little chunky, dark-skinned, with a short, tightly-curved 'fro. I'd never met his father. He didn't live with the family and Bobby'd never mentioned him, so I hadn't either.

After my instructions, Bobby schooled me: "I'm not s'posed to play with matches."

Not being a parent myself, that hadn't occurred to me. So I turned off the hose and followed him and the rolling wheel home. His bike was apart on the concrete area that served as his front yard. He didn't have many tools. He'd been using two butter knives to try and pry the tire off the wheel, at which he'd been unsuccessful. I laughed because when I was a kid, I'd used the same makeshift tools when my dad wasn't around. He kept his tools locked up for safe keeping.

So I went to work with the butter knives, inching them around the wheel until one side of the tire was completely pried off the rim. I took the tube out and tossed it to him. He had a bicycle pump, so he pumped it up with air, then we put the inflated tube in the outside utility sink full of water.

"Look for bubbles," I said.

"There they are!"

I dried off the tube and—to make the patch stick better—roughed up the area around the pin-sized hole with the tiny piece of sandpaper from the patch kit. "Pay attention, man. Next time you're doing this yourself."

He didn't say anything. He just sat there, cross-legged, watching me. I guess he figured his part of the job was done—getting me to do it for him. I clamped down the hot patch with the little vise that came in the patch kit, took a book of matches from the pocket of my Levis, and lit the corner of the patch until it ignited—fizzing and sparking and smoking like crazy.

"Wow!" said Bobby. His eyes were as big as moon pies. "That's cool! But it better not melt my tube."

“It won’t.” The patch burned out in about ten seconds. I left it clamped in the vise to cool, while I checked the inside of the tire with my fingers for anything that might have caused the flat. Sure enough, a piece of glass was sticking through the tire. I pried it out with one of the butter knives and showed it to him.

“This is what caused your flat. Always make sure you check the inside of the tire before putting your tube back in or you’ll just get another flat.”

He nodded.

I unscrewed the still-warm vise and showed him that his tube hadn’t melted. Then we put the whole thing—wheel and bike—back together. I noticed the handlebars were loose, so I tightened those, too.

“How about a ride home for the bicycle repairman?”

“Sure.” He smiled. “Hop on!”

It was one of those old stingray bikes with the banana seat, so I sat in back and pedaled down the driveway, while he sat in front of me and steered. We skidded to a stop in front of my house.

“Wow, that’s cool!” he said. “You’re a great bicycle repairman.”

Kids are easy to impress. I used to think my dad was a genius because he could fix everything that I broke. “You’d better get a lock for that bike.” I’d noticed he didn’t have one. “People are always stealing bikes.”

“I will. Thanks, Marty.” But he was already riding off down the block. I turned on the hose again and went back to watering, soaking the yellow spots. One time, when I was about Bobby’s age, I ripped-off a bike. Somebody had stolen mine and I was tired of walking and so one night on my way home from the movies (I was by myself because my friends had been on their bikes and I couldn’t keep up.), I stole a bicycle off somebody’s front porch. It was a lousy bike; all rusted and the pedal scraped against the chain guard every time I pedaled: you stole it; you stole it; you stole it. And there were no handlebar grips, so my hold was on cold steel. But I needed a bike and I didn’t have any money, and after all, somebody had stolen mine. So I figured I was just getting even.

The next morning in our garage, I decided to remove the chain guard and paint the frame. Just to be on the safe side. (Didn't want to get arrested while riding it.) It must've been a Saturday because my dad came in just as I started to spray the frame with some blue spray paint I'd found in the garage. His forehead wrinkled up like an old, cracked tire that had been left out in the sun too long.

"Who's bike?"

"Mine."

"Where'd you get it?"

"From a kid at school." I gave the fenders another pass with the spray can, so I didn't have to look at him.

He shook his head, then left. I finished painting the bike but did a lousy job. And a week or so later, when I'd left it out on our front porch, somebody stole it from me. About a month later, my dad loaned me the money for my next bicycle when I told him I'd gotten a job as a paperboy but needed a bike to do my route. I paid him back, too.

After my first repair job for Bobby, whenever his bicycle broke down or something needed an adjustment, he'd come back to me. And usually he'd bring one of the other neighborhood kids with him, who just happened to need his or her brakes adjusted or seat post raised. "Don't make a habit of this, you guys. I have other things to do besides fixing your bikes, you know." But soon I became renowned as the bicycle repairman of our block.

One Saturday afternoon a few weeks later, I was watching a Dodgers game on TV. I remember we were playing Houston. The game was tied. Hooten with his knuckle-curve was pitching for the Dodgers. There were two outs, a runner on second, and Jose Cruz, their clean-up hitter, was at the plate. I was lying on the couch, sipping a beer, with the fan blowing on the coffee table, when there was a knock on the door. I got up to answer it, keeping watch of the TV. Bobby was on the other side of the screen door.

“What’s up?”

“My bike’s broke.”

“I can’t fix it now. I’m watching the Dodgers.”

There was a cheer from the TV. I turned in time to watch the baseball carry over the centerfield fence. Two-run dinger. The fans in Houston were cheering.

“Damn.”

“Can’t you fix it now? I need it so I can ride with the guys.”

“Maybe later.”

“But I need it now. Please?”

Hooten got the next batter to ground out and the inning was over. But the damage was done. A commercial about Farmer John sausages came on.

“All right. I’ll take a quick look at it.”

The bike was lying on my front lawn. But it wasn’t his old bike. It was a red ten-speed, with the rubber brake pads missing on the rear wheel.

“Where’d you get this?”

“From a friend a’ Eric’s. Mine got stold.”

“I told you to get a lock.”

“I know. I forgot. The gears on this one are kinda’ messed up, too.”

I flipped it upside-down on its handlebars and seat on the lawn, then pedaled it while trying to shift through the gears. The chain was shot. The back sprocket and gears were dirty and rusty, too, but they just needed some cleaning and oil.

“Tell you what,” I said. “I’ll front you the money for a new chain, some

brake pads, and a lock if you cut and rake my front lawn. Twice. I'll show you how to use the mower. You have to water, too."

"All right," he said, without much enthusiasm.

I gave him twenty bucks and a shopping list (so he wouldn't forget anything), and sent him down to Pep Boys by the college for the parts. I got my tools from the house and started working on the bike. I figured I'd only miss a couple innings of the game if I hurried. I'd taken the chain and back wheel off, and was about to start cleaning the gears, when a cop car pulled up and stopped at the curb. Two local cops—one wearing shades, both carrying guns and nightsticks—got out and walked over to where I sat cross-legged on the grass with the wheel in my lap.

"Howdy," I said.

"Afternoon," said the one cop without the sunglasses. "That your bike?"

I stopped working. "Why?"

"Fits the description we have here of a stolen bicycle." He was looking at a notebook in his hand.

"Oh."

"Is it yours?" the second cop asked. He appeared eyeless behind the dark lenses in the wire-rimmed, aviator frames.

"Not exactly."

"Exactly whose is it?" the first cop asked.

"Well." I stood up. "It's a friend's."

"You want to tell us this friend's name?" he asked.

"He's just a little kid."

"We have to have his name," said the second cop. "Is it your son's?"

“No, I don’t have a son. Look, why don’t you take the bike and let me handle the kid. Okay?”

“No way,” said the first cop. He flipped a page in his notebook. “What’s your name?” He wrote down my name. “You live here?”

“Yeah.”

“So who stole the bike?” the second cop asked again.

I didn’t say anything.

He stepped closer. “Come on, man.” I could see myself reflected in his dark lenses. “You have to tell us.”

“I found it.”

“Where?”

“On my front lawn. It was here when I woke up this morning. The tooth fairy must’ve left it.”

“Don’t be a smart-ass,” he ordered.

“If you don’t tell us, we’re going to have to take you down to the station,” the first cop added.

I shrugged.

He took out his handcuffs.

“Come on,” I said. “You don’t have to handcuff me.”

“That’s the rules.” So he handcuffed me and put me in the back seat of the police car. He sat back there with me. The other cop closed the front door to my house, then put the bike and my toolbox in the trunk, the lid of which he had to leave open. He got in the driver’s seat, screeched away from the curb, and headed for the police station.

When we got to the corner by the college, the light was red, and there was

Bobby on the sidewalk, coming back from Pep Boys with his arms full of bike parts. He saw the bicycle in the trunk, then me in the cop car. He stared at us with those big moon pie eyes of his.

“It’s all right,” I shouted to him. “Go water the lawn.”

The light changed and we pulled away towards the police station.

“That the kid?” the cop beside me asked.

I didn’t answer.

“It’s your butt, smart-ass,” said the cop in the front seat, the aviator shades still hiding his eyes from the outside world. But what did he know? About yellow lawns and Dodgers games on Saturday afternoon. About bicycles and butter knives and hot patch repair kits. Or about me—and my dad.

### **Interview with Chanel Brenner, Poetry Winner**

1) In an essay that we'd done for *The Review Review* entitled "How Can Poetry Heal Us?", we reference a quote from Richard Gold, founder of the Pongo Teen Writing Project whom we'd interviewed in our summer issue. The quote is from the Pongo blog: "I've seen that our emotions after life's worst experiences can be sealed in a variety of containers, some buried, or in a black hole, some that explode unexpectedly, some that exist only in the public realm, some that exist only in private, some that exist in one part of ourselves and not in others. But I've also seen that through poetry, people can open these containers, and move their contents, these painful emotions, into new frames that are more open and repurposed for a meaningful life." Would you say that you have found poetry to be a personally cathartic medium of expression?

***Reading and writing poetry about the death of my son has saved my life. Weeks after his funeral, I walked into my writing class and announced that my son had died. I remember the moment like I was outside of myself. I was a ghost of myself in those first days following his death. Numb and lost. Telling the class my son died broke through the numbness and made me feel alive again. It was the same with poetry. The first poetry***

***book I read after my son died was The Andrew Poems by Shelly Wagner. It was about the death of her five-year-old son who drowned. I found it more helpful than any other books about grief recommended to me. The poems were painful to read, but comforting and inspiring. I have never been much of a crier, but when my son died there was too much pain. It had to go somewhere. For me, writing poetry is a way to purge. Instead of wasted tears and time, I have a piece of art. Something to share about Riley that honors him. Something that won't die.***

2) You've studied method writing with poet Jack Grapes (award-winning poet, playwright, actor, instructor, as well as the editor and publisher of the literary journal, ONTHEBUS); tell us what other poets have influenced or inspired your work.

***Actually, I am a huge fan of Ellen Bass and greatly honored that she awarded me first place for my work. Other poets who have influenced me include Wislawa Szymborska, Rainer Maria Rilke, Anne Sexton, Sharon Olds and Dorianne Laux. Also, the poets and friends in my Wednesday morning writing group continue to inspire me.***

3) What would you say is the most pivotal philosophy in your approach to writing powerful poetry?

***I learned to write for the process of writing, not for product. Instead of worrying about writing something "good," I am free to just write, connect to my deep voice and see what happens.***

**July 28th, 2012**

by Chanel Brenner

It's Riley's second birthday,

without us.

He would have been

eight.

Instead of dead.  
Instead of chalk dust.  
Instead of oysterless chips of pearls.  
Instead of a giant,  
insatiable pit.  
Instead of a collage of photos  
and cutout red crayoned hearts.  
Instead of our tears.  
Instead of a vanilla birthday cake  
bejeweled with his name.  
Instead of a ghost,  
haunted by us.  
Instead of frozen  
at six and a half.  
Instead of this fucking poem.

***Interview with Anita Solick Oswald, Non-fiction Winner***

1) You've written about your collection of essays told from the point of view of your younger self and speak of how they "celebrate an era, a time of change, an urban childhood, ethnic neighborhoods, girls' empowerment and the benefits of growing up in a culturally diverse community". Tell us about how the idea for the collection came about and what your favorite aspect of capturing that time is (not only for you the writer but for all of the readers who can relate).

***When my daughters were young, we lived in southern California. I would tell them stories of my childhood escapades and my old neighborhood. They always begged me for more tales, saying, "Your childhood was more interesting and fun than ours, Mom," although growing up near the beach was my dream when I was a kid. I shared the stories with family and friends and they continued to ask me for more.***

***As a girl I always knew that my parents believed in me. My experiences growing up on the West Side gave me confidence and a sense of purpose, and made me the person I am today. I wanted to share this empowerment with my daughters and others. The collection seemed like the perfect vehicle.***

***I had incredible freedom when I was a child, and I love reminiscing with my family and friends about a wonderful time in our lives. One of the best compliments I received was from an old friend who read the stories to her 88 year old mother and her brother. She said they all laughed and laughed together when they read my stories and wished they would never end.***

2) You anchor the reader strongly with your sensory description and sense of place; how do you go about recreating such vivid detail from childhood memories? Do you have a particular process in your writing for accessing the long-since past?

***I guess the past is always with me. I never left it behind. I can still hear my mother's voice in my sisters' voices and my own. She could never tell us apart on the telephone, and we sound like her. You never quite lose that Chicago accent. And I see my parents' and grandparents' faces in my own children and my nieces and nephews.***

***When I am preparing to write an essay, I call and email my sisters, Barbara and Donna, about the concepts. Those women never forget anything. I guess, for better or worse, it's a family trait. We talk and laugh and share our memories. They've provided great details that I might have forgotten, so I consider them my co-authors. My husband has been a great listener, too. We grew up in different parts of the country but we are the same age, so we have many childhood experiences in common –***

***toys, games, school, childhood heroes. We both think our childhoods were idyllic and we love to remember those happy times together.***

***I have family photos and mementos that I review for details. I've searched out information in newspaper archives, libraries and Chicago historical collections to help me conjure up the ghost of days past. I correspond with friends from the old neighborhood, too. We have a great Facebook page where everyone shares old photos and information. These friends have been an incredible resource. And I keep a notebook with me all the time to jot down a thought or memory that I may want to add to my stories of Chicago's West Side.***

3) What do you think are the most important things that you would tell writers who are planning to write memoirs?

***Trust your instincts. This is your story and your life. You won't find a receptive audience with everyone but you will find many people who will want to share your experiences, and will love your writing. Spend whatever time it takes to reminisce and gather your thoughts and memories. If you can, find other writers who are supportive to work with you. I worked with three incredible women who I met through the writers' workshops. We all have different stories to write and share, and the support and feedback has been invaluable. And, most importantly, I made some new friends for life!***

Hot Diggity Dog

By Anita Oswald

“Hot diggity dog diggity, boom what you do to me.”

The gang sang the popular ditty as we cruised down the cobblestone alley, our little Appian Way between Madison and Monroe Streets. The alley was our playground – it backed all our houses and was our thoroughfare to adventure.

There were thirteen of us: The Lennons – Mary, John, Katherine, Patricia, and Aidan, the Solicks – me, Barb, Donna, and Jack, Donna Doyle, younger brother David Doyle, Samuel McDina, and Tito the Gypsy. We were headed to the grand opening of the new Chicago style hot dog stand on Keeler Avenue next to the laundromat. Capitalizing on the popularity of the song, the proprietors had named the grimy take-out place, “Hot Diggity Dog.”

The gang was eager to check out this new food venue. Marginal small businesses – fortune tellers, junk shops, Chinese take-out with a gambling parlor in the backroom - occupied vacated store fronts as more established businesses took flight from our neighborhood for greener pastures. Before the Hot Diggity Dog opening, the owners tried to generate enthusiasm and showered the neighborhood with leaflets. The hand-painted stencil window sign promised free soft serve ice cream, dogs, balloons, and door prizes. Excited, we alternated between running and skipping down the alley, anticipating our free treats. Disregarding our mother’s standard warning, “The place has rats. You’ll get ptomaine,” we were ready with our coupons in hand for free eats.

In July, when every day seemed like the last day of Pompeii, a free cone sounded like a great idea. But as we turned the corner our maniacally eager expressions vanished. The line to get free soft serve cones stretched all the way around the corner on Madison Street right up to the front door of Solick’s restaurant. It looked like every kid in the neighborhood had heard about the freebies. I wanted to throw in the towel and go to the Columbus Park swimming pool. I didn’t like vanilla cones anyway. I wanted a chocolate dip cone. If we hurried, I argued, we’d still make the last batch of 500 kids before they closed the pool for cleaning. But the rest of the gang maintained that free ice cream was worth the delay.

“Come on, Anita, the line isn’t that long. It’s moving fast.”

I really didn’t want to go to the pool alone so I reluctantly agreed to hang out and wait my turn in the heat and humidity of Chicago in July.

As we walked past the takeout joint to claim our places in line, I had time to size up the place. I had to agree with my mother. Hot Diggity Dog didn’t look too hot. I admired their entrepreneurship, though. The staff was sweating and working as fast as they could, taking orders and dishing out soft serve to overheated customers. Their aprons were stained and the trash cans were overflowing. Money and sawdust covered the linoleum.

The owners had developed their own creative security system. They figured it would be harder to rip the place off if thieves had to pick up the cash and instructed the customers to throw their money on the floor. Sweaty dogs spun on the greasy roller rotisserie – no sneeze guard in sight. Mom was probably right about the hygiene. I saw people walking past us with cones and Chicago dogs and remembered my mother’s cautionary tales about dirty kitchens and diseases you’d get if you weren’t careful. The pungent smell of the dogs and the raw onions and the bleach smell from the laundromat next door made me gag. I thought about all the nasty pig body parts that were supposed to be in hot dogs. Maybe those hot peppers really were cockroaches – were they wiggling? I needed a Coke.

Feeling queasy, I decided to pass on the cone and gave my coupon to Tito the Gypsy. It just wasn’t worth the risk of getting sick when I wasn’t in school. I waited in line for my buddies to get their free cones. To pass the time I practiced my tap dance and Ethel Merman imitation, belting out “I got rhythm” until my friends began hitting me to make me stop. I felt like my brain was boiling. I started to perspire and black lines formed in the creases of my knees and elbows. We got to the front door – the dogs were sizzling and so were we. Finally, we reached the counter and everyone got their cones. We ran all the way to Columbus Park in time to join 487 other kids for the last splash at the pool that day.

The next day, the gang hooked up in search of new adventures. It was the middle of summer and we were beginning to get bored. The first day of school was still over a month away. I pinched myself. Could I really be wishing I were back in school? Was it heat stroke? I decided I better rest and get myself a lime Popsicle. As the gang strolled down the alley between Madison and Monroe musing about what we could do for fun that day, I spied an amazing treasure – perched on top of the garbage can was a whole box of the coupons for free ice cream! The gang went wild! What a score!

“Best day ever!”

There were at least 500 coupons in the box. It would keep us all in free ice cream all summer. I had another idea. I tried reasoning with the gang.

“We could sell the coupons and make some money.”

They voted me down.

“You’re crazy. It says free. Who’d pay for it?”

“We could sell them for a penny a pop – that’s five bucks!”

“Nawww. Ice cream. Ice cream,” they chanted.

I steadfastly maintained that we could sell them at a significant discount to kids and contended that since I saw them first I had first right of disposal. I couldn’t persuade the gang that the coupons were solely mine and this would be a better idea than eating 500 ice cream cones.

“We all saw them at the same time. They belong to all of us.”

To keep the peace, I decided that I would just go with this communist spirit. But then I saw a potential problem and pointed it out to the gang.

“The coupons say ‘1 to a customer.’ And we went yesterday.”

“We’ll disguise ourselves. They will never recognize us!”

“With what? It’s not Halloween.”

“We can trade clothes and stuff.”

I doubted that the staff would be fooled by this juvenile masquerade, but agreed to help out. I had nothing better to do. We decided to test the waters and see if we could fool the Hot Diggity Dog staff. So we marched in and presented our coupons. We were surprised when the man behind the counter did not balk. Everyone got their cones – I gave mine to Mitzy, the Lennon’s mongrel dog. The cones were either consumed or melted in minutes. We decided to try again. I put on sunglasses and my sister and I switched scarves and tied them around our hair which we pulled into pony tails. Tito turned his shirt backwards. The entire gang tried to disguise their appearance. I surveyed the young grifters. The results looked pretty dismal. Always the skeptic, I doubted our chances of success.

“It’ll never work.”

The gang agreed we should give it a shot. Boldly we marched up to the counter of Hot Diggity Dog. I shushed the younger kids who were giggling. I presented the first coupon and, without a blink, the man behind the counter handed me a cone. The gang filed up, winking and nodding. I

wondered whether he just didn't care because working at Hot Diggity Dog was such a lousy job or if he really had lost his marbles because of the heat and did not recognize us. We all marched out choking back the laughter. Back in the alley, we jumped in the air and yelled and congratulated each other. Mitzy got another cone, and licked the cobblestones in the alley after she'd polished it off.

This charade went on day after day. I was an early defector. I didn't like vanilla and pretty soon got bored with the game. Eventually the older kids gave up, tired of the same old vanilla cones. The thrill was gone. Fickle fans that we were we decided a pizza slice at the dime store was our new favorite. The soda fountain at the drugstore advertised fresh limeade. A Greek takeout opened in the next block later that summer and they served the greasiest fries I'd ever seen. Cooked in olive oil, almost transparent and served in wax paper; they were a salty taste treat.

One by one, the kids switched their allegiances. We forgot about the free cones. But Aidan, the little waif, soldiered on. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, I'd watch him from my third story wooden back porch. He pedaled down the alley in his fire truck to Hot Diggity Dog, coupon in hand. I'd yell to him.

"Aidan! Getting a cone?"

He'd waive and nod.

Aidan pedaled right through the front door of Hot Diggity Dog, clutching his greasy meal ticket. Not a word was exchanged between him and the man behind the counter. The short order cook turned to the soft serve machine and had the cone ready by the time Aidan reached the stools. They had an understanding.

I watched him pedal back, winter and summer, ice cream dripping down his dirty T-shirt onto his perpetually grimy diaper. A fatter Mitzy trotted next to him, catching the drips. Aidan grinned from ear to dirty ear.

## *Guest Judges*



Author Gwendolen Gross

Author/Poet Ellen Bass; Photo  
by Irene Bass

Author Kathleen Flinn

**Fiction**~ Gwendolen Gross holds an MFA in fiction and poetry from Sarah Lawrence College. Her novels have received critical acclaim, with her being dubbed "the reigning queen of women's adventure fiction" by *Book Magazine*. Her poetry was selected for the Adrienne Lee Award. Gross was chosen early in her career for the PEN West Emerging Writers Program. The author shares her experience in the field as an award-winning writing instructor, having led workshops at Sarah Lawrence College and the UCLA Extension online. Her novels include *A Field Guide*, *Getting Out*, *The Other Mother* and *The Orphan Sister* (Simon and Schuster). Her forthcoming novel, *When She Was Gone*, will be released in 2013.

**Poetry**~ Ellen Bass's most recent book of poems, *The Human Line* (Copper Canyon Press) was named a Notable Book of 2007 by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. She co-edited (with Florence Howe) the groundbreaking *No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women* (Doubleday), has published several previous volumes of poetry, including *Mules of Love* (BOA, 2002) which won the Lambda Literary Award. Her poems have appeared in hundreds of journals and anthologies, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Ms.*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The New Republic*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Field*. She was awarded the Elliston Book Award for Poetry from the University of Cincinnati, Nimrod/Hardman's Pablo Neruda Prize, The Missouri Review's Larry Levis Award, the Greensboro Poetry Prize, the New Letters Poetry Prize, the Chautauqua Poetry Prize, a Pushcart Prize, and a Fellowship from the California Arts Council.

**Non-fiction**~ Kathleen Flinn is the author of the best-selling memoir, *The Sharper Your Knife, the Less You Cry* and

*The Kitchen Counter Cooking School: How a Few Simple Lessons Transformed Nine Culinary Novices into Fearless Home Cooks* published in October 2011 by Viking/Penguin. Her most recent book is already on its fourth printing and recently was awarded Best Non-Fiction Book/Memoir/Autobiography from the American Society of Journalists and Authors. Kathleen is on the board of directors for the International Association of Culinary Professionals (IACP) and a member of the American Society of Journalists & Authors (ASJA), the James Beard Foundation, the Richard Hugo House in Seattle, the American Institute of Food and Wine, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) and the Author's Guild. Her recent partnership with the Rouxbe Cooking School allows for online cooking lessons that serve as a companion to the lessons in her book, *The Kitchen Counter Cooking School*.

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