

# Stories for *Visions of Life* Exhibit

Skokie Public Library  
Nov 2 - Dec 20, 2022



Three Peaches and a Knife on a Paper Napkin  
by Mary Barnes-Gingrich

# Paintings with Stories

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# Participating Writers

Bonnie Bagdon

Terry Brennan

Linda Buyer

Bruce Dravis

James Flanigan

- A Carful of Memories
- Peach Life
- Violin Practice

Joanne Freeman

Ann Kammerer

Donna Kathryn Kelly

Thomas Sundell

- The Day's Catch
- Zampha of Nigeria

Marie Thourson

## 1. Mars



### **Stones Were All They Knew**

By Marie Thourson

Stones were all they knew. They'd been born into the rocky landscape. Their infant selves had lain on sun-heated stones as their mothers hacked away at the soil to plant turnips and potatoes. They grew up helping the men dig up stones and

drag them out of the earth, then when they'd saved a bit of money, they'd marry some girl who also came from a field of stones. And so it repeated from one generation to another.

Each year when the people woke up after a long winter and went out to assess the newly greening pastures, they saw that the stones still littered the fields, though they swore they had moved them the year before. They weren't wrong. The rocks, when removed, relieved the pressure on the ground and slowly, unstoppably, stones still clasped in the earth's dark embrace mounted to the surface. The task began again, the digging, pushing, pulling, dragging. Fences were extended and piles of rock started appearing at the edges of the property.

There were once many more trees that towered over the stonescape, casting deep shadows where green moss thickened and elusive spirits hovered in the mists. Each year people cut down some of the trees for building and burning and turning into turpentine to sell to the men in fancy jackets who rode up from town. But when the people emerged on the first bright spring day, they did not see new trees replacing those they had cut down the year before.

They'd heard about lands without stones. Men who'd joined the army traveled across the water to fight in places that were smooth and covered in mud. And when they returned – if they were lucky enough to return - they told their stories. People shook their heads and said this is our place among the stones where we have always been. And they continued to cut down trees and dig up rocks from the stubborn soil.

Then one day, a man packed up his tools and walked down the road toward the sea, and everyone feared he was lost to them. But after some time, they received a letter. He said it was fine and fair where he was now and he was making good money working in fields with black dirt so soft you never needed shoes. And the people read this letter to each other over and over.

After much deliberation and no small amount of argument, another man left and another after him and then a daughter who didn't want to marry a man from the stones and her sisters after her. And they wrote home and told their stories, shined up a bit but nonetheless true. A few of the departed came home saying "I am a person of the stones after all", but others stayed away and so the people split and the generations slowly forgot each other. They forgot the names and faces but there remained a deep body ache for the lost souls. As for those who left, their children knew without knowing that some part of them was a person of the stones.

### 3. Chicago Rogers Park



#### **Rogers Park 2019**

By Terry Brennan

The delicate summer  
full light and cool – until solstice

Then the teams scurry  
Families, kids wielding splattering paintbrushes  
Careful painters  
Political statements and inspirations  
remembrances

The fifty new paintings  
facing the lake  
across sand and scrub  
and a beacon  
a jetty

I walk down the walk  
Turn right – water  
Left low – art  
Left medium – park  
Left high – brick apartments

At the end, a free-form sculpture  
kids slide and crawl

And where a contra fiddle player's  
father shot his mother  
and stepped into police bullets  
suicide by cop

What renews is new  
What returns comforts  
It all washes away  
rain, waves, memory, feeling

Just a memory of a feeling

#### 4. Clarksdale, MS



#### **A Carful of Memories**

By James Flanigan

The librarian lightly tapped Adam's shoulder. "Hello? Sir?" That minimal human contact seemed to rouse Adam from his fugue state, and he slowly turned to look at her.

She continued, "I'm sorry, but the library is now closed.

You'll have to leave. Did you miss the announcement? Are you okay? Do you need any help?"

Adam was unaware of how long he had been transfixed by the painting of the car in the library's current art exhibit. "I'm ... I'm ... so sorry. No help needed. This painting, uh, kinda captured my attention. It's just that, oh, never mind. You're closing, closed. I'll leave now. Sorry. Sorry."

The next day, Adam appeased his nagging curiosity and did a quick internet check. He found that the car shown in the painting was located just over an hour's drive south of Memphis, where he would be on a business trip the following week. Adam found the urge impossible to resist. While on his trip, he planned to take a short detour to Clarksdale, Mississippi after work one night. Adam just had to get a close look at that car.

When Adam finally found himself in front of the car painted to advertise the Delta Blues Alley Café, he was unsure of anything and everything. Adam had been so certain that he had once owned that car. The mismatched hubcaps in the painting synced with Adam's recollection perfectly. But it had been so many years, decades even, that Adam and Shonni had been riding around in maybe that car as they started their life together. As he squinted in through the car's windows, nothing looked familiar, except for his memories of Shonni sitting in their car's passenger seat, her laughter making her even more beautiful.

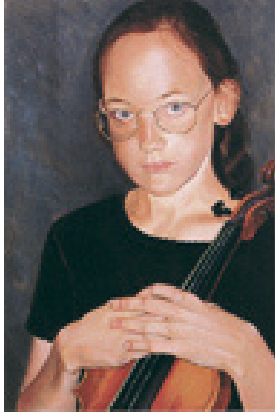
As Adam drove back to his modest business hotel in Memphis, he killed some time by calling the number he had dialed so many times before. It was after work hours and safe to call.

"Call Shonni Green," Adam directed his phone. He was rewarded with the message he wanted to hear. The message he needed to hear.

"Thank you for calling Fischer Industries. This is Shonni Westerburg. I can't take your call right now. Please leave me a message at the tone."

A small piece of Adam's heart was carved away each time he heard Shonni using her new husband's surname. But it was a price he was willing to pay in order to hear her voice. Adam hung up before the tone sounded and redialed.

## 5. Girl with a Violin



### Violin Practice

By James Flanigan

I used to complain about practicing violin.  
Back when I was just ten and first started playing.  
The hard metal strings made my fingers hurt.  
I once overheard my parents complaining, too,  
Joking about how painful it was to listen.  
But they don't joke anymore.  
Now they push me to enter competitions,  
And it kind of hurts to hear them beg.  
I'm not trying to be mean by refusing to compete,  
But they don't understand why I play the violin.  
Winning a ribbon or medal means nothing.  
If that was important to me,  
I'd play soccer at the park district.  
I'm actually a pretty fast runner,  
And win or lose, everyone gets a trophy.  
The violin is my voice.  
School is hard, and you have to watch what you say.  
You don't want to be branded a weirdo  
By students who pick on others,  
In their efforts to blend in.  
I'm already four-eyes.  
I don't want any more names.  
So I express myself through music.  
Very few may understand what I'm saying.  
That's okay. Most of the time I'm speaking to myself  
When I pick up the bow and start to play.  
I choose my music wisely,  
With a message in every piece,  
If people really want to hear it.  
I tell myself that all will be better when I'm older.  
I will be able to say what I want with words, not just music.  
People will not care if I wear glasses, get good grades, or are cool.  
But I know that's not true.  
There are way too many cruel people.  
That's why I play and practice,  
So I will always have a voice.

## 6. Piazza San Marco with Laredo Statue



### Ennui

By Joanne Freeman

*Only four years ago. Life was all smiles and laughter then, full of sweet glances and loving touches. Marielle swirls the straw in her glass. Now he barely notices me except to tell me I'm doing something wrong and once in a while to throw a bone of a compliment my way. I hoped Venice would be different. We could*

*have stayed home. He's more interested in his affogato than in me.*

"You seem to be enjoying your dessert, Eduardo," remarks Marielle. *Now he has to say something to me, she thinks. He's hardly spoken during the meal.*

"Why wouldn't I? It's so damned hot today." Looking up, Eduardo continues, "Aren't you melting in that heavy outfit and ridiculous hat?"

"I thought you liked this hat!" Marielle sighs. *He didn't care about the heat or what I wore when we were here on our honeymoon.* She peers at Eduardo, who silently finishes the espresso-soaked gelato and motions for the waiter. "Il conto, per favore."

"Next time I'll take you with me to the milliner's," Marielle says too brightly.

Eduardo ignores her comment. He feels irrationally angry, takes a deep breath. *She's beautiful and sweet. And I'm drowning in her relentless goodness and patience. So predictable. And boring.* He stands.

"Siesta time. You'll feel better when we get back to the hotel," says Marielle as she rises and slips her arm through her husband's.

Neither speaks during the short walk to their lodgings. Eduardo languidly notices the glances he and Marielle elicit from other pedestrians. A good-looking couple. *Perfect for each other. That's what everyone says.* Eduardo shakes his head as if to deflect the thought. *Ah, if they knew how colorless we are.*

Near the passageway to one of the shadowy back streets of Venice where their hotel lies, they're jostled into a quickly forming crowd near the edge of the Grand Canal. A loudly sobbing woman, soaking wet, kneels beside a matted mound of golden fur. An equally dripping man stands a few feet away, head bowed. A gondolier gestures dramatically as he addresses two policemen and the crowd.

"What can I do? Nothing! They start to argue. He grabs her little pet and tosses it from my boat. She slaps him and jumps into the water to save her dog. He goes into the canal after his wife, shoves her onto the pier, then climbs up himself. She pushes him back into the water. She's screaming she hates him, that he must bring back her dog. He finds it—too late, poor thing." The gondolier throws up his hands.

Marielle shudders. "The brute!"

Eduardo guides Marielle away from the throng. "You never would have pushed me back into the water, would you?" he asks.

"I don't know, Eduardo. I might well have." She stares defiantly into his eyes. "Don't ever tempt me."

*Brava, Marielle! I did not expect that.* Eduardo pauses and regards his wife with a sly smile. "And I do like your hat. Very much."

## 6. Piazza San Marco with Laredo Statue



### Venice

By Bruce Dravis

My wife was looking down at her drink when she said, “I disregarded your flaws.” Then she lifted her mischievous eyes. “And I forgave you your virtues. To keep you from becoming completely arrogant.”

“Well, that didn’t work.”

She made a face. “Better than you’ll admit,” she contended.

The late afternoon was unseasonably warm for autumn and Venice was humid. We wanted a rest at the café. For a full meal, we could order room service later, but she ate little these days.

“Some people mistake self-confidence for arrogance.”

“I don’t,” she said. “Just enough arrogance, that’s good, to drive someone hard, like you, or our daughter. The trick is to keep it in bounds.”

“But you were never arrogant.”

“I was the worst.”

Across the piazza, a statue white as chalk depicted two young lovers, not quite nude and not quite clothed. She saw where I was looking. “It’s like the old Groucho Marx line,” I said. “That woman reminds me of you. But then, you remind me of you.”

We met when we were both fifteen. At the school picnic I sneaked a couple of beers with my friends and found my nerve to sit with her on the bus home and later we began dating, but she left me because she needed to escape into adulthood as desperately as if she was breaking out of jail, and I wasn’t ready to keep up. Years passed, and we reconnected and we began careers and raised kids and made friends and celebrated achievements and mourned a miscarriage, and we made money and watched children marry and friends divorce, and we buried parents, and the lush carnality of the early years cooled and we shared the indignities and aches of age and could no longer entwine our fingers holding hands because the joints had swollen with arthritis. The Parkinson’s diagnosis forced her to retire before she was ready. While in the doctor’s office, a song played in the waiting area, “You love, you lose, you choose, you change, nothing living stays the same.” She trembled occasionally and sometimes in the evenings she would see things that weren’t there.

Our daughter, 30 years in investment banking, treated us to Venice for our anniversary.

“You know what our son-in-law told me?” I asked. “He said, ‘All men marry women who are too good for them.’”

“It’s certainly true in his case,” she said.

“Oh, he’s right. You know he’s right.”

## 7. The Weaver



### **The Weaver**

A poem

By Donna Kathryn Kelly

The reporter unraveled it:  
sly burglar,  
entering under cover of night.  
But he did not steal anything.

No - his was an intent to destroy,  
the warp and the weft,  
the right and the left:

an undoing,  
an unbraiding,  
an unmaking,  
of the work of a woman's hands.

Injured art  
still lives,

But its scars are a glory  
in a way,  
a survival,  
a triumph of sorts:  
a breath,  
though harmed,  
forgiving  
into the continuing.

Here is the trick:  
if the fingers do not retain pain,  
if the mind does not hold anger like  
a rain cloud,  
the repaired work  
may exalt over the original.

The reporter will not ask for  
forgiveness.  
Without evidence, he is without  
guilt.

So, return artist,  
return to your loom,  
with your hands of hope:  
a work that yields,  
a giving of the wrists,  
a bending of tension,  
an interlacing  
of the woven  
into the whole.

## 8. Irish Man



### **Freedom at the Soup Kitchen**

By Bonnie Bagdon

The men in the soup line  
Stand a foot apart.  
They do not talk.  
They do not laugh.  
They do not complain.  
One should not waste  
Food.

The pastries are  
Leftovers.

"Are they free?" he asks.

I show him the assortment.

He hesitates.

Then finds the one he wants

And takes his choice.

## 8. Irish Man



### **Two Friends**

Variation on a folk song

By Ann Kammerer

Two friends,  
old friends,  
unmatched bookends  
on a metal bench,  
their simple shoes  
planted on pavement,  
the rhyme of a folk song,  
as one departs,  
the other rocks,  
charred by winds that  
scramble leaves,  
toss branches,  
and dapple sun  
on their dirty wool clothes.

## 9. Three Peaches and a Knife on a Napkin



### Peach Life

By James Flanigan

“Why does the knife have to be pointing toward me?” asked the peach on the left. “I’m definitely the least ripe of us three.”

“Maybe it’s to cut off your hoity-toity stem and leaves,” the middle peach snidely suggested. “You always thought you were better than us. Well, let’s see how you look without all your fancy foliage. Hey, what do you think?”

The peach on the right seemed startled. “Please don’t drag me into this. I’m not even on the napkin. I don’t think they plan to eat me.”

“Eat?” questioned the center peach. “Is that what this is all about? I got the chills when you said that, and my fuzz stood straight up. What are these people, barbarians?”

The peach on the left replied, “What are you so worried about? The knife’s pointing at me. And what did you think would happen to us? Do you think we’re posed like this for someone to do a still life oil painting of us?”

“That might explain the easel standing there,” chimed in the peach on the right.

“Oh, great. I hear these artists can take weeks to do an oil painting,” groaned the middle peach. “We’ll rot.”

“Maybe the artist will use the Bob Ross technique and be done in under an hour,” offered the right-side peach.

“And then what happens?” the left peach asked rhetorically. “I’ll say it. They eat us.”

The right peach gazed wistfully out the window and pondered, “Maybe they will savor our juicy flesh and plant our pits in the backyard. We’ll sprout and live again to someday produce offspring who will honor our legacies.”

“Or, maybe our pits get dug up by squirrels, cracked open, and eaten,” posited the center peach.

“Our futures are as fuzzy as our skin,” the right peach opined.

“Here she comes, and she’s holding a paintbrush. Yay!” noted the left peach.

The middle peach relaxed and said, “I hope she gets my good side. You know, without the bruise. Damn produce guy dropped me.”

And with that, peach life went still once again.

## 10. Fisherman of Mola di Bari



### The Day's Catch

By Thomas Sundell

“In the painting, it’s the downcast eyes of the fisherman, holding two octopi, that grabs Hardy’s attention. Why downcast? Sorrow or being attentive to the catch?

Difficult to tell the time of day, what with the overcast sky, but Hardy guesses early to mid-morning. Are the fishermen preparing to go to sea or in the harbor at the end of their daily foray?

Leaning to see the label affixed to the wall, Hardy reads Fisherman of Mola di Bardi by Bruno Surdo. So Italians, and Hardy is pretty sure Italians actually refer to the town as Mola. He’s been to Bardi, the city, years past, and Mola is some kilometers away.

So why is the scene so somber? Was that how it was or how the artist chose to depict it? In Hardy’s experience such fishermen should be alive with chatter, the octopi still twisting and quivering, the seagulls calling and swooping.

Turning to the gallery owner, Hardy is ready to pose a question but the man is on the telephone. Instead, Hardy turns back to the painting, examines it further for clues. His great-uncle was a commercial fisherman out of Stonington in Maine, mostly for lobster, but anything viable, really: flounder, cod, haddock, pollock, hake, herring, mackerel. Well, you name it, and Uncle Pete probably went for it.

Hardy likes a painting that fires the imagination. This one could let you tell any number of stories. Thinking about it, Hardy decides the lack of good spirits means they’ve lost someone at sea. Still the men must get their work done first, that’s a rule for this kind of livelihood. So they work as they mourn.

Sorrow coupled with determination is something Hardy understands. The loss of his son two years and five months ago on a scouting trip, drowning when Talbot’s canoe overturned while shooting the rapids, is seared into Hardy’s psyche. So he buried himself in his work, unable to help his wife through her grief. She blaming him for wanting their boy to be an Explorer, forgetting that Talbot wanted it even more.

Divorced now, these past eight months, Hardy is just venturing forth, a Saturday at the galleries instead of hiding himself at the office.

To be confronted by this painting and what he takes to be the central figure’s misery. Or is he simply reading that into the depiction of the man?

Likely, Hardy should find a happier painting, brightly colored, joy on faces, maybe dancers or lovers. No, not lovers, nothing so mawkish.

The owner is off the phone, and Hardy calls to him, gesturing at the painting, “I’ll buy this one.”

## 11. Growing Up



### Home

By Linda Buyer

Home is the place I want not to be more than anything. It is the place where my parents scream at each other after lights out, when my sister and I are bedded down for the night in our shared room. It is the

place where I can't ever do what I want: where I can't have the Halloween costume I want, where I can't have long hair, where I can't continue the ballet lessons I love because my "teacher isn't good enough." The place where I am never good enough.

Home is full of mid-fifties modern furniture. A wire armchair. A numberless starburst clock. An armless couch draped in plastic. It is a place that smells of nothing. The place where my mother stands guard with a vacuum cleaner when anyone decides to make popcorn. The place where she threw out everything in the pantry after finding a single sesame-seed-sized reddish-brown bug in a closed tin of McCormick paprika. The place where pets aren't allowed because a turtle that escaped from the shallow, oval terrarium on the slatted wooden bench under the dining room windows came ambling back across the dining room floor, three weeks after he disappeared. Home has no houseplants. No sweets. Nothing to attract a butterfly.

Home is a place where no one ever touches another. No kiss or hug "goodnight." No pat on the shoulder "good job." It is the place where perfect isn't good enough.

Home is a place to escape, reading late into the night, towel rolled up at the foot of the bedroom door. Books propose the perfect, rational worlds of *Fountainhead* and *Walden Two*. Introduce Caleb Trask, wrong just for being, my shadow twin. Books mostly have happy endings. Would there be so many if it were never true?

Home is the place I want not to be more than anything.

## 12. Zampha of Nigeria



### **Zampha of Nigeria**

By Tom Sundell

Head cocked, eyes looking down, unwilling to look at me, as if she expected to be hurt — not physically, but worse than that, in her heart. Maybe because we both knew this day was coming.

Zampha came to America as a student, but stayed as Nigeria disintegrated with the Ibo trying to create their own state of Biafra. Now that war is done, the Ibo devastated — horrendous stories coming out of Nigeria, a country thrown together by the British when they were colonial masters of a myriad of tribes. The war done and our government no longer honoring Zampha's visa.

We had existed, Zampha and I, under the pretense that this day would never come. Foolish, of course, and we both knew it. So we must part.

Save if we should marry, and we change her status. The truth, though, after three years together, is that we know we're not meant for each other. Ours is not that kind of love, a friendship more than a mating.

I love her art, her creativity, her view and stance on life, on America, maybe, on me. There is so much that Zampha means to me — and our time together has helped me grow, and, I hope, helped her. But it is not enough to build a life together.

So while I search her face, she not looking at me, I am sad at our parting but not sorrowful. And I can tell it is the same for her. And that she yearns for her Africa more than for my America.