

## GOLI MAHALATTI

*Joyous Journey, 2020*  
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 in.



COURTESY THE STUDIO SHOP GALLERY

## KAREN TOLOUI

### A Darker Sky

The sky above the horizon was almost black. The faded prayer flags just inside the fence of the cabin flapped on their standards, which stuck precariously out of the sand. The wind whistled and howled through the small gaps in the doorframes and rattled the screens. “Looks like we’re in for it,” Nikki said, hoping Barb might look up from the computer. But she didn’t.

And Molly needed to go out. “Come on, girl,” Nikki said to the floppy golden retriever, grabbing her leash from the hook by the door. She wanted to tell Barb they’d be back soon. But what was the use?

Opening the door brought a rush of wind and a scattering of sand just inside.

The little patch of land that wanted to be a yard was just a parcel of sand and fallen pine boughs, with the odd stand of struggling ferns and shrubs in a big hump in the middle of it. Nikki kept Molly on the leash to do her business. She was Barb’s dog and sometimes didn’t come to Nikki when she called. Barb would have let her run off into the woods, but all Nikki could do was give her some slack on the leash.

The air was heavy, and this darkness was uncanny for morning. It should have been brilliant with sun off white sand. It should have been the spring day they had planned for. Their weekend at the beach, just the two of them, to rekindle what had gone out of their relationship a year ago. Had it been a year since Nina? The accident, the sudden shock of her death when they thought she was recovering. To lose a child is the worst, everyone said, and even though she was Barb’s and Nikki had barely known her, it *was* the worst. How to comfort your lover? There was nothing to say. Nothing to do that could help her feel better. But now, it was time to take up where they’d left off. It had been Barb’s idea to get away from the grief-laden house, Nina’s pictures everywhere, and wake up together with nothing to do but hold and be held and work their way back into their soft ways with each other.

And yesterday had been better. Somewhat. The excitement of throwing their things into duffels, packing Molly’s bed into the back of the Subie, her water dish and bag of kibble, the coffee for them, and provisions for the weekend when they would cook if they felt like it or go to the rustic cafés in town if they didn’t. Nikki had imagined them so drunk on love that the three bottles of chardonnay they’d



packed just wouldn't be needed. And they wouldn't get out of bed except for Molly's needs. And the weather was going to be wonderful.

"Are you *really* bringing that thing?" Nikki had asked as Barb was packing her laptop into its bag.

"Just in case we want to write something, eh?" Barb had said with a wink. But it was going to be Barb's book about teaching writing to fourth graders, not something they were working on together. Nikki had wanted to say no, let's not, it's like bringing a child on a honeymoon. But she'd watched as the gray leather Tumi slid just behind the driver's seat.

But dinner last night, at the old hotel, had been good. Barb complained, as usual, about too much dressing on the salad, but the lasagna and pesto were as good as ever, and they shared their plates as they used to do. They drank good red wine, too. After all, they were on the Sonoma coast, so even the house wine was good. And that made the night softer, extended the evening back to the cabin, where there were kisses and a roll on the bed, hands going, at last, where they wanted to go, remembering, flexing then what hadn't been flexed for so very long.

The white candles flickered with the smell of fire and wax, an unassuming burn like their sex had been. And as the night waned, Barb groaned as she rose off the bed and seemed to stumble slightly, her feet tangling with each other, and she caught herself before she could fall. "Shit," she said, and she clambered to the bathroom.

"You okay?" Nikki called. No answer from Barb, she turned over and thought maybe Barb had had more wine than she thought. But that would be unlike her. If anyone drank more wine, it was Nikki. Then why the struggle when she got up?

A few moments later, Barb moved from candle to candle, hovering over each one before blowing it out, as if making a wish. Nikki was sorry to see the little splotches of light going out. They were small beacons of intimacy she hoped they might light when at home but probably wouldn't.

Early in the morning, Nikki had woken to Barb at her computer, typing in flurries, waiting, reading, typing and reading some more. There had been no morning kiss, no stroking of hair, and no remnant of the previous night's melding of hearts. Nikki fell into an ache of missing again, a new grief already building up.

Molly was now lying by Nikki's feet in the sand, and there was sand in the corners of her eyes, sand on her snout and even in the ruddy strands of fur hanging off her ears. "Oh, Molly," she said, softly, stroking the dog's head. "Have you been rolling in the sand?" She waited as if to hear Molly's reply, as if she would say, "Not me!" But it was obvious she had not been watching her all that carefully and would now have to brush her off before going in.

But when she looked up, Barb was standing on the step in front of the door with two mugs of coffee in her hands. Her sunglasses perched on her head and ringed by her spiky short hair, and wearing her down vest, she could have been dressed to go skiing.

"Oh, Molly! You're a mess!" Barb said, her first words of the day.

They sat together on the steps, sipping their coffee—Barb's black and Nikki's with just the right amount of milk—not talking. Nikki wanted to ask so many things, but the air was already heavy with the threat of a storm, and between the thunder of the crashing waves and the howling of the wind, there was no room for words.

And there was something different about Barb, her gaze fixed on a spot in the distance, deep in the woods, as if sending a message into the trees. Where was the Barb who would be throwing Molly's tennis ball or gathering pine cones? It wasn't her Barb; it was a different Barb, a robot Barb that had been cloned in the night. Was she changing her mind, now that they'd broken the ice of the year?

"Let's go for a walk," Barb said, finally.

"But the storm . . ."

"It's beautiful! Just a little bit, up the beach. Here, Molly!" Barb stood up and grabbed the leash, thought for a minute, then handed it to Nikki. "You take it, okay?"

She shrugged. This was odd. Barb was the alpha, always preferring to be the one to lead Molly and show her who was boss. Even Molly was confused, glancing at both of them with a questioning gaze. "It's okay, Molly," Barb said, and they started toward the pounding, surging ocean, then turned right at the water's edge toward the stand of driftwood they had known on previous visits.

They walked slowly on the hard-packed sand where the tide had recently come in and gone out, Molly stopping to sniff a feather or a shell, anything sticking up that looked interesting to her, though she'd probably rather be

jumping in the waves. But this was not a possibility with the waves as big as they were now, as at any moment, they might lose her in a swell if she swam out too far. This was a terrible place for her mind to go, but would she be able to save a drowning dog in this kind of surf? She couldn't see herself as heroic and willing to risk her life for anyone, especially not a dog. Glad she didn't have to make that decision, she could only wonder, now, how she was going to save her relationship with Barb.

"There's a good place," Barb said, and they turned toward a little cove where the perfect log was waiting. The ocean and the wind didn't sound so loud there, so it might be a good place for them to talk, if she could just get past Barb's strange wall of silence.

They sat face-to-face on the log, not looking out at the ocean. Nikki could feel the seriousness of the moment. Barb was going to tell her something heavy, and she tried to prepare herself for it. She had worked hard at being a good partner ever since moving in with her, before and after Nina. Had kept their social engagements sparse after Nina and helped Barb focus on the positive things in their life—her work, her other children in college. Now, looking right at Barb's face, she couldn't see in. It felt like a breakup, the end of something, some fierce animal about to attack from inside.

Barb reached out for Nikki's hand that was holding the leash. She patted it gently, looking down, as if gathering her thoughts, hesitating. Nikki remembered the last time they'd been here, just before Nina's accident. They'd watched some children building a castle in the wet sand with intricate towers and even a driftwood drawbridge. When they were done, the boy and girl had waited for the tide to creep in, then watched as the water first filled the moats then wiped out their work, tower by tower. She couldn't forget those children's grim faces, how hard they'd worked, knowing that, in the end, their creation would be carried away. She and Barb had laughed, quietly, at the Buddhist lesson they were observing on impermanence and the inevitability of suffering. And not long after that, the lesson played out in their own life. What lesson would this be now?

"Have you noticed this?" Barb raised her hand up as if offering it for a palm reading.

Nikki looked down. All she could see was that Barb's

hand seemed a little bonier than usual, as if she'd lost some weight, but just in her hands.

"Noticed what?"

"There's something going on. My hands just aren't normal. See my thumbs? They don't work like they're supposed to. It's like they're dead. Or dying."

She watched Barb try to flex her thumbs, and they seemed to flop, as if she barely had any strength. "Wow, honey, what is it?"

"I'm not sure. But it's been going on for a while. Do you remember when I saw Dr. Groves a while back? He thought I was dehydrated."

"Yeah?" Nikki remembered Barb's trips to Costco for giant supplies of bottled water, and how, lately, she'd been handing the bottles over to her to open them. It was, she had thought, an intimate gesture on Barb's part, a way of showing her she was needed.

"It's been, I don't know, a few months. And then, last night . . ."

"When you almost tripped . . ."

"Yeah, almost! And that's not the first time. So, I've been looking up stuff this morning, and . . . I think . . . I know . . . what it is . . ."

Barb brought a hand to her cheek and limply brushed away a single tear rolling down from under her sunglasses, as if it were a fly.

"It's ALS," she said. "Lou Gehrig's disease."

"No way," Nikki said. The dark animal inside, the one that she'd felt was about to pounce, evaporated, replaced by something bigger but shapeless and dark. She knew ALS. Her friend's sister had had it, died of it. It was horrible. And always terminal. This couldn't be true now for her lover. "But your doctor . . ."

"Oh, right, but he didn't do any tests. I've been on all the websites this morning. I've got all the symptoms. Not just my hands and tripping last night. I've got the jiggly feelings in my muscles. Too many signs."

More tears made their way down her face, and this time, Nikki reached up to wipe them away, but Barb turned away sharply, using the sleeve of her turtleneck.

"It could be something else," Nikki said. "Something harmless, something we can deal with." They'd gotten through Nina's tragic death, and this could be something



much easier. But she knew better than to say this. “Go back to Dr. Groves on Monday.” She didn’t want to say too much, because that might make this whole thing real. If they didn’t talk about it, maybe it would go away.

“Okay, yeah,” Barb said, sniffing and sounding not at all convinced.

Just then, thunder rumbled somewhere offshore, and only seconds later, a downpour opened up as the clouds that had been huddled over the waves now settled over their heads. Their first impulse was to run back to the cottage, out of the rain and the threat of lightning, but even though Nikki was eager to run, she thought that maybe she should help Barb get up off the log slowly, so she wouldn’t trip. With one hand clinging tightly to Molly’s leash, and one hand pulling Barb upward, she helped her to stand, then took her arm and started the hurried walk back to the cabin.

“You don’t have to do this,” Barb said, raising her voice against the roar of ocean and the wind and the rain, which wasn’t letting up.

“Do what? I don’t want you to fall.” Barb had pulled away, a little, but Nikki tightened her grip on Barb’s elbow.

“I don’t mean just now,” Barb said. “I mean, you don’t have to stay with me if this is what I think it is.”

Nikki couldn’t answer, not now. She would need to be close to Barb to say how she felt, holding her close and saying it quietly, not in the wind where her words might be carried away into the woods. Of course, she would stay with her, no matter what it was.

By the time they reached the cabin, they were drenched. Molly’s fur was now almost plum colored, and it clung to her, making her look skinny and sleek. Nikki tied her leash to the handrail and followed Barb into the cabin in search of a towel. As if reading her mind, Barb handed her one she’d used earlier to clean a spill in the kitchen, but stopped her, placing her hand on Barb’s arm.

“You don’t have to stay. You can go. You don’t know what you’re in for.”

“I know,” said Nikki. “But I’m here for you.”

Their eyes locked. Barb leaned in and kissed her cheek gently, as a mother would kiss a child when she was thinking of some chore she had to do. “I need to take a shower,” she said, and she disappeared into the bathroom.

There was a crashing sound outside, against the

window. She looked out and saw a seagull lying on the window ledge, dead or dazed after being slammed into the glass by the wind.

“Oh, God! Molly!”

Nikki jumped to the door, looked outside, and found Molly growling, looking in the direction of the fallen gull, but unable to get close to it because of the leash. She quickly dried off the dog and brought her inside.

Nikki sat down on the couch, still out of breath from the excitement, and still dripping with rain. Barb’s words played over and over in her head, as if she had planted a seed inside her. Could she do it? Stay with her for whatever was coming? Was it strong enough, whatever was holding them together?

Her eyes fell on the window ledge outside. Some of the gull’s feathers blew upward, but the gull didn’t move. Nikki stood up and closed the blinds.

**Karen Toloui** teaches writing and literature at Diablo Valley College and lives in Ashland, Oregon. She has an MA in creative writing (poetry) from San Francisco State University. Her memoir, *A Late Stop in Queersville*, is about her late-in-life experience of finding the love of her life, then falling way, way down into a tragic heap, and her ultimate rising and landing in a better place. Not that long ago, she played drums in Placenta, an all-mom punk band based in Oakland, California.

## GOLI MAHALATTI

*Land of Dreams, 2020*  
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 in.



COURTESY THE STUDIO SHOP GALLERY