The Jeremiah Tree

Poetry by Nina Carey Tassi

Fine Art by Jeanine Rivard Malaney

The Artists in Dialogue

Nina

Nina: *Our collaboration of poetry and painting in this book is an artistic dialogue on two levels – both in our conversations and in our actual works. The poems and paintings are arranged as pairs which set the two media next to each other in an artistic dynamic that flows back and forth between them.*

Jeanine: *So the paintings are not meant to be mere illustrations of the poems.*

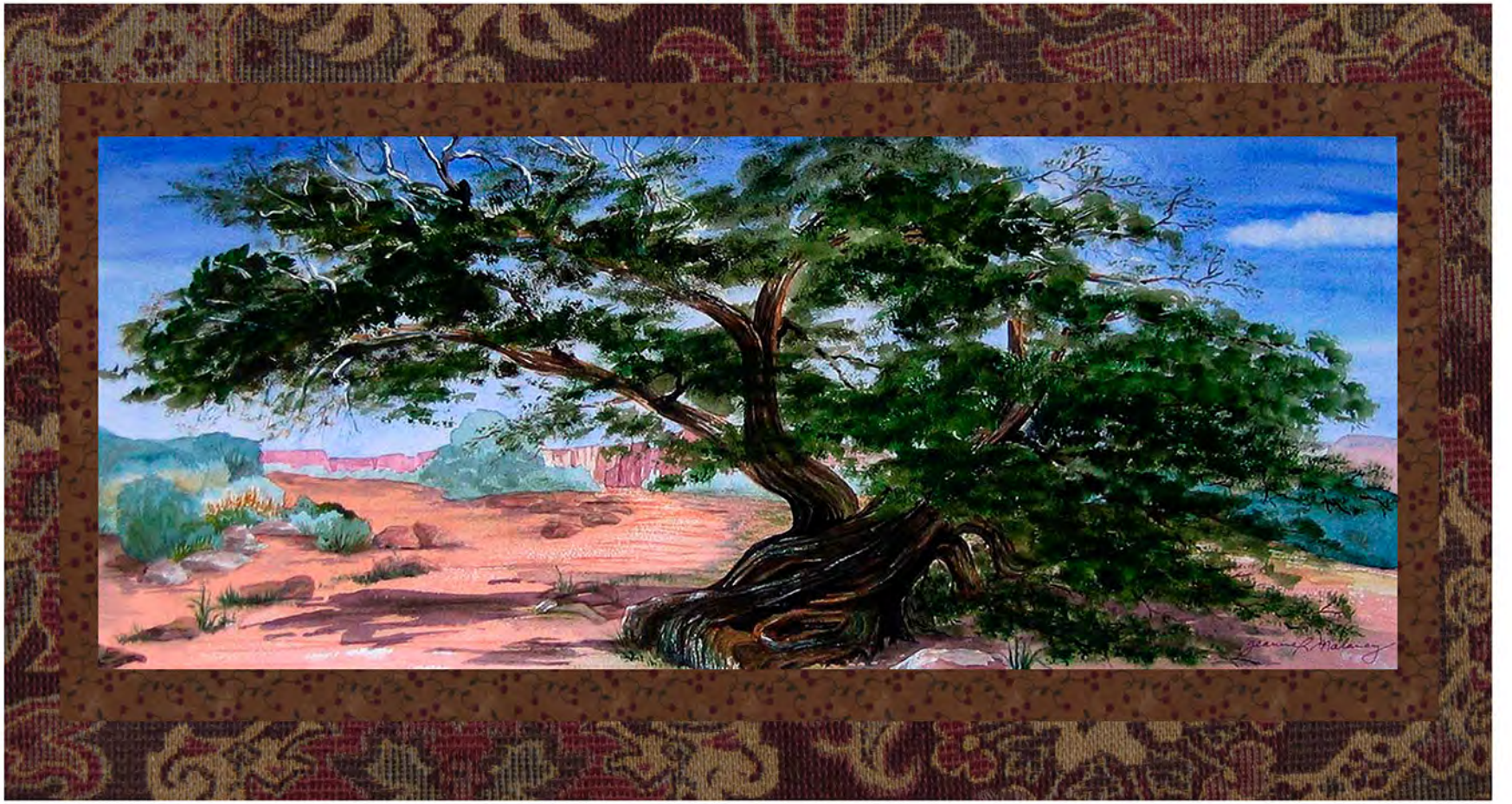
Nina: *There may be an element of illustration for both – a painting illustrates a poem and vice-versa, but a lot more is happening between them. One art calls out to the other for a response. Each influences the other.*

Jeanine: *Yet your words have been my inspiration for many of these paintings.*

Nina: *And your paintings have revealed meanings to my words which I didn't see before.*

This is a journey of deepening faith, where we are inspiring each other and our readers to discover the subtle and hidden dimensions of beauty, love, and truth that our work seeks to reveal.

Jeanine



Old and Wise

The Tenderness of Jeremiah

I was a naked leafless stem,
a stripling weak and bare of knowledge
when you called me, Lord.
You set before my eyes
the tender shoot of an almond tree,
drawing me near, quickening my heart.
But then I saw a seething pot, its oily vapors
boiling over, spewing onto the plains
thunderous pounding armies from the North,
and I drew back in fear.

Suddenly before me there burst into view
an orchard of billowing swaying almond trees,
a flowery profusion of white snowy petals
rejoicing as, breaking free, they flew through the air
or fell to the earth. So sweetly did the promise
of the almond's heady scent beckon to me
that all vanished, save the felt warmth
of your touch on my mouth, which
I have ever longed for.

You made me an iron pillar,
then handed down words no pillar could bear.
I became bearded, hoarse with manhood.
Your words grew craggy in my mouth.
Always when I lifted up my eyes,
high in the hills was the continuous vision:
a torrent of boulders, the crushing of Jerusalem.

You put me through so much.

For you, Lord, I was a laughingstock in stocks.
My people dug a pit and dropped me in it,
making me twist in the abode of evil ones,
causing my bones to quake.

They excoriated me, my people,
and would have killed me if you had let them.

Sometimes you grew silent.
I would creep by night to a dark field,
lay myself down in the dirt, press my cheek hard
against the earth, straining to hear your voice.

The day came when you cried out
your grief for your people
who had forsaken you,
and you laid before me the charge
to bring them back to you.

Your grief melted me, O my Father,
and grew intertwined with mine.
I became a gnarled barren vine,
laboring to deliver them.

I contended for you faithfully
forty years and more.
I withstood my people for you,
and I withstood you for my people.
What more can a son do?

I asked: Are you the soul of my soul, Lord?

After length of years you gathered me up
and brought me into the hills to a quiet
fragrant olive grove where you showed me
your son Jesus, weeping over Jerusalem.
And when my heart lurched with grievous pity,
You gave me this Jesus for my brother.

What a God You are! Unutterable.

The Tenderness of Jeremiah & Old and Wise

NT: *The first moment I saw your painting, which you painted long before you saw any of my poems, I knew you and I were kindred spirits – artistically and spiritually. The swaying curved lines and vivid colors suggest the visionary quality of the prophet Jeremiah's call by God. The tree itself, low to the ground and gnarled, is the tree of life, weathered and scarred, like Jeremiah.*

JM: *Your poem brings the prophet of old to life, relevant even today, discouraged and weeping for a sinful world. What a wondrous God that gave us Jesus as savior!*

Coming Off the Mountain

Elijah's Return

Close by the Creator's Mind,
A glacier all of pristine ice cloaks
And adorns the mountaintop where
They appear on a great cloud,
A ring of radiance encircling them –
Emissaries from the Father,
Elijah wrapped in a robe of glorious blue
As sumptuous as the sky, he and Moses
Come to anchor Jesus, bolster him,
Assure him of his ableness for the mission.

Jesus steps apart from his disciples,
His radiance shooting forth from him,
To converse with Elijah and Moses,
Becoming one with their shining faces,
Brothers lifted up above the earth,
Flesh of one another's flesh,
Blood of one another's blood,
The Spirit flowing among them,
Sinuous congruence of minds meeting
As mirrors before words can be uttered.

And Moses in the glory of his mission
And Elijah as first-called man of prophecy
Recline on this cloud of dazzling whiteness,
Beauty of their bodies equal to their strength,
At ease in the joy of the presence of Jesus.

Says Elijah: I stayed in the shadows, Lord,
Until Yahweh summoned me to the cave;
I raced with fervor to answer His summons,
Burning to live forever in darkness
Had Yahweh commanded it.

You were never in the shadows, says Jesus.
Yahweh kept you sheltered in His close embrace.

Says Elijah in a soft voice,
I acted for Yahweh, steadfast and severe.
Every man that I pierced through the heart
With fiery sword knew the ice in my veins.
But for me the killing is over, all behind me.

I felt one night a ruffling through my beard,
A slight lifting of the hairs at my temple,
A murmur that passed across my face
And into my heart: no more killing,
No more calling down the fire.

Suddenly Elijah raises his fist,
Cries out, his face darkened in fury:
I will be there with my sword!
It is not over, it cannot be.

Jesus consoles him, saying:
They rejected me as they rejected you,
But you laid your hand on my brow,
Brought me cool waters to drink.

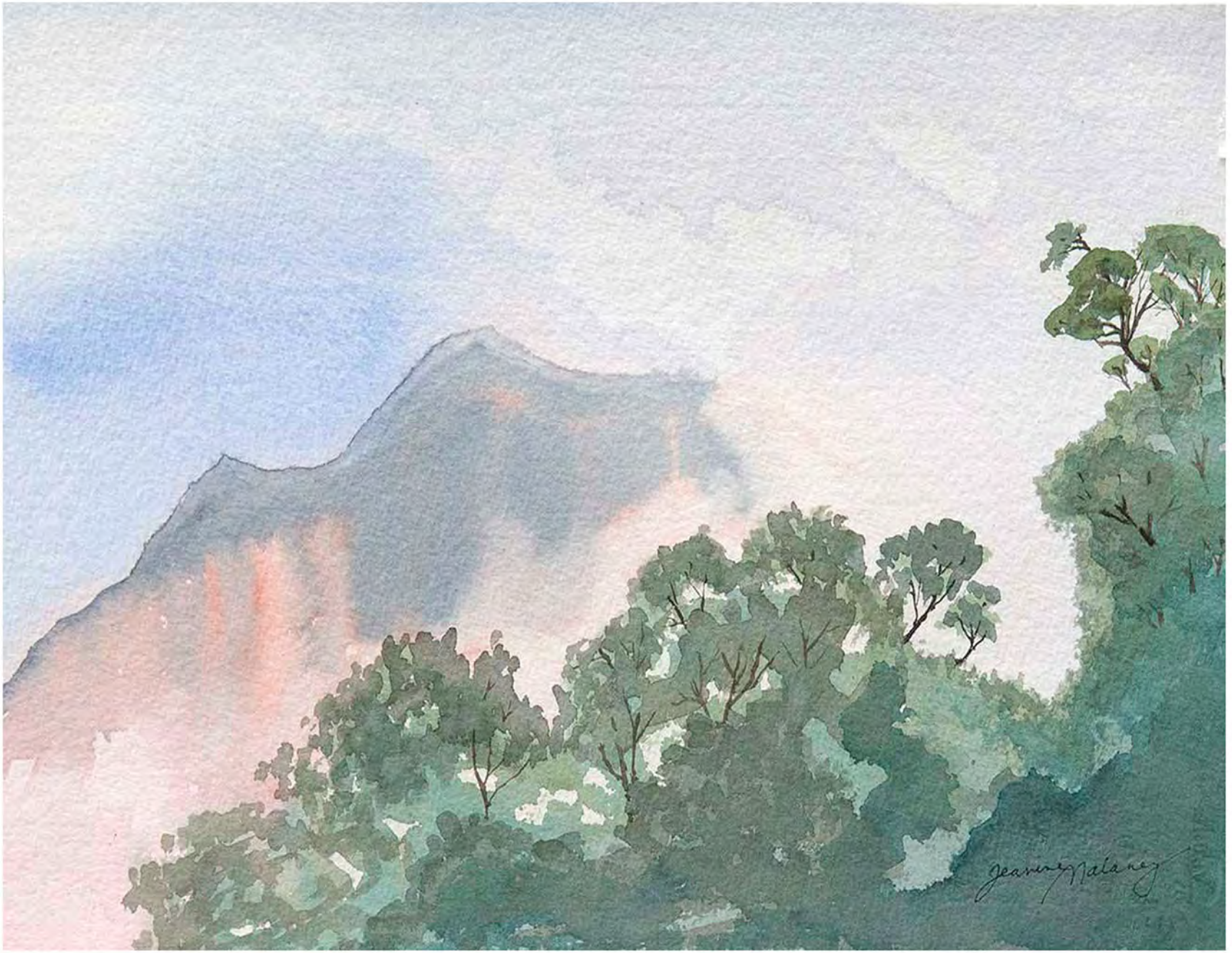
Says Elijah, I wanted to die, but Yahweh
Shook me awake, sent ravens to feed me,
Sucked me into a whirlwind, took me
To Himself in a fiery chariot.

Jesus answers the words of Elijah:
Your very name says: my god is Yahweh.
You took the sword to false prophets
Who would trample Yahweh in the dust.

Now says Jesus, it is I Who must die.

Moses and Elijah hear their brother, their Lord,
Their faces ablaze in the light of the sun,
And they lay bare their hearts, loving Him,
Worshipping Him, calling out to Him
The Father's name: Yahweh, Yahweh, Yahweh.

And then only the white glacier remains
On the mountaintop, and Jesus returns to his men.



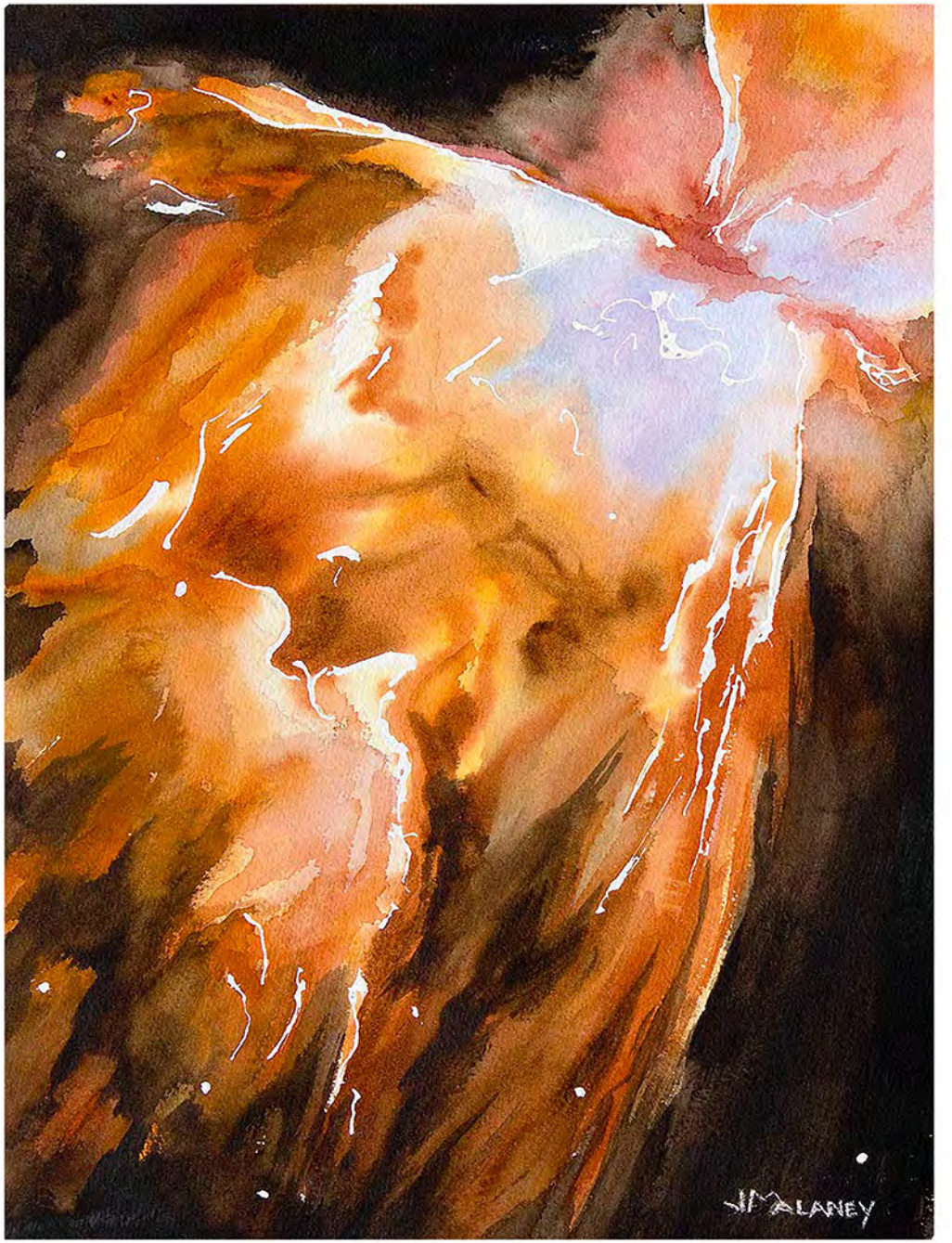
Pu'u o Kila, Koke'e Kauai

Bird of the Wind

"The bird that makes the breeze to flow"
Samuel T. Coleridge, Rime of the Ancient Mariner

O solitary albatross wandering the sea,
Suddenly appearing out of the mist,
Soaring white seabird, great wings stretched
Across the sky in a thrilling arc, majestic in flight,
Kindred to wind and turbulent waters alike,
The wind your life's breath, the waters of the deep
Appealing to you, deepening your ease,
You glide for endless hours in rhythm with the sea,
Master of slow effortless motion,
Rarely beating your wings, dipping down as sea falls,
Rising up again on rising waves,
Resting when the waters rest in utter stillness,
Then soaring up again, flying far beyond all ocean birds,
Circling the globe alone, carried on the wind.

And yet a marvel on land, you return
To your natal colony on a barren island,
Awakened to ancient mating rituals, the sea forgotten
In a new dream, an elaborate dance of desire,
A repertoire of preening, vocalizing, sky-pointing,
Vying for female after female, until the chosen one
Regards you, your wings extended, circling her,
And she, reticent but willing, steps into your circle.
Your bills touch, her wings flutter in answer to your call,
A spectacular courtship intensifying for weeks,
Culminating at last when you extend your enormous wings
To her in ecstasy, her wings extended fully to you,
Calling on the sky to see the dance has ended,
You belong to each other for life.



Spirit Ascending

Apocalypse

First harbinger: darkness gone.
Light quickens to breathe
Radiance on the continent of ice,
Emanations like music made visible,
Undulations imbued with melody,
Quivers of light, pulsating spectrum
From bright to murmurous watching,
Light resonant with anticipation.

Congregations of clouds gather,
Luminous against the deep cerulean,
Gaining in number and magnitude
Until they overtake the sky
And begin their descent, first coming
Down to embrace the mountaintops,
Then the glaciers, to make them ready,
Finally assembling at the edge of the sea.

I hear the trumpets sounding.
Shaking icebergs stationed in the sea:
All is returned to primal whiteness,
Earth and sky gone, all save the waters.
The white kingdom is upon us,
The great white throne will appear.
Soon the book of life will open; names
Will be written. Exultation will reign.