

CAROLE RAFFERTY

A Stroll in North Beach, 2018
Oil on canvas, 15 x 16 in



COURTESY STUDIO SHOP GALLERY IN BURLINGAME, CALIFORNIA

ALYSON LIE

On Love and Brecht

At nearly one in the morning, I sit in our darkened kitchen listening to a Schubert symphony on the radio, my feet propped against the wall, my arm resting on the windowsill next to the garbage chute. With the lights off I can see across the air shaft to our bedroom window, dimly backlit by a bedside lamp. Ruby went to bed hours ago. When I last checked on them, our dog Lester was sleeping against her back. Ruby was on her left side, a pillow propped under her stomach supporting the weight of our baby, due in less than a month. My research paper on Bertolt Brecht's poetry lies dismantled on the kitchen table.

As I listen to the symphony, recorded live in Leipzig, I notice that a man in the audience begins coughing—a dry, insuppressible cough—just as the orchestra reaches a pianissimo section. I am at the point with this paper where serious work is impossible. All my ideas and critical legerdemain have slipped away like water through burlap. When I try to think about Brecht's poetry, all that comes to mind is this recurring image of a fragile piece of his cigar ash resting delicately in a fold of his black wool shirtfront. I am intently listening to the symphony, not for the interplay of the movements or the dynamics of instrumentation, but because the man in the Leipzig audience—as much a part of the performance as anything else—continues to cough. It's as if something in him, despite the possible embarrassment, wants to incite, to interrupt the otherwise calming mood of the music. I imagine his wife's fingernails gouging the flesh of his wrist with each involuntary attack. Along with this, I am also distracted by the oddly satisfying sound of the upstairs tenant's trash sliding down the garbage chute to the dumpster below: *Sssshhh-tup!*

It's only two weeks till my paper is due and I have already considered changing my topic to the homoeroticism in Melville's *Billy Budd* or the comic elements of Emily Dickinson's poetry. *Why did I choose to spend all this effort barely treading water in the seas of Bertolt Brecht's poetry?* My preoccupation with Brecht started off as a hobby. When Ruby and I first met, we were performing in Brecht's one-act play *The Informer*. She played the mother and I played her fourteen-year-old son—the alleged Nazi informer. I remember it as one of my best performances. I shaved my beard for the part, wore khaki shorts and shirt and a black tie. Our friend George played her husband.