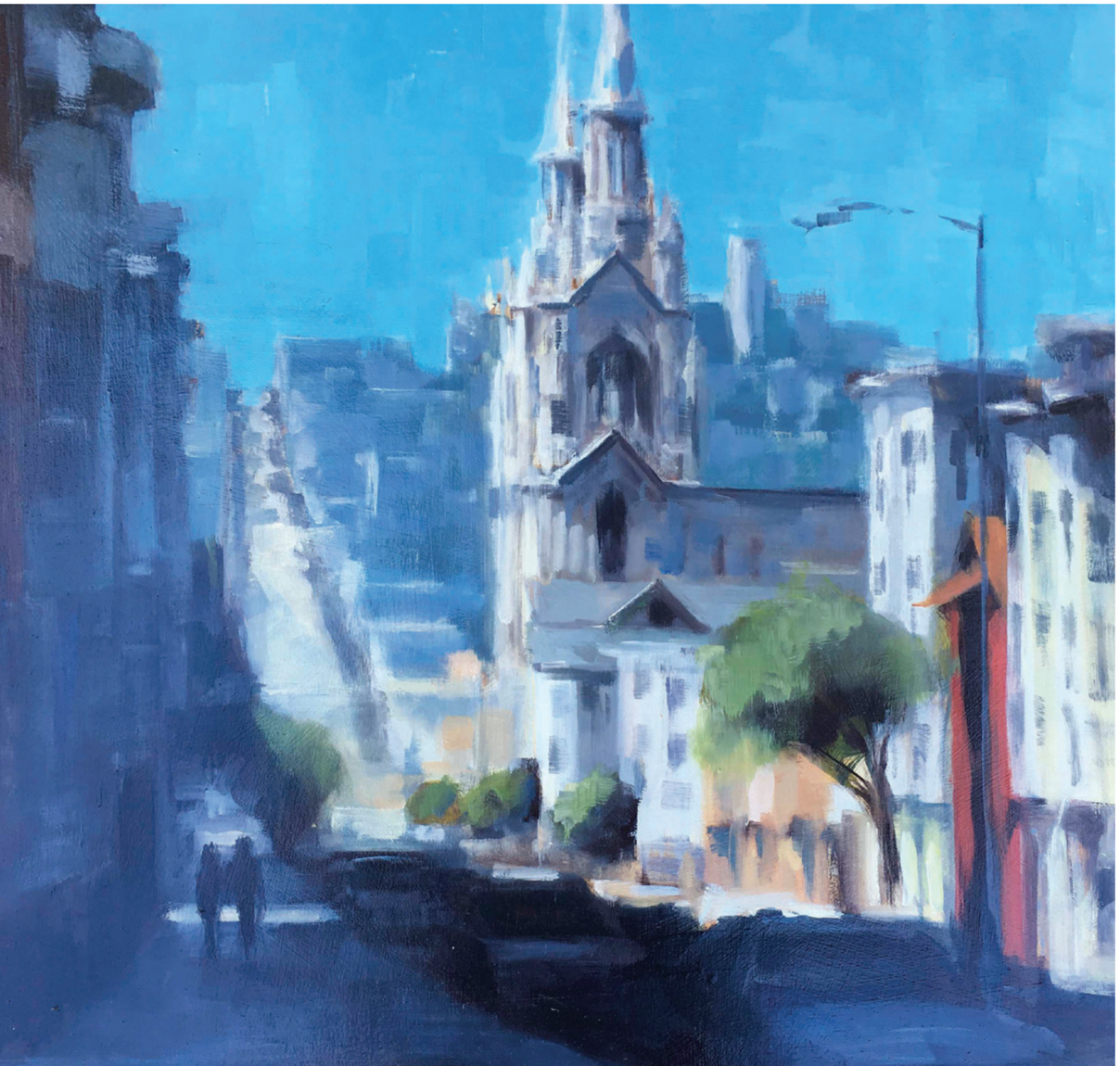
## CAROLE RAFFERTY

*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: *Sssshhhh-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.

At the time, Ruby was trying to decide if she was in love with George or me; a matter, she said later, that hinged on which of us would make the first move. It's my theory that Ruby was swayed by the blurring of my character, "Boy," and the real me, "Alan," which resulted in a sort of Jocasta complex. She claims it was the shoulder massage I gave her two weeks later in the greenroom just before the last performance. In any event, our introduction, through Brecht, has led to eight years of monogamous happiness, relatively speaking.

When I shared my thesis proposal with my professor, he accepted it but showed little interest in the project, which included twenty or so of Brecht's poems read in translation, two biographies on Brecht, and, to spice it up, several readings on Marxist aesthetic criticism. He read the proposal, scribbled his signature on it, then turned his attention to the student waiting behind me—a striking young woman wearing dark-rimmed, high-IQ eyeglasses.

I confess: I am a rank dilettante. I realized this my first year of undergraduate school ten years ago. (Note: This time span reflects a break in my pursuit of higher education in order to explore the romantic world of objectified labor and perfecting the art of juggling three objects of any size or shape.) I was initially shocked by the revelation that I was constitutionally unable to swim beneath the surface of nearly any topic. I'd always considered myself a pensive sort, a thoughtful person, largely because that was what others thought of me. It turns out that I and my family and some of my acquaintances had misinterpreted my painful shyness and my tendency to frown a lot as a sign of intellect. I appeared, at least, to be always thinking. Who was I to question that? This delusional tendency is, of course, one of the hallmark symptoms of dilettantism.

When I spoke with my professor, I didn't bother to mention my correspondence with a certain KK in Berlin who claimed to be a Brechtian scholar. KK had run an ad in the back of an obscure literary journal that I found at City Lights Bookstore. The ad read something like this:

*Brechtian scholar and ex-affiliate of the Brecht Archive has heretofore unpublished documents, personal artifacts, and ephemera belonging to BB and would like to correspond with any interested parties.*

Curious, I wrote to the Berlin address explaining my interest in Brecht; not only Brecht the playwright and poet, but also Brecht the man, his habits, his quirks—in short, the quotidian Brecht.

A month later my first letter from KK arrived—bearing a commemorative postage stamp celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of Brecht's being awarded the Lenin Peace Prize. The letter was handwritten, chatty, but there was no mention of the personal artifacts or the documents. Ruby, in a characteristic moment of cattiness, suggested that KK was obviously fencing stolen articles and probably testing me. Either that, or KK was a sham altogether and only wanted to entice some naïve American intellectual into marrying (her) so (she) could defect to the U.S. as a full-fledged citizen.

I wrote again, this time mentioning some of my own arcane tidbits. I told KK that I knew for a fact that Bertolt Brecht had visited my city (San Francisco) in June of 1947, just before he was called up in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and while here, had stayed in a Victorian hotel that doubled as the Russian Embassy—a building that still stands just a few blocks from where my *wife* (emphasis not included in the original) and I live. This was a lie of course. The part about the hotel once being the Russian Embassy is partly true; it had, in fact, been occupied by czarist Russians (decidedly *NOT* fellow travelers) in the 1920s and was thus dubbed the "Russian Embassy." But I have no way of knowing whether or not Brecht ever stayed there. To make this small lie even more convincing, I went on to say that I knew that Brecht had lunch in the west wing of this hotel with Peter Lorre, Charles Laughton, and a member of the California-based Communist Party, a certain Rupert Growbonsky, with whom Brecht enjoyed playing chess, even though he lost two out of three games.

KK's next letter included a brief catalogue and a price list:

- two pairs of dark-rimmed glasses
- one black cap (worn in photograph taken in Buckow, 1952)
- a dog-eared, annotated copy of *Das Kapital*
- several unpublished poems
- one short story fragment

Any one of these was worth at least a month's rent. KK encouraged me to take my time in considering as (she) knew it would be a difficult decision. Would I prefer the personal belongings? Or would a one-and-only copy of "Ein Schiff mit acht Segeln" (a rough draft of "Pirate Jenny") be more to my liking? Were I able to afford it, the choice would be simple. What did I care for manuscript scribblings of what, by now, I was beginning to consider pretty mediocre poetry? (There's sound reason why Brecht is known mainly as a political theorist and playwright—a Rimbaud he wasn't. Though I can't say this with authority because I've only read *The Drunken Boat* and didn't quite understand it or its appeal.) But for Brecht's leather cap? I would sell our vintage Volkswagen, if Ruby would let me.

At the close of the letter, KK intimated an interest in my story about the meeting in the hotel. She said she'd had an idea Brecht had been to our city and that it seemed perfectly fitting he would stay at the Russian Embassy. Could I send her some documentation of this? Perhaps some photographs, both outside and inside the hotel? Preferably in high-contrast, grainy black and white. For these photographs she would consider some sort of exchange. Perhaps, she offered, I'd be interested in two ticket stubs to a boxing match that she was almost positive Brecht had attended in Leipzig on February 22, 1931.

At this point I am thoroughly convinced of KK's sophistication. I have never found out KK's true gender. I opt for the female, not only on Ruby's suggestion, but also because it's the sense I get from the letters, their neatness, the way the handwritten script leans backward, and because in the fifth grade I was in love with Karen Krejci—the only girl in our class (as far as I was aware) who wore a bra. Karen was one of the smartest students in the class, wore pointy, gray-rimmed glasses with white tape on one of the hinges, and sat directly in front of me during music class. Through her loose-knit sweaters I could see the whiteness of her bra straps. When I was called on once to sing "America the Beautiful" in front of the class, I was so wrapped up in the erotic geometry of Karen's back that the lyrics escaped me. We kissed once in the closet of our homeroom while we waited for the rural-route bus. The feel of her teeth against my teeth was all I could think about for months. I wrote love notes to her that I intended to slip in her coat pocket every Friday so she would have the weekend to consider my proposal. My mother would find the notes in the wash and leave them on my dresser neatly flattened out. That I base my belief about KK on these criteria suggests a sort of sloppy sentimental logic, the same kind of sloppy logic that leads me to conclude that Brecht, for instance, probably didn't care for Schubert sonatas and more than likely couldn't sit still long enough to let a piece of his cigar ash rest delicately in the fold of his wool shirtfront.

In my last letter to KK, I said that I would oblige with the photographs of the hotel, and that, yes, I would accept the ticket stubs from the Leipzig boxing match as fair exchange.

* * *

What used to be the "Russian Embassy" is now the Fulton Inn—a bed-and-breakfast owned and run by a married couple. I call the number and on the third ring I hear a falsetto voice, not unlike Graham Chapman's impersonation of Mrs. Conclusion in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. I take a deep breath, introduce myself, and explain the reason for my call. I ask if there are any records of the building dating back to 1947. Apparently the owners are unaware of any records dating back that far. Too bad, I say, because if they had the records, they'd be able to confirm that Bertolt Brecht, Charles Laughton, and Peter Lorre had stayed there. Oh really? I hear a bit of commotion and then the sound of either the woman or a small mammal licking the receiver. Yes, I say. I tell her that I am collaborating with a Brechtian archivist on a Brecht biography and that a few pictures of the building would be a nice touch. The owner (her name is Lola Pfeiffer) agrees. Could they have one of the photographs? I say they can. In turn, Lola offers me a free weekend's stay in the Gold Rush Room. I tell her I may take her up on the offer once the book is finished.

On the day of the Fulton Inn visit I wake up at 8 A.M. I pace back and forth in our tiny galley kitchen while I'm waiting for the coffee to finish brewing: four steps, stop, turn; four steps, stop, turn. Once the coffee is finished, I prepare a cup for Ruby and take it into our bedroom. What wall space we have is taken up by Ruby's paintings: interior settings with brightly covered overstuffed chairs, still lifes with woodworking tools and origami. On the wall above our bed: a large canvas of a bed strewn with books and newspapers on a rose-colored comforter, the impression of human forms left in the pillows. Ruby seems deep asleep. I rub her lower back where she's complained of

*I begin to resent my teachers, all the work—even Bertolt Brecht.*

aches. She groans and rolls over like a house cat. She smiles. "One dark French roast café au lait." I hold the mug up to show her. Since the pregnancy, Ruby, who always used to take her French roast *sans lait*, has been drinking her coffee with cream because she heard that it's better for her and the little creative genius to be.

Ruby maneuvers herself into a sitting position and rubs her face in her hands. "Did you sleep well?" I ask. "Yes," she says. Then says, "No." Then says, "I don't know." Then says, "If you could call sleeping with a prenatal Olympic gymnast warming up inside you as sleep then I suppose it was okay."

I would trade places with her if I could. At least I think I would. Well, I know I *would*, but in three weeks I would probably regret it.

I hand her the coffee mug then bend down and place my ear where, according to the ob-gyn, our son will be trapped for a few more weeks. I hear gurgling, then sense some movement—an appendage strokes my cheek from the other side of the uterine wall. I look up from Ruby's belly. "He touched me!" Ruby sips her coffee and smiles, "Aww, he likes you."

I leave her with the coffee and go into the living room, which means simply walking through the open French doors that separate the only two nonutilitarian spaces in our studio apartment. Handwritten notes and photocopied pages are strewn over the desk and coffee table, burying books and assorted other objects, including an overripe banana on a dinner plate. Instead of plunging into the pile, I sit at the desk and think. I have approximately twenty of Bertolt Brecht's poems to read, explicate, and then somehow come up with a thesis. Herbert Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension* sits at the top of a small stack of books on the desk. I pick up the slim volume and study the cover: pea-green background, red border, author's name in the same red as the border, title in black sans serif font. Holding *The Aesthetic Dimension* in my hands, I feel as though I am somehow more grown-up, more worthy of a raised eyebrow in public circles. At that moment, I wish that I wasn't sitting in our cramped little apartment on Scott Street, but at Caffe Trieste or Specs' in North Beach, nonchalantly displaying the book as I sip a beverage and wait for someone to interrupt me and ask for a Marxist interpretation of *Hamlet*. To answer this, I would, of course, have to read this book at least, maybe even others, and have read *Hamlet*. I open *The Aesthetic Dimension* to a random page:

*Art's separation from the process of material production has enabled it to demystify the reality produced in this process. Art challenges the monopoly of the established reality to determine what is "real," and it does so by creating a fictitious world which is nevertheless "more real than reality itself."*

I hold the book in my lap and lean back in the desk chair, eyes closed. Within seconds I have an inspiration regarding this essay: I will photocopy the poems on colored paper and assemble them at the end so they will be easy to find as I reference them.

I smile, sit up, reach for the telephone, and call the Fulton Inn. Ralston Pfeiffer answers. He seems very excited. "Have you seen? No fog! Mirable visu!"

"No," I say. "That's great, though."

"Before ten is best, don't you think? For the exterior shots, I mean. After that the glare may wash out all the color, the detailing on the trim and such."

I remind him that I will be using black-and-white film and working mostly indoors.

"Oh, yes! Okay. Fine. Ten then?"

"Yes," I say, "ten it is." When I hang up, I feel the very poignant sense that I'm going to let the Pfeiffers down, going to let down KK, my professor, Ruby, our young Michelangelo, and even myself, despite my low expectations.

* * *

The Fulton Inn is on the north side of Alamo Square Park—two long blocks from our apartment. The north side of the park is gentrified, populated with refurbished Victorians with spires and cupolas and rounded bay windows. The east side of the park features the cliché lineup of "Painted Ladies," the row of gaudily decorated homes one sees in postcards all over the city in bookstores, cafés, restaurants, liquor stores, gas stations. The south side, where we live, is shadowed; the sidewalks are littered with broken glass, food wrappers, condoms, and abandoned furniture.

Ruby has decided to walk with me most of the way to the inn. She's read that babies in utero can actually feel the sun, so she intends to lie in the grass while I take pictures of the inn. As we leave our building, I have to keep a tight rein on Lester's leash so he won't snag chicken bones from the Church's Chicken down the block. In an empty lot of overgrown fennel weeds, three neighbor kids ride a fallen water heater and make spaceship sounds.

The past few weeks, Ruby has begun to move a bit slower. Her quick city pace has wound down, shifted into a lumbering stride that looks remarkably like her unfit father's waddle. When I stop to think of the last nine months, I regret having missed so such of her pregnancy. I was up to my neck in the regenerative symbolism of *Moby Dick* when Ruby felt the first flurries of movement; was researching the tragic decline of the Kickapoo language when our little being began to somersault and swim back and forth; and was in the library so much this last month that I hadn't even noticed Ruby's pear shape invert itself as our son-to-be turned and began his slow swan dive toward being. If I dwell on this, I begin to doubt the soundness of my decision to return to college. Why is it that an institution so devoted to the study of life wrenches us from that very thing—life? I begin to resent my teachers, all the work—even Bertolt Brecht. He could screw his brains out with Marianne Zoff and Paula Banholzer while working on *Trommeln in der Nacht*. I, on the other hand, put Ruby to bed at ten thirty and, deprived of crucial prenatal bonding, sit up till two in the morning working on twenty or so pages of literary double-talk that I'm certain will look like a fishnet T-shirt by the time my professor is through with it.

The absurdity of this situation has led me more than once to the brink of dropping out again. I could get my job back at the Crab Shack. I could be a happy, working-class Brechtian hobbyist with a wife, a baby, and two antique ticket stubs from a Leipzig boxing match. Whenever I mention this idea to Ruby, she clouds up, then says, "You could get a better job with a college degree." As iffy as this answer sounds, I always succumb to her line of reasoning. How can I argue with her? She's got the balance of our next twenty years nestled in her pelvic girdle.

At the corner of Fulton and Scott Streets, Ruby takes Lester and walks up the hillside of the park to lie down. I take my camera and tripod to the Fulton Inn and ring the bell. I hear the soundtrack to *Cabaret* and the barking of a small dog. The door opens slowly and I see a man holding a dog about the same size and color as a loaf of marble rye.

"Hello," the man says. "Or should I say, *guten Tag*? I'm Ralston Pfeiffer. This is Amelia."

I say hello to Ralston and Amelia. Ralston smiles. Amelia growls.

"Shush!" Ralston says. He puts Amelia down on a chair inside the doorway. She curls up and appears to fall asleep. Ralston looks prematurely aged, in his late forties, maybe early fifties. He wears a yellow cardigan and Hush Puppies. A slightly more effete Mr. Rogers.

"Come in," he says. "Like the music? I thought it would set the mood. The guests are all gone for the day. Where do you want to start?" He gives me a big smile and makes a sweep of his arm toward the den. "It's all yours." I had only guessed there was a den in the west wing from looking at the outside of the building. I'm not sure why, but when I imagined this den, I saw it as sparsely decorated, maybe a few pieces of mission-style furniture, some dark wood wainscoting, an oak coatrack on the wall. A decidedly minimalist den. I hadn't counted on rose-colored drapes and lavender cushions, a brocade divan and a Louis Quatorze commode.

"It's nice."

"Thank you."

In my mind I begin trying to Brechtify the room. I see that there's a simple enough table over by the bay window, and I note that there are two straight-backed chairs in the foyer, one of them currently occupied by Amelia. While I begin setting up for the photographs, Ralston excuses himself to go "finish up in the kitchen."

I go to the foyer, grab the unoccupied chair, and move toward Amelia's chair. She growls. I look away, then take the chair and tip it, giving her no choice but to leap off the seat. She growls again then disappears down the hallway. I set the chairs at an angle around the table so that they

look just sat in, then snatch a few books off the mantelpiece (a *Reader's Digest* condensed book and an antique Latin primer). I place them on the table, spines facing away from the camera. I adjust the shutter speed on the camera so it's just a little underexposed and look through the lens. The setting seems too sterile. I take my coat off and drape it over one of the chairs, then toss my snap-brim cap carelessly onto the table. Better, but still not what I want. What do I want? I want at least a sense of Brecht—his boyishness, his trenchancy, his calculated irreverence without being too obvious.

A tall, broadly built woman enters the room. She appears to be considerably older than Ralston. "Hello," she says. "I'm Lola Pfeiffer." She stops and smiles to herself. "Or should I say, *guten Tag*? Please feel free to move things around if you need. Do you like the music? We thought you might find it apropos even if it's not exactly Brecht. My husband and I met in Munich, the summer of '72."

She regards my still life of the table and chairs.

"I think it's missing something," I say.

"Did you take the lens cap off?" she asks. "I always forget that."

"You wouldn't happen to have a guitar, would you?"

"No," Lola says. "But we have an unstrung ukulele. It's hanging on the first landing. It's Ralston's. Do you want to use it?"

I tell her no, but thanks. Then I get another idea. "How about a cigar?"

"Excuse me?"

"Are there any cigars lying around?"

She motions for me to wait, then disappears.

* * *

From the front porch of the Fulton Inn, Ralston, Lola, and I have a perfect view of the park. Amelia is curled into a mop of mottled fur on Lola's lap. I've only smoked about two cigars in my entire life, so I don't consider myself a connoisseur. This one—a contraband Havana supposedly—has a nice feel to it, if one appraises cigars through the qualia of touch. It was left at the inn by a property investor from Austin, Texas, several months back. Lola and I decided it was the perfect touch for the photograph. I thought for the sake of realism that it had to show signs of usage. She agreed, but suggested that I not smoke in the inn. I puff on the cigar then try, unsuccessfully, to make a smoke ring and it blows back in my face. The aroma reminds me of when l was five years old and lost in the men's room in Penn Station. I kept trying to get out through the broom closet door. I panicked. Then a man smoking a cigar came up, grabbed me by the shoulders, and pointed me toward the exit. "That kid," I heard him say, "he's gonna go far in this world."

I hold the cigar in my hand while the three of us regard it blankly. I see a couple walking toward the inn from the park, both healthy looking, both wearing bright-yellow sun visors, and both walking with hiking sticks as though they've just stepped out of the Tyrolean Alps. Granted, there are a few streets in San Francisco, Filbert Street in particular, that can seem dauntingly steep, but even the steepest is conquerable without crampons, rope, and carabiners. To me, this couple—who now appear to be at the very threshold of middle age and heading directly for us—seem mutually complicit in a kind of premature enfeeblement. They both look up to the porch and smile. Ralston stands and goes to the front door, preparing to open it for the intrepid walkers. Amelia lets out a low growl punctuated with one sharp bark, then appears to have said all she's going to say.

"Well," Lola says, "our guests have returned from their trek to parts unknown. What did you discover?" She turns to me: "Mr. and Mrs. Wood hail from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania."

I smile and nod, and for some reason feel that I need to hide the cigar from Mr. and Mrs. Wood.

Mr. Wood shakes his head in puzzlement. "We made it as far as Market Street and turned back." Mrs. Wood: "We saw naked men sunning themselves right out in the open!" She seems not unhappy to report this.

"San Francisco has everything to offer," Ralston says, and opens the door for them. "Next time, you'll have to make it to Golden Gate Park. The Dahlia Garden is exquisite!"

The Woods mount the stairs to the porch and enter the inn. Ralston returns to his chair. "Nice couple," he says. "I appreciate their innocence."

Lola smiles: "I so enjoy watching some of our guests squirm at the more extravagant elements of our dear city."

A moment of quiet follows. An iridescent hummingbird flutters up to a fuchsia blossom, dances in front of it, then plunges in.

Lola interrupts the silence, "So, tell us something about Bertolt Brecht. What do you know about him? Give us a brief summary of his *Weltanschauung*."

She smiles to herself and sits back in her chair, preparing, it seems, for a casual lecture on Brecht. I tell her that I know he had bad teeth and smoked cigars, wrote poems and plays, and liked to swim naked in the Danube.

"Remember," Ralston says to Lola, "remember that wonderful couple we met just outside of Les Deux Alpes?"

Lola continues: "But what do you think of his use of alienation effects in theater? Do you think they were original?"

Me: "No, not really. I mean, if you think about it . . ."

Ralston interrupts dreamily: "They were so nice."

Me: "Those techniques were used in theater long before his time. Greek masks and chorus, for example. Or commedia dell'arte . . ."

Lola: "That wasn't Les Deux Alpes, Ralston, it was Lausanne."

Ralston: "It was . . . ?"

Me: "He just knew how and when to appropriate those techniques."

Lola: "So Brecht was a plagiarist?"

Ralston: "But I remember a lake. And that they were in a traveling mime troupe. He stood by the river and juggled these clubs he'd carved out of driftwood. His body was so lean . . . and naked."

Me: "No more so than any artist. We have to start somewhere. To be honest, I'd say that Brecht's work was informed by personality traits and life experiences more than anything else. His use of estrangement techniques could just as easily have been motivated by a simple desire to revitalize the audience's role in the theater experience, or maybe even his unresolved feelings for his mother."

I look at Ralston. He looks at me. I look at Lola and sense that I've stumbled on a rich vein of interpersonal history.

Ralston: "And they were so friendly. I wanted to take them with us on to Avignon, but you said there wouldn't be enough room."

Lola: "But that's just looking at him psychologically. I'm speaking about art and the artist."

Me: "What's the difference? To me, what really counts is the person. Did he fold his clothes before going to bed at night? How did he tie his shoes? Was he courteous to salespeople?"

Lola: "You're just being funny."

Ralston points up toward the park, "Do you know that person?"

I look and see Ruby sitting up in all her gravid splendor and waving at us. I wave back.

"She's my wife."

She lies back down. The mound of her stomach against her Kelly-green sweater is like a perfect miniature of the grassy slope of the park. Lester sits next to her, guarding, looking in our direction.

"She's pretty," Ralston says. "Have you been together long?"

"Eight years."

"How did you meet?" Lola asks.

I tell the story of how I first saw her playing Titania in an outdoor production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Her hair was longer then. She wore only a brown leotard and tights and earrings made of dried eucalyptus leaves. I saw the play several times—always arriving late. I would just catch the beginning of act two, where Titania tells Oberon to go stuff it, that she won't give up her changeling boy. I would stand in the back near a grove of redwoods and watch as she walked downstage and delivered her monologue—one of the few Shakespeare speeches that

*I tell the story of how I first saw her playing Titania in an outdoor production of* A Midsummer Night's Dream.

I've managed to commit to memory.

I pause. Lola smiles and gestures with her palms up. *"La scène est à vous."*

I watch Ruby on the hillside as I recite the speech and feel myself returning to those nights in the redwoods:

*The Fairyland buys not the child of me.*
*His mother was a votaress of my order,*
*And in the spicèd Indian air by night*
*Full often hath she gossiped by my side,*
*And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,*
*Marking th' embarkèd traders on the flood,*
*When we have laughed to see the sails conceive*
*And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;*
*Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait*
*Following—her womb then rich with my young squire—*
*Would imitate, and sail upon the land*
*To fetch me trifles and return again*
*As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.*
*But she, being mortal, of that boy did die.*
*And for her sake do I rear up her boy,*
*And for her sake I will not part with him.*

I stand up and perform an exaggerated bow to Lola, Ralston, and finally Ruby, who doesn't see me. I sit again and sigh, feeling a flood of love I haven't felt in a very long time. I look over and see Ralston dabbing at his eyes. Lola stares dreamily up toward the park. "You're quite the romantic, aren't you?"

I look at the cigar in my hand. "I suppose so."

Lola produces a handkerchief from the sleeve of her dress and hands it to Ralston. He takes it and smiles, dabs at his eyes again.

"Well," she says, "shall we?"

"Yes!" I say.

Back inside the inn, I take a half dozen pictures of the den. In two of them, Amelia sits on one of the chairs and appears to be looking at the other empty chair as if waiting for someone, possibly Brecht himself, to return. Once I've finished, I gather my things and thank Lola and Ralston for their time. They both hug me as if I were a visiting long-lost cousin. "Why don't you and your wife come and visit us?" Ralston says. "Yes," Lola says. "Anytime. And certainly let us meet your young squire once he's arrived."

"We will."

We walk out to the porch and I offer to take one last photo . . . of them . . . together. Lola moves awkwardly toward Ralston. They do a comic dance of trying to get comfortable being so near each other. As if on cue, they throw up their arms and hug, and I snap the photo. Then they kiss, and I snap again.

As I head up the hillside to where Ruby is sleeping, I am smiling so hard it hurts. She's on her side, her arm draped across her stomach. Lester runs up to me. I pet him, then lie down next to Ruby. I now know what is important. I know exactly what to do.

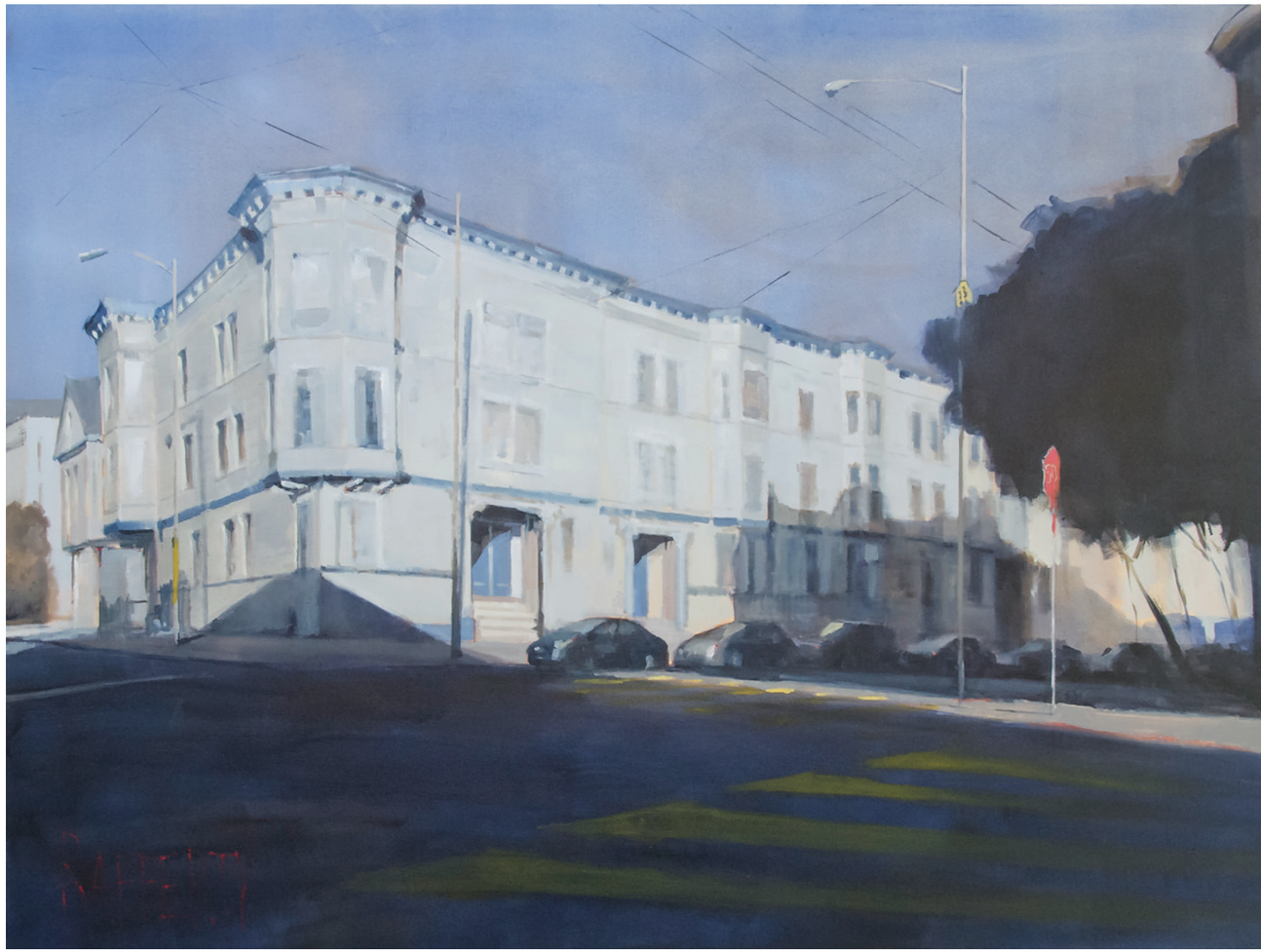
I snuggle up against her back, place my arm over hers, and together we hold our son.

**Alyson Lie** is a contributing editor at *Catamaran Literary Reader* and editor at *Leaping Clear*, an online magazine of the arts, literature, and contemplative practice. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and works as a personal care attendant and meditation instructor. Her essay titled "Her Boyhood" was published in the Fall 2015 issue of *Catamaran* and was selected as a notable essay in *The Best American Essays 2015*. This is her first published fiction.



## CAROLE RAFFERTY

*Street Corner*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in



COURTESY STUDIO SHOP GALLERY IN BURLINGAME, CALIFORNIA