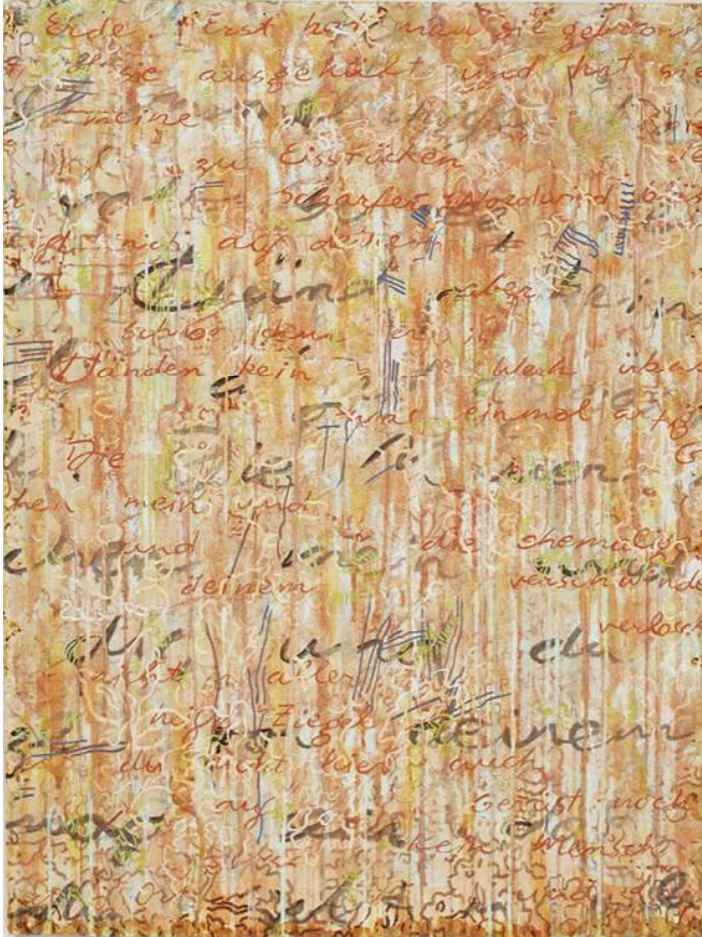


## HANNA HANNAH

Untitled (“... Erde. Erst...”), 2019  
Casein on Arches watercolor paper, 30 x 22 1/2 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## ALEXIS LUDWIG

# Sifting through Books

*Rediscovering my mother's  
life through her journals,  
documents, and books*

*Tu pleureras l'heure où tu pleures  
Qui passera trop vite  
Comme passent toutes les heures.*

—Guillaume Apollinaire, “À la santé”

**W**e moved our mother into a memory care home in March of last year. At ninety-two, she is plunged into a deepening dementia that prevents her from recognizing even the most familiar things or people, like soup spoons or her four sons. In her more lucid moments, which have become less and less frequent, she can still lift an aged index finger, crooked and crinkled with time, point in one's direction, and ask in her native French: “Who are you for me?” She knows I am—or was—someone important in her life. “I am your son,” I respond once again. I've lost track of how many times I've had to answer the same question in the past fifteen minutes. “You have four sons. I am number three.”

“Ah, four sons,” she says, with hesitation, shaking her head as though she can't quite believe what she's heard or doesn't quite understand and has already forgotten. She will ask again soon. In truth, our oldest brother died unexpectedly last November; our mother, thank God, has no idea.

There was a time, not so long ago, when we were a source of great pride for her. “Each one of you is doing fine. None is a drunk or a scoundrel. Not one is lazy, vulgar, or disrespectful . . .” She would repeat a variation on that claim to everyone she spoke with: family, friends, visitors, even her skeptical daughters-in-law.

I look at her now and see a deeply elderly woman, her advanced age now written into every facet of her being: her loose, mottled skin, her faded, dimming eyes, her frail, thinning bones. It is etched into her every labored gesture, painfully evident in a way that can no longer be hidden or conjured away. Several times not long ago, as I watched her asleep in her bed, straining to hear her faint breathing, she seemed to sink into the sheets as though she were about to merge with them. I had the impression she was falling back toward wherever it is we come from, floating up like a thinning, transparent soap bubble toward wherever it is we are headed, her body ever lighter. Ashes to ashes and empty air.

\* \* \*

I grasp at how to take the measure of a life. After leaving our mother in her new home, in the place where she will eventually die, one of my brothers and I returned to the home she had just left behind, our childhood home. We

*Reading from these notebooks in haphazard fashion, opening this page and that at random, I realized that this fiercely independent woman who actively sought and cherished her solitude had often felt intensely lonely and alone.*

returned to begin the process of what comes next: sorting through the papers, documents, pictures, letters, books, and other objects, the innumerable odds and ends that accumulate like uneven sedimentary layers of everyday life. I myself spent nearly five unbroken days on the task, mostly alone, clearing out bedrooms, closets, and parts of the living room and attic. It was impossible to do this work quickly or “efficiently.” I was constantly interrupted by what I had found, my mind sent wandering in different directions, to different times and people and places in the near or more distant past. A life is no one single life. A life is many lives, many people, the interplay of countless different threads woven by many different hands, the patterns only partly discernible, even in retrospect.

I came across photo albums of course, with pictures of people I didn’t know or couldn’t remember from long ago, and some whom I did from more recent times, people and places far away and close by. One thing I hadn’t seen before was a small black book-like photo album chronicling

my mother’s elder brother’s nine decades (and counting) of life. Why had she crossed out those two later photos of herself with black-ink-marker strokes, leaving untouched the adjacent images of her older sister and brother? It seemed a strangely adolescent gesture for an older adult person. (“*Il n’y a pas de grandes personnes.*” I suddenly hear my mother’s voice echoing from long ago, quoting a famous French writer. “There’s no such thing as adults.”) Was she ashamed of her appearance as an elderly lady? Or was her resentment so powerful that she preferred to blot herself from her own brother’s book of memories? Seeing those thick black-ink pen marks, I suddenly recalled that she had had a definitive falling out with her brother in recent years—recent in this case meaning about two decades ago. I rummaged on. Some minutes later I picked up one of the several diary-type notebooks in which she had sometimes drawn quick pencil sketches of the people and scenes she saw around her, interspersed with brief commentaries and descriptions of outside events and her state of mind.

Thumbing through it, I eventually came across her version of that incident, an incident I had heard before only secondhand, from one of my brothers. I summarize it here as follows. When she departed France for the United States in 1958, my mother left behind several objects of personal value somewhere in storage. One of these objects, apparently, was a Japanese woodblock print that clearly had special sentimental importance to her. During a return trip to her home country many years later, she had visited her brother in Marseille and seen her Japanese print framed and hanging on his living room wall. When she inquired, requesting its return, he had refused. “It has been here a long time, and it is home now,” he responded. She never forgave him. I imagined that that incident—the theft, in her view—had represented the tip of some iceberg, or a kind of final straw. The entry in her notebook corroborated this impression. Cross-referencing a life.

Judging by the bunched-up entry dates in their opening pages, her notebooks—there were a number of them—reflected a flurry of early enthusiasm to sketch her surroundings and write down her thoughts. But few of the notebooks were anywhere close to full. Most of the pages were blank. It seems that, like many of us, her inspiration would surge . . . and then wane, leaving behind a partially visible trail of unrealized hopes and ambitions. Reading from

these notebooks in haphazard fashion, opening this page and that at random, I realized that this fiercely independent woman who actively sought and cherished her solitude had often felt intensely lonely and alone. One characteristic entry (translated and paraphrased) read: “Why is it that one moment our happiness seems so boundless, as though filled with the presence of God, and the next we suddenly feel so barren and alone?” It’s a question I imagine many of us ask, with no good answer. Except that things change. Neither the good nor the bad lasts forever. Not even the indifferent or seemingly meaningless does. States of mind or heart come and go like the sun and clouds. A life too.

Another entry dated 2008, in the opening pages of yet another partly filled notebook, was a brief private message she had penned to her own mother, who had died of tuberculosis when my mother was a girl of five. Gazing at the framed photograph of her mother that had stood on the bookshelf beside her bed for as long as I can remember, my mother saw “something sad in your beautiful face, as though you already knew at the time that the illness was about to take you . . . To think that I will never see you again . . . How strange it is to have loved you all these years without even knowing you.”

A devout but undogmatic and socially liberal Catholic, my mother had accumulated quite a collection of crosses and crucifixes large and small over the years. After chancing upon yet another small brown wooden cross in a cluttered desk drawer in her bedroom, I realized I wasn’t sure what I was going to do with them all. Should I bring them to her church, as a family friend had suggested I do? Take them to the Goodwill with other objects that someone else might value or find use for or pleasure in, like the folding metal chairs, the untouched silverware, and the reams of blank white sketching paper? I had made several donation runs already. Many more would come. Surely these objects did not belong in the trash heap with all the other used and worn stuff of uncertain origin and utility. By contrast, the large straw crucifix that had hung for some years above her head board (a memento from one of my brother’s many road trips to Baja California, I believe) had a clear destination from the start. I took it down from the wall and brought it with me to the memory care home. It now hangs above her bed there. My mother had a similar fixation with rosary beads. I found a proliferation of these

beads—in different shapes, sizes, and shades of color. They kept on cropping up in different places like little animals, like conjured things that were alive. They appeared in desk drawers, on bookshelves, in small polished wooden boxes filled with odds and ends: old drawing pencils, assorted coins from different countries, tacks and paper clips . . . ah, look—another string of rosary beads. I knew she prayed. But she obviously prayed a great deal more than I knew. Have most of her prayers been answered? What does an answered prayer look like? How do those differ from unanswered ones in the long run? What about her situation now? Can she still pray?

\* \* \*

I had to push on. There were many other boxes to go through, old letters, other documents, other objects to decide whether to keep or discard, with a Roman emperor’s almost arbitrary thumbs-up or thumbs-down. There were other facets of the past to prick back to brief life, other incidents to pluck from the disorderly pile and turn over in my mind for a minute or two, before releasing them back into oblivion again. For example, I found a box in the attic of what turned out to be mostly my own stuff, from high school and college and just after. It contained a cluster of letters to me, many of them from my mother. She was one of those people from the “older generation” of that era who often lamented the lost art of personal letter writing, a demise she blamed first on the telephone and, later, on email. (No sense in mentioning the technology that has come since; that is sheer futurology.) But on rereading my mother’s own letters, I found that most of them read ironically like emails or even spoken conversation. They often described fleeting things happening at the moment of her writing: branches swaying in the breeze, the clear blue Southern California sky in summer, sounds of a grandchild laughing and playing with a hose in the garden, preparations for the imminent visit of family and friends. Like most of one’s life, there was little transcendental in them. So, not knowing what else to do, I decided to throw them away. Why keep them? And where? I felt, rightly or wrongly, that their continued, theoretically accessible physical existence would contribute little or nothing to the storehouse of memories that make up my own life, absorbed into my blood like conversations over wine

with family and friends, merged into my experience like past gusts of wind or like waves that had broken and then rejoined the shape of the ocean long ago.

One letter I found and reread and decided to keep turned out to be from a college friend—more accurately described as the friend of a friend, but no matter—who at the time, in 1987, had recently arrived in Paris to study to become a professional interpreter. I was living with my girlfriend in Seville, teaching English to pay for food and rent, and reading Cervantes, Unamuno, Ortega y Gasset, and other more contemporary and less heady stuff during my many free hours to bring my Spanish up to snuff. My friend's letter was written in surprisingly engaging Spanish that struck me as impressive even today, more than three decades later. It is one of life's many little ironic twists of fate that my friend had written the letter, at least in part—I remember feeling it then, as I did now—like a proud peacock strutting, to show off his well-established command of a language that I was only then beginning to truly learn. But in the letter he also bared his soul a bit, despairing about ever being able to speak or even understand French, which he knew I had learned from birth thanks to my mother. Fast forward to today: he is a professional interpreter based in France whose strongest second language is French. Meanwhile, thanks to a Foreign Service career spent largely in Latin America and the related rings of circumstance and experience that life brings, Spanish has become mine. But I digress into the present. My mother's life branches out into the details of her sons' lives and the lives of their families and friends, and so on, and so on. It is another version of the tree of life. No life is a single life.

\* \* \*

Then there were the books. There were mostly the books. Hundreds and hundreds of books in English, French, German, and a smattering of other languages—the latter group largely explained by my late German-born university professor father. For her part, before her eyesight dimmed below a correctable threshold and dementia eroded her ability to retain the meaning of a word or sentence long enough to be able to move along and grasp the whole without forgetting what had come before, my mother had been a serious reader of both French and English.

A *serious* reader in the sense of a person for whom one of life's main pleasures is reading—reading good books by good writers. Reading not for show or erudition, not for the higher degree, not for career advancement or for self-improvement, but for the actual felt pleasure inherent in the act of reading. Evidence of her love, the seriousness of her love, a passionate if somewhat disorderly love, was everywhere present around me, scattered on the bookshelves of her bedroom, lined up on the tired old gray wooden bookshelves along the walls of the living room and stacked in haphazard piles in the study turned TV room. During much of the last two decades, my mother had participated in a French-language book club, meeting with a group of French-speaking friends every month or so over coffee, tea, and pastries to discuss their latest selection, usually of fiction. So there were dozens of books by modern French writers, many of whose names I didn't recognize. There were also books about growing old, about death and dying. There were spiritual books, books about wisdom and faith, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *Zen Flesh*, *Zen Bones*. There were Catholic books. Books about the California impressionist painters. There were French classics. Proust. Stendhal. Madame de Sévigné. Balzac. Albert Camus. Until recently, whenever I returned home to visit my mother in California, I would unfold my laptop on the table in the evening during dinner and stream a books-on-tape version of the unforgettable opening lines of Camus's *L'Étranger*, read by a famous French actor: "*Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas.*" (Today, Maman died. Or was it yesterday? I don't know.) The passage never failed to delight her, and she asked to hear it again and again.

But of the many writers my mother read with pleasure during her long life of reading, two writers stand out as special loves. Maybe three. I found concrete evidence of these loves all around me, perhaps reinforced in my mind by the fact that she had passed on to me a degree of her appreciation for them, and so I was better able to recognize what I was seeing while sifting through the stacks of books in her bedroom, the living room, and elsewhere. The first was the French writer Julien Gracq. From what I could tell, my mother had acquired every work of Gracq's that she could get her hands on, including his notebooks and letters. She had kept books and magazine and newspaper articles

about him too. Not among the most widely known French writers of his generation (his life spanned the twentieth century), Gracq was a recluse by nature who rejected the many public honors granted him, including the prestigious Prix Goncourt. He only rarely gave interviews, arguing that what mattered about any writer, including himself, could be found in the works—a bit like Thomas Pynchon in the United States but without the self-conscious aura of mythology. Trained as a geographer and having earned a living as a high school teacher for most of his life, Gracq is best known for his ability to evoke a mystical sense of place, to conjure the concrete details and ambience of an imagined world, a threshold world where dreams and reality intermingle. *Le rivage de Syrtes* (translated into English as *The Opposing Shore*) is generally considered his masterpiece. I remember the book as being eminently worth the challenge of its reading almost three decades ago. Most of all I recall its strangely compelling, spell-like mood and rarefied style, a dense, rich, carefully sculpted language that one reviewer at the *New York Times* accurately described years ago as characterized by a "relentless and intoxicating use of metaphor." I set apart my mother's copy of the novel—her name signed and the date she had acquired it, March 1986, scrawled inside the cover page—as well as a book of Gracq's reflections about reading and writing, *En lisant en écrivant*, that was missing its front cover. I had enough space in my suitcase for those.

The second is the German writer W. G. Sebald. If memory serves, my mother discovered Sebald thanks to a deeply appreciative review by Susan Sontag, whose novel *Volcano Lover* I know my mother loved. Seeing Sontag's book on one of the bedroom bookshelves reminded me of both of these things. If not exactly a writer's writer, Sebald is surely a reader's writer, and I know he had become the writer with whom my mother felt the closest personal connection during the period that would turn out to be the final stretch of her life as a reader. Sebald is sometimes described as a poet of memory, and his works often feature a solitary narrator walking without clear purpose around a city or in the countryside, reflecting on what he sees around him, his thoughts skipping like stones on the surface of urban structures or rural landscapes and then plunging beneath the visible world and sinking through the deposited strata, into the dark groundwaters of memory

and association and loss. The texts of his essays, novels, musings, appreciations, recollections, or whatever one wishes to call them are sometimes punctuated by actual photos, representing the objects of his contemplation and memory, personal and historical, or having some elliptical relationship with these objects in any case. All of Sebald's main works were there on my mother's shelves too—in English, French, or both. (Sebald wrote in German.) *The Emigrants*. *The Rings of Saturn*. *Vertigo*.

And that wonderful masterpiece *Austerlitz*, which recounts—I hesitate to suggest any story or plot—a series of chance and planned encounters and conversations over the course of several decades between two fellow lone wanderers, the narrator and Austerlitz himself, the life, reflections, and memories of the latter recalled by the former. In Sebald's long, flowing sentences and unbroken paragraphs and pages, Austerlitz's recollections and stories, as recalled and relayed by the narrator, intermingle with the narrator's own reflections and experiences, coexisting with them on the same or a higher existential plane. I think of it now as a vision of lives fusing with other lives, the dead with the living, the far away with the here today, a palimpsest of time present with all other time, a weirdly undifferentiated tapestry in which the lives and memories of unknown others long ago may be the most immediately pressing and real and fully alive dimension of one's own life now. Austerlitz's description of his straining at the glinting edge of a memory of himself as a four-year-old Jewish boy from Prague freshly arrived to his coldly alien new home in rural Wales, the language into which he was born frightened into silence like a caged animal, has never left me: "and recently I have even thought that I could still apprehend the dying away of my native tongue, the faltering and fading sounds which I think lingered on in me at least for a while, like something shut up and scratching or knocking, something which, out of fear, stops its noise and falls silent whenever one tries to listen to it." I remember Sebald's untimely 2001 death in a car accident touching my mother like a personal kind of trauma. It is somehow fitting, even Sebaldesque, that I can't now recall whether she felt that trauma retroactively, as a reader who had come to discover Sebald only later and to feel in his past death a sense of present and future loss, or at the time that it actually happened. Does it matter? I picked up from the disorderly pile a thin book



of Sebald's travel essays and appreciations of other writers, *Campo Santo*, and set it to the side. I had room in my suitcase for that one too.

Though she appreciated the writer a great deal, her third literary love was not so much the writer as the book: John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*. Its beige cloth hardcover yellowed with time, its binding all but unglued from the body at the spine, single pages here and there disconnected and sticking out at odd angles from the rest, that book on her shelf resembled just the kind of unwieldy jumble that would otherwise justify my immediately tossing it in the trash, alongside the other perhaps colorful and storied but not quite worth keeping flotsam and jetsam of a long and varied life. But I couldn't get myself to do it, at least not quite yet. I myself had reread the book the summer before for the first time in I don't remember how many years and was struck by how much time Steinbeck had spent alone during his travels. Alone, that is, save for Charley, his faithful French poodle of a companion, who was constantly by his side. You could almost count on the fingers of one hand the people he met and actually exchanged words with during those solitary months on the road. While I had found the writing somewhat overwhelming this time around compared to my long-standing memory of it up to then ("memory is at best a faulty, warpy reservoir," as Steinbeck himself notes), my mother had always thought of the book with great fondness, recalling it often, sometimes out of the blue in a conversation about something else, struck by some stray recollection. Maybe Steinbeck's travels across the United States reminded her of her own trip in the early 1980s with my father. They drove in his beloved Volkswagen Vanagon from Southern California to Washington, DC, and back over the course of several months, along the back roads and blue highways of a largely southern route, always stopping in campgrounds for the night, a nod to their sense of both adventure and frugality. That journey was probably among the happiest memories of my mother's later adult life, and her recollections of the beauty and immensity, the diversity, charm, and warmth of the American landscape remained with her for almost as long as she could remember anything at all. Perhaps Steinbeck's book had been a seed for the idea of that future trip, and then later, over time, became a kind of stand-in for the actual travels themselves once her own

personal recollections of the road had receded, mixed up with memories of anticipation and the great pleasure and delight and joy of reading a good book. Perhaps.

\* \* \*

There comes a time in the course of sifting through the closets and desk drawers and bookshelves of the past that one has to move on. The time for contemplating what was, or for wondering what might have been had the needle only been pointed just one tiny degree to the left or the right, or in some other direction entirely, comes to an end. I notice my mood changing. The bursts of exhilaration and rediscovery have given way, gradually and then all of a sudden, to a growing sense of impatience, even despair. The walls of the present have closed back in, the here and now is reimposing its imperious order. I begin to see all these things, all these crosses and crucifixes and rosaries and notebooks and sketches and family photos and other odds and ends of a lived-up life as so much meaningless stuff. No different from tired pajamas, or old battered pans and pots with their covers or knobs missing, or stiffened mops in time-streaked plastic buckets that haven't been used for years. And I haven't even gotten to the purpose-built file cabinet of cassette tapes—now obsolete—or the dusty stacks of CDs on top of it, my mother's prized piano solos by Schubert or the partitas for solo violin by Bach buried or piled up in there somewhere. Those objects require more than the mere human mind to conjure their dormant contents back to life. And the antique devices that would help perform that trick are no longer anywhere to be found anymore, not in this house anyway. All that mute music has only one destination.

The whole damned shebang suddenly strikes me as a massive exercise in futility, of foolish, almost biblical vanity—a paltry, pathetic, and ultimately doomed effort to paper over with gestures and noise the barren emptiness inside and above and below all things. It all seems like a fantastic waste of time, an endless, futile exercise of sucking the centers from out of zeros. It may have seemed important in that little room at that little time, even pressing or absolutely necessary, but who really cared? Who cares right now, and who will care a day or a year or a decade or a century from now? And that's only human time. Who will remember even the shadow of a trace of the thing that

caused us to strut and fret during all those hours and days, that kept us hopelessly awake and alert, our necks pulsing like crazed demons, our minds crackling wildly with colliding thoughts during those seemingly endless strings of nights? Who will remember those wrongs? Those crimes? Who will carry that flame? My mother herself remembers essentially nothing now, not even the name of the selfish, vain, and sometimes quite charming man who was her husband and our father, and she's not even gone yet. Not quite. So what does it matter? Sins are forgiven as a matter of course, without need for a priest's absolution. The fabric of her life has frayed into oblivion. The center is no longer holding, the pattern itself dissolved and gone. Is this the fate we can now expect? Is this the last stop along the way to our wondrous final destination? Our life is like some drunkard's dream. The brief, giddy tingle has been melted away by the midafternoon sun. Now the tediously long and drawn-out stretch of slow time that seems to compose most of the hours and days we are alive is looming again, starting to come on strong. I feel it closing in like a headache, like an upset stomach, expanding slowly outward to the edges of everything I can see, like a heavy blanket of humid heat. Suddenly there are no more options.

In the light of this darkened mood, I look at all these books, stacked on the floor, piled in half-filled boxes, some still scattered sideways on shelves, and see them as so many inert objects, like a bunch of old, weathered bricks. They're stupidly heavy and only take up space, and I fear I'll throw out my back carting them around. How am I going to clear out all this crap? The sense of despair is settling in now, making itself at home . . . Suddenly I find myself pondering the fate of the famous writers and thinkers who produced all these works. My god! This is how they chose to spend their days and hours?! Prone over desks for their whole brooding, bleak lives, scratching their meaningless marks on the page, erasing, trying again, the small sandpaper sound like the sound of stone upon stone. To what empty purpose? Under what profound pretense did they labor? Why? They're as wretched and hopeless as the rest of us in the end: anonymous blank skulls stacked indiscriminately among the catacomb's disorderly pile, staring vacantly through their empty, shattered eye sockets at the infinite expanse of nothingness.

The older woman volunteer at the local library's used

bookstore looked at me funny, ever so slightly annoyed, when I arrived at the doorstep with crates and boxes filled with books, pleading earnestly—the voice I sounded struck me from the inside as oddly upbeat, even chipper—that many of these were really quite good and very high quality. And these were donations, mind you. "We don't have much room left on our shelves, and even the storage area out back is packed pretty tight. Most people are using e-readers these days. But please, go ahead and leave them right there on the floor for now. Another volunteer will look through them later this afternoon or tomorrow." The local university's office of book acquisitions never returned my calls, even though on my voicemail message I listed a representative sampling of some of the finest I had: Montaigne, Diderot, Balzac, Simone de Beauvoir . . .

I can't go on; I'll go on.

\* \* \*

Several days later I visit my mother in the memory care center one last time before returning to my so-called normal life on the other side of the continent. I can sense as I sit down beside her in the dining room that she is straining to remember who I am, sifting through whatever coherence remains of her mind for some loose clue . . . Surely I must be someone of importance. Why else would I be here? She puts up a brief fight, tries to hold on against the relentless forgetting, the gearwheels turning but without any purchase on a surface smoothed sheer . . . until she gives up. So she will have to pretend again; it would be impolite not to. I sit next to my mother at a small round table in the facility's large dining room just before dinner time, and we hold hands. Every few minutes, she tells me not to worry, thank you for coming, there's no need for you to stay if you have somewhere else to go or something else to do, thank you so much, it was so nice to see you. ("*Merci beaucoup d'être venue . . .*") She's always been gracious that way. Not wanting to be a burden. Self-sacrifice etched by long years of repetition and practice into who she is at the deepest level, just above the reptile brain. I smile but mostly say nothing.

\* \* \*

In July of 1980, when I was seventeen and recently graduated from high school, my mother drove me up to LAX to



catch a flight to London Gatwick. It was a flight on Laker Airways, \$280 for a one-way standby ticket. Laker Airways of the British maverick airlines entrepreneur Freddie Laker, later Sir Freddie Laker. Pioneer of the standby. God bless him. It was a time when anyone could walk freely through the airport up to the boarding gate, passenger or not. So my mother accompanied me the whole way and sat beside me in the waiting area outside the gate until boarding time. When the departure announcement sounded and I turned to board the plane, I said to her, "I guess I'll see you in two or three months." I had no set plans other than London, Paris, and a monthlong Eurail pass after that. Stockholm too of course, in pursuit of a Swedish girlfriend who had returned to her country after a year as an AFS student in my high school in Southern California, leaving me crushed and devastatingly alone . . . "Or three or four months, or maybe a year or more if you prefer," my mother responded. That's the way she was, always leaving the door open. The following week, wandering alone in the streets of Paris, I found myself at the Centre Pompidou, that brightly colored, newfangled, modernist extravaganza of a museum complex in the Les Halles neighborhood. There, I chanced upon an exposition on the Belgian singer Jacques Brel, whom I knew little about at the time and who had died of lung cancer just two years before, it turns out, at the age of forty-nine. As I recall, it was a kind of retrospective of Brel's groundbreaking work, focused on the lyrics and verse. Two years younger than my mother, Brel had been among the most popular singer-songwriters in the French-speaking world of her era. I remember my mother telling me she had seen him perform in the night clubs of Paris in the late 1950s, along with rough contemporaries like Édith Piaf and Georges Brassens.

Today anyone can call forth at will on YouTube Brel's performances in the intimate setting of a small Paris nightclub or cabaret, as I have done. I've been impressed by the crisp and clear acoustics of some of those old recordings, and also with the film-like cinematography, which spotlights the singer's gifts as a dramatic performer. Brel's brutally bracing song about old people, "Les vieux," is one of those performances I've watched and listened to raptly on YouTube over and over again. His arms motioning like the hands of a ticking clock, his trembling voice, the spare staccato of the piano in the background, jabs of an accordion,

and the wispy, funereal violin. "Even the rich are poor," he sings, ". . . and those living in Paris, / might as well be living in the provinces / if they live too long. // . . . Their world is too small"—he extends his arms in front of him, his two hands cupped close together as though holding a small box, a box that shrinks with every step, with every metaphorical tick of the clock—"from the bed to the window, / then from the bed to the chair, / then from the bed"—long pause, as palm touches palm—"to the bed." The world is now closed for business. The walls of what is known are clamped together. Inside and outside are the same. Before and after too. The here and the beyond, yesterday and today, all of these things are no more. All are one and the same. There is no more space or time to move or breathe or live. The clock stops. Or pauses again for what seems like eternity, a long, drawn-out, syncopated note of silence. Because it always starts back up again—back, forth, tick, tock, tick, tock . . . And the music too.

My mother's life, which she herself no longer remembers, is now made up of the memories of those of us who still do. With each passing tick and tock of the clock, she too is slowly but surely becoming her admirers—that small but ardent circle of friends and family, for whatever time remains left in the song.

**Alexis Ludwig**, a California native, has served in the US Foreign Service since 1994. Before becoming a diplomat, Ludwig was a freelance writer who published occasional essays in *San Francisco Examiner*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and elsewhere. He currently chairs the editorial board of the *Foreign Service Journal*, where he also contributes the occasional reflection.

## HANNA HANNAH

*Untitled ("Nacht wurde verboten . . ."), 2019*  
Casein/Arches wc paper, 30 x 22 1/2 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST