

## PAUL HOTVEDT

*Fields of Sleep, 2022*  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## ARACELI ARDÓN

### A Cup of Tea

—Translated from the Spanish by C. M. Mayo

Yesterday Mrs. Abigail Bayle came out of the forest in her painting. Sometimes when we talk she doesn't come out of the frame, but some days she ventures into the dining room. Very slowly and carefully, she descended from her tall chair. Placing her left foot on the circular footrest, she then lowered her other foot. She left her cup of tea on the wooden seat, which was polished for having rubbed so much against her blue dress. Then she came down completely, stepping onto the tiles, which in another time had received the caress of an oriental carpet. She sighed as if she would like to catch the air of half a century. As she did every afternoon, she offered me black tea.

She has a voice delicate with soft notes, as if she were singing an old ballad. When she was young she used to go to the opera. I imagine her elegant and distinguished, with her chestnut-colored hair pulled back in a bun, leaving her ears uncovered so as to show off earrings with gold fittings and enormous topazes that favored her long neck. Abby always holds her head high; she looks at you directly, her eyes scrutinizing your most intimate secrets. Her gaze is deep and questioning. Of blue sparks. When she was a girl, all the theaters already had electric light. Her topazes caught the light of forty candelabras. In that time she had many suitors, she never lacked for invitations to dances, dinners, concerts, and family parties.

Other families invited her because she lived alone. When she turned twenty, when she was working in the factory of a distillery where they made an infamous brandy, Abby's father died peacefully in his bed, after three days of dreadful fevers, his forehead beaded with the cold water of the compress his wife applied. There was nothing that could be done and the girl, his only daughter, had to organize an austere funeral in the most Lutheran style.

Four years later, her mother married a widower who lived two hundred miles away and she went there with him.

Abby was left at the mercy of the winds that howled at night and down through the chimney to flutter ashes from the burnt logs. Sometimes ash jumped out to the floor, beyond the gray stone that encircled the hearth, as far as the post, and made figures that the girl could not decipher. Maybe they were not drawings, nor secret messages in code. More likely, they were nothing more than the dust of old embers that had once glowed in this home.

“When you are  
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One day, the girl went to the store to stock her pantry with pasta, canned foods, bread, and orange marmalade. She was chatting with Mrs. Jones, the owner’s wife, when a young woman came in to ask if there might be a house for rent nearby. On a whim, Abby answered, “Yes, I have a house two blocks from here. It is roomy, surrounded by woods, with three rooms, a bathroom, and a backyard.” She said it quickly, as if wanting to solve a long-standing problem.

Without even taking her things that were piled on the counter, Abby left the store to show her prospective tenant her house. The lady’s husband, whose name was Keith Ginyard, had begun working for a distributor of imports from India. To Abby this seemed a fascinating job, as if the magic of this exotic country had enveloped Mr. Ginyard and his wife. She was six months pregnant and showing the sweet curve of a belly full of promises.

Abby moved by herself to downtown Coventry, and once in a while she went to London to spend the day and visit her aunt and uncle, who loved opera.

One day I asked her about the war. It’s curious: Abby had experiences like the ones of characters in the novels I read at night. The explosions of the bombs in World War II would make my whole body hurt. I felt like I was there, right in the rubble.

“War is an atrocity,” she answered seriously. “It makes you a sponge for all the world’s pain. When it seems safe, you go out into the street and see the ruins made by the bombs. The building where you grew up destroyed. The door to my school was left in tatters and people came in

through the hole. I had drawn maps with Chinese ink and antique calligraphy. I never could get them back.”

She sighed. She continued on in a low voice, “When you are a sponge that has filled with sorrow, wherever you go you leave a wet trail. You keep on weeping this salt water that bursts your kidneys and liver. Your lungs feel frozen, retaining the liquid that chills your body from the inside and then falls from behind your eyes like a soft rain. Your gaze turns to water, your tears are drops that appear behind the dam of a river, water trapped in pools made by sorrows. The sorrows have big, sharp teeth like those of beavers. Like those animals, they go on stabbing at the good times to cut the twigs to make their dikes. So they slake their thirst and guarantee their survival. The sorrows survive. They are capable of ruining moments that should have been happy.”

Bit by bit the word *survival* came from my friend’s lips, each syllable pronounced carefully because she learned Spanish when she was already elderly. She decided to learn this language in order to converse with me. Abigail became silent. Sometimes this would happen to us: When another person came into the room, she would fall silent. If she was outside the picture, say, in the pantry, I would close the door and she would have to hide herself among the cans.

When Abby went back into the painting, I felt the need to let go of my sorrows, let them go on howling, let them fill the whole room and drench it with tears. I waited for her to come out of the painting again in order to talk to her.

“I know what you’re talking about. There was a time when I too was a sponge full of tears. The war I experienced was not in the street but in my home. In my parents’ bedroom. My mother would spend the night walking from one wall to the other, sobbing, with a rosary in her hands. She couldn’t say the prayers because her words got cut off by her sobbing. I would pretend to sleep but I heard her moans. When she could no longer stay in the room, she would go out to walk the halls, she would arrive in the kitchen, and prepare something for our playtime at school. She would scrub the bathrooms so hard, she would leave the bathtub and the sink shining. The next day they would smell of chlorine and it would seem strange to me that they did not also smell of her tears and that her drowned cries did not leak from the walls.

Abby asked me why my mother cried. I answered her in confidence, “Many nights my father did not come home. When he left work, I don’t know where he went or with whom. Mother didn’t know for certain where he was, either; she stayed to take care of us. She didn’t go out looking for him like a tireless spirit; she did not want friends and family to see her wandering the streets and plazas with the terrible expression of one who had been abandoned.”

Everyone knew about it, I explained to Abby. I told her slowly, with extra delicacy, that my mother could see the truth just by looking at other people’s faces, she could feel their pity for the mistreated wife.

That’s how things were in my town. That’s how life was.

I explained to Abby that one day I left my parents’ house, I got married, had children and a husband to whom I serve dinner. I like to read and sometimes I hear the voices of the characters. There is nothing wrong with that. He doesn’t like it when I tell him about my characters; this is why I am very careful not to talk about my friendship with Abby. But I think that tomorrow I will tell him that the old English lady left the painting, went into my purse, and started to play with my cell phone. For her, whose life was half a century ago, this thing is magic and it has an enormous screen, like in a movie theater. My husband will die of shock when he opens my purse and sees her.

If he dies of shock, he’ll stop taking me to the doctor who gives me pills so I won’t think about these things. When I take the pills, Abby does not come anymore. My best friend goes away. The only person who understands me. It is better to keep throwing the pills in the trash.

Mexican author **Araceli Ardón** is the author of the novel *Historias íntimas de la casa de don Eulogio* (Ediciones Vieira, 1998); the short story collection *El arzobispo de gorro azul* (Ediciones Vieira, 2006); a children’s book, *La pandilla de Miguel* (Instituto Electoral de Querétaro, 2002); a biography of Don Roberto Ruiz, a Querétaro entrepreneur and philanthropist; and a biography of Junípero Serra both in a separate book and published in the art book *Los caminos de Fray Junípero Serra en Querétaro / The Paths of Junípero Serra in Querétaro* (Fundación DRT, 2013). In addition, she is the editor of the anthology of essays *Romance de piedra y canto* (Municipio de Querétaro, 1998) and of *Restituto Rodríguez, Surrealista* (Código Áureo, 2014), a collection of original fiction by various Mexican and other writers inspired and accompanied by paintings by Rodríguez, which includes this story, translated by permission of the author.

**C. M. Mayo** grew up in the San Francisco Bay area, although she is a native of Texas and has lived in Mexico City for most of her adult life. Her most recent book is *Meteor*, which won the Gival Press Poetry Prize, and her collection of short fiction, *Sky Over El Nido*, won the Flannery O’Connor Award. Some of her translations of Mexican writer Rose Mary Salum’s short fiction have appeared in *Catamaran*. In 2017 she was inducted into the Texas Institute of Letters.