

**KORAKRIT
ARUNANONDCHAI
2557
(PAINTING
WITH
HISTORY IN A
ROOM FILLED
WITH MEN
WITH FUNNY
NAMES 2)
(WITH KORAPAT ARUNANONDCHAI)**

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Private view 16 September, 6–9pm

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JAMES ENGLISH LEARY NATURE ABHORS A VACUUM

For K.A.

I first met the Painter right when everything started to really change in my life, so forgive me if I attribute to him properties that seem at best misguided and at worst, well, occult. I'd noticed him a hundred times skulking around outside of our building before realizing that he was someone that I had to get to know. He'd walk in circles, drowsy little circles. In hindsight I realize he was thinking, but at the time it looked like boredom, mental illness, or worse. He seemed lost, deeply and chaotically lost, although I realized after our first real conversation that he was not lost at all. Over time I've realized I'm the one who was lost. I lived with my girlfriend on the 5th floor, across the hall from the Painter. She was working her way up the ladder at a publishing company whose

name you'd recognize if I told you. I loved her and she me, and it was clear that we were heading somewhere together. A life or something like it. I liked that having a life made it so that you could invite lonely figures in off the street and for a night at least give them a place to exist. When I said this to him the Painter nodded innocently commenting that Nature abhors a vacuum. It made sense at the time, but now I'm not so sure what he meant. We ate a deeply mediocre and heartfelt risotto that I'd spent my years as a bachelor perfecting. I'm not much of a maker. I'm really better at organizing things or naming them. At first the Painter was too shy to be interesting but then he got drunk and started in on art. He liked Picabia, the only mystic who doesn't embarrass the shit out of you, he said. And George de la Tour who painted women who'd swallowed the light. Massachio was *at least* as good as Pantera, both being mainly caught-up with that sadly obliterating Christian morality that we're all too good for and for which we'll never be good enough. Oh, and those silently wobbling bottles in Morandi! He felt passionately (ideologically even he claimed) that Harry Winston was a more engrossing manipulator of light than Vermeer who in the scheme of things really was a bit of a zirconium-grade hack. He professed the greatest crime of art history was the cleaving apart of pop and cubism, which really ought to have been regarded all along as a single current (the Painter proposed it be called 'Morphology') the most important exemplars of which were Stuart Davis and Saul Bass. Saul Bass? I asked. My girlfriend explained that Saul Bass was Salman Rushdie's *nom de guerre* on an episode of Seinfeld. It seemed as if the Painter was used

to people knowing *that* Saul Bass, but no, the Saul Bass to which he was referring was the graphic artist who designed the credits for 'Anatomy of a Murder' and 'Vertigo' and probably every other movie that was fundamentally great. In his opinion the most interesting work in the world was being done by the RRP. Have you heard of the RRP? he asked, and naturally we hadn't. Rembrandt Research Project, he said it slowly. The Dutch Government has deep pockets and state-of-the-art labs that they're committing to conclusively authenticate all the master's works and parse out the 'attributed to's, from the 'formerly attributed to's, from the 'school of Rembrandt's, from the out and out forgeries, he explained. As I'm sure you can imagine, it's a real political fuck-storm. He clearly relished the thought. But you can't believe what they're learning about the working practices of the master. A chemical analysis of paint taken from conclusively authenticated works showed fecal bacteria, urine, skin cells, saliva, sweat, vomit, bile, blood and cum. The Painter asked if we'd seen Jurassic Park. Who hadn't? And then he kindly reminded us of that lone mosquito locked in the hardened amber, from which they so adeptly extracted the past... The more excited the Painter got though the more he revealed the depths of his loneliness. He'd clearly chosen a life of opinions over a life of people. I couldn't tell if I was attracted to his braveness or flushed with pity for him. When he got up to leave, I said I'd love to see his work sometime. As if in consolation he put his hand on my shoulder and said of course. Then he left. A week later I lost my job. I'm actually happy about it, I said to my girlfriend who looked at me like the stranger I was

already becoming. The next time I saw the Painter I told him about what had happened and he repeated his mantra about Nature and the Vacuum. When I asked him what he meant he shrugged and said, what's done is done. I asked him about how his painting was going. He said he was working on one called 'Meeting' the idea for which he'd lifted from a Guston painting which had a sort of top-view of a gathering of these ahuman blobs, a bit, the Painter suggested, like in that movie where the marines are tracking an onslaught of aliens with a tracking device which registers the organisms with these bleepbleeps that issue faster and faster, the closer the aliens got. I asked if the *meeting* had anything to do with an AA meeting or like actually more like a Communistic or some sort of Utopian meeting, a meeting of the minds, since isn't that the real medium of dreamers, meetings, since that's how dreamers connect with other like-minded dreamers, at meetings, so that they might articulate their shared vision for a better world, since a consolidated voice is the strongest push-back against the machinations of those annoyingly effective arch-conservatives who all see society as just an extension of savage nature, and so for those of us who believe in higher values of, say, civic empathy, values that as a sentient species we possess the collective agency to enact, meetings are where we start to leverage ourselves into that collective voice, right? It's just blobs, said the Painter dryly. Without a job I just loafed around. In hindsight I can see how impossible it was to love the person I was becoming, but when my girlfriend announced she was leaving I was completely shocked. The Painter was nice enough to spend a lot of time with

me after that. You need some beautiful distractions he said. I suggested that we go to a museum and he did what he always did when you suggested something at odds with his impulses, screwed up his face. Give me a break, he said. So we went to the racetracks just past the city limits and I ended up winning three hundred dollars. Now isn't that better than a tacky museum, the Painter said slapping me on the back. And he was right. More and more I came to understand and respect the incredibly improbable truth in the Painter's intuitions. Which is not to say that I actually got to know him any better. Whatever it was, for example, that brought the Painter here remained ambiguous. He referred in passing to various grants, residencies, research, distant and dying relatives, vendettas, financial ruin and once even pestilence. Reasons to come and reasons to flee. One clear advantage here was the availability of materials freeing him from any direct dependency on the mail system to which he bore a somewhat (I thought) extreme aversion. The things change, he swore, they actually change, I mean on a molecular level when passed through the grueling digestion of the parcel system. He never went to art supply store which he held in contempt as being hopelessly amateur. In any event, the materials he needed to make his work could only be purchased at an apothecary in the garment district, although at some point he abandoned that establishment when he was lucky enough to cultivate a cozier relationship with the assistant manager of an exotic stone dealer in lower midtown. There he could acquire the little knot-tied baggies of cadmium and cobalt, which would be dissolved into the highly volatile and at times even

alchemical paints. Once when we stopped to chat in the hallway of our building, the Painter launched into a breathlessly enthusiastic monologue on the periodic table as it pertains to painting mediums. By way of demonstration he threw ten baggies down into a row onto the stair landing. He looked like a parody of a drug dealer. The Mohs Scale, he shouted betraying an excitement that I hadn't felt in many months, if ever. He pointed at the second bag and then back at the first. Gypsum is harder than Talc, but Calcite (he tapped on the third bag) is harder than Gypsum. These ten samples went from being tools to materials, understand? I didn't. The Fluoride (he tapped the fourth) was used, when whole, to pulverize the Calcite and was then smashed by the (5th bag) Apatite. Appetite? I asked. No, Apatite, he said. Orthoclase (the 6th) crushes Apatite and is crushed by Quartz (the 7th) which is pulverized by Topaz (the 8th), which is vanquished by Corundum (the 9) which is slaughtered by Diamonds (the 10th and final bag). Do you see now? he asked, from tools to materials? from object, to subject? I saw myself as a calcite, maybe. Not the absolute weakest but pretty weak. My ex-girlfriend was surely a quartz or perhaps even a topaz. I guess the Painter would have to be the diamond among us. So what scratches a diamond, I asked knowing full well the answer. The Painter said this particular diamond dust was just for a study. The final work, he assured me, would be made of crushed diamonds of a far more impressive provenance. The Painter collected up his baggies and left to begin his work. I was really lonely around that time but resisted the temptation to bother the Painter when he was busy with the work that clearly

brought him so much more pleasure than anything else in the world. I always knew when he was home from the zamboni-ish whirring that penetrated the wall. I'd read a page or two and unable to concentrate put down the book to go for a walk that I'd abruptly cut short and return. I'd start a movie and turn it off. Against the silence, the strange sound of the Painter at work. One day a tanned man in an exceedingly expensive suit started pounding on the Painter's door. I watched him through the peep hole. For 15 minutes he pummeled it with his fist and at a one point it actually seemed like he wished to break through it. Then he took a call. After listening for a moment he howled into his phone I'll fucking kill you, I'll cut your balls off and stuff down down your fucking throat! Enough time had passed before I saw the Painter again that I felt silly warning him about the tanned man. It's my dealer, he said. He's really not a bad man although he's done bad things. Very bad. But we should try to see people based on their potential rather than their accomplishments. Especially when those accomplishments are terrifying, the Painter said. I asked him how his paintings were coming. He said he was working on one called "Investigation" and that no, he didn't find that title to be redundant since there ought to be a kind of painting that's not an investigation at all but only a proof of something, merely confirming what the theoretician already suspects, rather than endowing the religiousness of 'discovery'. That's what Da Vinci was after, the Painter added, when he'd used an unorthodox Chestnut oil medium for his masterpiece the Battle of Anghiari (a figure-8 of assaults and defenses, a real torture ballet, said the Painter licking his lips) and the

Chestnut Oil failed to cure and after 3 months the whole painting slid off the wall. Well that wasn't a case of Da Vinci 'searching' for better materials, it was a case of him 'proving' that Chestnut oil was a viable medium, and, well, being just wrong. But his painting, the Painter stated returning to his work, was in fact a proper investigation and so it made sense to call it one because he had no idea what discoveries it would yield, or even if it would yield discoveries. He said it's worth noting while we're on the topic that the preeminent American ontologist of the last 25 years was secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld who summed it up best when he famously declared that there are known-knowns and known-unknowns but there are also unknown-unknowns. He left out unknown-knowns, the things that we don't know that we know, which the painter supposed Rumsfeld left out, it being pretty unambiguously within the already well-established philosophical purview of Foucault, the tragically naturalized. I'm working on another one called 'Johnny Cakes', said the Painter. More and more often, I found myself wandering the streets. I should have been out looking for a job. But I was content to squander what I'd saved. As for my girlfriend, I deluded myself with all the mantras about things not meant to be in the first place. There was a secret that I was keeping militantly from myself which was that I was crushed. I thought all the time about calling her. I thought that there might be a way to fix things. The Painter said the greatest obstacle to pleasure isn't pain, it's delusion, which I rightly took to mean she'd never come back. The next time I saw the Painter he handed me a sheet of paper before disappearing up the

block. It read, *even in the moment of consummation we remain in the grip of confused longings that will never be fulfilled.* Jesus, I thought. The next time I saw the Painter, I asked him about it. A little dark no? I asked. Are you over her? He asked back. No, I replied. You're projecting onto her because you hate yourself, he said. Then he scribbled on a piece of paper and ran away. It read, *bodies cannot pierce, nor be in bodies lost.* I was pretty sure he was lifting these lines from somewhere, but my Google queries yielded soft-core, gothy negligee fan sites. I gave up looking. It was a long time before I saw the Painter again. Hard months where mostly I just held my head and rocked in my seat. And then one day, there he was, right there in front of the building, going in his customary funny little circles. When he spoke I could tell something was wrong. Are you high? I asked. He said he was just agitated and that he also had a fever, but I'm almost certain that he was strung out on something. He was speaking rapid fire and biting aggressively at the inside of his lip. He'd gone to see 'The Polish Rider' at the Frick and this, he said, was occupying most of his time these days. Looking at the painting? I asked. Plotting, he said. The whole thing is waaaay too fucking interesting, he said. In 1791 Michal Kazimierz the grand Hetman of Lithuania gave the canvas to King Stanislaus Augustus II of Poland. How Kazimierz came to possess it nobody knows. When the king died the painting passed through various lines of nobility even falling into the perilous hands of Count Grabski, an utterly bitter scion, who was in the habit of using the royal art collection for target practice. But before he could get to 'The Polish Rider' he died (naturally in murky circumstances) and that

painting along with a lucky corpus of other condemned works were gifted to one Tarnowski. That's when it came to the attention of the great pederast, technocrat and master thief (the three characteristics, said the Painter, of all truly great art collectors) Henry Clay Frick who dispatched his buyer Robert Frye (himself an unsuccessful painter) to the Tarnowski Castle in Dzikow, Poland. Since then the painting has lived in the Frick. But here's the thing, he paused for effect, it's a fake. How do you know? I asked. The Rembrandt Research Project, he said. They've written it off. Do you know what this means? To be perfectly honest with you, I didn't. But the painter was convinced that this created a substantial opening for the right person to swoop in and make a killing. All you had to do, his thinking went, was buy up discredited canvases, and add imperceptible glazes to the canvases surfaces, gelatin-based glazes that would contain infinitesimal trace amounts of the Master's DNA, cloned from master cells that he, the Painter, had already or was planning on attaining in a clearly don't-ask-you-don't-want-to-know kind of affair. Well at that point you could hire your own experts, people with at least enough credibility to at the very least get the case of the painting's attribution reopened in the court of public opinion and then in the resultant confusion, you could flip the painting to one of the many impulsive and irresponsible collectors out there for a monstrously huge profit. Needless to say, I was a little worried about the painter. I asked about his work. Oh, work-shmerk, it's fine, it's always great. Out of cultural poverty, great fortunes of the imagination are being generated as we speak. His new paintings were all

coming along. One was called 'Platform'; another 'Swarm' (an update of his Guston-plagiarized, not-per-taining-at-all-to-the-problems-of-the-left 'Meeting'); another was called 'Bowlegged'; another 'Apparatus'; another one was called 'Ledge'; another had the working title 'Proscenium'; another he was calling 'Drill' but just for now; another was called 'Whatzit'. Wow, well it seems like you're ready for *several* shows, I said. The Painter remarked somewhat coldly that he wasn't thinking about his work on those terms anymore, that what really interested him was the Damsfort Museum which specialized in damaged, forged and stolen art, work that lived on the ruinous outskirts of art, amidst all of art's blighted infrastructure and betrayed industry, near its airports and titty bars and dumping sites and the speculative real estate gambits of art's unknown tomorrow. As always I said I'd love to see his work at some point when he was ready to show it. I had grown used to saying this which made it empty, the way old friends see each other on the street and say 'we should get together' before going on their separate ways. How's Thursday at noon? he said to my surprise and walked off before I could reply. Over the next days, I beefed up on my art history. I went to the museum. I searched the internet excitedly and was disappointed to learn that I was the kind of person who prefers a reproduction of a painting to a painting. The night before I was due to go see the Painter's work, I felt stir-crazy, my heart beating out of my chest. My apartment had become a prison, the bondage of which was made paradoxically worse by the fact that I could freely come and go as I pleased. I wandered the city with the ominous feeling that I knew

the exact experiences that awaited me in every direction. I wandered into an emergency room and for an hour invented backstories for each of the sick and injured. I left and made my way back home. When I was a few blocks away I tasted cinders in the air. Naturally, there's only one reasonable ending for a story like this one. The fire was almost completely pissed out by the time I came upon the building. When I charged the entrance fire marshals held me back. I thrashed and fought to break past them but they were solid as oak. I asked the owner of the deli about whether the Painter was around, if there was any confirmation about him being in or out of the building, in short if he was alive. You mean the carpenter? He asked earnestly. That night I stayed in a hotel and the next day with the fire long squelched I snuck in past the yellow ribbon. Before even entering my own apartment I went to the Painter's. The door had been kicked in. Honestly the damage wasn't bad. The place was more like an office, or a crime scene than how I'd pictured the painter's studio. There where a few cubical units turned over in the main space. A crate of mailers spilled across the floor. Upon closer inspection I saw a dusting of purple powder ground into the carpet. (why was there a carpet?) Jars of odd substances. A roll of melted bubble wrap. A roll of scorched fabric. But otherwise no carnage. Just abandonment. For the first time in my adult life I was overcome and I crumpled over and I wept.



