

*from* THE BAD ARTS

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August was one of those friends I couldn't decide whether I liked or not. But I'd known him for years, and I spent quite a bit of time with him anyway. August and I were both writers, art writers specifically, so we had that in common and we could talk shop. We were drinking in a bar that he described as 'vintage Expo 86,' because it hadn't been renovated since the mid-eighties. Our friend Michael, who wrote for *The National Post*, had been encouraging August to write for more mainstream publications, and August was telling me how Michael had gotten him an assignment. At least you'd get paid more, Michael has said to him. And besides, Michael continued, writing for larger audiences would be a good challenge for you ("someone once told me," August paused to sip his drink, "that my own *politics were suspect* because I was friends with *bourgeois writers* like Mike. Vancouver is where fake socialists go to die"). But the thought of being paid more, I can only guess, did appeal to August. Michael had told August he could introduce him to the editor of *Passages*, a travel magazine based out of Vancouver. The production value was high and its demographic was the kind of people who lived in downtown condos. Thanks, Mike, he acquiesced. Besides, Michael continued, I'm about to quit my job so if you want me to give you the "in" right now, I can. August looked at Michael. This was the first time he'd mentioned anything about quitting his job. Michael would tell us later that he wanted to become a 'postconceptual artist.'

Michael had introduced August to the editor via email the next day, and August pitched two articles: one about real estate in the Okanagan, the other about Fes el Bali. Much to his surprise, the editor replied within a day accepting the pitch. However, the article would be about the real estate boom in the Okanagan Valley, focusing on the rise of boutique wineries. Now months later, August had failed to finish the article. An on-again, off-again affair had ended abruptly when August discovered the woman (or rather *girl*, for she was much younger) started seeing someone else and neglected to tell him. The unexpected shock of the way the affair ended exacerbated what was already a frustrating writer's block. Even after he returned from the Okanagan, the article floated in front of him like a jellyfish in an aquarium, just out of reach. It was two months overdue.

I had been thinking a lot about August (I'd heard he'd given up on the article, but I hadn't asked him about it), when Michael texted to invite me to a party. I hadn't been outside in days, already stuck in early winter doldrums, so I accepted the invitation, simply out of distraction. After we got there, I had gone off to get myself a drink, and when I returned I found Michael talking with August, who, it seemed, despite his self-professed hatred for these events, attended everything. By this point, his relations with Michael were tense. In general, August seemed awkward although I fared no better. A lot of guests, he felt, looked askew at him, or rather us, either because he was, or we were, unrecognizable or because, he said, they considered him, or perhaps us, unimportant. I was less insecure. I simply disliked the events because I didn't know what to say. August would become progressively drunker as the evening continued. Since all three of us had

graduated from the University of British Columbia together a decade ago, Michael had become a successful journalist, writing for national newspapers, while August and I only published in smaller 'critical' journals ("wallowing," as August said, "in the provincial avant-garde"). I was surprised when Michael offered August the break, and he furthered that bewilderment when he informed us that he was leaving journalism to become a 'postconceptual artist' ("when he offered to help me out I was bit taken back. I wanted to say 'no,'" said August, "but my shifts at the library had been cut in half. I was burning through my paltry savings, just on rent. But what does 'postconceptual art' even *mean*?"). And so, as I mentioned, August had accepted the offer ("they pay over a dollar a word," Michael had said to him, "and most articles are fifteen-hundred to two-thousand words, though they may start you out on a smaller assignment"). I kept running into August long after the deadline had passed; I never brought it up.

The party, for an environmental design magazine, was happening in a hotel in the West End. I scanned the crowd. Michael had already moved on and was talking to Karen Phillips, whose first novel, *Gone*, about the missing women in the Downtown Eastside, had charmed national radio ("a book about a serial killer should be uncomfortable, not assuage feelings of guilt," August hissed in my ear). I watched Michael and Karen chat—chat, indeed, being the operative word, for even at a distance their conversation announced its frivolity. She giggled, tapping his arm. He took a piece of sushi from a passing waiter and popped it in his mouth. I walked closer. They were talking about Karen's vacation plans to London. Michael noticed me: you know Karen, right? Yes, I said, we met a few years ago. Right, I remember! Hey, would you find it too forward if I asked you a personal question? We were just talking about sex, and I'm curious about something. What would the age of your hypothetical 'first child' be by now? Phillips had a reputation for non-sequiturs of a personal nature. I tried to suppress a rush of blood to my cheeks. Uh, about thirteen, I guess. How about you Michael? She smiled, pleased. Fifteen. Interesting, she said. Oh I was just joking, she brushed my forearm. We were actually talking about London. I found a plausible excuse to leave the conversation ("I'm going to go get another drink; do you want one?") and left. Their conversation reanimated. So where are you staying? I heard Michael ask as I walked away.

Both literary events and art openings are similar in that they are insufferable without alcohol. At least this party had an open bar. An elder poet once told me that all he expected was one nice meal paid for a year. I leaned against the bar and ordered bourbon. I didn't know *any* of these people.

If, as Aristotle claimed, the purpose of friendship is goodness, I wondered what I was doing here, or what, for that matter, these events were for at all. I excused myself for some fresh air and exited into the alley. A light winter rain was falling, and I stood under the canopy of a huge cedar tree. The subdued voices of the few remaining smokers

mixed with the patter of rain. The persistence of trees this size in West End alleys was one of my favorite features of the city, one of its distinguishing urban traits. I wished I were a smoker, or had some other functional reason to be outside, so as not to look ridiculous, lurking in the shadow of a huge tree. The smokers, I gathered, were discussing a new green building workspace that had opened in Gastown. In the arts, one is never supposed to be obvious about networking, because it is considered gauche. But these events, which were some vague hybrid between meeting and party, became the only event in the so-called cultural worker's life, the main way people interacted or exchanged ideas, while, at the same time, the field became more professionalized; these spaces—whether an opening at an art gallery, a reception, an event for a new publication, or even standing under the canopy of a cedar in a West End alley—became a kind of work, a kind of work that could not articulate itself as such for fear of breaching rules of etiquette. It was as if two different spheres of life, the social and the professional, the public and private, had become superimposed, the way a painter might cover an earlier composition with a new layer of paint, the traces of the previous still visible through the second surface. As such, events like this were complex, even more so to negotiate. First there was the practical 'work' aspect of the evening, the one everyone indeed acknowledged, the fact that we gathered because of a shared vocation, field or at least aspiration. This acknowledgement was complicated by another fact: the fact that most people knew each other so that a complex web of associations, affiliations, acquaintances, friendships and romances governed the event. All of these were more generally subsumed by the term 'friendship'—"we're all friends here," so that the professional world absorbed the social. There was no escape from work, in the same way there was no escape from capital, the work world just visible beneath the social. I noticed the painter Emma Brown, who must have been here to support one of her students, join the smoker's circle. I had written about Emma's work, which I liked, although I didn't know her very well, and I went over to talk. Soon I was back inside the party.

Michael and I were standing in a crowd. Tony, that portly architecture critic, approached us, a champagne flute in one hand and pamphlets for a recent exhibition he'd curated in the other. He passed us each a pamphlet. It's for a show I'm curating in London, he declared. I'll be there for two weeks, and then I'm off to Dubai. You should talk to Karen, Michael added, because she's going to London too. Then Tony moved on. Michael again raised his eyebrow at me. I could see him eyeing Karen, who had already been approached by Tony and were in conversation. I needed another drink. I saw August in a crowd of people. His gestures had become loose. I heard that after I left he had threatened to throw his shoes at someone during a joke that had gone too far. Apparently, he had even taken one shoe off and wielded it like a club. But before that, he was telling jokes, commanding a crowd. He and Michael didn't speak for the rest of the night. I walked up a flight of stairs to the bar.

From the mezzanine, I espied Michael through a banister, talking to Karen. Michael was a friend, and I respected him as such, even if I was jealous of his success.

There was no point in being derisive simply because I could not control myself. At times it strained our friendship, probably inexplicably for him, unless of course he suspected my jealousy, in which case, I could imagine, he was condescending to me by suspecting me of being jealous, which of course in reality I was. But if he suspected as much, I figured it was because he thought himself better than me, and I would not stand to be condescended like that, and, well, we would, of course, have to fight or become estranged, or perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself, and it was unfair not to tell him what my issues were. Why had he helped August out and only invited me to a party? Most of the time, we were on good enough terms that such tensions were minimal. I was standing in a crowd of people, feigning laughter, more nerves than affectation. And now as I saw him through the banister, he had somehow thwarted my jealousy. He was laughing. Again I walked toward him. I tried to open my mouth, but nothing would come out. I wanted to say something to him, to thank him perhaps, to say that what he had done for August was a good thing, even if he didn't finish the article, I don't know, to say something, to make him aware that his friendship mattered to me, even through the muted jealousy, but I could think of nothing—I wanted to, I began—and then fell silent. He raised his eyebrow and smirked. What are you smiling at? I asked. Oh nothing, he continued to smirk, it's nothing.