

BIRD LIZARD HORSE

Copyright © 2015

Edited & Published by Nostrovia! Poetry

Words by August Smith

Cover Art by Kyle Harvey

Printing by Bottlecap Press



Welcome to My Garden

Welcome to my garden.
Yes I admit there is nothing growing here.
It is a conceptual garden.
The concept is that it's empty.

Look over here, at this patch of dirt.
That is where I conceptually planted tomatoes.
The hazy light hits it so perfectly
that the birds actually fall asleep,
right there on the ground,
lying on their sides for days.
Have you ever seen anything like that?

It's quite unlike the patch of dirt over there.
Over there, the light falls harshly,
like falling bricks,
unshadowed by leaves and stems and fruit,
baking the soft barren earth.

Okay, I admit that this isn't a garden.
And I admit that those birds are dead.
I really wanted to garden, though.
I've always wanted to be a gardener.
I even looked up how to do it—
“how to garden”—
but I got dangerously bored.
Anyway, come, let us bury the birds,
for that is why I invited you over.

Jokes

Nuclear radiation doesn't work on me
because I am a huge asshole. I stand in long lines
that I don't have any reason to be in
just to show off my money in large,
suspicious briefcases. The ancient texts
foretell of an unlikely hero,
a young boy, who,
by overcoming massive obstacles,
would unite everyone in the world,
bringing about lasting peace.
That boy is probably not me
because let's be frank here
that'd be too obvious
and plus
I never overcome massive obstacles.
I just kind of hang out with them
until they get bored and lumber off
and die unburied on the edge of some forest.
I'm avoiding their skeletons.
I'm running out of skeletons.
I'm running out of good jokes to tell your girlfriend.

Everyone Is Getting Laid Except for You

I'm sorry
your poor phone is now a talisman of silence.
Carry that weighted stone of bad vibes
in your pocket, inches away from your embarrassed
genitalia. Your invite to the party must have been lost,
wedged in the space between your anxiety and paranoia.

Suffice to say,
last night's party was so certifiably insane I've framed it
on my wall. Your ex-lover—you know the one—
was there, handing out cute vials of blood,
and not even her batting eyes asked about you.
Eric brought his pet snake which ate the ironic conga line.

There was this moment near the end of the night,
as the varnished deck moaned under the weight
of cast-off cigarettes, when all felt cosmic;
people worse-looking than yourself started to pair off
and float through the air absurdly. We hummed
a simple language that you can't speak.
The stars erotically aligned, just as you suspected.

Listen,
I'm sorry to bear the bad news,
but everyone fell madly in love at the party,
and no, you weren't there,
but I'm sure you'll feel all about it tomorrow.

Your House Party Sucks but You're Having Fun

This house was not built to handle so much vomit. In fact, this house was built before vomit existed, a pristine era, the times of pre-Four Loko and simpler shoes, of darker hues of blues instead of the sheen of dayglo green. There aren't any birds here. Not anymore. This is hallowed ground of weird lights and computer-manipulated drum fills. This temporary cathedral built from red solo cups, this weird eye-contact with some guy in a toga, this constant movement and shifting body heat, this cool dance move that I just invented called "the broken weather vane." This is the place where you have chosen to party tonight.

You are not calm. And you're making sure everyone knows that because you're making what I would describe as animal noises. You have a bicep tattoo and neither of us knows what it means. Your hair is bad but your attitude is two mountains high-fiving. You are howling. You are pointing at people sometimes. Other times your hand is in the shape of a fist, punching at the air on each downbeat with such ceremonial diligence that for a moment it's like your fist is powering the music, somehow part of its unseen machinery, instead of just a bass reaction. You drink beer. You drink more beer. You drink more beer. I'm not sure what we're celebrating but I think it's nothing. The ping pong ball falls into the cup of beer with a pleasant sound and the people around the cup react, again and again, until the police come put us all to bed like parents.

The World Is Not Enough

Fuck! James Bond just shot me directly in the face
and the movie hasn't even started yet!
This is some confrontational art. This is what it's like
to be dying: blood filling my sniper scope vision.

I, too, want to wear a tuxedo and shoot evil Russians, but
this world, it restricts me. I don't even own a nice suit,
much less a gun. My inventory is usually just wallet, phone,
keys, granola bar. No ammo. No such thing as a laser-watch.

Getting through this day-to-day is often a paradox:
I crave uncensored violence yet value my safety.
I watch things die from blood loss, punctured flesh,
compression by polygon, simulation by paid actors.

So when James Bond turns to me and pulls the trigger—

BANG—

wide-legged stance against an all-white backdrop—
“entertainment” and “mortality” double-helix
for a pausable moment.

And I am briefly dead.

And I am at full health.

And I am excited by the prospect of both.

And James Bond is now chasing a sexy assassin
who is escaping in a hot air balloon, I kid you not.

And things are getting pretty tense for us.

And he offers her protection, reaches out his hand.

And she refuses and then she explodes.

And I cannot fathom such splendor.

And watching this movie

is the most boring thing I've done today.

The Bottom Line

A celebrity with a million dollars can buy a dog that rollerblades. Probably two. Probably why I'm not a celebrity with a million dollars.

•

My new green shirt doesn't fit like it did in the dressing room. But it's the same shirt. I've entombed it in my closet until it cooperates or until I find the receipt.

•

Stop me if you know this one.
I heard a joke at a party once and laughed. Later, I repeated the same joke at a different party. No one laughed.

•

There are two things most people avoid thinking about: their own impending death, and their own parents having sex.

•

There are two things we all have in common: we are going to die, and our parents definitely had sex. Not with each other, but maybe. The 80s were a wild ride.

•

Rich neighborhoods lack sidewalks.
I'm told that this isn't indicative of anything.
I'm told "shut up" a lot.

•

Complaining about white people has been appropriated by white people.
Look: I'm even doing it right now.

•

If you shatter a mirror, it just becomes a cluster of tinier, shittier mirrors. But you'll be fine.
It's the person in the mirror who has all the bad luck.

•

A dog on a skateboard drifts past.
He's a celebrity with a million dollars
and a book deal with Harper Perennial.

•

I down the bottle of pomegranate juice like a fucking prince.
I look at the label.
Turns out it's mostly cherries.

•

I feel skeptical of existence.

This is the bottom line.

Under Less Advanced Fluorescents

In line at the grocery store
a baby stared at me
maybe because of
my orange facial hair
or my green hat loud
under bad fluorescents
we held eye contact
for a moment and then
maybe because the mother
was busy paying for
papayas, carrots, paper towels,
a bottle of red wine,
and not paying attention,
I made a silly face
sticking out my tongue
and widening my eyes
and raising my eyebrows
high upon my large forehead
and then I thought of myself
as a fat, bald, doughy baby
in line in the same grocery store
under less advanced fluorescents
in 1991, confused all the time,
my frazzled mom forfeiting coupons
for tomatoes, carrots, paper towels,
a bottle of white wine,
and strange young men and women
in awful hats making ugly faces
that I try to process but can't.
I'm sorry, other baby. Please stop crying.
This is all part of the job
of being a baby.
Grow the fuck up.

Hello, Young America

I'm August Smith:
established poet,
teen heart murmur,
friend to small animals,
presidentially pardoned,
here to assure you
that I am both extremely strong
and very cool.

My smile: hotly debated
on various gossip blogs;
my personality:
up twelve points
on the NASDAQ;
my patriotism: convenient
and my friends: wealthy.

Like you, I have strong morals
and am motivated
by good intentions.

And after a long day
of writing
and editing
difficult poems,
there's nothing I like more
to recharge my mind and body
than a toasty, delicious
Quiznos® sub sandwich, with
the perfect balance of exceptional ingredients,
low prices, high volume, fresh mindset,
progressive politics, youthful appeal,
essential nutrients, and high-quality

hearth-borne, hand-ground multigrain bread,
ideal for lunch, dinner, or by god help me,
breakfast.

You're good enough for this sandwich,
Young America. You're good enough
for this smile that winks and twitches
through the airwaves.

I will follow you like a twice-branded puppy
through the doorways of your home,
feed you this sandwich
while you lounge,
beset by neon lights,
enclosed by inoffensive music,
supine upon a gently warping water bed
upon which not a single crumb will fall.

Two Stars, and a Sliver of a Third

Is there ideology behind your veganism?

Is there psychology behind your Buddhism?

Is there chemistry behind your depression

or prescription behind your medication?

Is there certification behind your certification

or frustration behind your masturbation?

Is there inference behind your meaning?

Is there a way to google this vague dread we all feel
mucking up our veins and throttling our bandwidth?

Worry not, good people of this flailing era!

I have read all of the big books and

I know the answers you seek.

Bring me your doubts.

Bring me your Top Albums of 2008 lists.

Bring me your favorite dollar menu items.

Don't forget to bring me your doubts.

I have spread a colorful blanket upon this hilltop
overlooking the city. There. We have started out
with a true statement.

Information, then, is impassive.

Stimulus is impassive.

I am so fucking impassive.

And yet, good people,
you hang your perceptions on things
like heavy coats on hooks.

It's a nice coat!

But I don't care. Here,
have some wine.

Did you know that the stars in our galaxy
outnumber the atoms in our universe?

Of course not, because that information is a lie
and doesn't care. Good people, perhaps
we are no longer moved by anything.

We catalogue information,
examine it like a colorful object—a doohickey—
log it away into our files,
conjure an appropriate
emotional reaction
and then move on. God,
it's terrifying. I don't want
to think I just need
more wine.

But we have no respite and the feed is always fed.
Does the sun set for political reasons?

Yes, but I can see both sides of the issue.

Did you read Huffington Post's thinkpiece
on racial politics written by a tropical lizard?

Of course. A commenter took issue
with the fact that the author of the article
was "just a lizard."

Is your iPhone powered by sickle cell anemia?

No, actually, I have an Android and hemophilia.

Which rapper co-branded with Lean Cuisine on Labor Day?
The best one.

Did you catch the hilarious viral vid of that guy
setting fire to his grandmother's toolshed
while listening to ABBA?

That was me.

And for the record it was a boathouse.
Which Sex and the City character are you?
I'm
 like
 totally a Miranda.

Good people, can I even call you Good?
What is that word?
Who invented it?

Are we filtering this world through a bad filter?
I want to decrease the contrast
 until everything is swallowed in a light
 the color of milky beige but what is beige
 without brown and yellow reference points?
 If I average each review on Amazon.com—
 each opinion on kitchenware,
 each position on two-sided duct tape,
 each view on the latest big book,
 each judgement on a dog kennel—
 the result is two stars, and a little sliver of a third.
Information! It's worse than impassive,
 it actively doesn't care whether we react or die.
 We are at peak shrug.

Our shoulders just keep going up and up
 to stars that aren't bright enough,
 casting a weak, sour glow on this hilltop, reflected and
 warped
in my wineglass.

I give those stars
two stars out of five.

I give this glass three stars.

I give this wine four and a half.

Mario Parties

for John Carroll

1.

Wario and Waluigi stand idly on a brightly-colored boardgame space. They are at a party. They are waiting for their turn. It's a turn-based party.

Mario happily leaps past them, trailing coins and stars, hardly registering their presence.

“Why don't we ever throw a party?” asks Waluigi. Silently, they ignore the obvious truth: no one would attend.

2.

Waluigi rolls out of bed, lights a cigarette, starts cooking eggs at the dirty stove. “Mornin’,” says Wario on his way to check the mail at the front door. “This apartment's a shit hole,” says Waluigi.

Wario sits at the cluttered kitchen table and opens a large red envelope bearing the Official Nintendo Seal. “Looks like we're playing golf today,” he says.

“God fucking damnit,” says Waluigi as he stubs his cigarette out on a stale piece of garlic bread. “I hate golf.”

3.

When they arrive at the course,
everyone is already there,
fawning over Mario,
talking about rainbows.

As Wario and Waluigi exit their rusting Nissan Stanza
and approach the group, everyone goes quiet.
Luigi leans over to Daisy and whispers something,
and they both laugh.

A bright, happy melody plays from the sky.
Even the sun's smiling face seems to taunt.

4.

Wario and Waluigi arrive home very late.
A long day of losing
adds little
to a long life of losing.

They place their bags of Taco Bell
on the kitchen table. Waluigi lights
a joint. Wario dumps sand out of his
shoe and pours himself a glass of Dr. Pepper.

"I don't even want my own game," says Waluigi.
"I just... don't want to play anymore."
"It doesn't quite work like that," says Wario.

They turn on Adult Swim
and eat their burritos in-between
bouts of grunting laughter. Thankfully
the moon is faceless. Thankfully
the sky is silent.

Raspberry

Age 5

sugared dimension, memory of whirled youth,
dewy-eyed cousins and emotion of baked honey,
ripe gift from your old hands, activated by smile,
placed on a tongue that refused
to take the lord's name in vain.

a young sky, the roof of God's
gaping mouth, tooth-white clouds, backyard
warmed by a paisley sun, thorned berry patch
next to the garage,

soil trod crayola by scores of lithe limbs.
good heavens, vicious red, seeds
so ripe and so bound to season,
your face a kind of melted wax
waning like the saint in the setting sun.

Age 10

Again, the sun figures clearest in the memory,
the warmth of my bike's handlebar,
the friction of an ungainly tennis racket,
dragged two blocks from the courts to your house,
scattering gravel like clicking sparks across
the knee-shredding pavement.

Sad-eyed mother on the porch
touches my bony shoulder,
says "go inside, she's awake but tired,"
tells me "it might be scary."
Never since have I seen my mother
so matter-of-fact.

The air in the house
felt paused, twitching;
time as a warped VHS tape
rewound until too tired
for the red pace of life,
the candy bowl now more
void than fruit.

So I decided to leave,
but not before I saw
through an open door
your narrow back
underneath your own quilts,
heaving slowly outward
then inward
subtle movement
like the plants I swore
as a child
I could watch grow.

Age 11

At your funeral, God closed his mouth,
salivated rain. Gallant heaven
shut down for maintenance.
I turned to my cousin,
told him I'd never seen
a casket lowering device before.
He hadn't either.

We watched the machine as it whirred,
trying to figure out how it worked.

Age 23

The people who live in that house now
have painted your garage door black.
It looks ridiculous next to the
above-ground pool—fake blue plastic
beneath a breathing hometown sky.

These days I'm not as sure how God figures into
an equation as simple as planting,
watering, waiting, and color,
soil so rich you could make a living off it,
that swallowed sun hanging above—great variable—
christening your raspberry bushes' offspring in my
mother's garden, wondrous roots strong
beneath so many slowly dying plants.

Spectral Shift / Sine Wave

The most profoundly alone thing in the universe is subjective.
This I have learned from the transdimensional hypercube
that I communicate with on a daily basis.

The hypercube and I are in lockstep.
I perceive it only inwardly, like everyone else.
I bounce ideas off it. I project what I can muster.

By our very composition we agree on everything:
the hologram-like nature of existence and
how it all feels deceptively “beyond,” as if with great focus

I could phase my everything into another’s,
converging and absorbing memories and passwords,
data clusters, emotive equations, vortices, ideas.

We agree that the outer self is like a laser:
straight-forward, halted by the physical,
blindingly pure, great at a party,

but victim to spectral shift from the distances
between gridlocked subjectives,
as the sine wave warps even the most distilled message.

When two lasers intersect nothing significant happens.
Two ships passing in the night on separate planets,
antenna-tuned to different dimensions:
profoundly alone.

Things Change the Same

Mom is still looking for a new job.
She tells me this over the phone, distracted
by the cooking she has to do for my siblings
who I can hear shouting in the background—

Charlie has JonPaul cornered and is repeatedly
snapping him with a rolled-up wet towel.

JonPaul doesn't usually retaliate; he curls into a ball
and commands Mom to tell Charlie to stop.

Jack Henry whines, shrill and drowned out,
tea kettle in a wind storm.

Benjamin plays a song on his guitar about Jack,
referring to him as “tiny Jack baby boy.”

Frank, the eldest, complains about the cold coffee
in the pot without doing anything about it.

Mom is the sole employee of
a local noodle packaging company,
crafting ravioli while her boss sits,
cracking open beers at noon, punctuating
the day-to-day with racist Obama jokes.
Cradling the phone with her shoulder—

she tells me the education field is hard to re-enter
after spending 25 years as a stay-at-home mom.

She and Dad still have fifteen years to consider
her career as their children age and leave the home. 21

She wants the family to visit me in Boston, but doesn't know when they can; "Maybe in a few years."

She recently took a class to learn Microsoft Access which she thinks will help her prospects.

She wants me to pray for her, "even though I know you don't do that kind of thing anymore."

I hang up the phone and sit quietly at my desk and let the sadness crush me like a huge quilt dropped in slow motion from a skyscraper. Outside a neighbor family is passing around a football and I distract myself, inventing their names and lives—

Joanne tosses the ball to James, who hates sports and refuses to participate.

Robert demands that James plays along, his prepubescent voice carrying high and far.

Donna, the quiet one, has her eyes glued to her phone, oblivious to the game she's a part of.

Perry loudly complains about the chilly wind that hushes our street and stokes his boredom.

Steve catches the football and refuses to let it go, coaxing his siblings into chasing him.

I don't give this family a mother.

Bird

What crime did I commit, August,
besides being near you on that day
you entered the woods behind
your uncle's house?
Everyone remembers their final
day, August. That's how it works.

With eleven years of retrospect,
I would describe that final day
as *anticlimactic*.

For me, a normal bird day:
deft hops from twig to branch,
a pause to transmit a brief melody
to my earshot likeness,
feathers to preen, seeds to scope, etc.
when suddenly, mid-sonata,
I am shot,
replaced by a small wintery cloud
of feathers, a BB-sized hole in my tiny bird lung,
a ruddy-cheeked kid standing
at a blurring distance,
holding a gun, mittens at his feet,
surprised that he still feels like a child.
For you, August: *anticlimactic*.

Lizard

Who could blame you, August?
You tried to feed me. You did some research.
But I just wouldn't eat.
You'd pile handfuls of
carefully chopped tomatoes
onto a bed of wet lettuce
just like the fourteen dollar handbook told you to.
But the only thing I tried to bite
was your hand. Not to be a jerk but

you know how sometimes
you just immediately hate someone
the moment you meet them?

What most offended me, August,
was how long I remained dead in my tank.
Were you being optimistic? Or ignorant?
When you buried me I was eyeless.

Oh and by the way—
“Matrix”? Really?
That's a stupid name
for a pet lizard.

Horse

You were luckier than I, August.
You were driving down
a foggy Michigan road
under a really huge and yellow moon.
You and your friend
were seven hours into
the long trip home
for Christmas break,
eyes weary, small talk spent.
The other horses and I—
one of us had broken the fence
to our pen and so we decided
to go for a walk on the highway
to warm our blood and stretch our legs
amidst the chill in the air that
makes one want to get home quickly.
We were all wearing colorful blankets
and mine was bright red
and then it all happened really fast,
you, swerving
between my brothers and sisters,
headlights blasting huge horse shadows
against the roadside snowbanks,
and then the muffled snap of your fender
striking me in the back leg.

I lay sprawled in the snow
while my siblings, spooked,
galloped through the fog
and you called 911 from your car.
Soon, my owners showed up weeping,
not looking at you but me.

And then you drove away.

August, it could have been you.
You could have been the dead animal.
I'm glad it wasn't you, of course.
I'm happy for you.
But I just want you to know
that it could have been you.

4 Can't-Miss Lifehacks That Will Change Your Life!

1.

If you want to increase your circle of friends—
because, honestly, who doesn't?—
simply widen your definition of the word “friend.”
Keeeeeep going. Widen it all the way. Swallow
the world in an awesome tidal wave of friendship
definition. Ravage the continents with
your circumstantial connections, particles
of unrequited love vibrating invisibly across the universe
like in string theory, which incidentally
was discovered and theorized by a bunch
of my genius physicist friends,
those crazy fellas!

2.

If you want to have a building named after you—
because, again, this appears to be
a desirable thing universally—
all you have to do is change your name
to that of a preexisting building. This is advice coming
directly from me, Mr. Space Needle Eiffel Tower,
the most prominent poet-slash-tourist attraction
this side of Robert Frost's dusty old barn in
Vermont
or wherever it is.

3.

Okay, follow me on this one:

something only exists if you have a word for it.

Logically, it follows that if you mentally replace
negative, hurtful words—

for example, death, depression, war,
starvation—

with brighter, more colorful words—

e.g., rainbows, candy canes, disco balls,
the October light streaming through a window
and resting gingerly on your dearest lover's
silken shoulder blades—

then those original concepts stop existing entirely,
becoming like a linguistic blindspot of brilliantly white
ignorance.

This is my own method of coping.

I never feel very candy canes anymore,
and I certainly haven't noticed anything in the news
about disco balls in the Middle East.

4.

Now that I think about it,
let's do away with language altogether.
Syntax and meaning offer no shelter
to the sparrow who takes flight
through the breaking light of October.
There is no pleasure there,
but likewise, no definable pain.
There are no friends
and no enemies, no naming
and no subjective comparisons.

There is only song and stimuli,
breathing and reactions,
candy canes and disco balls,
birthday cakes and;;; emptiness
the game of rest and time
-- eyes with of this it,
merry words with out any
truth tongue going
happi""ness tree gargle ham ocean
instantly (/ ● ▽ sadgg ●) / *aeat: ° weat

backwards trumpet the departure propriety. Frankness

resolution piano gravemoss assistance
ungiven loveless
engaged oblivion adhdftychivny
bbb badgy

Frankness
backwards trumpet the departure propriety. Frankness

ABOUT



August Smith is a Michigan-born poet. He currently lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, and is an MFA candidate at University of Massachusetts Boston. He runs Cool Skull Press, writes for Mostly Midwest, and is the author of four other chapbooks: *The Mario Kart 64 Poems*, *Alien Drug*, *I'm Having a Blast*, and *Upperpeninisula*. In his free time, he enjoys cooking curries, sitting on porches, and consuming beverages.

Special thanks to Minor Manor, Chelsea Errante, Christopher Morgan, and all of the people in my MFA program.

Read More: <http://august.mostlymidwest.com/>

“Welcome to my Garden” originally appeared in *Gesture* #6.

“Your House Party Sucks but You’re Having Fun” and “Jokes” originally appeared in *Circle Poetry Magazine* #3.

“4 Can’t-Miss Lifehacks That Will Change Your Life!” and “Spectral Shift / Sine Wave” originally appeared in *Electric Cereal*.

“Hello, Young America” appeared w/ recording in 90’s *Meg Ryan* #5.

“The World Is Not Enough” is directly inspired by a @dril tweet.

“Under Less Advanced Fluorescents” was published on Metatron’s blog.

This book is dedicated to Michigan
and all of my friends that live there

and all of the animals that successfully avoided me.