

Catching Lightning Bugs



poems by Todd Meierhans

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Dedication

To Mom.

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“Isn't life a series of images that change as they repeat themselves?” –Andy Warhol

Catching Lightning Bugs

By Todd Meierhans

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Catching Lightning Bugs

As dusk begins to settle past my window's bars,
The smell of stale tobacco returns me
To dusk at home, when I poked holes in jars' lids,
So the tiny lightning bugs could breathe.

I headed out to the woods in my backyard,
Where lightning bugs often twinkle at night,
But twinkled quietly. It was so hard
To see them flash against the sky's dimming light.

There! Back behind the mossy dogwood tree!
I lay the jar down on the damp, thick grass,
And caught him in my cupped hands, stealing
His light, encasing him in the glass.

When the trees circled me to block my path,
My mother's voice reached to pull me back.
It was never easy for me to find
My way home, with only my bug lantern.

My mother calls me still. I need to go.
I shake black, rusted bars that never move,
Begging God to light my way home,
And set me free, so that I can seek love.

She sleeps silently surrounded by dark,
And had I only one more night out
In the woods, I'd catch enough bugs to find her.
The prison guard orders, "Lights out!" Darkness.

Tee Ball and T-Shirts

When I was about ten years old
Britney Spears was a Mouseketeer
on the New Mickey Mouse Club Show.
She didn't have celebrity breasts then,
but she had the same cute face.

When I was ten I could've gotten her -
I was good at Tee Ball and soccer
and rode a five speed BMX bike
with baseball cards in the wheels.

Britney's a big star now, and wouldn't date me.
So I went to Sam Goody last week
and bought a Britney Spears black T-Shirt.
But after one wash, her face is flaking off.

Campfire Marshmallows

As my friends and I sat
around the campfire
on that cool August night,

my marshmallow fell
off the end of my stick
into the hissing fire,

burning into itself,
blackening,
and finally disappearing under the flames,

reminding me of that
Buddhist monk in Vietnam,

whom I saw on TV.

A Beacon

Old mariners have been guided into dangerous ports
By lighthouses whose flames were out,
Or which crumbled into the ocean years before
Like the ships they tried to save.
The old remember the lights.

Young mariners need a beacon.
After sailing past the edges of their maps
Any light is land, and any land is home.
The young have big eyes.

Some of their ships fell from the horizon
Only a few miles away from land,
One flash from deliverance.

Some of their ships found their way.
Those mariners lit a tallow candle,

Because it's lonely in the dark.

The Last Game at Palmer Stadium

In the bleachers across from me
there were cloth banners,
large orange numbers on black backgrounds,
one for each year Palmer Stadium was open.
All the alumni sat behind their years.
It was vacant behind the earliest banners:
1916, 1917, 1918, 1919, 1920.
All empty.
Behind 1921 sat just one ancient man,
bundled up in layers as if his mother
had dressed him to play in the snow,
slowly waving a tiny orange and black flag.

Spring Water

At a Borders Books in Boston
A young woman sits in the coffee shop,
Drinking a Poland Spring,
Reading names carved into her table
Instead of her book on travel.

A phone rings, the Fier Elise tone.
She picks hers up but hers is dead.
Cell phones and grandmothers just die.

At a bar in Barcelona
A grey-bearded man sits on a stool,
Holding a frosted mug,
Staring at his own trembling hand,
Instead of the woman dancing.

A remake plays of a song he knew.
He sings, but his words are wrong.
He smiles, then sips and hums along.

Dove

As I sat alone on the boardwalk
staring out at the ocean
on an breezy summer afternoon,

a boy was flying a red kite
that dove to the beach
and dragged behind him,

scraping against the ground,
writhing,
and leaving a trail of blistered remains,

reminding me of that
black man who was dragged to death,

whose name escapes me now.

Snowmen

Snowmen were watching him
When he thought he had her all alone.
They saw through the window.
She screamed and they took him away.

She stood atop his grave
Which is buried beneath pure white-
Snow that had only touched other snow-
No cigarette ash, no dirt.

She lay down atop him,
And though the snow gave her back
The same chill his hand once did,
Made snow angels to carry him to Heaven.

Reflection

Lord, how those Salvation Army bells
Clang clang above the Christmas crowd,
Clanging me away from a sale at Saks,
Across the stream of shoppers and bags.

But then I see a bubbling fountain
Which lures me in, like so many
Who wished on their spare change.

I sit on its ledge, about to snatch the coins,
But gazing into my own wavering eyes,
I let them stay, like God leaves stars in the sky,
Afraid of defacing my soul with a rippling swipe.

Man in the Moon

It was Halloween
And I was as a hobo, with a bandana on a stick,
Driving to a party I was expected at.

Hobos don't like parties though.
They like riding trains, for as long as they want
Or until they get caught.

I saw some old train tracks,
So I pulled my car over,
And followed them on foot into the woods.

I saw a light from the ground to my left,
It wasn't a train and was away from the tracks,
But I walked towards it anyway.

The pond was glowing.
The moon sat in its bottom,
So close that I could sink to it.

It was Halloween
And I didn't have my pumpkin pail,
But I stood alone at the pond's edge,

Asking the moon
If I could join him beneath the surface,
If only for the night.

Album

Iron and selenium captured my soul,
and click by click froze my smiles.
What lovely days? Where does the time go?

Here's me trying to become a star.
I would swallow baking powder
and cough up prepared cakes.

I would swallow long swords
and bleed on stage.
I juggled flaming sticks,
But anyone can juggle in a picture.

I never had the nicest clothes,
but Mom taught me how to dance
and wrapped me in a blue, fuzzy blanket.

She took so many pictures.
I hate this dusty album.
I would have buried it with her
but she was cremated.

I tried to snort her up,
cutting her into little lines,
remembering happy times
when we'd dance and smile.

These small, rotten, daguerreotypes-
Picture after picture, it's all the same.
Romantically I smile, lick up the dust,
and cry powdery tears.

True North

Some nights, you just need to get lost.
It's hard with all the signs and lights,
So I went to the woods the night my mom died.
I sat on the ground, running my fingers through the grass,
Stopping to clench a smooth rock in my hand.

I looked up at the stars pushing through the trees,
Remembering my Boy Scout days,
And realized that even in the woods I couldn't be lost.
I had learned how to find Polaris,
True North- always dictating the way.

But even that doesn't last forever.
True North changes,
As the Earth wobbles in its rotation.
Polaris, Alpa Cephei, Vega, then Thuban.
Again Polaris.

It takes 360 years for its light to reach us.
So the light in those woods left that star
Before my mom got sick,
Before she was born,
Before people lived long enough to die young.

As tough as it is to get lost,
It's even harder to be found
360 years later. Or even 100.
I won't live that long, and I regret
Her light will die with mine.

Aunt Emma

Aunt Emma's funeral was filled with flowers not people-
Lilacs, chrysanthemums, anything appropriate,
Even an arrangement of white carnations
Made to look like Max, her little bichon frise.

Every year she sent me birthday cards, sure,
But I never got a check in them.
And as her final gift to me,
I had to drag her casket out of the Church-
Too heavy for four pall bearers to lift
Since she ordered it filled with her jewels,
Hundreds and hundreds of pounds
Of antique bracelets, necklaces, and tiaras.

I'd love to be a pirate
With a big green parrot on my shoulder
And a black eye patch.
I'd say: "Aargh matey, let's dig 'er up."
And set out to the cemetery with my crew.

Once we got her casket out,
We'd pry it open and run our hands through the booty.
Polly would peck her eyes out and we'd laugh
Because parrots always get the better of dead people.

A Crowded Street

Fluttering lights off to the side of the road.
A tow truck. A cop car. Maybe an ambulance.

Green light.
Cars inch forward.
Two lanes merge into one.

Yellow light.
A motorcycle on its side.
Policemen by a taxicab
With a caved in windshield.

Red light
Staining the road between the cars and grass.
A blood-soaked boot,
Ten feet away.
It's brown, like a burnt match.

Green light.
I'll never know the name of the man,
Or whether his boot still held his foot,
But I have to go because it's green.

Seals Kissing

Two pictures hang in my kitchen-
one has two seals,
kissing on a beach.
(I didn't know that seals could kiss)
The crest of a wave breaks behind them.

The one below has two seals on grass,
lying on their backs,
being gutted by large Alaskan men.
(I think I can see a heart)
Their red innards spilling onto the green earth
mocks my seasonal Christmas napkins.

Maybe those are the same seals.
The carefree seals kissing
were later opened by the Eskimos,
until their ribs crested out of their bodies.
A before and after, of sorts.
Though I suppose it could be the other way.

I'm too damn old

I'm coughing after ten minutes of tennis
and I know that cigarettes are bad for me,
but I'm old enough to buy them.

I'm old enough to know that you don't die
falling out of trees
crashing your bike
skipping school
smoking a joint
getting turned down for a date
going to the prom with a girl who likes your friend
getting rejected from college
losing your friends to other colleges
losing a parent
losing your wallet

I'm old enough to have some children by now
but I don't

I'm old enough
to be afraid of kids riding their bikes late at night
to hate the snow
to feel alone
to hate my boss

I'm not too old to find 16 year old girls attractive,
but I'm old enough to know better.

9/11/01

All the pictures
(or at least some of them)
of the people who are missing
(or at least some of them)
have been posted up on a building by the missing people's loved ones
(or at least some of them).
How horrible it would be if that building were blown up too,
the missing being again covered in stone,
their photographs melting into the earth
and joining the lost.

On a Street

We found our enemy:
It was bin Laden, in Afghanistan, with the Taliban.
I saw him on a poster
Standing next to Bert from Sesame Street,
Held by a man too upset to get how funny it would be,
For Bert to teach Osama how to share a cookie.

Trick or Treat

Ghosts and Monsters walk side by side,
Collecting candy house by house.
But hiding behind any door could be a terrorist
Waiting to ambush our children.
A terrorist with Anthrax rolled into Smarties.
A terrorist with smallpox in the small Snickers.
So parents take their children's bucket of candy
And throw it out,
Replacing it with store-bought treats.

In Afghanistan, parents walk the streets,
Searching the cratered ground for food.
Their children haven't eaten in days.
A yellow canister lies on its side-
It could be a week of humanitarian aid-
Or a cluster bomb.
Fathers, unwilling to watch their families starve,
Just pick it up,
Ending their suffering.

Taboo

Empire State
Building

New York
King Kong
Tallest
Highest
Skyscraper

Me: Uh... It's the one that's still standing
Her: Empire State Building

Mailbox

Stamp
Post Office
Letter
Envelope
Send

Me: This is where you could find anthrax
Her: Everywhere
Me: It's got a flag
Her: Everywhere
Me: No, you might get a Christmas card there
Her: Card store
Me: No, the specific iron thing outside your house- you can check it...
Her: Mailbox

Airport

Travel
Planes
Runway
Takeoff
Fly

Me: It's where you have to wait.
Her: In a line.
Me: It's a line where you go through metal detectors.

Her: Public School

Me: No, it's where you wouldn't want to see a terrorist.

Her: In my closet.

Me: Baggage Claim

Her: Airport

Time.

A Winter Wish

We'd test the Christmas lights,
Strand by strand before they go up.
When a string stays dark
It's usually just one bulb,
Either loose or dead.
We'd circle what works around the tree,
And throw out the rest.

Then we'd go through the ornaments
Looking at each one,
Remembering Baby's First Christmas,
Projects from art class,
Like the misshapen cardboard reindeer
With googly eyes, damaged antlers
And glitter across its torso.
Then the ancient ornament:
A blue, glass bulb with a metal top and hook
which survived the trip to America 50 years ago.
We'd hang each one,
Finding the perfect spot.

Then a crash and shattered glass on the floor.
I broke the ancient ornament.
I wish to end like that,
And not like those lights.

My Princess

I searched for my princess
Many years ago, when I was still a boy,
Young enough to believe in true love
And second chances.

I ran across green fields.
I jumped over brick walls.
I swam with puffer fish in the deepest of oceans.
I fearlessly leapt across bottomless gorges.
I shot fire from my hands.

And when I found her,
She loved me just because I was there,
And life has never been simpler.

The Mirror

She was patient in life, and patient with death;
It took her a year to succumb.
Her son wasn't there when she finally passed,
And only the large mirror on the wall
Watched her gasp her final words.

They read her will, and everyone was satisfied;
Her daughter got the stocks and stamps,
While her son got the house and everything in it,
Including the mirror.

The son's wife was fond of redecorating,
So they turned his mother's bedroom into a home gym,
With a treadmill, a Stairmaster, and even a television.
They used air purifiers and Febreze
To remove the smell of dust, mothballs, and lingering despair.
They put her things into storage,
But brought the mirror down into the living room,
To complete the retro look his wife wanted.

One day, during a round of Pictionary in the new living room,
His mother's face appeared in the mirror
With her watchful eyes and wrinkled brow.
First, his wife saw her, but kept drawing hoping no one would notice.
Then the son saw her, sitting speechless as the hourglass expired.
Their guests, following his gaze, saw the liver-spotted face
In the mirror and hurried to leave.

Something had to be done about that mirror.
But what could they do?
They couldn't keep it in their house, sell it at a garage sale,
Or just give it away to a friend.
And who would be the one to hit the glass with a hammer
And shatter her soul?

So they took the mirror and placed it in storage
With the rest of her belongings,
Where it remains to this day.
Her old checkered tablecloth covers the glass,
Hiding her face that still mouths her final words,
"You're next."

Snowdrifts

In a forest I know, near where I grew up
Moss grows thick at the base of the oaks,
Making green pillows for the trees' shadows.
Squirrels chase each other, then stop.
Birds on the ground, searching for food
are frightened by a falling branch
And explode into a flying flock.

Even if I stay in bed,
Snow is going to fall in a few hours
And will rest on the braches,
Like those shadows on the moss.

In the town where I grew up,
Snow is going to fall in a few hours.
Little boys stuffed in puffy coats will
Furiously work their driveways with red shovels.
Snowforts will be built by tiny mittened hands,
And defended by snowman guards
And fierce iceball fights.
Plows will clear the streets,
Leaving piles the size of burial mounds by the curbs.

After spring comes and squeezes
The men and the forts into the lawn,
The last snow will sit in huge piles
In the corners of shopping mall parking lots.
But that too will melt
and stream into the sewer,
leaving no trace behind,
Except for stories about how behind Nordstrom
There was a heap of dirty snow over
Ten kids high.

Stapled

His wish was granted and they were divorced,
Meaning that he was now in charge of decorating.
He started by taking down the wedding pictures,
Then plucked the ugly oil paintings from the walls.
Finally, her sewing room was becoming his den.

He was asthmatic and carpets made him wheeze,
But there was a light brown carpet on the floor,
Wall to wall.

He used a sharpened hooked tile knife to cut the rug into strips,
Making sure to lift the carpet well off the floor
To avoid damaging the wood.
It was rolled into strips, tied, and then hauled out to the curb.

Removing the pad was a different matter-
It crumbled as he tried to roll it into a bundle,
Tearing on the hundreds of staples used to secure it.
But piece by piece he picked it up and swept it up.

The floor had as many staples as the beach has shells.
On his knees, he yanked them out, one by one,
With a small pair of needlenose pliers,
Frustration mounting with each pull.

Even though he's done with the den,
And the rolls of carpet and the bags of padding
Have been collected and taken away,
He still finds staples from time to time,
And probably will forever.

Escape

After the jail break, he will be recognized
Even at gas stations hundreds of miles away.
But a mask would arouse more suspicion-
He chuckles thinking of Richard Nixon
Trying to buy a plane ticket to Mexico.

He remembers walking along the Pacific,
His small hand enveloped by his father's.
A red balloon slipped out of his other,
And soared into the sky, out of sight,
Toward freedom you can't find on earth.

About the Author

Todd Meierhans was born in Metuchen, New Jersey and lived there for years before moving to NYC. In addition to his writing, he holds down a day job and has a thriving T-Shirt business.

Todd encourages his friends and enemies to contact him through his website, <http://www.toddmeierhans.com>