



See it here

Save it where?

Max Du
Forward by Timothy Karoff

Forward

Over the course of the quarter I've had the privilege of reading Max's poetry and watching his style crystallize. Now that these ten weeks have passed, I'm lucky enough to have a soapbox – in the form of this foreword – to explain what it is about these poems that makes them special to me. My hope is that I can use this foreword to convince you to pay special attention to the details in the poems collected in *See it Here – Save it Where?*

Du's poetic voice is earnest and wistful, but serious. Even when his poems' subject matter veers into dark territory, their romantic tinge often remains. Take, for instance, this couplet from "Ode to a Dying Fish": *The red starburst on your head I touch, / an oozing stamp, metal rod's kiss*. The poem flips the reader's expectations, turning a gruesome scene into a gently-rendered image. Who would think to describe a wound as a "kiss"? The tensions in this couplet – between innocence and brutality, beauty and gore – undergird many of the poems in this chapbook. The brilliance of poems like "What Whales Do" and "I need to know." lies in the ways that they metabolize their brutal anecdotes, never flinching from painful details, but never indulging either. It's a challenge to keep the poem from being subsumed by its grisly images, especially when those images are as haunting as the dead whale and robin chicks that Du conjures in these poems, but Du navigates this challenge with grace. He strikes a balance, letting these stories breathe while ultimately folding them neatly into the poems.

One characteristic of Du's poetry is his fascination with childhood, and on a deeper level, innocence. Though many of these poems center on the speaker's childhood memories, to call them 'nostalgic' would be an oversimplification. In "Orbits of Forgotten Dreams" (my favorite poem in the collection), the speaker struggles to understand why, as a child, he filled the planets hanging from his bedroom ceiling with candies. Here, childhood is a time of wonder which the speaker can no longer access. But in "Ode to a Dying Fish," the speaker's childlike wonder leads him into a one-sided encounter with a dying fish, thereby implicating him (*I was curious. / You were dying.*). And in "I need to know," the speaker's innocence allows him to believe that the robin chicks he takes home are alive, setting him up for the horrific realization that they were dead the whole time. These poems detail moments where childlike innocence bumps up against raw, often painful reality. In Du's poems, innocence is simultaneously wonderful, fragile, and dangerous.

I can't discuss Du's poetry without at least touching on his use of imagery. Du's sense of observation is keen; his poems are driven by their vivid, strange, and sometimes surreal images. Take, for example, this fragment from "I need to know.": *the mist collapsed to dew*. In the days after I read this poem, I caught myself thinking about this phrase when I walked over dewy grass on the way to my classes and imagining it as flattened fog. The image is tangential to the theme of the poem; it's just a small snapshot of the world through a different lens.

These poems are peppered with many other sharp, delightful lines like these. A few of my other favorites: *the walls smudged saddle-grey from years of constant chafing* ("What Whales Do"); *Wheels on weld joints tap-tap like / trembling frozen branches* ("Trains, they Barrel Through the Snow"); *wax glaze clinking like marbles* ("Orbits of Forgotten Dreams"). Du's images worm their way into the readers' minds and stay there long after they've finished reading.

There are other features of Max's poems that I'd like to discuss: his subtle attention to the sounds of words, his sentence structures, his lineation, his use of indentation. But I only have so much space here. I'd rather you read the poems yourself than read what I have to say about them. I hope you'll enjoy this collection as much as I have.

-Timothy

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Ode to a Dying Fish

I traced, with a probing finger,
the dark curve that ran along its body,

flipped the dorsal spines open, shut,
stroked the urine-slick, milky belly.

I was curious.
You were dying.

The red starburst on your head I touch,
an oozing stamp, metal rod's kiss.

The same tanks, burbling air pumps,
butcher, blue apron, rubber mallet,

amberjack. Scale-flashing figures, slime-ridden
bodies, ugly creatures, they are thrown on crimson boards.

And the same split second that I turned away,
reading off chemicals from cans of coffee.

Ignoring, maybe, the smack of steel on slimy bone.
So why, why do I remember you?

Brain scrambled, you still gulped and
slapped your tail listlessly.

So I just set you down, softly, and watched
the way your gills flashed and flared,

and even as you finally stopped
twitching and lay, shedding your

scales on the market floor tiles,
your eyes, they stared not at me

but at packs of disposable chopsticks
and instant coffee, final sale.

Orbits of Forgotten Dreams

In my old bedroom hangs
a solar system of plastic
planets, dangling from pieces

of fishing line tied to star-shaped
thumbtacks thrust into the ceiling
and held with wads of chewing gum.

One morning, freshman year of
college, I rise too quickly and hit
my head on Neptune.

It splits into two pieces and from
the faded turquoise shell comes
a shower of old candies.

I run my fingers through
the brown-blotched sugar bites,
that faded raspberry pink,

lemon yellow. They tumble
in the hemisphere, dust sloughing,
wax glaze clinking like marbles.

And for a long time I wonder why,
bed-bouncing in floppy mohawk hair
and a Timex Triathlon, waterlogged,

this eleven-year-old boy would find joy
in cupping little
hollow worlds in his

slender hands and filling them
with marvelous sweets that he
would never eat.

Trains, they Barrel Through the Snow

In pine shadow my old neighbor sits on a lawn chair and I
stand, in snow pants and boots and coat and streetlamp haze,
the fields, glistening fields in front, and he says

listen, as two horns sound, feathered,
from beyond, beyond the Mormon church, beyond
the limestone quarry, beyond...

It's the Amtrak. The snowless sky, it
shuttles sound from nine kilometers
away,

through these sparkling trees, these two bodies,
these houses behind, behind.

Many January nights I stick my face into
my window screen to smell
the air, the sharp, peppery air.

Horns, though I heard their braying,
meant nothing

until he tells me what they are,
as if my world was but a frosty
haze that crystalizes, explosively,

from his pointing fingernail, flattened
from hammering wooden plugs
in 1973, dam repair.

And then, then another sound.
"You have good ears," he says.

Wheels on weld joints tap-tap like
trembling frozen branches.

What Whales Do

Until I turned eighteen, I slept with a killer whale plushie. I'd wrap my knuckles around the crook of its dorsal and lie belly-to-belly because my mom forgot how to hug and my dad slept in a different room, where he wedged a piece of notebook paper, folded, in the jamb to stop the wind from rattling the door.

My friends, they'd throw the whale around the room, making airplane noises as it tumbled from wall to desk to creamy carpet,
because that's what boys do.
So, I learned that boys didn't nuzzle stuffed animals in their sleep, even if the stuffing smelled of stale shampoo and its plush worn down to a matted fuzz.
Our neighbors siphoned boxed wines and slow danced tipsy, feet grinding patio moss to smithereens.
In algebra I learned that two slashes, two negatives, they cancel out.

In 1910, Stanley Madden and Sophus Jensen, aged 14 and 17, Decided to trap a killer whale and shoot its eyes point-blank and cut its throat open with a hunting knife.
How it must have squirmed on the dock they dragged it on, bound tight on fin and tail,
how its bloody smile never faded
because that's what whales do, right?
They keep smiling and I kept smiling
because two slashes were meant to disappear,
even when my dad drove away to his new apartment and I was left sitting on the mattress he used to sleep on, the walls smudged saddle-grey from years of constant chafing as he took apart his bedroom every morning and turned it into an office.

And on these mornings, I, still plushie-warm, would smile as the air from our bodies intermingled
on the stair landing,
and he'd ruffle my hair, call me little boy, my little precious boy,
but that the smile was a torn smile,
hopeless, as I've since realized,
like the pearly smirk of a slashed throat.

I need to know.

Summer nights, I'd leave my window cracked open,
and as the air stilled, waiting, and the mist collapsed to dew,
I would hear the robins sing.

To me the robins were listing,
their songs filled with conjunction.
But this, yet this, and this, still—

For at times, I find myself thinking of human communication,
the songs we weave with our eyes, our arms, our hips,
the songs I, an only child, learned to sing out of tune.

But tell me, a flock of people at an airport gate in O'Hare—
how do they stitch themselves into twin lines?

Or, my dad and I walking, alone, through Baneberries and Monkshood—
who starts by saying, "I love you?"

Once, after a storm, I found an overturned robin's nest,
three pink chicks tangled up inside.
Limp, they smelled of metal.

But I put them by our fireplace,
swaddled in spare scraps of fleece and
shrouded in paper packing ribbons.

Yet in the flickering light I saw,
one chick's wing was rendered to a bloody pulp,
another's head was pecked in,

And the last, its guts were flowing
out of its body, bubbling up
like a glob of toothpaste.

Still, morning comes, once again,
I sit, knees to chest, enveloped by a steel-gray light.
Again, the robins list their conjunctions.

So tell me this, for I don't know:
mate-searching robins in the fading mist—
who taught them how to sing?