

Helen Bowell reviews Luke Morgan, Hugo Williams and Oksana Maksymchuk

Blood Atlas

Luke Morgan
Arlen house, £14.99

Fast Music

Hugo Williams,
Faber, £10.99

Still City: Diary of an Invasion

Oksana Maksymchuk
Carcenet, £12.99

How far does your family history affect who you are? This is the question underneath Luke Morgan's **Blood Atlas**, where the Galway poet imagines meeting an aunt who survived the potato famine, recounts sectarian rifts, and stumbles across the Worcestershire mansion where his great-great-great-grandfather lived. He drives up to that grand house in *A View of Chateau Impney*, but when the "Private Property / sign" and "some steel bollards halt [his] descent" (both literally and genealogically), he realises he won't find anything of himself there.

That endless search for home will be familiar to diasporic readers. The speaker repeatedly attempts to locate himself in places: in the book's final sonnet sequence, he returns to a familiar town:

checking these roads are still
how you imagine them

...
seeking
reassurance from the shedding trees
that you still are who you think you are.
(1. *Proprioception*)

In truth, nothing stays 'still' – home is a place of no return as Avtar Brah puts it – and as the seasons turn, neither the land nor ourselves can remain as we remember them. This idea returns in the collection's final lines, where a childhood place becomes "a vast terrain / which you both know and, suddenly, do not."
(10. *Interoception*)

Blood Atlas contains a variety of poetic forms, some of which sacrifice emotion or narrative in favour of rhyme, such as in the sonnet *Equilibrioception*:

Last week you almost drowned in quicksand; next
You'll win a glass award and make a speech.
You check your phone again in case a text
comes through to bring excitement back in reach.

At times, this focus on form also results in empty or generic phrases. In *Ancestry.com Ghazal*, the speaker helps his grandma to get a DNA test. She passes away while waiting for the results, and the poem ends:

Though we found no secret, no lost memory –
her lineage grows, single file.

Her people and mine came from the soil

that fertilised this revitalising isle.

The test teaches them nothing, which, though an anticlimax, is perhaps the point: a person's DNA isn't the most interesting thing about them. But instead of using this as a volta, and now without any suspense, the poem continues for a further three lines. The tone also shifts strangely, with "revitalising isle" sounding like something more suited to a Visit Ireland webpage.

There are beautiful lines in *Blood Atlas* – like the description of people crossing the frozen sea as "colour-coated dots / sliding across a great slate mirror" (*The Day the Sea Froze*) – and memorable moments, like in the wry *A Ditch in Hallow*:

Here lies – almost – the eternal resting place
of Tessie Mitchell, marked when she leapt clean
off her bike into shrubbery to escape
the ripping up of bullets from a Luftwaffe plane

As *Fast Music* is Hugo Williams' fifteenth collection, you, reader, may already know what to expect from a Hugo Williams book, but somehow this is my first contact with the winner of the 1999 T S Eliot Prize.

The book begins by exploring schooling, writing, memory and illness; its second section details an affair and its aftermath. Many of the poems are wryly handled, and bring to mind Billy Collins or Wendy Cope. I chuckled at *My Future* where, outed as a poet, the young speaker is asked by his headmaster:

Did I have a friend I could talk to
about my problem? I said yes,
I had two friends, but they weren't
interested in poetry. Nobody was.

The childhood poems are among my favourites in the book. One speaker, longing wordlessly for home, watches the moths (instead of the months) burn up "on the strip lighting of the dormitory" (*The Moths*) nightly. Another poem turns questions demanded of young people on the reader:

they always ask the same question:

what do we think we're doing
and who is responsible for this mess?
(*I Don't Know, Sir*)

But some of the later poems edge towards twee. The poem *i.m. Tara Browne (1945–1966)* is in memory of Williams' friend, the racing car driver whose death inspired The Beatles' *A Day in the Life*. It starts energetically ("London had barely started / when you blew into town") but quickly succumbs to cliché: there are "Cheshire cat grins" after "the first lap / of your race to oblivion". The poem ends a little clunkily, too on-the-nose, gesturing towards the Beatles song:

You didn't notice that the lights had changed,
but spun the car around
to protect your girlfriend
and went to face the music on your own.

The clichés keep coming. In *Death Letter*: "I'd have given my right arm / to send him home to you in one piece"; in *Leaving Faces*, "They were going places once, / setting off into the blue / without a care in the world"; in *Them* (referring to women), "We would follow them to the ends of the earth / just to die in their arms". This feels disappointingly lazy, given Williams' subtle handling elsewhere.

The unimaginative writing verges on caricature in the book's second section, where an affair is portrayed in terms bordering on the misogynistic. Williams is, I think, exaggerating his speaker's foibles to make fun of a younger, less emotionally intelligent man. The character comes across as desperate, even pathetic: at one point, "You find yourself talking in moans" (*Bite-marks*) to a woman walking up the stairs, "too excited / and dumb to even swallow it [your spit]". At times, it verges on creepy: in *Visiting Late*, the speaker chirps: "I think she likes being terrified / by someone she doesn't know" and without turning the lights on, crawls into bed with the woman "like a crocodile, / biting the inside of her leg". After the break-up, this self-described predator talks to a man who:

seemed to know you personally,
or someone very like you:

the same unreadable signals,
the same chains of yellow hair
lashing him to the mast in a storm.
(*Life at Sea*)

Girlfriend as an unreadable siren? Straight from a 1970s playbook.

Are the clichés and sexist stereotypes signals not to take Williams seriously? If so, ***Fast Music*** becomes a rather repetitive book of jokes at his speakers' expense, more than a deeper study in the psychology of this man, or indeed his girlfriend, from whom we never hear.

Oksana Maksymchuk's English debut, ***Still City: Diary of an Invasion***, records ordinary life just before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While reading it, I was thinking about the tendency to assess war poetry on moral, rather than aesthetic, grounds – in other words, that the poet's "radical honesty" and "willingness to take [us] to her homeland", so we can "begin to understand the brutality of its violation" are the most praiseworthy aspects of the book, as Diane Seuss' blurb suggests.

It's true that poems like *Rocket in the Room* masterfully convey the horror of the violence perpetrated. As its opening unfolds, each new line, and its half-rhymes, makes our stomachs drop further:

what the rocket has in common
with the room full of children
is its current location

War becomes the lens through which everything is seen, and Maksymchuk transforms imagery as trauma transforms the mind: now the cat who "plays / with the ball of yarn / rolls it like a grenade" (*Warm, Warmer*). At moments, the work becomes a touch too prosaic, diary-esque; of a fellow poet, she writes a little aimlessly:

It's all over for him –
the wait, the uncertainty –

What will become of me?

Just the beginning for us
(*When a Missile Finds a Home*)

Generally, though, Maksymchuk conveys the strange normality of war for civilians to great effect, and asks for our continued attention on Ukraine: "Don't pour wax / in your ear, stranger – / it'll seal your soul" (*Mirroring*).

But the book is more than a call to action. Its speaker confronts impossible philosophical questions daily: how can war exist at the same time as "festive / dogs in felt deer antlers" (*Arguments for Peace*), and "an ad for pizza delivery" (*Timeline Scroll*), two decisively frivolous images? Is it selfish to "take / a private exit / out of the common catastrophe" (*Collective Bargaining*)? Is an animal's life worthy of saving from bombardment? How can you 'prove' any of this really happened – to yourself, to other governments, to other publics – "how do you know / you didn't dream it all up" (*Post-Truth*)? And, under it all, what is poetry for, when you're being bombed? "Will a song keep you safe / when the ceiling caves?" (*What Gives*). Of course it won't.

But nothing will. For Maksymchuk, writing poetry is not about keeping her safe from missiles, but preserving her humanity. In *The Orders of Priority*, writing becomes a way of connecting with something bigger than us, bigger even than war: "World is a poem / before it's anything else". As she's "crafting" this poem, "it is, for a moment, last / in the sequence of things": just for an instant, poetry is more present than a bomb. And doing something to contribute poems, not missiles, to this moment, feels worthwhile. Poetry and readings also offer community, solidarity and normality. In the *Cherry Orchard*, the speaker remembers:

we read our poems
in an underground gallery
surrounded by feminist art
to an audience of teenagers
...
we laughed so hard

that a window opened
and a woman in a nightgown
shook both her fists at us!

Still City contains many joyous moments like this, complicating the idea of war as monolithically horrific. *Unsteady Topography* opens “Even inside a war / I’m still at work / making life delicious”. The poem ends with “a scream”, but still, the baking in the communal yard becomes “a collective poem”; she

glimpses “two elderly neighbours / making love”. **Still City** shows us again and again that, like joy, like love, even in war, poetry is its own point.

Helen Howell's debut pamphlet, *The Barman* (Bad Betty Press, 2022) was a PBS Choice. She co-directs Dead [Women] Poets Society and edited **Bi+ Lines** (fourteen poems, 2023).