

Andre Bagoo reviews Rebecca Bilkau, Lewis Buxton and Lauren O'Donovan

Still Life

Rebecca Bilkau
Wayleave Press, £7.00

Mate Arias

Lewis Buxton
The Emma Press, £7.99

Taxidermy Heart

Lauren O'Donovan
Cork City Libraries, €14.00

One theory art historians have as to why Renaissance painters put flies in their paintings is that it was a way to indicate a portrait was *post mortem*. Another is that they were meant to be symbols of sin and mortality. Another is that they were a kind of flex: to paint a fly was to show prowess. Yet another theory is that the flies were jokes. Giotto, in one story about his apprenticeship, fooled his master into believing one of the pesky insects had landed on a canvas by painting one there.

All of this came to mind as I read the title poem from Rebecca Bilkau's *Still Life*, in which a woman leaves a window open for flies to enter: "You'll see nothing move, but look again, there are more, / or fewer, the same kaleidoscoped into new patterns." All three of these pamphlets, in different ways, deal with mortality. I know, dear Reader, what you are thinking: 'Death as a subject-matter for poetry? Ground-breaking.' But these poets have crafted excellent

sequences that deserve attention. The work is sobering and playful, cool and heart-warming, quieting and startling, sometimes all at once, sometimes within a single poem.

Death. That's how *Last Dance*, the opening piece in *Still Life*, starts. It's just one word followed by a period. But it establishes a bold, declarative mood that signals the poet's attempt to deal headfirst with the theme. It's followed by the wry sentence "Here we go." That sentence becomes a refrain, establishing a repetition, a scaffolding of consistency; the word "or" is similarly repeated throughout, expanding the flow of possibilities while still tethering the poem to the signposts of craft. To read this poem, with its cast of characters – from Kierkegaard to "the lad down the road with cornrows" – is to get a sense of the ubiquitousness of experience and to journey from a position of solidity to doubt. Opening so memorably with one definitive word, it closes with a question: "Will you know or know and still not know, / snipe from the unsafe shadows, or tango into the storm?"

While all poems, and certainly the poems here, can be read as intimate portraits of life, Bilkau is not concerned with discourses on art. This is not the expansive reimaging of ekphrasis as poetic practice seen recently in Richard Scott's *That Broke into Shining Crystals* (2025), which contains an entire movement devoted to still lifes. Nor is it Marianne Boruch's engagement with the props of artmaking in her poem *Still Life* (2008). Nor is it even Gillian Clarke's sleek ode to friendship, *Still Life* (1978). On

the poet's mind is the painterly layering of experience and the adage, "There's still life in the old dog yet." Instead of a noun, she is concerned with still as an adjective and adverb. The poems are about how life overflows even in the face of death; how we might live on in the memories of others. In *Dialect*, a man is distilled into "his best imagined role" – that of being a dad; in *Forebear*, nothing remains of an anchor-making ancestor, "But I have his blood, maybe his chin; I hold steady;" in *A preserve*, the death of a dream is ameliorated by apple-growing: "You anticipate pies, crumbles, an old, old age. / You would have been such a good father;" in *Relocation*, stillborn children leave their mothers dripping milk: "The love, the love / runs on." The images and reflections form an impressive cornucopia.

Death is also at the beginning of Lewis Buxton's *Mate Arias*, a series of sonnets that starts with the image of two men working out: "We lift until our arms are dead rabbits." But this opening poem, *Working Out*, is not concerned with how exercise is itself a push against eventual decline; the poet is not interested in the ways a gym becomes a forum for the exertion of power over fading flesh, as it is in, say, Mark Doty's *At the Gym* (2001). Instead, Buxton's target is the difficulty males experience in defining relationships: "Mate? Friend? / Buddy? Pal? Brother? I don't even know." The poem's intensity heightens when its narrator reveals his gym buddy, Alex, is reluctant to work out alone. At precisely the mid-way point when a sonnet might turn, we have a pleasing split that dramatises the contradictory impulses of each character reconciled by their undefinable relationship: "I wouldn't go / if you didn't come with me, Alex says." The enjambment after "I wouldn't go" both separating and holding together two people.

That, it turns out, is emblematic of how the poems in this wonderful pamphlet work. They stand individually. But when taken together as a cluster, they cohere in a way that echoes the homosociality they describe. The sonnet is a particularly fruitful choice of form here, too; it provides a constraint that contrasts with the relaxed posture of bro culture. In *Alright mate?* the narrator breezily asks: "Do you want

to come round mine, watch sports, / swig from cans, eat crisps, create memories, and y'know, talk?" For such activities there's a pleasing variety of suits. One sonnet is a list poem that defines *Good Husbandry*. Couplets appear in *Mundesley*. And the idea of mateship isn't limited to just one gender. *Conversations with Friends* is an infinity mirror of a poem that is about conversations between a female writer and male friend about, you guessed it, the Sally Rooney novel *Conversations with Friends*, famously itself a work featuring spoken-word poets navigating relationships. There is even space for gestures towards the ways in which sublimated questions of sexual orientation generate tensions and intersections within contemporary subcultures, as in the cheekily named poem *Some Horses*, in which a man who identifies as straight stridently denies any kind of impulse to react to well-hung dudes. *Watching Films with Tom* gives us a narrator who fights sleep, asking: "Why am I so afraid to fall / asleep? With friends is it another kind of falling?" While their wives look on, two male friends argue "like a married couple" in *Arguing with Matt*. And *Cinema with Alex* – him again – ends thus:

This is where we lost
years: before beers, or jobs, or even texts –
we are two friends not questioning the soft

popcorn touch, the hug of borrowed Premier Seats,
the off-school kiss of our smuggled sweets.

A stunning leap occurs at the end of Lauren O'Donovan's *Taxidermy Heart*, whose title alone makes plain the work's focus on death. After a sonnet crown reflecting on a father figure who has died by suicide, the pamphlet turns to its title poem, which opens with the staggering declaration: "When my dog dies, / I will cut beneath his chin and draw down." What follows is a step-by-step detailing of the process by which a beloved pet is to be turned into a stuffed animal, "one iris bright blue, / the other half-eclipsed by a chestnut moon." Half-serious, half-whimsical, the poem perfectly captures the mortal coil; the urge to confront and transcend death within the domestic setting. Tamed momentarily is our collective anxiety and grief, anticipatory or otherwise, by the closing

lines, when the stuffed animal is posed on his bed in a living room: “as if / he has woken up just enough to notice me / and now will go back to sleep.”

Latrina Vox, a found poem from a bathroom stall, is a great example of this assured pamphlet’s inventiveness, bearing the line “~~Yolo~~ / you Live everyday, you only Die once.” A prose poem, *Binge*, yields a memorable description of smoking: “there are nineteen more escapes left in the pack.” *The Steadfast Heart* is an erasure poem from Virgil’s ***Aeneid***, giving us at its onset a haunting image: “the open mouth of the cavern.” And that stunning sonnet crown. It is tender, vivid, heartbreaking – flitting lyrically between past and present like a hummingbird. A grieving daughter discloses of a father: “His biggest boast was that he saw me first, / that I held his thumb tightly in my rosebud fist” and “I

want my hands to grow as sure as his.” O’Donovan has an eye for the telling detail: the way supermarket doors can automatically open worlds, the way water refracts in a shipyard, the way the news of a visit by a pope can bookend a personal crisis, the way a phone call at 3.02 a.m. can tear a life in two, how a snowed-in city can appear like a sleeping baby “swaddled in still ripples of white,” how cigarette butts can be deadly to some animals, and the way a childhood home might find its way back to you after you’ve long left it. ***Taxidermy Heart*** is an astounding achievement, one in which not flies but our longings take flight.

Andre Bagoo’s books include ***Midnight Bestiaries*** (2024), ***The Dreaming*** (2022) and ***The Undiscovered Country*** (2020), winner of the 2021 OCM Bocas Non-Fiction Prize. He lives in Trinidad and Tobago.