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ARNOLD McMILLIN

HANNA KOMAR AT THE START OF A VERY PROMISING  
CAREER AS POET AND TRANSLATOR

At the present time many Ukrainians are fleeing their country due to unprovoked Russian aggression, and many members of the Russian intelligentsia, who can, are leaving Russia for the same reason. Not all Belarusians have transferable skills for work abroad, but in recent years many editors and writers have emigrated to escape the corruption and violence now prevalent in their land. Three of its best young poets of our time now live beyond the boundaries of a country widely known as the last dictatorship in Europe: Val'žyna Mort (b. 1981) has now firmly settled in the USA, Voĺha Hapieva (b. 1982) is living in Germany, and now Hanna Komar is studying in Brighton and living in London.

Komar is a highly talented and unusually memorable original poet as well as, in *Recycled*, a skilful adapter of her own work, as well as an admirable translator of Charles Bukowski (a sample of which will be given later). Her own verse has been put into Polish, Swedish, Norwegian, Ukrainian, Russian, Czech and German, and she is the recipient of various awards in Belarus, Ireland, Sweden and Norway. Despite writing until recently in what remains a stubbornly patriarchal society, she presents with direct honesty a young woman's point of view in poems that combine striking beauty, unobtrusive but highly effective assonance, strong and original imagery, all at the service of her manifestly sincere treatment of personal, including familial, and political themes.

Born in Baranavičy in 1989 she is currently engaged in literary postgraduate work at the University of Brighton, UK.<sup>1</sup> Her mostly unrhymed verse is in iambic lines of varying length, and in the examples

<sup>1</sup> Her topic is 'Using poetry to help Belarusian women share their stories of

given here the dating by the poet of individual works from her first book is retained. In her second collection of original poetry, *Tryputnik*, dates of writing are given when possible. Bilingual in Belarusian and Russian with impeccable English, Komar is free of the unconscious influence of Russian on her language, unlike some of her Belarusian contemporaries. The poet draws on a broad lexical palette that includes occasional dialectal and obsolete words, although it must be stressed that unflinching clarity of expression is one of her greatest strengths.

In what follows, illustrative examples of her verse will be also given in English translation. Where works from her debut book have been recycled into English by Komar herself, the recycled versions are used here, although the poet believes that some of them should be regarded as reborn, and perhaps better than the originals (Komar 2018: 4). Where, however, the poet's new English translations are not available, the present writer's prosaic versions will have to serve.<sup>2</sup> The works on which this article is based are *Strach vyšyni* (Fear of Heights, 2016), *Tryputnik* (Ribwort, 2023), *Recycled* (2018), *My vierniemsia* (We shall return, 2022) as well as Čarlz Bukoŭski, *Światło, i pavietra, i miesca, i čas: Zbornik pierakladaŭ* (Charles Bukowski, Light and air, place, and time: A collection of translations, 2017). Komar's first book was mistakenly thought by some to be childish, on account of its mention of real or imaginary fears; in fact, however, it is a remarkably bold and mature statement of the poet's beliefs and views on many aspects of life.

The first themes to be considered in this survey are ageing, death and suicide, and the initial example shows another characteristic of her work, namely the combination of whimsy with clear-eyed realism: *Moj dzień narodzinaŭ* (My birthday, 20/3/2016) begins with the question of whether, if we do not mark our birthdays, we shall stop growing old, and the poet notes that it is only the girl at the local shop's cigarettes and alcohol counter who will know that she is over eighteen. Instead of celebrating our birthdays, it is suggested that we should visit graveyards and remember the dead, although she adds

domestic abuse and state violence: an auto-ethnographic approach'. Expected date of completion 2026.

<sup>2</sup> In *Tryputnik* translations into English are included throughout, but, since they are not all by the poet herself, I have used my own versions in illustrations from this book.

that, in this connection, it is doubtful whether your (poetic) voice is entirely your own. After recalling that her birthday is the day when the distinguished writer Uladzimir Duboŭka (1900-1976) died and a Jewish writer killed by Stalin, Majsiej Kulbak (1896-1937), was born, she notes that it is also the International Day of Happiness, quickly adding, “no more about Hanna” (Komar 2016: 55-56).

Another poem *Nie prarastu* (I shall not grow through: 28/4/2014), is about death and memory: some substance that has been poured in a cemetery to prevent the grass from growing, also stops the dead from having contact with the living. The last two lines are striking:

Ды ведаеш, мама, зараз жа ўсё не жывое ў модзе  
І мёртвыя гучна скардзяцца на жывых.<sup>3</sup> (Komar 2016: 5)

A naturally referential poet, Komar responds directly to the suicidal American poet Anne Sexton (1928-1974) in *Adkaz na vierš En Sekstan*, “*Žadańnie pamierci*” (A reply to the poem of Anne Sexton, *Wanting to die*: 10/5/2014). In this she is following Jaŭhienija Janiščyc’s 1983 verse, *En Sekstan*, in which she, ironically in view of her own tragic fate five years later, says there is no poetry in sins (Janiščyc 1988: 194). Komar feels more open sympathy, but believes that she herself has not enough courage to follow this example, comparing the death wish to a war, as we read in the third stanza:

... Unlike you, Эн, я не спараджала самагубстваў,  
але інцэст самагубстваў нарадзіў мяне.  
Спосаб – пытанне адно разнастайнасці густаў,  
мне ўсё адно, што – таблеткі, лязо  
ці вяроўка – выграе ў гэтай вайне.<sup>4</sup> (Komar 2016: 6)

If the grim phrase ‘incest of suicides’ might not immediately convey an image to many readers, most of what the poet writes about her

<sup>3</sup> You know what, Mum, nowadays everything that is not living is in fashion / And the dead are complaining noisily against the living.

<sup>4</sup> ...Unlike you, Anne, I did not engender suicides / but the incest of suicides gave birth to me. / The means is simply a matter of taste, / it is all the same to me whether tablets, a blade / or a rope will be victorious in this war.

parents is excruciating in its directness, for instance, in *Ja maŭčala!!!* (I kept quiet!!!: 3/1/2016) when she describes her father's drunken antics. The English version of the opening stanzas in *Recycled* (cited here) is far more concise, though not automatically more affecting:

Я маўчала, калі цябе выкідалі п'яного з аўтобуса:  
у мяне была лялька – я клапаціла пра яе  
і прыціскала да грудзей сваіх моцна.  
Ты сяк-так падымаўся і мы рухаліся далей.  
[...]

Я маўчала, калі вострыя зубы відэльца  
ўпіваліся ў мякаць тваёй рукі.  
Я адчувала сябе тапельцам,  
што ідзе на дно тваёй белай ракі. (Komar 2016: 46)

(A good daughter:

You get kicked off the bus, drunk,  
I press my doll to my chest  
and stay silent.  
[...]

You dig the fork into the flesh  
of your arm. I hand you a towel  
and stay silent).<sup>5</sup> (Komar 2018: 45)

Escape from many things, including the cruelty of her father, forms the subject of 'abmiežavanaja kamiakom mannym...' (limited by a lump of semolina...: 6/2019) in which, pleading for release, she depicts him as being split like a hangman's rope, with one tooth left and just a body. This desperate image is the more powerful for its simplicity (Komar 2023: 28). Another example of referential writing is *Idyjotka* (Idiot: 12/7/2014) where she at first called herself Josephine,

<sup>5</sup> It will be noticed that the version in *Recycled* is not only more concise but also slightly different in meaning in the second of the stanzas quoted. In this and subsequent cases the versions from *Recycled* are given, even when they diverge in title or content from the cited original which has been quoted.

an idiot of Danish film maker Lars von Trier (b. 1956), but towards the end turns to her father again, as well as resuming her own name. In *Recycled* the title is plural (as it is in the film to which the poem refers), although the verse is a very personal outpouring, of which these are the closing lines:

... мяне завуць Жазэфіна,  
а гэта – мой бацька.  
Ён – мае межы,  
ён – мае кайданы,  
ён – мае вярэды,  
ён – мая турма,  
ён – мае страхі,  
ён – мая пасрэднасць,  
ён – мая штучнасць,  
маё неіснаванне.  
Мяне завуць... Ганна.  
Я – ідыётка... (Komar 2016: 10)

(... my name is Josephine;  
I'm a Von Trier's idiot  
and this is my father.  
he is  
a lump in the throat,  
my shackles,  
my prison,  
my mediocre artifice.

My name is... Anna,<sup>6</sup>  
I am an idiot). (Komar 2018: 10-11)

In a poem written in prose and verse, *Matuli* (To Mum: 7 / 2015), she depicts herself as part of an endless electrical circuit with her mother a continuation rather than a bond of affection. The following excerpts are from the verse section only:

<sup>6</sup> For unknown reasons, the publishers of *Recycled* have chosen to rename Hanna as Anna throughout the book.

Дзе заканчваешся ты – пачынаюся я.  
 Мы – пераносчыкі току неабходнага дзеля жыцця.  
 Не мы выбіралі лёс, але лёс выбраў нас.

Я не вінавачу цябе за тое, што я не ток,  
 што я – толькі провад.  
 Не вінавачу цябе ні за што,  
 не вінавачу,  
 не...

Я цалую твае зморшчынкі,  
 лашчу твае валасы,  
 Я дарую табе  
 ўсё  
 раз і назаўжды  
 родная (Komar 2016: 25).

(Where you end – I begin.  
 We are carriers of the current vital for life.  
 We didn't choose this fate, it chose us.

I'm not blaming you that I am no current;  
 I'm just a wire.  
 I'm not blaming you for anything,  
 for anything at all,  
 I'm not,  
 I...

kiss your wrinkles,  
 stroke your hair,  
 I forgive you  
 And let it  
 All go). (Komar 2018: 51-52)

In a poem from *Tryputnik, ja prasnulasia slabaja i chvoraja...* (I woke up weak and ill..., 8/2019) the poet describes being ill and wanting care, but her mother neither weeps nor comforts her and at the end the poet imagines her apologizing that she had never been taught how to be affectionate (Komar 2023: 30). The mood is lightened in the next

verse, *Treba žanicca* (You must get married), in which a bossy aunt expresses her advice with the same conviction as her belief in artificial flowers on April graves (Komar 2023: 32).

Love and men may be thought to be natural themes for a young female poet, but Komar appears to be ironical when she writes about the superiority of men in *Pazaklasnaje* (Extra studies, 2015), although when she says that her boyfriend knows more than her parents, it might be a genuine observation. She describes how she is pulled along by wiser men, feeling that she cannot say anything that they do not already know, and that they anticipate everything she has to say. Her little story will keep her in a box so that she does not poison the surroundings with her longings. The end of the poem, however, is more banal when she asks rhetorically what a female pupil can offer a teacher: the answer is a short skirt revealing good legs, and extra lessons after class (Komar 2016: 41-42). In an untitled poem, *Kachainnie-ekspierymient u styli art-chaŭs...* (Making love is an experiment in art-house style..., 18/11/2014), love is compared to a film made for only three or four connoisseurs, not something for critics or the masses, or to be shown on high days and holidays. In reply to a question from one of the select few: 'How is it getting on?' she says, 'It is lying, waiting for the next new wave or other fashion' (Komar 2016: 13). Such insouciance is remote from *Sustreć ciabe* (Meeting you 1/11/2014) which begins with a serious accident when she cuts open a vein with a razor, something her lover hardly notices. This is the eloquent last stanza:

Сустрэць цябе – усё адно, што шаснуць па венах.  
Калі я цябе страчу – значыць, яны паспелі  
<выратаваць>. І я зноў зачыненая між чатырох сваіх сценаў.  
Сустрэнемся ў наступным жыцці – у тваёй пасцелі.<sup>7</sup>  
(Komar 2016: 12)

In *raka maja...* (my river..., summer 2018) her generosity in love ends in disappointment, as is clear from the closing lines: “і побач з вамі / я – перасохлае горла” (and beside you / I am a dried-up throat).

<sup>7</sup> Meeting you is just the same as cutting my veins. / When I lose you it will mean that they have managed / 'to save me' and I shall again be enclosed within my four walls. / We shall meet in the next life – in your bed.

Another verse, however, *hetaje mora ўnutry...* (this sea inside me..., 5/2020) is a very unconventional and sensitive love poem:

гэтае мора ўнутры  
 супокоїцца  
 калі я  
 раскажу, як лічыла  
 твае радзімкі  
 і складала з іх  
 новы сусвет,

якія прывіды  
 наступаліся да цябе,  
 пакуль ты спаў,  
 як я аддала ім  
 ланцужкі свае ды пярсцёнкі  
 і нават чывонья туфлікі,

як я дыхала ледзь-ледзь  
 па іх сыходзе,  
 каб не разбудзіць цябе,  
 і мае лёгкія ператварыліся  
 ў асеннія лісцікі,

гэтае мора ўнутры  
 супакоіцца,  
 калі я  
 раскажу,  
 а ты  
 пачуеш мяне.<sup>8</sup> (Komar 2023: 64)

<sup>8</sup> This sea inside me / will become calm, / when I tell how I counted your birthmarks / and created from them an entire universe, // what ghosts / came to you / while you were sleeping, / how I gave them / all my ornamental chains and rings / and even my little red slippers, / how I barely breathed / when they went / in order not to wake you, / and my lungs turned / into autumn leaves. // this sea inside me / will become calm / when I / tell / and you / hear me.

More conventionally romantic is *Vietru* (To the wind, 25/7/2015), a poem written in Bulgaria about the delicate wind that caresses her skin like a lover, and at the end she seems to hear a romantic message:

... Вецер ахінае мяне  
цёплымі хвалямі,  
пахам солі і ёду,  
і сярод звукаў, ледзь  
чутных чалавечаму вуху,  
я магу пачуць:  
<Я хацеў бы спаткацца з табой, Анна...> (Komar 2016: 31)

(... The wind embraces me  
with warm waves,  
salty and iodine scents,  
and among the sounds  
that a human ear  
can barely catch  
I hear:  
'I would like to see you again, Anna...') (Komar 2018: 59)

The fickleness of men is the subject of a poem with an epigraph from the Ukrainian poet Sergij Žadań (b. 1974) on the same subject, *Maim mužčynam* (To my men, 15/5/2015), which is mainly about parting from men and the ensuing results. As so often with this poet, a vivid image remains in the reader's mind. Here is the last stanza:

І я ніколі  
не буду належыць  
маім мужчынам,  
і каханне – гэта  
такая куля,  
што вырываецца з гільзы  
і застрае між рэбраў.  
Там яе і пакіну,  
Як сувенір на памяць. (Komar 201: 22)

(I will never  
belong  
to my men.

Love is  
 a bullet that gets stuck  
 between the ribs.  
 I will leave it there  
 as a souvenir). (Komar 2018: 35)

Summer, often portrayed as a symbol of happiness in love, is treated rather differently in two poems by Komar. In *Lieta na bis* (Summer encored, 18/9/2015) she is with a lover who feels she is not right for him, and so she tells him to go, not taking the summer with him, but leaving it for her (Komar 2016: 33). The second poem, *Maim vam* (To you who are close to me, 6/2016) also reflects unevenness in the relationship and a characteristic note of realism:

Маім вам  
 Рэйсавым аўтобусам з Мінска ў Маскву і назад  
 перадаць табе ад яго апельсіны і вінаград,  
 яму ад цябе – скуркі ды косткі.  
 Яму ад цябе – пацалункі і вёсны,  
 табе ад яго – абдымкі і вечнае лета.  
 Мне спазняцца нельга, бо  
 хутка псуецца  
 гэты тавар.<sup>9</sup> (Komar 2016: 60)

Parting from a man is expressed by a sequence of images in *ad-puskaju* (Letting go, 22/2/2015) including releasing air from lungs, the national bank freeing the dollar rate and the President his political prisoners; the process is also compared to getting bugs from behind wallpaper, an animal getting tics from its belly and spitting out a loose tooth without pain; and in parting plans she will erase his name from planks, walls and so on (Komar 2016: 17).

Memory is clearly a major factor after the ending of relationships and one of Komar's best poems on this theme is a long and original verse that here is slightly shortened: *Zamova* (A leave poem, 8/7/2015):

<sup>9</sup> (To mine and to both of yours): On the regular coach route from Moscow to Miensk and back / to you from him oranges and grapes, / to him from you skin and bones. / To him from you kisses and spring times, / to you from him embraces and everlasting summer. / I must not be late, for / both these goods / go bad quickly.

Замова  
Перад тым, як ты  
мяне пакінеш, выканай маю просьбу:  
напішы для мяне верш –  
у ім угадай падрабязна  
усё, што запомніў.  
У ім  
раскажы, як я  
заганяю голкі  
сабе пад пазногці  
і крычу ад болю,  
бо не ўмею крычаць ад  
асалоды.  
Раскажы, як  
праз высокі ціск  
з носа майго  
сочыцца мова  
і пэцкае твае белыя кашулі.  
[...]  
як я, каб легчы ў ложка,  
здымаю скуру,  
а ты так баішся  
аголенай плоці,  
што ніколі  
не ночыш.  
Напішы пра мяне верш  
і крычы яго,  
прачнуўшыся ад кашмараў,  
глытай яго замест амфетаміну,  
любі яго так, як зручна і як бяспечна.  
Напішы – і мне не паказвай ніколі.  
Будзь яму бацькам і  
замяні яму маці.  
Мне ж пакінь апошнія два радкі.  
Якія  
нічога,  
абсалютна нічога не значаць. (Komar 2016: 23-24)

(A Leave Poem  
Before  
you leave,

please,  
 write me  
 a poem.  
 In it recall  
 what you remember.  
 Tell them how  
 the extreme pressure  
 of my language  
 makes blood drip  
 from my nose  
 to foul  
 your white shirts,  
 [...]

how I  
 take off my skin  
 before going  
 to bed,  
 and you're so scared of  
 the naked flesh  
 that you never  
 sleep with me.  
 Write me a poem  
 and take it instead of amphetamine,  
 love it in a safe and  
 convenient way.  
 Just don't show me.  
 Be its father  
 and its mother.  
 Leave for me  
 only the last two lines –  
 the ones that  
 mean  
 nothing. (Komar 2018: 15-18)

A highly assonantal dream poem is *Polie...* (The field..., 4/10/2015), in which the background is winter, and when they have destroyed their photo albums and choked on recollections, she finds herself in a field, which she does not want to leave; the sky is pregnant with rain, helping her to grow there. At the end of the poem, she awakens in her dear familiar field (Komar 2016: 35-37). *Pa švach* (At the seams,

12/9/2015) describes her feeling of weakness in autumn, although the tone of the poem is far from tragic:

Па швах  
Восень зашпілівае на ўсе гузікі,  
а я разыходжуся па швах  
з кожнай новай раніцай  
у новым месцы,  
пачынаючы з ног.  
Нібыта, калі мяне сшывалі,  
сэканомілі на нітках.  
І я ляжу, не ў сілах падняцца,  
сабрацца ў нешта суцэльнае.  
Забярыце мяне –  
заліце мяне суперклеем. (Комар 2016: 32)

(At the seams  
Autumn in buttoning up,  
yet with every new day  
I am falling apart  
at the seams  
in another place  
from my feet up...  
as if when stitching  
they saved on thread.  
Here I lie, unable to get up,  
get myself together.  
Assemble me and  
cover me with Super Glue). (Komar 2018: 28)

Leaving behind the seasons, fanciful or realistic, it is clear that parting from lovers must at the very least be painful and leave the poet with a feeling of loneliness. Volha Napiejeva (b. 1982) has made this condition central to her poetic world as a feminist in a patriarchal society (for detail, see McMillin 2019). Komar is familiar with some of the older poet's earlier work,<sup>10</sup> but she brings her own bearing on this theme in a poem *Samota viečnaha padarožnika* (The loneliness of

<sup>10</sup> Communication from the poet 6 July 2022.

an eternal traveller, 7/4/2016) where a single line suffices to express a total feeling of desperation: “Ні сцежки, ні сцяга – самота ад мора да мора” (With neither path nor standard it is loneliness from sea to sea, Komar 201: 57). Another poem, *Frahmienty* (Fragments, 5/3/2016), imaginatively describes collecting a person to love from many different parts of the world, and at the end makes an indirect comparison between the abolition of loneliness and that of AIDS, describing the former as another kind of virus to be fought:

Фрагменты  
 Я збіраю цябе  
 адзіны мой,  
 па чужых краінах,  
 злізваю з вуснаў  
 мужчын, што  
 гавораць на розных мовах.  
 Не тая, не тая, не тая мова...  
 і зноў не тая.  
 Ад кожнага з іх  
 па кропельцы –  
 і ў пробаўку,  
 не падпісваючы імя,  
 месца і дату –  
 толькі рысы характару,  
 потым іх усе сінтэзую,  
 калі назбіраю дастаткова  
 для цэлага чалавека...  
 І ты будзеш, ведаеш,  
 нават не пазл – а квілт,<sup>11</sup>  
 у памяць пра тых,  
 каго я заразіла  
 вірусам веры ў тое,  
 што аднойчы  
 болей не стане  
 самоты. (Komar 2016: 52-53)

(Fragments

<sup>11</sup> Komar suggests that a quilt was, amongst other things, a symbol in memory of victims of the AIDS virus.

Assembling you  
my only one,  
from foreign cultures,  
licking you up  
from the lips of men  
who speak  
all those  
tongues.  
Wrong, wrong, wrong,  
wrong again.  
A drop from each –  
into a test tube:  
no name, place, date  
to synthesize them  
when I collect enough  
samples  
to make a perfect man...  
And you'll be,  
not even a tapestry  
but a quilt  
to commemorate  
all those I  
infected with the belief  
that one day  
we won't be  
lonely). (Komar 2018: 39-40)

Another powerful image is found in *naradžaješsia ŭ poŭniu, bycam upieršyniu...* (you are born at full moon, as if for the first time..., 12/2018) where the clouds, which had been pregnant with rain in *Polie*, are now compared to sharks hunting the boats of the lovers (Komar 2023, 46).

Locked doors have a considerable literary pedigree. To give but two references, Komar's chosen poet for translation Charles Bukowski's *Hell is a closed door* is deservedly well-known, and a promising Belarusian writer Vitaľ Ryžkoŭ (b. 1986) called his debut collection, *Dźviery, zamknionyja na kľučy* (Locked doors, 2010). Her own poem *Začyniena* (Locked, 21/2/2016) expresses frustration and the eventual realization of futility:

Зачынена  
Зачынена  
знутры!  
Зачынена  
знутры!!  
Зачынена  
знутры!!!  
Можаш  
грукацца  
грамчэй.  
Можаш  
ламаць  
дзеры.  
Можаш  
да світанку  
стаяць  
пад вокнамі.  
Але...  
зачынена  
знутры.  
і  
там  
нікога. (Komar 2016: 50)

(Locked  
Locked  
from the  
inside!  
Locked  
from the  
inside!!  
Locked  
from  
the inside!!!  
Knock  
louder.  
Break open  
the door  
Stand  
endlessly by  
the window,

But...  
It's locked  
from the  
inside  
and  
no one  
is  
in there). (Komar 2018: 69-70)

By contrast, in *Nievidavočnaja paezija* (Unobvious poetry, 5-7, 2019) at the beginning of the day, the door is banged on with a cry of “Let me in bitch!”, and at its end the poet is squeezed up like a cat in the cellar (Komar 2023: 83). Far less stressful is an unusual love poem, *Z kišeni karmić voranaŭ...* (To feed ravens from my pocket..., 5/2020) in which the polite request to open the door is to intimacy:

З кішэні карміць варон  
гладзіць па спінах чмялёў  
спрачацца на роўных з ветрам  
гэта я перастукваюся з табой  
праз сцяну таўшчынёй 628 дзён  
прыгожы почырк для гэтага непатрэбны  
перакрычаўшы адзіноту тэлевізараў  
праціснуўшыся праз натоўпы калідораў  
прыступкамі хрыбетніка падымаюся да цябе  
адчыняй.<sup>12</sup> (Komar, 2023: 66)

As has been seen, several of Komar's poems are akin to dreams or nightmares, and *vydzielienaja* (isolated, 3/3/2015) is typical. Having been banished by her lover, she has nightmares of jumping from high hills, and finally of having to cross a river although she cannot swim. He can, but has other plans for the dream, and so she does not hurry to wake up (Komar 2015: 18). Dreams and fantasy are successfully combined in *Son na dvaich* (A dream for two, 17/4/2015) set in Vilnia, a city that is still dear to many Belarusians:

<sup>12</sup> To feed ravens from my pocket / to stroke the backs of bumble-bees / to argue on equal terms with the wind // it is me knocking to you / through a wall of 628 days / fine handwriting is not needed for this // shouting over the loneliness of televisions / squeezing through crowds in corridors / I come up the steps to you / open the door.

сон на дваіх  
 Спі, Вільня, спі пагамонім, калі прачнешся  
 Няхай новы дзень без цябе пачнецца.  
 Спі, Вільня, спі, мой па-за-рэчаіснасці горад,  
 спі, Вільня, спі, бо навокал самота і холад.  
 Я паляжу тут, побач, каб бачыць твае сненні,  
 іх лабірынтамі доўга блукаць і лёгка выйсці.  
 Я на імгненне вочы заплюшчу, усяго на адно імгненне...  
 Вільняле пяе, Ужуліс ёй падпявае намаляваным лісцем.<sup>13</sup>  
 (Komar 2016: 20)

The already mentioned verse *Samota viečnaha padarožnika* is just one of the many references to travel in Komar's work, ranging from her desire to escape from her dysfunctional family, and from her unsatisfactory male companions, to poems of a metaphorical, fantastical and occasionally realistic nature. One particularly memorable poem is *Linhvistyčnaja mapa serca* (A linguistic map of my heart, 17/3/2016) of which this the second half:

... Маё сэрца – мапа Еўропы,  
 на якой панатыкана чырвоных  
 сцяжкоў.  
 Апраўдваюся любоўю  
 да моваў і дарог.  
 Я ведаю: роднасць душаў  
 абмінае межы і візы, але  
 кожны з іх прапануе сустрэцца  
 і можа, пакажа мне мора,  
 ды ніводны не навучыць  
 ездзіць на ровары. (Komar 2016: 54)

(... My heart is a map of Europe  
 with little red flags

<sup>13</sup> (A dream for tow): Sleep, Vilnia, sleep, let us talk when you wake up, / let the new day begin without you. / Sleep, Vilnia, sleep, my city that is beyond reality, / sleep, Vilnia, sleep, for all around is loneliness and cold. / I shall lie down alongside you, so as to see your dreams, / one can wander amongst them for a long time and easily find the way out. / I shall shut my eyes for a moment, only just for a moment... / The Vilniale river sings, and Užupis district sings along with her with brightly coloured foliage.

pinned on it.  
Love excuses my longing  
for languages and the road.  
I know: soul connections  
skip over borders and visas.  
But each of these men wishes to meet  
and show me a new sea.  
Yet none has shown me  
how to ride a bicycle). (Komar 2018: 42)

Another, less attractive aspect of travel is expressed in *Perajezdy* (Moves, 3/2016) where frequent travels are said to destroy memory, and recollections become a burden, to be given away to a woman who collects old clothes and rag and bones. You become used to travelling and where you stay boils down to distance from transport and the local shops, colour of the houses, number of bedrooms and cups for visitors, as well as the visitors themselves. Homesickness is a permanent guest, and to the question ‘Where are you?’, she replies, ‘At home’, herself believing this less and less (Komar 2016: 58-59).

Finally on the topic of travel may be mentioned two fantastic poems: the first concerns a train that disappears into the sky, the passengers of which have mainly emotions for luggage, *ciahnik nie prybudzie na kancavuju stancyju* (The train will not arrive at the terminus, 15/11/2015):

Наш цягнік узлятае –  
на канцавой станцыі  
нас не чакае ніхто.  
Заплюшчвайце вочы:  
у вагонах – слязісты газ.  
Не хадзіце ў першы і  
апошні вагоны –  
трымайце ў сябе рэшткі  
перавараных эмоцыі.  
Сядзенняў не хопіць на ўсіх –  
зрэшты, лёс усё адно напаткае  
вас – сядзіце вы  
альбо стаіце ў праходзе.  
Наш цягнік узлятае,  
бо няма ніякае канцавой станцыі,

ні прыпінку, ні прытулку, ні дома –  
толькі бясконцы шлях у нябёсах.<sup>14</sup> (Komar 2016: 38)

Although not a comic poet, Komar shows a good sense of humour in her work. Two poems, for instance, take for their titles Soviet clichés, of which the first, favoured by the so-called Soviet Peace Committee, *Miru mir* (Peace to the world, 15/10/2015) begins by saying that the war ended in victory for both sides, as it was not a matter for women (however manly) or poets. At the end of the verse, it is revealed that it is language that has been victorious: ‘Я пакладу табе ў заплечнік ссабойку з мовай / нашай агульнай мовай, якая перемагла’ (I shall put in your rucksack language to take with you / our general language which has been victorious: Komar 2016, 34). The second poem, which takes an approximate but frequently quoted statistic referring to Belarus’s losses in WWII, is ‘Kožny čaćviorty’ (Every fourth one: 26/12/2014); after a variety of other fours, the poem ends with a cart stuck in the mud of everybody’s favourite myth of love. It is worth quoting in full as an illustration of the poet’s ironical response to the use of the War to prop up the present dire regime:

Я – кожны 4-ы незнаёмы мінак,  
кожная 4-я праблема, у якой ты вінаваты,  
кожнае 4-е жыццё, якое пражыў не так,  
кожны 4-ы бомж: без мэты, без працы, без хаты.  
Кожны 4-ы кат і краты.  
Ты – кожная 4-ая кніга, да якой я не даспела,  
кожная 4-я спраўджаная мара й выкананы план,  
кожны 4-ы дэсерт, які я не даела,  
кожны 4-ы бяздомны сабака, якога я падабрала.  
Кожнае 4-е знявечанае цела. І джала.  
Мы – кожнае 4-е непрамоўленае слова  
і няскочаны сказ.  
Кожны 4-ы крок наш выбіваецца з агульнага рытму.

<sup>14</sup> Our train flies up – / at the terminus / nobody is waiting for us. / Close your eyes tight: / a gas that makes them water is in the carriage. / Don’t go to the front or / the back of the train – / keep to yourselves the remains / of your fevered emotions. / There are not enough seats for everyone – / incidentally fate will catch up with / you whether you sit or stand in the passage. // Our train flies up / for there is no terminus, / no stop, no refuge, no home – / only an endless track in the heavens.



... каб яны не паспявалі  
 з табой не згаджацца,  
 няхай не разумеюць,  
 задаюцца пытаньнямі,  
 разгублена пераглядаюцца  
 і вінавата маўчаць.  
 калі ва ўсіх тваіх перамог  
 не атрымалася,  
 можа, хаця б віна  
 нарэшце іх аб'яднае.<sup>17</sup> (Komar 2023: 24)

In the poems discussed hitherto there have already been passing (though far from insignificant) references to hangmen, prison bars and mutilated bodies, and the final poems in *Tryputnik*, under the title *Nieabaronienyja* (The defenceless ones, 9/2020), concern the political demonstrations on the streets of Belarus and the ensuing violent repressions of 2020-21. Towards the end of these verses, however, is a striking poem about a German, Kurt Prüfer, who made a profitable living from the ash in concentration camps from Dachau to the Mahilioŭ ghetto, *Heta nie ja siadžu na balkonie vosieńskaj spiokaj...* (It is not I who sits on a balcony in the autumn heat...: autumn 2020).<sup>18</sup> Here are the last three stanzas:

... Я найлепшы інжынер фабрыкі <Топф і сыны>,  
 але гэта не я сяджу на балконе восеньскай спёкай.  
 Я ствараю попел дваццаць чатыры гадзіны.  
 Попел не пахне газам.  
 Попел пахне перспекывамі і поспехам.  
 Калі не я, дык хтосьці іншы б,  
 іх так многа,  
 як туфель, зубоў, дзённікаў, –  
 проста попел.

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<sup>17</sup> (...in order that they could not / get on with you, / let them not understand, / they ask lots of questions / they look at each other in confusion / and fall guiltily silent. / when for all of them / your victories were not successful, / maybe guilt at least / will finally unite them.

<sup>18</sup> This title, but not, of course, the poem, is taken from the well-known Russian poet Polina Barskova (b. 1976) who is currently at the University of Berkeley, California. Communication from Hanna Komar 5 July 2023.

Нават пад страхам ГУЛАГу,  
усё адно б –  
бо хто, калі не я.<sup>19</sup> (Komar 2023: 154)

Before turning from the atrocities of Germans during WWII, and the refrain in the poem implying absolution from any guilt, to the violence in contemporary Belarus, it is worth remembering that only a year after his election Lukašenka notoriously praised the work of Adolf Hitler to the German *Handelsblatt*, doubtless seeing a model for his own style of undemocratic leadership. One particularly memorable poem, *Noč na aŭtadazvonie* (Night on autodial, 13-17/8/20), describes how a friend of the poet was beaten up and then incarcerated in the notorious Akrešcina prison in Miensk, which is ostensibly a pre-trial detention centre, but notorious for torture and other abuses:

ноч на аўтадазвоне  
гудкі – як дручкі,  
гумовыя кулі –  
усе на аднаго:  
130, 131 працяжны –  
да ранку тварам у бетон,  
непрытомнасць, з якой вырывае  
новы удар,  
трое сутак без ежы...  
няма адказу на ўсе нашы  
белыя кветкі,  
чырвоныя сэрцы.  
чалавечае цела і памяць  
вытрымліваюць траўмы,  
несумяшчальныя з верай у лепшае,  
пераймianoўваем колеры  
<страх>, <трывогу>, <жалобу>  
на <супраціў>, <чаканне>, <надзею>.  
калі ўсё гэта скончыцца,

<sup>19</sup> ...I am the best engineer in the factory 'Topf and Sons', / but is not I who sits on a balcony in the autumn heat. / I make ash round the clock. / Ash does not smell of gas. / Ash smells of promise and success. // If it were not me, then it would be someone else, / there are so many of them, / like shoes, teeth, diaries, - / just ash. // Even under fear of the GULag, / it would be all the same – / for who would it be, if not me.

я дапамагу табе фарбаваць  
 гэтыя голыя сцены.  
 ў белы  
 чырвоны  
 белы.<sup>20</sup> (Комар 2023: 118)

Three poems will illustrate the tone of the *Nieabaronyja* cycle. The first, *u našaj kamiery...* (in our cell..., 9/2020), clearly reflects not only the poet's feelings but her own experience; in the middle of the verse there is a short dream-like mention of normality before the reality of prison returns:

у нашай камеры  
 на чатырох усё агульнае:  
 вадкае белае  
 ліпкае вохравае святло  
 рыпенне ложка  
 холад скручаны абаранкам  
 чыстае паветра са шчыліны ў акне  
 сонца за густым шклом  
 грукат вольных цягнікоў  
 бразгат дзвярэй  
 перастукванне праз сцены  
 цёплая вада ў душы  
 дэзадарант  
 газета сканвордаў  
 голас які чытае кнігу  
 згушчаны час  
 просьбы  
 праклёны  
 кашмары  
 і адно на ўсіх

<sup>20</sup> Night on redial / sirens like clubs, / rubber bullets – all for one person. 130, 131 – drawn out / his face against the concrete until morning, / unconsciousness, from which he is aroused / by another blow, / three days and nights without food... // there is no response to all our / white flowers, red hearts. // the human body and memory / can bear traumas / incompatible with belief in better things, / colours are given different names: 'fear', 'alarm', 'grief' / become 'resistance', 'waiting', 'hope'. // when all this is over, / I shall help you to paint / these bare walls // in white / red / white.

<калі выйду на волю...><sup>21</sup> (Komar 2023: 150)

The second poem, *Niamiha* (The river Niamiha, 2020) expresses the frustration of demonstrating in the face of cruel opposition:

Няміга  
калі нас атакуе  
рой чорных дручкоў,  
калі нашы крылы ломяцца  
аб сляпую упартасць вадамётаў,  
што мне рабіць:  
маліць іх спыніцца  
альбо уцякаць?  
даволі! хопіць!<sup>22</sup> (Komar 2023: 134)

The third poem, *Potym raskažam...* (Later we shall tell..., 12/2020), looks forward to recounting a victory against the forces of darkness:

Потым раскажам,  
як мы выжылі, як змаглі;  
што нас вяло на вуліцы,  
што вяртала дадому;  
за каго мы запальвалі  
свечкі штовечар;  
пра летапісы нашых жыццяў  
у лістах зняволеным;  
як, ідучы па вуліцах, уздымалі вочы  
на вокны, баючыся не далічыцца;  
хто насамрэч перамагаў  
у нашых снах

<sup>21</sup> in our cell / everything is shared between four / the damp white / sticky ochre light / the creaking of the bed / the cold squeezed up like a twisted roll / the clean air from a crack in the window / the sun behind the thick glass / the rumbling of free trains / the crashing of doors / the knocking between walls // warm water in the shower / deodorant / a newspaper with scanwords / a voice reading a book / time is condensed / appeals / curses / nightmares / and the same for everybody / ‘when I get out to freedom...’

<sup>22</sup> (Niamiha): When we are attacked / by a horde of black truncheons, / when our wings are broken / by the blind stubbornness of water cannons, / what am I to do: / beg them to stop / or run away? // Enough! Give up!

і куды мы сыходзілі па начах,  
замест таго, каб кахацца.<sup>23</sup> (Komar 2023: 172)

Hanna Komar is one of the most eloquent poets to describe the struggles that have made Belarus notorious throughout the world.

As a natural consequence of the appalling political situation in their country, many young Belarusians have at least thought of emigration, and many others have taken that step, permanently or in the hope of returning. Komar has made another original move in the direction of what has become known as docupoetry, something slightly akin to the work of Svetlana Alexievich in prose.<sup>24</sup> *My vierniemsia* is Komar's contribution to this relatively new genre, using the words of emigrants turned into poems that convey the confusion and longing felt by many. The book contains verse based on Belarusian and Russian speakers, and the three short examples that follow are from the former linguistic group. The first is pithy in its total disappointment:

Паліна  
я проста хачу дамой  
я проста хачу дамой  
я проста хачу дамой  
я проста хачу дамой  
эмігрантка херава<sup>25</sup> (Komar 2022: 34)

In the second example of docupoetry the young emigrant appears to find the February weather familiar, but the typographical emphasis on the fact that people are laughing would seem to point a question:

Аргур

<sup>23</sup> Later we shall tell / how we survived as best we could; / what brought us out onto the streets, / what brought us home; / for whom we lit / candles every evening; / about the chronicles of our lives / in letters to prisoners, / how, walking the streets / we would raise our eyes to / the windows, fearing not to distinguish between them; / who really won / in our dreams / and where did we go out at night / instead of making love. (For a little more on Komar's political poetry see Korkunov 2021: 196-97).

<sup>24</sup> For more detail on this phenomenon in general see Lektzier 2018a.

<sup>25</sup> (Palina): I just want to go home / I am a shitty emigrant.

Раставаў снег,  
цяклі ручаі талай вады.  
Я сядзеў у кавярні,  
піў каву.  
За вакном хадзілі трамваі.

Смяюцца людзі.  
Люты –  
гурбы снегу,  
і ён раставаў...<sup>26</sup> (Komar 2022: 37)

Absence of the central character's husband and the changes when he joins her is the theme of the third example:

Алена  
сон быў без сноў  
пакуль не прыехаў мой муж  
я глядзела у акно ды плакала  
пакуль не прыехаў мой муж  
усё падавалася шэрым  
пакуль не прыехаў мой муж  
з'яджала амаль што без думак куды я еду  
у чым была  
з суда  
<Дарога ў Асвенцым>  
і <Беларускі Данбас>  
днямі начамі  
пакуль не прыехаў мой муж  
што са мной будзе?  
ўсё ў дымцы ды павалоцы  
прыехаў мой муж  
я з сям'ёй  
Кіеў адкрыўся цудоўнымі колерамі  
пасля  
батанічны сад ды рака Одра  
жыву жыццё зараз  
толькі справы на дзень

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<sup>26</sup> (Artur): The snow was melting, / streams of melted snow were running. / I was sitting in a coffee shop / drinking coffee. / Beyond the window trams were passing. / People were laughing. / February – / snowdrifts, / and it was melting...

не думаць  
 пра країну  
 што я буду рабіць  
 цела  
 без сноў  
 я жыву  
 я жыву  
 без сноў  
 з сям'ей<sup>27</sup> (Komar 2022: 51-52)

The lion's share of translations in the Bukowski collection are by Komar, and the rest made by Julija Timafiejeva (wife of what the American poet might have called a celebrity, Alhierd Bacharevič). As examples of Komar's skill in coping with Bukowski's often elliptical verse, here is the end of a harrowing poem about a traffic jam on the Californian Harbor Freeway, *Jam (Zator)* followed by *Be Kind* (Budž dobrym). In each case the translation follows the original:

... we were like some last, vast  
 final dinosaur  
 crawling feebly home somewhere,  
 somehow, maybe  
 to  
 die. (Bukowski 1992: 17)  
 ... мы былі нібы апошні ў свеце,  
 даўжэзны дыназаўр,  
 што павольна поўз дахаты, куды  
 каб  
 памерці. (Komar 2017: 39)  
 be kind  
 we are always asked

<sup>27</sup> (Aliena): Sleep without dreams / until my husband comes / I looked out of the window and wept / until my husband comes / everything seemed grey / until my husband comes // I left almost without thinking where I was going / in what I was wearing / from the courtroom. / 'The Road to Auschwitz' / and 'Belarusian Donbass' / by day and night / until my husband comes // what will become of me? / everything is in a mist and shroud // my husband has come / I am with my family / Kyiv has opened up in wonderful colours / afterward the botanical gardens and the river Oder // now I live life / only for daily affairs / not thinking / about my country / what I am to do // my body / is without dreams / I live // I live / without dreams / with my family.

to understand the other person's  
viewpoint  
no matter how  
out-dated  
foolish or  
obnoxious.  
one is asked  
to view  
their total error  
their life-waste  
with  
kindliness,  
especially if they are aged.  
but age is the total of  
our doing,  
they have aged  
badly  
because they have  
lived  
out of focus,  
they have refused to see.  
not their fault?  
whose fault?  
mine?  
I am asked to hide  
my viewpoint  
from them  
for fear of their fear.  
age is no crime  
but the shame  
of a deliberately  
wasted life  
among so many  
deliberately  
wasted  
lives  
is. (Bukowski 1992: 42-43)  
будзь добрым  
нас заўжды заклікаюць  
прыняць чужую  
пазіцыю,

нават калі яна  
 састарэлая  
 бязглуздая ці  
 непрымальная.  
 заклікаюць  
 разглядаць  
 суму іх памылак,  
 іх змарнаванае  
 жыццё  
 са спачуваннем,  
 асабліва ўлічваючы  
 іхні ўзрост.  
 але ўзрост – гэта сума  
 нашых справаў.  
 у іх непрыгожая  
 старасць  
 бо яны  
 жылі  
 не навёўшы рэдкасць,  
 не пажадаўшы  
 бачыць.  
 не іх віна?  
 тады чья?  
 мая?  
 заклікаюць хаваць  
 ад іх  
 маю пазіцыю,  
 страхавацца ад іх  
 страху.  
 узрост – не злачынства  
 а вось вялізнага мноства  
 свядома  
 пахераных  
 жыццяў –  
 злачынства. (Komar 2017: 81-82)

The excerpts from Komar's translations may be hoped to complete this picture of her remarkably enterprising work; in verse particularly, using strong imagery and widespread assonance in her frequently grim pictures of dysfunctional family and intimate personal relationships,

as well as insights into the life of political prisoners and refugees from Belarus. Also clear, however, is her vivid imagination and lively sense of humour, both by reference, for instance to Soviet shibboleths and day to day prejudices, as well as by keen observation of human behaviour. Hanna Komar has made a remarkable start to what promises to be a stellar career.

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*Hanna Komar all'inizio di una carriera molto promettente come poetessa e traduttrice.*

Questo articolo intende introdurre, a un nuovo pubblico di parlanti inglesi, una poetessa e una traduttrice di talento che, come tanti altri giovani bielorusi, adesso vive al di fuori del suo paese di nascita. La poesia intraprendentemente originale di Hanna Komar, in uno stadio ancora relativamente precoce, colpisce già per la sua audacia tematica e per la sua onestà, facendo uso di un immaginario ampio e originale, di una grande assonanza e di un vasto spettro lessicale, senza soccombere all'influenza del russo, così onnipresente altrove. Profondamente patriottica, non solo ella descrive le proteste e la loro barbara soppressione, ma tenta anche di registrare in versi, basati su interviste, i sentimenti e le impressioni di coloro che sono stati spinti all'estero da un regime spietato. La sua poesia è stata ampiamente tradotta ed ella si è mostrata intraprendente e capace nel trasporre l'opera di Charles Bukowski in bielorusso. Si spera che Komar possa presto ottenere l'ampio riconoscimento che indubbiamente merita.

*Parole chiave:* poesia bielorusa, proteste, emigrazione, docupoesia, traduzione, relazioni disfunzionali, onestà.

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