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## Valžyna Mort: A poet between two continents

*Walžyna Mort: poetka między dwoma kontynentami*

*Вальжына Морт: паэтка паміж двума кантынентамі*

### Abstract

Valžyna Mort is one of the most talented Belarusian poets in emigration. The aim of this article is to analyse the works of this poet written before and after her emigration to the United States. Amongst works discussed are: *Factory of Tears* (a bilingual edition, 2008), *Collected Body* (works only in English, 2011) and *Epidemija ružaŭ* (2017). Mort's best poems to date include *Belaruskaja mova I* and *Belaruskaja mova II*, *Rafalu Vajačaku*, *Fabryka slioz / Factory of Tears*, *Scena siaredniaviečnaj vajny (pavodlie adnajmiennaj karciny Dega*, *Mužčyny prychodziać jak ličby ũ kalendary...*, *Na pliażach Flarydy*, *N'iu Jork* and *Uspaminy*; prominent amongst her prose works are *Hopniki* and *Ciotka Hanna*; of her English-language mentioned are *Photograph* and *A Portrait of a Mother in Fall*. Mort's exceptional talent is for use of her native language and for exceptionally vivid imagery, for unusually perceptive descriptions as well as a profoundly ironic view of the banal aspects of both Belarusian and American life: she also possesses a most touching ability to describe her family. Very open in writing about her body and human physical functions in general, she is one of the most memorable Belarusian poets living today.

**Keywords:** Valžyna Mort, Belarusian poetry, American poetry, Belarusian emigration, intimacy

### Abstrakt

Walžyna Mort jest jedną z najbardziej utalentowanych współczesnych poetek białoruskich na emigracji. Celem artykułu jest analiza poetycka utworów, które powstały zarówno przed emigracją, jak i po wyjeździe do Stanów Zjednoczonych Ameryki. Wśród przeanalizowanych książek

znalazły się: *Fabryka słoz* (teksty białoruskie i angielskie, 2008), *Collected Body* (wiersze angielskie, 2011) oraz najnowsze wydanie wierszy białoruskich *Epidemija rużau* (2017). Omówiono najlepsze wiersze poetki w języku białoruskim oraz angielskim, m.in.: *Bielaruskaja mowa I*, *Bielaruskaja mowa II*, *Rafalu Wajačaku*, *Fabryka słoz/Factory of Tears*, *Scena siaredniawiecznaj wajny (pawodle adnajmiennaj karciny Dega)*, *Mużčyny prychoziać jak ličby ŭ kalendary...*, *Na plażach Flarydy, Nju Jork, Uspaminy, Photograph, A Portrait of a Mother in Fall*. Badaniu poddano także prozatorskie utwory *Hopniki* i *Ciotka Anna*. W artykule udowodniono, że twórczość Mort charakteryzuje się bogactwem języka, obrazowością, niezwykłą spostrzegawczością oraz ironią w opisie banalności codziennego życia zarówno na Białorusi, jak i w Ameryce. Poetka szczerze pisze o rodzinie i intymnych stronach ludzkiego życia. Niewątpliwie jest jedną z najbardziej wyrazistych i oryginalnych postaci współczesnej literatury białoruskiej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Wałżyna Mort, poezja białoruska, poezja amerykańska, emigracja białoruska, intymność

### Анатацыя

Ваљжына Морт – адна з найбольш таленавітых сучасных беларускіх паэтак на эміграцыі. Мэта данага артыкула – аналіз твораў паэтки, напісаных да і пасля яе эміграцыі ў Злучаныя Штаты. Сярод кніг, на якіх факусіруецца ўвага ў артыкуле: *Фабрыка слёз* (паралельныя беларускія і англійскія тэксты, 2008), *Collected Body* (англамоўныя вершы, 2011) і найноўшая кніга беларускіх вершаў *Эпідэмыя ружаў* (2017). Разглядаюцца найлепшыя вершы паэтки на беларускай і англійскай мове, такія як: *Беларуская мова I*, *Беларуская мова II*, *Рафалу Ваячаку*, *Фабрыка слёз / Factory of Tears*, *Сцэна сярэднявечнай вайны (наводле аднайменнай карціны Дэга)*, *Мужчыны прыходзяць як лічбы ў календары...*, *На пляжах Фларыды, Нью Ёрк, Успаміны, Photograph, A Portrait of a Mother in Fall*. Асобна аналізуюцца два пражэктныя творы: *Гопнікі* і *Цётка Анна*. Аўтар артыкулу прыходзіць да высновы, што творчасць Ваљжыны Морт вылучаецца багаццем мовы і маляўнічай вобразнасцю, незвычайнай назіральнасцю і вострай іроніяй у апісаннях банальнасці штодзённага жыцця як у Беларусі, так і ў Амерыцы. Паэтка шчыра піша пра сваю сям’ю і інтымныя праявы чалавечага жыцця. Яна, несумненна, з’яўляецца адной з самых каларытных і арыгінальных постацяў у сучаснай беларускай літаратуры.

**Ключавыя словы:** Ваљжына Морт, беларуская паэзія, амерыканская паэзія, беларуская эміграцыя, інтымнасць

Already in her first book, *Ja tonieńkaja jak tvaje viejki (I am as thin as your eyelashes)*, 2004, publ. 2005)<sup>1</sup> Wałżyna Mort showed herself to be a highly original poet and prose writer as well as a consummate translator into Belarusian from English, Polish and Ukrainian. She is also an excellent reader of her own poetry. Since moving to the United States in spring 2005 she has experimented in writing in

<sup>1</sup> This book will be called in references Jt.

English and has collaborated with American poets in translating some of her Belarusian works, several volumes of which have been published and will be mentioned subsequently. A huge event for Belarusian literature in 2017 was the publication in Miensk of another book of poetry and prose, *Epidemija ružaŭ* (*Rose Pandemic*), giving hope to many that Mort's emigration did not mark the end of a career in Belarusian literature that had started so brilliantly.

Vaĺžyna Mort (real name Martynava) was born in Miensk in 1981, and graduated from the State Linguistic University there in English as a Foreign Language in 2004. In the United States she has been awarded many prizes and contributed to a large number of poetry and more general magazines and newspapers. Perhaps one of the most important events, in that it directly affected her poetry and her attitude to her earliest work, was the poet's stay in Warsaw as the holder of a Gaude Polonia Scholarship in 2005. Her mentor there, Adam Pomorsky, in her own words, „completely changed the way I knew poetry and I made a drastic turn to the poems that would be a part of *Factory of Tears*”<sup>2</sup>. In the years 2009–2012 she was Visiting Poet, MFA (Master of Fine Arts) Program at the University of Baltimore, conducting, inter al., poetry workshops and seminars in literature and writing. During this time she obtained an MFA in „Creating Writing, Poetry” at the American University in Washington DC. In summer 2013 she was Guest Professor in the Humboldt University, Berlin, and in the years 2012–2017 was Visiting Assistant Professor at Cornell University, teaching, amongst other things, Creative Writing, Verse Writing, Literary Translation and various aspects of sexual politics. From 2017 she has held the distinguished position of Professor of Practice at Cornell. Such a glittering career as that sketched above, however, fades beside her outstanding gifts as an original poet, writer of poetic prose and translator.

Before turning to a review of Mort's creative work, it is worth pointing out that not only did she make a „drastic turn” after her first book, but also that she has rejected many of her earlier poems.<sup>3</sup> Some of the earlier works, however, survive in later publications, sometimes changing the order of elements in a particular poem, and sometimes republishing the same work with a different title.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, the latest, or only, publication of a work will be the one to which reference is made, although some of the earlier poems that did not reappear will also be referred to and occasionally quoted. The later volumes are: *Factory of Tears* (2008) (in references Fot) in which

<sup>2</sup> Private communication.

<sup>3</sup> Private communication. One of these early poems, „i liudzi pieratvarylisia ŭ kamieńnie...” (and people turned into stones), about personal relations, nonetheless seems to anticipate Mort's later words when she writes: „я забяру ўсе свае словы” (I shall take back all my words) (Mort, 2005, p. 7). It is, of course, the right of creative people (writers, and for that matter, composers and artists) to reject their early work, but a commentator need not be so restricted.

<sup>4</sup> A clear example of this is a poem to be discussed later: *Sitzendes Mädchen mit verschränkten Armen* in Er is printed in a free version with a different title in Cb. In this and comparable cases, the translation will refer to the English version and the Belarusian to the text in Er.

Belarusian texts are printed parallel to English translations;<sup>5</sup> *Collected Body* (2011) (in references Cb) only in English; and, without pagination, *Milk as an Animal* (2013), also in English, but with just one poem that has not been printed elsewhere;<sup>6</sup> most important of all is *Epidemija ružaŭ* (*Rose pandemic*) (in references Er). One or more other books or booklets, particularly *Favourites for Accordion* (with translations by Franz Wright), described as a chapbook, have been impossible to access at the time of writing.<sup>7</sup> Also worth mentioning is a remarkable play „X”, performed (partially improvised) by students of the philological faculty of BDU (Belarusian State University).<sup>8</sup> It would be impossible to mention all Wałżyna Mort’s successes in America, which include the compiling and editing of several books, most notably *Something Indecent: Poems Recommended by Eastern European Poets*; amongst the latter are the selections of one of her friends, the outstanding Russian poet Vera Pavlova, another creative writer who plays a large and unselfish role in the publishing and promoting of others.

Such a long introduction to Wałżyna Mort’s poetry and prose must be attributed, at least in part, to the richness of her precociously talented life.

A particular feature of her poetry is the fecund, continuously inventive, and consistently original imagery, often related to personal relations and in particular the female body, as well as a multitude of other aspects of the intense life of this poet, whose imagination seems completely alive whatever her subject. Apart from poems about love, sex and passion, there are many reflections on the Belarusian language, memory, travel and escape from routine, the seasons, flowers, alive and dead, including, unsurprisingly in her most recent book, roses. Mort’s linguistically rich poems are extremely musical with unobtrusive assonance and melody,<sup>9</sup> making much use of repeated lines both within poems and from one poem to another.<sup>10</sup> Her work is marked by great contrasts,

<sup>5</sup> Where a more literal version of a poem is possible, I have used my own. In some cases, however, the printed translations are freer and even include new lines. In such cases a reference is given to them in a footnote. It is possible, even probable, that the poems in *Collected Body*, which were re-published came from earlier versions: such examples include *Love* and *Locust music*.

<sup>6</sup> This poem has one line on each barely connected page, beginning with a striking image: „Over the growing shadows fell the dead weight of light”. Other memorable images are „Dust rose like columns of unpaid debt” and „Inside her breasts milk circled like a growling animal / locked behind two heavy nipples”.

<sup>7</sup> Full publishing details of books that have been accessed are in the Bibliography.

<sup>8</sup> This play should not be confused with the prose poem, „X” in Er (Mort, 2017, pp. 89–91).

<sup>9</sup> Here may be mentioned an English poet whom Wałżyna Mort particularly admires, Alice Oswald (b. 1966), who in an interview following her appointment as BBC Radio 4’s poet-in-residence, in response to the suggestion that poetry was a combination of music and form, agreed, adding „And about twenty other things as well”. A reminder, if any be needed, that to describe a poet’s work is bound to be, at best, an imperfect exercise, even an impossible one, if according to the late Professor Lojka’s suggestion about an earlier master of metaphor, Ryhor Baradulin (1935–2014), that only Belarusians can fully understand and appreciate his poetry (Lojka, 2000, p. 14).

<sup>10</sup> Two early examples of this phenomenon are *Son dryvasieka* (*The woodcutter’s dream*) and *Ja ahluchnu ad cišyni* (*I shall go deaf from the silence*) (Mort, 2005, pp. 20–22). There are many more.

particularly of violence and gentle sensitivity, although there are few of her poems about love, sex and the female body that do not have at least some dark elements. One fine early poem that the author has chosen to republish in her bilingual anthology may be quoted as a mild example of the intrusion of violence into a verse that starts and, perhaps, ends with images reflecting the wonder of intimate personal relations, „ci heta zhublieny taboju volas...” (was it a hair you lost...):

ці згублены табою волас  
пусціў карэньне  
пасья таго як на пустыню прасьціны  
упалі  
дажджом доўгачаканым целы

ці гэта гады  
разбуджаныя ў пячорах коўдры  
свае вогненныя  
высунулі языкі  
альбо фантанам крыві  
сканала паветра  
задыхнулася  
паміж двух целаў  
унутры

белая пена – вась чым стала прасьціна  
і хвалі коўдры вынеслі на падлогу  
дзьвюх рыбаў што рты выварочваюць няўмела  
і што гэта там вісіць  
ці не чырвоны месяц  
ці гэта бог узняў свой голас  
і кінуў уніз  
і ён упаў на дом мой громам  
і нерухомую маланкай  
на маім ложку  
стаіць туліпан (Mort, 2008, p. 26)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> „was it a hair you lost / one that's grown roots / when upon the sheet's desert / two bodies / fell like welcome rain // or were those snakes / startled awake in the caves of the blanket / snakes that stuck out / their fiery tongues / like a fountain of blood / the air died / strangled / between two bodies // white sea foam / this is what's become of the sheet / and the blanket waves tossed / two fishes on the floor / turning their mouths inside out / and what is hanging there / if not a red half-moon / or was it god / who cast down his voice / and he voice struck my house like thunder / as frozen lightning / from my bed / grows a single tulip” (Mort, 2008, p. 27). Some of the subsequent translations, if not acknowledged by book (as in the previous one) or name. are mine even if they

Also relatively mild is her sexually charged tribute poem, *Žan-Pol Biełmando* (*Jean-Paul Belmondo*) at the end of which during wild dancing women cut him through their breasts with razor-sharp dresses covered in peonies; her outpouring of admiration include the following lines that attain a fantastic element by the idea of a river shocking the Deity:

вядзеш мяне да ракі, што аднойчы ўзняла сваю спадніцу,  
І Бог, збянтэжаны такім відам,  
Загадаў прыкрыць яго горадам (Mort, 2017, p. 57)<sup>12</sup>.

Quite different is a poem about another outstanding man, the tragically short-lived Polish poet Rafał Wojaczek (1945–1971), ten of whose poems were excellently translated in Mort's first book. Her poem *Rafalu Vajačaku* (*To Rafał Wojaczek*) was printed in *Factory of Tears* and reprinted in *Epidemija ružaŭ*:

перад вачыма  
лезе ў рот  
над вухам  
брыдкаю мухай  
лётае сьмерць  
перашкаджае  
глядзець  
есьці  
слухаць  
нарэшце здолеў яе ўхапіць  
сьціснуць  
у кулаку  
і ў выніку  
больш нічога не трэба  
адарваў яе крыльцы  
галаву  
адпусціў яе мітусіцца  
на падлогу  
і назіраеш падоўгу  
дакладней вечна (Mort, 2017, p. 59)<sup>13</sup>.

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are slightly modified, in a few cases, from versions in a book. Where, however, the versions are specifically the poet's own, then that will be used, even if they differ considerably from the Belarusian equivalent.

<sup>12</sup> „you lead me to the river, which one day pulled up its skirt, / and God, alarmed by such a sight, / Ordered that it should be covered up by a city”.

<sup>13</sup> „before your eyes / getting to your mouth / above your ear / like a filthy fly / death is flying around / interfering / with seeing / with eating / with listening / finally you managed to catch it / squeeze

It is difficult to imagine another poem that describes so vividly the nature of depression and suicide.

It is not her references to death that, of themselves, make Valžyna Mort's poems dark, although she does not shrink from it as a subject. In the poetic prose of *Ciotka Anna (Aunty Anna)*, for instance, she produces a remarkably strong image to describe its inevitability: „Смерць, як распешчанае дзіця, якому ніхто ніколі не казаў нельга” (Mort, 2017, p. 33)<sup>14</sup>.

Another powerful image is in *Biellaruskaja mova II (Belarusian II)* where her native language is compared, amongst other things, to death:

яна як смерць раптоўная і неразборлівая,  
як смерць, ад якой немагчыма памерці,  
як смерць, ад якой мерцвякі ажываюць (Mort, 2008, p. 108)<sup>15</sup>.

Returning to the Deity, *Mabyć tabie taksama časam zdajecca...* (*Maybe it also seems to you sometimes...*) with much repetition of the word „mabyć” pictures God as a head teacher who never gives high grades, causing her parents to abandon their daughter by dying.

An interesting poem, untitled in *Epidemija ružaj*, but called *Love* in *Collected Body*, is memorably original and strikingly intimate not only in its opening stanzas:

Найчалавечы з усіх чалавечых гукаў:  
уверх-уніз шчоткай па зубах, праз калідор.  
Нават саранча збянтэжана слухае. Таксама  
яна, на голым матрасе, кінутым на падлогу,  
дзівіцца, колькі яго цела ў гэтым гуку –  
быццам толькі зараз заўважыла, што ён не бязрукі.

Плявок у ракавіну – яны лічыць  
яго целам.  
пятлю яго сліны над сваёй вагінай –  
яна лічыць яго целам (Mort, 2017, p. 14)<sup>16</sup>.

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it / in your fist . you need nothing more / you tore off its wings / its head / and let it flutter / on the floor / and you observe it at length / or, more accurately, forever”.

<sup>14</sup> „Death is like a spoilt child to whom nobody has ever said «No»”.

<sup>15</sup> „it is like death, sudden and unscrupulous, / like death from which you cannot die, / like death, from which corpses come to life”.

<sup>16</sup> „The most human sound a body can hear – / teeth being cleaned late at night across the hallway. / Even the locusts listen confused. / She too on a bare mattress thrown over the floor, / is surprised how much of his body is in that sound – / as if she had just now noticed that he had arms. // The spit shooting down the sink – / she still counts as his body. The noose of his saliva over her pussy – she still counts as his body” (Mort, 2011, p. 12).

Mort possesses a remarkable talent for recreating a strong sense of physicality, epitomized in the poem's last four lines:

Яна ляжыць на матрасе, а праз калідор,  
знятая пасля доўгага дня на працы  
кінутая на падлогу пасля доўгага дня на працы,  
ляжыць маўклівая вопратка (Mort, 2017, p. 15)<sup>17</sup>.

The repetition in this final verse seems to emphasize the lover's recent past, but the version in *Collected Body*, p. 15 omits the repetition and vividly expands the image (see note 17).

*Utopija (Utopia)* (Mort, 2017, pp. 74–76) is a poem rich in imagery that was also presented in *Cb* (Mort, 2011, p. 40) in a slightly different version. In it Mort depicts with a string of daring images a picture of an idyllic town where love is free and passionate: „Мы вітаем вас у калоніі сонца, / чый жоўты сцяг – шклянку ліманаду – / мы ўздываем за кожным сталом” (We greet you in a colony of the sun / whose yellow flag – a glass of lemonade! – we raise at every table) (Mort, 2017, p. 74):

Таму мы не ведаем ні добра, ні зла.  
Часам нашымі словамі можна рэзаць мяса.

Калі нам здраджваюць,  
мы заходзім глыбока ў ваду  
і глядзім, як нашае сэрца  
ўзбівае акіян у пену (Mort, 2017, p. 75)<sup>18</sup>.

This poem also illustrates Mort's characteristically swift moves from light to dark: for example, blood falls on white stones, breaking the teeth of lovers, thinking them to be apples; her desire is to present an image of the world that reflects something of its contradictions; the word „realism” is entirely inappropriate, but it is a feature of the poet's modernity and, perhaps, even of her Belarusian origin, that her imagination ranges from the bliss of intimate happiness to the often bleak world beyond, epitomized by the mass production of tears in her bilingual book (*Factory of Tears*)<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> „She too lies across the hallway smelling / his long-day clothes tossed on the bathroom floor, / as his sweat crawls out of the cotton folds, / and disperses, and multiplies / like cockroaches” (Mort, 2011, p. 13).

<sup>18</sup> „this is why we know neither good nor evil. / sometimes our words can cut meat. // when we are betrayed / we go deep into the water / and watch how our heartbeats / scramble the ocean into foam” (Mort, 2011, p. 75).

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, the English version of *Utopija* in *Cb*, follows the above passage with two intensely sad lines that do not appear in the Belarusian version: „and throw high waves on the shore / where children drown” (Mort, 2011, p. 40).

Another poem rich in imagery is *Muzyka sarančy* (*Locust music*) where these rapacious insects play a considerable role, as the narrator dreams of driving in a convertible with a man, old or young, but at the end she writes:

і немагчыма заснуць з тым мужчынам  
з ім цела становіцца ўначы  
музыкай саранчы (Mort, 2017, p. 55)<sup>20</sup>.

Earlier in the poem there is a remarkable passage in which mountains are compared to one of Mort's other recurrent images, tortoises:

і горы прыселі як бегуны на старце  
і вецер уздымае іх зялёныя майкі  
а потым горы – гіганцкія чарапахі (Mort, 2017, p. 54)<sup>21</sup>.

One example of Mort's English-language poems is *Photograph*, a honeymoon picture dated Sochi 1982, at the time of an air crash the names of whose victims are read out from a newspaper by an „enormous mother”:

Under her sweaty palms, the print blurs,  
turning into black body bags  
arranged on the page (Mort, 2011, p. 36).

The happy bride's thoughts, however, are far from the disaster:

She thinks to herself:  
my Lifeline is not on the palm of my hand,  
but bent slightly in the knee,  
it's my leg lifted over a man's body.  
How natural it is for a Lifeline  
to start where the leg does (Mort, 2011, pp. 36–37).

The above reference to an air crash inevitably, for readers of Vaĺžyna Mort's earlier Belarusian work, recalls a striking poem about men in the poet's life, which begins in Belarusian and ends in English, *Mužčyny pryjchodziać, jak ličby ũ kaliendary...* (*Men come like dates in the calendar...*). It is one of the poems reproduced with changes mainly in the English parts from its first edition in *Factory of Tears* and given a title:

<sup>20</sup> „it's impossible to fall asleep next to this man / at night my body gradually becomes / the music of locusts”.

<sup>21</sup> The mountains are kneeling like runners at the starting line / their green t-shirts billowing the wind / and then the mountains become gigantic tortoises”.

*Mužčyny (Men)*. These men not only repeat every month, but apparently possess immense powers that seem almost unique to their sex. Here are some of the Belarusian lines and the last of the English ones in which she appeals to her mother for salvation:

мужчыны, што вучаць дзяцей дзіцячаму сьмеху.  
мужчыны, што вучаць час не стаяць на месцы.  
мужчыны, што любяць мужчын у туалетах клюбаў,  
мужчыны, што цалавалі рукі самое сьмерці,  
мужчыны, што ніколі не павераць.  
which bound me to a chair  
mama their lips fall down on me  
like burning airplanes  
[...]  
come back  
rescue me find me  
in this plane wreck (Mort, 2008, pp. 94–96)<sup>22</sup>.

The metaphorical air crash in this poem is of course, quite different from the reported one in *Photograph*. In its description of omnipotent and omniscient men, it in a sense anticipates many of the later poems where women and their bodies are at the centre of attention.

Valžyna Mort speaks very freely of the female body and bodily functions altogether. In *Ciotka Anna* the narrator looking from afar at a group of gardens in the village of M, imagines them as female genitals:

Пучок садоў М., зменшаны перспектывай да аднаго куста, быццам лабок голай жанчыны, што ляжыць перада мной на спіне (Mort, 2017, pp. 26)<sup>23</sup>.

Later in the same piece, the narrator writes of a woman with breasts of geographical propositions: „жанчына з грудзямі, што, як Уральскія горы, аддзялялі яе твар ад цела”. (Mort, 2017, p. 28)<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> „Men who teach children childish laughter, / Men who teach time not to stand still. / Men who make love to men in the lavatories of clubs, / Men who have kissed the hands of death itself, / Men who never believe me”. [The rest of the text does not require translation].

<sup>23</sup> „the flock of M’s gardens shrunken by perspective into a single bush, as if it were the pubes of a woman lying on her back, naked” (Mort, 2011, p. 16). The use of the word narrator here and elsewhere could easily be replaced by „the poet” or her name, since throughout Valzhyna Mort’s work, the connection to real people and events is, at best, misleading, and, like many another creative artist, she dislikes linking the content of her verse and prose to real events or people, including herself, even in prose poems like *Ciotka Anna* or *Ženia*. Utterly different, however, is „babulia” and „babuli”, which will be discussed later.

<sup>24</sup> „A woman with breasts which, like the Ural mountains, separated her face from her body”.

In a sense, the image of a woman's hair lying over her breasts in *Dźvie Jev'* (*Two Eves*) as railway lines with trains running over them could be considered an example of the relation of the female body to violence (Mort, 2017, p. 3). Another poem, *Kryža-vanka* (*Crossword*), begins with a curious description of a woman's genitals and the comparison of nipples to the tips of festive shoes. Here is the first stanza:

Жанчына ідзе ўздоўж кустоў ядлоўцу і шыпшыны,  
з чыстай вульвай, складзенай паміж ног,  
з грудзямі, што, як кончыкі яе святочных туфляў,  
ціха блішчаць у цяжкой шафе (Mort, 2017, p. 23)<sup>25</sup>.

In a strong but rather bizarre early poem, *Kab uvajŝci ŭ hetuju kvateru...* (*In order to get into this flat...*) a woman offers her absent man apples, parsley and her bared nipples reminding her of the colour of red caviar:

нібы два  
каліва чырвонае ікры  
вось будзе ежа  
але ты едзеш (Mort, 2005, p. 35)<sup>26</sup>.

Bringing up memories is like hiring a prostitute to push around the flat on a wooden horse, while even the hands on the clock are violent:

ты бачыш як па дыску цыфэрблатным  
дзьве стрэлкі прагна носяцца па крузе  
адна другой наскоквае на плечы  
наскоквае на плечы – гвалтуе  
і мы – іх ненароджаныя дзеці (Mort, 2005, p. 36)<sup>27</sup>.

In *Apoŝniaja jablynia* (*The last apple-tree*) the narrator's hair sticks to the tree's flattened leaves (Mort, 2005, p. 17). More mildly, in her prose poem *Ženia*, the poet compares wet hair to the many hands of a clock, permanently pointing downwards (Mort, 2017, p. 72).

For all its vivid, sometimes startling, imagery, there is nothing abstract about the poetry of Valžyna Mort and she conveys in her verse a very physical sense of, for instance, hair and saliva, as well as urine. Apart from the reference to hair in *Dźvie*

<sup>25</sup> „A woman moves through dog-rose and juniper bushes, / her pussy clean and folded between her legs, / breasts like the tips of her festive shoes / shine silently in her heavy armoire” (Mort, 2011, p. 14).

<sup>26</sup> „like two / grains of red caviar / that will be your food / but you are going away”.

<sup>27</sup> „you see how on the disk of the clock face / the two hands chase greedily in a circle / one jumps on the shoulders of the other / jumps on the shoulder and rapes it / and we are their unborn children”.

*Jevy*, in another early poem, *Sonca – marski asilak...* (*The sun – a marine giant...*), Mort describes with palpable distaste flies making nests in her hair at the seaside. The following lines will serve as an illustration:

у маіх валасах  
зьвілі сабе гнёзды мухі  
якія пераносяць заразу  
я адчуваю кожны іх крок  
кожны іх стогн у стане экстазу  
мухі казычуць  
маё драўлянае горла  
сваімі лапамі валасатымі  
пад імі нехта нараджаецца  
а нехта гніе  
некаторыя назаўсёды застаюцца гарбатымі (Mort, 2005, p. 12)<sup>28</sup>.

A notable reference to saliva is in *Vohnišča z vačej konskich* (*The bonfires of horses eyes*), as may be seen in the following lines:

І калі ўвойдзеш у гэтае вогнішча,  
то спачатку  
будзеш глытаць яго  
сьліну чырвоную (Mort, 2005, p. 18)<sup>29</sup>.

Urine is found egregiously in descriptions of the children in *Z pliažaŭ Flarydy* (*From Florida beaches*) where her disgust returns after an extended image of the birds and fishes as money:

на вадзе – дзеці – будучыя магі,  
смейоўчыся, пазначаюць тэрыторыю.  
Толькі зхлынуўшыся, ты разумееш.  
што ўся соль зямлі – у акіянскай вадзе,  
што рыбы  
у прыроднай валюце – дробная манэта.  
якую ня цяжка здабыць. Не тое што птушкі –  
папяровыя грошы, якім ўсё дазволена.  
Яны нават вецер паставілі ракам  
і па яго сьпіне спускаюцца да вады

<sup>28</sup> „in my hair / flies have woven themselves nests / which transfer infection / I feel each of their steps / each groan in a state of ecstasy / the flies tickle / my wooden throat / with their hairy feet / under them someone is born / and someone rots / some remain forever hunchbacked”.

<sup>29</sup> „And when you enter this bonfire / at first / you will swallow its red saliva”.

і там пакідаюць вадзяныя знакі.

[...]

У вадзе – дзеці – нашчадкі малпаў

бессаромна мочацца на люстэрка Бога (Mort, 2008, p. 68)<sup>30</sup>.

Rather different pictures of the „unpoetic” subject of urination are to be found in two other of Mort’s poems. Firstly in the rather terrible English verse „My Father’s Breed”, which will be quoted later and in *Oda da Branki (Ode to Branca)* beneath the roof of a circus a little bear relieves itself:

З-пад купала цырку нам на галовы

сцыць медзвездзяня,

не ад сораму альбо страху:

каб узняцца да самай гары, яно мусіць скінуць

залатую вагу нашых дзяцінстваў (Mort, 2017, p. 18)<sup>31</sup>.

This poem is rich in imagery, including some striking views on language, a topic at least as important to Valžyna Mort as her body and its various natural functions. She repeats a phrase about the two languages (presumably Russian and Belarusian), which is continued here with a further image:

Вось калідор паміж мовамі, дзе мае вусны

складзены адно на адно, як бярэны лясное хаты.

Вось келіх забытай мовы, напоўнены да краёў

словам сэ-рэ-ма-ка-ра-а-пі,

што разліваецца на падлогу,

аздоблены бюстамі абезгалоўленых сірэн (Mort, 2017, pp. 19–20)<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> „In the water – boys – future monarchs / laughing, mark out their territory. // Only after choking you realize / that all the salt of the earth is in the ocean’s water. / That fish – / according to nature’s currency – are a sort of coin / that is easy to catch, / while birds are paper money to whom all is permitted – / they even put the wind in the doggy position / and sliding on its back they reach the water / and leave their watermarks. [...] In the water are children – ape’s descendants – / pissing shamelessly on God’s mirror” (Mort, 2008, p. 69).

<sup>31</sup> „Beneath the bigtop of the circus down on our heads / a little bear pisses, / not from shame or fear: / to climb to the very top, it must eject / the golden liquid of our childhoods”.

<sup>32</sup> „Here is a corridor between languages, where my lips / are folded one on to another like the logs of a forest house. // Here is a bowl of forgotten language, filled / by a single word se-re-ma-ka-ra-a-pi, / and spills into / the busts of headless sirens (translation or slightly altered version by the poet). The hyphenated word in the second stanza is said by the poet to be of ancient origin, here referring to the bust of a headless siren on the prow of a ship. It adds to the images of both violence and magic. Private communication.

Two major poems present in memorable form the poet's attitude to her native language: *Bielaruskaja mova I (Belarusian I)* and *Bielaruskaja mova II*. They are printed as one poem in *Epidemija rużajŭ*, but are published separately in *Factory of Tears*, and it is the latter edition, including the translations, which will be used in what follows: *Bielaruskaja mova I* begins with the poet and her kin being born, crawling from the ruins after a bombing, later experiencing love in the potentially menacing image of a chariot visiting a door marked with chalk, and finding public lavatories not a place for socially unacceptable activities, as in *Mużčyny*, but the only place for freedom<sup>33</sup>, and discovering with fierce determination their sense that the language was they themselves:

а калі апынулася што мы былі нашай мовай  
і нам вырвалі языкі мы пачалі размаўляць вачыма  
а калі ў нас выкалалі вочы мы пачалі размаўляць рукамі  
калі нам адсяклі рукі мы размаўлялі пальцамі на нагах  
калі нам прастрэлілі ногі мы ківалі галавою на <так>  
і хісталі галавою на <не>... а калі нашыя галовы з'елі жыўцом  
мы залезлі назад у чэравы нашых сьпячых маці  
як у бомбасховішчы  
каб нарадзіцца ізноў

а там на даляглядзе гімнастачка нашай будучыні  
скакала праз вогненны абруч  
сонца (Mort, 2008, pp. 2–5)<sup>34</sup>.

The conclusion of this poem forms a link with an early stage of it when a virtuosic gymnast of their future was also described with a mixture of disgust and dismay. The second poem, *Bielaruskaja mova II* begins with a powerful image, going on to a series of objections to the very existence of the Belarusian language and hostility to its „lack of any system” and its fatal small size which seems to prove that it does not exist. The opening image is of nationally (and linguistically) conscious Belarusians being herded into a huge orphanage. Here are the first few angry lines:

за тваімі межамі, мая краіна,  
пачынаецца вялізны дзіцячы дом.

<sup>33</sup> In this sense of freedom in a lavatory she shares the belief of Enderby, one of the best known characters in the work of the British novelist Anthony Burgess (1917–1993).

<sup>34</sup> „when we discovered that we ourselves were the language / and our tongues were removed we started talking with our eyes / when our eyes were poked out we talked with our hands / when our hands were cut off we conversed with our toes / and when we were shot in the legs we nodded our heads for yes / and shook our heads for no... and when they ate our heads alive / we crawled back into the bellies of our sleeping mothers / as if into bomb shelters / to be born again // and there on the horizon the gymnast of their future / was leaping through the fiery hoop / of the sun” (Mort, 2008, pp. 2–5).

і ты вядзеш нас туды, беларусь,  
можа нарадзіліся мы без ног,  
можа ня тым багам молімся,  
можа табе ад нас гора,  
можа мы невылечна хворыя... (Mort, 2008, p. 106)<sup>35</sup>.

In this loveless situation, objections are raised concerning the validity of the language, which Valžyna Mort herself uses with such skill:

твая мова такая маленькая  
што яшчэ й размаўляць ня ўмеє.  
а ты, беларусь, у гістэрыцы,  
табе ўсё здаецца,  
што акушэркі пераблыталі скруткі.  
што ж табе зараз, карміць чужое дзіцяці,  
сваім малаком паіць мову чужую?  
мову, што ляжыць сіня на падваконні,  
ці мова гэта ці шэрань мінулагодняя,  
ці шэрань гэта, ці толькі цень ад іконы,  
ці цень гэта, ці проста нічога.

гэта ня мова  
бо ў ёй аніякай сыстэмы.  
яна як сьмерць, раптоўная і неразборлівая,  
як сьмерць, ад якой немагчыма памерці,  
як сьмерць, ад якой мерцьвякі ажываюць (Mort, 2008, pp. 106–08)<sup>36</sup>.

A little later another imaginary rant begins about the language and the impossibility of its existence:

гэтая мова не існуе!  
яна нават не мае сыстэмы!

<sup>35</sup> „outside your borders. / they built a huge orphanage, / and you left us there, Belarus, / maybe we were born without legs? / maybe we worshipped the wrong gods? / maybe we brought you misfortune? / maybe we were deathly sick?” (Mort, 2008, p. 107).

<sup>36</sup> „your language is so small / that it can’t even speak yet, / but you, Belarus, are hysterical, / you are certain / that midwives mixed up the bundles / what if you’re feeding somebody else’s baby?! / letting another’s language drink your own milk? / the language that is lying on the windowsill – // is it a language or last year’s hoarfrost? / Is it hoarfrost or just an icon’s shadow? / is it a shadow or just nothing? // it’s not a language. / it doesn’t have any system. / it is like death – sudden and unscrupulous. / like death you can never die from. / like death that brings the dead to life” (Mort, 2008, p. 107–109).

з ёй размаўляць немагчыма.  
яна адразу б'е ў морду! (Mort, 2008, p. 108)<sup>37</sup>.

Solidarity against this absurdity and hostility is found in an accordion onto which she puts her system (translated as „let this system kiss my accordion”), which is described vividly and with striking personification:

ён ежу бярэ з рукі  
ён ліжа і як дзіця  
не слазіць з маіх кален (Mort, 2008, p. 108)<sup>38</sup>.

The accordion is left the last word in this powerful and passionate poem. Also on the Belarusian language and its travails is a very short untitled poem of despair:

Лепш бы мы нарадзіліся нямыя,  
каб ніхто ў нас не пытаў пра родную мову.

Лепш бы нарадзіліся не мы  
а зязюлі (Mort, 2017, p. 46)<sup>39</sup>.

A poem showing the poet's strong feeling about her native language without even mention it directly is „nieba pad pudraju ablokaŭ...” (the sky under the powder of the clouds...):

неба пад пудраю аблокаў  
вяжа з паветраных глыбаў вузлы,  
і мне лягчэй крычаць: Курлы!  
чым проста мовіць насустрач:  
*Здрастуй* (Mort, 2005, p. 9)<sup>40</sup>.

There are examples of the appearance of Russian, usually but not always italicized, in a number of other poems. For instance, *Mara – nia być abaronienym...* (*A dream – not to be protected...*) is a quasi-cradle song, in which the dream is of death, and two lines from the middle perhaps use Russian to emphasise the idea of the lowest depth:

<sup>37</sup> „this language does not exit! / it doesn't have any system! / it's impossible to talk with it – / it strikes you in the mug at once!” (Mort, 2008, p. 109).

<sup>38</sup> „eating from my hands / it licks them and like a kid / won't get off my lap” (Mort, 2008, p. 109).

<sup>39</sup> „It would be better if it was not we who had been born dumb / so that people did not ask us about our native language, // it would be better if it were not we who had been born, / but cuckoos”.

<sup>40</sup> „ the sky under the powder of the clouds / weaves knots from the windy clods / and it is easier for me to cry „Kurly” [the cry of Belarus's national bird, the stork] / than to simply say to somebody I meet in the street, *Zdrastvuj* [the standard Russian greeting]”.

Наша справа –  
*пойти ко дну* (Mort, 2005, p. 30)<sup>41</sup>.

In *I byscam by ja šaryk...* (*And as if I were a ball...*) the Russian word *vnimanie* (attention) for an official announcement seems to be included only to add authenticity in a poem of pure imagination. *Ты – ... (You –)* is addressed to an uncomfortably packed train in which the poet is forced by the crush to remain until the terminus: „Мне прыйдзеца ехаць у тваім цягніку да *конечной*” („I am forced to travel in your train to the terminus”) (Mort, 2005, p. 29). This use of a Russian word may be for emphasis, or perhaps just for a rhyme with the Belarusian *kanešnie*.<sup>42</sup> Whatever the significance of the use of Russian in these three early verses, they have none of the power of *Biela-ruskaja mova* or, indeed, „nieba pad pudraju ablokaŭ...”.

As has already been suggested, contrast plays a large role in Mort’s work. There are several references to or implications of magic, and one untitled poem is neither more nor less than a spell, *Bieražy mianie, bieražy...* (*Protect me, protect...*), in which the first two lines of the last stanza consist of jumbled letters from the two opening lines, ending with the first line of the poem. The third line of the fourth stanza, however, defies comprehension:

Жырабе немя, жырабе!  
Гірабе ема на жымя!  
Жуцька ешаін цесь цьцэжы...  
Беражы мяне, беражы!... (Mort, 2005, p. 27)<sup>43</sup>.

A quite different aspect of Mort’s poetic armoury is her strength in description. One memorable example of this is her *Scena siaredniaviečnaj vajny (pavodlie adnaj-mennaj karciny Deha)* (*Scene of War in the Middle Ages [according to a picture by Degas]*), in which six naked women are attacked by three men on horseback. Here are the first five lines:

Бог з’яўляецца перада мной жанчынай,  
прывязанай да вогненнага куста.

Яе галізна – белае месца на палатне,  
дзе мужчынская рука практыкавала  
жаночыя жэсты (Mort, 2017, p. 16)<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> „Our business is – / to go to the bottom”.

<sup>42</sup> Another poem about a train has a Russian title *Ne prislioniat’sia* (*Do not lean on the doors*), but this is inevitable since that is what is written on the doors of the underground carriages, despite the fact that the announcements are in Belarusian.

<sup>43</sup> This final part of this spell defies translation into English (or possibly any other known language).

<sup>44</sup> „God appears before me as a woman, / tied to a burning bush. // Her nakedness is a white place on the canvas, where a man’s arm was practising women’s gestures”.

This poem is not only a close reading of Degas's 1865 picture, but also a strongly personal interpretation of the fearsome scene depicted, particularly the brutish behaviour of the men to the women. Another example of what appears to be skilful observation and description is the already mentioned (in note 8), „X” about Chryścina from Sukhumi, although this woman may have no origin in real life, but have attracted the poet partly by the name of the place in Georgia from which she comes, a near homonym with the Belarusian word for „dry” – *suchi*. This applies to many other of Mort's excellent descriptive poems, which never fail to interest or to lull the reader into a comfort zone by her use of unexpected, always original, adjectives and images.

Before turning to foreign lands, it is worth mentioning two other poems about the country she left or, in the case of *Bierlin-Minsk* (*Berlin-Minsk*), to which she is returning from abroad. In the latter case, as they pass through Warsaw, the poet undergoes a series of physical reactions such as her heart turning into a blowing wind, or spinning like a planet inside her, at the end climbing out of her mouth and straining her eyes. *Minskaja pieśnia* (*Song of Minsk*) is mainly about the river Niamiha that flows through the city's centre and has a strong significance for its citizens, but perhaps not the one that Mort describes:

Горад трымае Нямігу  
як фігу.  
за спінай (Mort, 2017, p. 64)<sup>45</sup>.

All modern poets worth their salt sometimes ask difficult questions of their readers. Referring to her country as a whole in *U Pozie pytałnika* (*In the pose of a question mark*) Mort writes of children changing a question mark for an exclamation mark, going on to describe the mysterious position of Belarus:

Левая губа Польшчы і правая губа Расеі рассоўваюцца,  
і нашыя галовы з'яўляюцца з...  
чаго?  
[...]  
У позе пыталніка –  
усім сваім целам мы ставім сябе пад пытанне,  
замацаванае кропляй мачы.  
Гэта мы? Насамрэч? Ставім сябе пад пытанне? (Mort, 2017, p. 48)<sup>46</sup>.

In a sensitive poem about youthful perceptions of the world, *Malaliетки* (*Juveniles*), the last stanza shows the unquestioning attitude to life of children:

<sup>45</sup> „The city keeps Niamiha / like a rude sign / behind its back”.

<sup>46</sup> „The left lip of Poland and the right lip of Russia are pulled apart, / and our heads appear from / what? [...] In the pose of a question mark – with our entire body we place ourselves under question, / stuck together with a drop of urine. / Is it us? Really? Are we placing ourselves under question?”

і мы ляцім на ўсіх самалётах  
і ўсе самалёты ляцяць да мінску  
таму што мы дзеці  
і маем права на горад дзяцінства (Mort, 2017, p. 48)<sup>47</sup>.

In *dlia A.B. (for A.B.)* the poet wonders at the process of growing up and imagines the world as a stray dog that she and her friend wanted to take home, but others took it away and taught it to regard them as strangers:

а наш сабака вырас на чужым павадку  
а нашы маці раптам перасталі спаць з мужчынамі  
і гледзячы на іх сёння  
усё лягчэй паверыць у нявіннае зачацьце (Mort, 2017, p. 49)<sup>48</sup>.

The poem ends with an image of an ideal white-washed village by the sea, in a land of heroes, far from land-locked Belarus.

After these poems about Mort's images of her land of origin, there are several more pictures of foreign places in her work, sometimes as escape, or followed by ghosts of the past. First, however, may be mentioned three poems about north Germany: two about the holiday resort of Sylt (*Ziult* and *Ziult 2*) show a calm place and people at ease with their bodies. Seemingly connected with these two poems are one, exceptionally, with a German title, *Sitzendes Mädchen mit verschränkten Armen* (*A sitting girl with crossed arms*). This poem, which appears in Cb as *Unter den Linden* combines realism with impressionism, as the following lines show:

Яна складае рукі на грудзёх, што вырастуць неўзабаве,  
калі жанчыны ў яе родзе заручаліся імі,  
калі іхнія звісалі смочкамі, патрэсканамі, як локці, уніз.

Яна хавае рукі, бо ў хаце  
з такімі крывімі сценамі нельга  
разлічваць на роўны почырк.

Яе дзед мігае, заікаецца і кульгае. Далоні гадзінніка  
складаюцца ў малітве, калі ён заходзіць,  
каб з'есці страву адбеленую  
ў смятане, пакласці

<sup>47</sup> „and we fly in all aeroplanes / and all aeroplanes fly to minsk / because we are children / and have a right to this city of our childhood”.

<sup>48</sup> „and our dog grew up on another's lead / our mothers suddenly stopped sleeping with men / and looking at them today / it is easy to believe in the immaculate conception”.

свой надкусаны хлеб

на сінякі яе літар.

[...]

Тутэйшая зямля і неба склеены разам

вантробамі матыля, засушанага між імі –

вуліца вёскі і крылы садоў абапал.

Яна сціскае асадку, бы лыжку. Яе сцятыя вусны

насупіліся на лінію далягляду (Mort, 2017, p. 81)<sup>49</sup>.

Amongst more glamorous setting is the already mentioned *Utopija* where almost everything in the blissful surrounding is perfect, although some of the imagery may, as we have seen, cause disquiet. The following comparison is perhaps emotionally neutral, but helps to avoid the banality of a true idyll:

Аклян кідаецца на чаек,

Як сабака на ланцугу,

І капліца адкашліваецца штогадзіну,

Але так і не наважыцца нічога прамовіць (Mort, 2017, p. 74)<sup>50</sup>.

Two more poems about exotic foreign parts deserve mention: *Hateł „Pieraśmienik”* (*The „Mocking Bird” hotel*) begins with cries of Hallelujah, but as the poem progresses the atmosphere becomes darker, including the waiter’s behaviour before they begin their descent down the Mocking Bird hill:

Нашым рахункам кельнер рассякае стол.

Мы сыходзім уніз па Перасмешнік-Гары,

не уздымаючы пылу. Не ўздымаючы задняй нагі,

сабакі, чыя поўсць вісіць, як мокрае пер’е.

Сцуць жоўтым дымам (Mort, 2017, pp. 94–95)<sup>51</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> „She folds her arms over her breasts, where one day her chest will fold into breasts, / if that’s something women in her family have secured, / if theirs hung, and had chapped-elbow teats. / She folds her arms, because in a house / of such uneven walls nobody / should be expected to learn handwriting. // Her uncle limps, stutters and winks. The clock’s hands / fold in a prayer, when he comes to eat / a dish bleached in sour cream, to place his chewed // bread over her bruised / letters. [...] This land and sky are glued together / with the pressed out guts / of a butterfly dried between them – / a one-street village with wings of gardens on each side. / She holds her pen like a spoon. Her pursed lips / frown at the horizon line” (Mort, 2011, p. 34).

<sup>50</sup> „The ocean throws itself at the seagulls, / Like a dog on a chain, / And the tower clock clears its throat every hour, / but never dares to speak out”.

<sup>51</sup> „The waiter slashes the table with our bill. We descend Mocking Bird hill, / without raising dust. Without lifting their back leg, / dogs, whose fur hangs from them like wet feathers. Piss yellow smoke”.

The other poem, *Vyspa (Island)*, though essentially about love, depicts a potentially idyllic spot, referring, however, to the sun spitting and the waves slapping, as may be seen in the following lines from the middle, as the narrator compares men's slaps with that of the sea:

але ніводзін не змог мне пляснуць па твары так,  
як мора б'е сваю прыёмную дачку  
і само ў слязах адступае.

Выспа, выплюнутая сонцам праз плячо сусвету (Mort, 2017, p. 96)<sup>52</sup>.

Turning to Vałzhyna Mort's new country, in the already mentioned *Na plażach Flarydy*, things are almost the opposite of idyllic. New York, on the other hand, in the poem of that name, though presented with great imagination, is at once realistic and magical. It opens with a comparison of the city to a giant pike and ends with it, when even time has sold out, being pulled up by the ears of its skyscrapers:

н'ю йорк мадам  
гэта помнік гарадам  
гэта –  
ТА–ДАМ  
гігантская рыба  
у якой луска ад здзіўленьня  
паўстала дыбам  
[...]  
і нават час ідзе з аншлягам  
калі пад агульны ох і ах  
з чорнай шляпы  
хвастаты маг  
вымае н'ю йорк  
за вушы хмарачосаў (Mort, 2008, p. 92)<sup>53</sup>.

To end this brief review of Mort's poems about her new country, here is *Vosień u Tampie (Fall in Tampa)* where we again see the poet's vivid imagination:

<sup>52</sup> „but none could slap my face as hard as the sea slaps / its adopted daughter and steps back in tears.  
// This island spat out by the sun over the shoulder of the universe”.

<sup>53</sup> „new york, madam, / is a monument to cities / it is / TA-DA / a gigantic pike / whose scales / bristle up in amazement [...] and even time is sold out / when to the public's «wow» and «shhh» / from a black top hat / a tailed magician / is pulling out new york / by the ears of its skyscrapers”.

## Восень у Тампе

гэта наша кроў высахла  
і цярушыцца скрозь пальцы  
як пажоўклае лісце  
але тут не бывае восені  
і лета нерухома застыла  
белаю чаплай ў зялёнай вадзе (Mort, 2008, p. 66)<sup>54</sup>.

Returning to the theme of travel as escape, and to Mort's country of origin an interesting early poem is *Opera – Nie (Opera – No)*, in two acts with an epilogue, which shows in a rather whimsical way the attempt to escape by bus from the city that sends shivers down her spine; the journey, at the end of the first act, turns out to have been cancelled, provoking the ironic words:

Вось такі ў мяне з табою  
прагэктарат (Mort, 2005, p. 31)<sup>55</sup>.

Amidst attempts at love making and amorous promises, at the end of the act comes an invitation to buy tickets to their original destination. Such a journey is, of course, of a quite different order from that of Poles in a strong and sympathetic poem about other newcomers to the United States, *Polskija imihranty (Polish immigrants)*, of which these are the first three stanzas:

як яны адарваліся ад зямлі  
дзе нават камні пускаюць карані

як дзьве мовы дзеляць адзін рот  
бы дзьве жанчыны на адной кухні

як яны пранеслі свае акрываўленыя целы  
абмотаныя акардэонамі замест бінту  
праз таможную (Mort, 2008, p. 70)<sup>56</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> „it's our blood that's dried up / and crumbles through our fingers / like faded leaves / but there is no fall in here / and summer is standing stock-still / like a white heron in green water” (Mort, 2008, p. 67).

<sup>55</sup> „That is the protectorate / you and I have”.

<sup>56</sup> „how do they break away from the land / where even the stones take root // how do two languages share one mouth / like two women in one kitchen // how do they bring their bloody bodies / wrapped in accordions instead of bandage / through the Customs”.

Memory plays a considerable part in Mort's poetry, not only about childhood, but also her family and others. One example was the already mentioned comparison of bringing up memories to inviting a prostitute on a wooden horse in „kab uvajŝci ũ he-tuju kvateru...”. Before turning to such subjects, however, there are several remarkable images of memory as such. „cioplaj pustečaju daliokabalčnaŝciu” (in the warm desert of lengthy vision), a rather elegant early poem, ends with a failure to remember:

успомніць  
твары памяці  
і  
не  
пазнаць (Mort, 2005, p. 10)<sup>57</sup>.

More dramatic is the image in „uspaminy” (recollections):

успаміны  
два  
пальцы  
якія  
засунулі  
у  
рот  
лёсу (Mort, 2008, p. 62)<sup>58</sup>.

In *Fabryka ŝlioz (Factory of tears)* one of the stanzas describes this institution's use or, rather, abuse of memories:

у нас калі станцыя па апрацоўцы ежы  
перажоўвала чарговую катастрофу,  
фабрыка слёз перайшла на эканамічна рэнтабельную  
пераапрацоўку адходаў мінулага –  
галоўным чынам, асабістых успамінаў (Mort, 2008, p. 112)<sup>59</sup>.

Finally, in a poem about a (presumably psychiatric) hospital, *Boľnica (Hospital)*, the patient, having spent a long time bashing his head against the concrete wall, finally curls up:

<sup>57</sup> „to recall / the faces of memory / and / not / to recognize them”.

<sup>58</sup> „recollections / are two / fingers / which / have been thrust / into / the mouth / of fate”.

<sup>59</sup> „while the Food Refinery Station / was trying to digest another catastrophe / the Factory of Tears adopted a new economically advantageous / technology of recycling waste products of the past – / mostly personal memories”.

адчуць

як зазямяецца праз цела памяць (Mort, 2008, p. 24)<sup>60</sup>.

Recollections of family members are amongst the most touching of Mort's poems. One of the simplest is about her mother, „kab ja pra jaje nikoli ne zabyvala... (that I should never forget about her...)”:

каб я пра яе ніколі не забывала

завязала мама

на маім целе

вузьялок твару (Mort, 2017, p. 24)<sup>61</sup>.

More complex in ideas is *A Portrait of a Mother in Fall*, a poem that has no Belarusian version but begins with the theme of a knot again:

A Portrait of a Mother in Fall

we tie a knot on everything that bends  
and only our necks are free of knots  
the sky like the soggy feathers of a bird  
that's sleeping or most likely dead

and dinner comes  
exchanges food  
for our time

she used to bend over her teacup brim  
as if it were the edge of the universe  
and she would sip and pause  
and sip and pause  
and never talk  
about what she might have seen

and it is comforting to know  
when far away:  
the end of the world  
is in our mother's hands (Mort, 2008, p. 17).

<sup>60</sup> „and senses / how the body uses memory to bind it to the earth” (Mort, 2008, p. 25).

<sup>61</sup> „that I should never forget about her / my mother tied / onto my body / a small knot of a face”.

There are many other glimpses of childhood and of her mother, alive and dead, in Mort's poetry, including *My Father's Breed*, in which, as a ten-year old, she remembers beating her mother's breasts („not to hurt my knuckles") at four in the morning, to keep her from her husband who has clearly come home after an escapade:

My father lies at the door. From his shirt  
lipstick smiles at me with the warmth of urine.  
It's as if somebody threw at him slices  
of skinned grapefruit.  
Every time she hits him – I hit her.  
*Look at this. Look whom you've bred*

How can he see from under his pink vomit.  
But his body smiles –  
cannot help smiling (Mort, 2011, p. 38).

Vałżyna Mort has twice written very touchingly about her grandmother: in a prose poem *babuli (for grandmother)* and in a verse *babulia (grandmother)*. The first of them begins with a description of her simple beliefs and, after the poet has declared her grandmother to be God's Bible, ends with God addressing the old woman in a way that is at once humorous, respectful and meek:

Ты бачыш сваё жыцьцё як рэч, пазычаную на нейкі час у суседзяў. Ты кажаш – асьцярожна з ім, гэта чужое. Яго трэба будзе аддаць такім, якім яго нам прынеслі. Ты бачыш сваё жыцьцё, як рэч, пазычаную ня толькі табе, але ўсім нам. Вакол твайго жыцьця, як вакол першага чорна-белага тэлевізара, мы сядзім усе разам у захапленні. Не жыцьцё вучыць цябе – ты вучыш сваё жыцьцё. Быць самім сабою. Адаваць сябе да канца (Mort, 2008, p. 82).

Дарагая Вальжыніна бабуля, зьвяртаецца да цябе Бог. Мы асабіста незнаёмыя, але, можа, ты пра мяне і чула – пра мяне пісалі ў некаторых кніжках. [...] Я такі і стары, што шмат хто ўжо ўголас пацьвярджае маю сьмерць! Яшчэ крыху, і я сам паверу ў яе. Пасадзі мяне да сябе на калені, распавядзі мне, як зямля трымаецца на чарапах. Твае рукі на дотык – як чарапашы панцыр. Дай мне схаваць пад імі сваю галаву (Mort, 2008, pp. 82–84)<sup>62</sup>.

<sup>62</sup> „You see your life as something borrowed for the time being from your neighbour. You say – be careful with it, it's not ours, We'll have to give it back. Beside your life, as if beside the first black and white TV set, we all sit entranced. // It's not your life that teaches you – it's you who gives your life a lesson. To be yourself. To give yourself to the end. Dear Vałżyna's grandmother! This is God talking to you. We haven't been personally introduced, but you might have heard about me – I have been written about in various books. [...] I'm so old that many already speak openly of my death! If it goes on like this I myself will soon believe it. Put me on your lap, tell me stories

The ending of this prose poem explains partly the poet's repeated interest in tortoises; for instance, in one extraordinary image in the poem, *Muzyka sarańcy*, although this animal does, of course, have its own ancient status in world myth.

The poem *babulia* is less fanciful than „babuli” and, like it, highly touching and rich in imagery, which makes the reader feel very close to the relationship of the poet and her beloved grandmother:

Бабуля

мая бабуля  
не ведае болю  
яна думае што  
голад – гэта ежа  
галота – гэта багацьце  
смага – гэта вада

яе цела як вінаград абвілася вакол палкі  
яе валасы як пчаліныя крылцы  
яна глытае сонечныя зайчыкі таблетаў  
назвае інтэрнэт тэлефонам ў амэрыку

яе сэрца стала ружаю – толькі і можна  
што нюхаць  
прыціскаючыся да яе грудзей  
больш ад яго ніякага толку  
толькі кветка

яе рукі як ногі бусла  
чырвоныя палачкі  
і я сяджу на кукішках  
і выю ваўком  
на белую поўню тваёй галавы  
бабуля  
я кажу табе: гэта ня боль  
гэта так моцна цябе абдымае бог  
цалуе і коле сваёй няголенай шчакою (Mort, 2008, p. 12)<sup>63</sup>.

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about the world that is standing on tortoises. Your hands feel like a tortoise's shell. Let me hide my head in them”.

<sup>63</sup> „my grandmother / doesn't know pain / she thinks that / hunger is food / poverty is wealth / thirst is water // her body is like a grapevine winding around a walking stick / her hair is like bees' wings / she swallows the sun specks of pills / and calls the internet the telephone to America // her heart has turned into a rose the only thing you can do / is smell it / pressing yourself to her breast /

Few poets ignore the seasons, and many pay attention not only to the weather but also to trees and flowers. In the last quoted poem, for instance, her grandmother's breast has become a rose and is „useful” only as a flower. It would be amazing if there were not a profusion of flowers, especially roses, in Vaľžyna Mort's latest book, *Epidemija ružaŭ*, where not only roses, but also tulips, peonies and many other species are featured both literally and, at times, metaphorically. To give but one example, in *Kienataf (Cenotaph)* the poet suggests that genealogy is not a tree but a rose bud (Mort, 2017, p. 9). In the already mentioned *Sonca – marski asilak*, amidst the seaside squalor, the poet declares fiercely: „але ж я не кветка папяровая!” (*but, after all, I am not a paper flower!*). Apart from her summer holidays, Belarusian winter is the most featured season in Mort's poems. Incidentally, the unusual word „pandemic” also occurs in an early verse *Kunstkamera (The Cabinet of curiosities)*, where outside there is a „pandemic of snow” (Mort, 2017, p. 85) into which the poet eventually escapes. In another early poem, *a ja ad cišyni takoj... (and I from such silence...)*, the poet is deafened by the lack of sound:

а я ад цішыні такой  
аглухла. Сьнег набраўшы ў грудзі,  
ты кажаш: Вось і судны дзень.  
а я ў адказ: Нарэшце студзень (Mort, 2005, p. 8)<sup>64</sup>.

Finally, describing a very particular season, *Užyvanyja ptuški (Used birds)* is a strong poem that seems to be a comment on the Chernobyl catastrophe in late April 1986, although the author herself denies the connection,<sup>65</sup> showing little interest in this early poem, which ends with two memorable lines:

Месяц травень  
Трава тае (Mort, 2005, p. 13)<sup>66</sup>.

The same words occur in the next poem in the book, *Treplie tvary mliavy viecier (The languid wind touches out faces)*.

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there's nothing else you can do with it / only a flower // her arms are like stork's legs / red sticks / and I squat / howling like a wolf / at the white moon of your head / grandmother / I tell you it's not pain / just that god is embracing you very strongly / kissing and scratching you with his unshaven cheek”.

<sup>64</sup> „and I from such silence / am deafened. The snow has collected in my breast, / you say: See, it is the Day of Judgement. / and I say in reply: January at last”.

<sup>65</sup> Naturally, the poet has the last word, but the present writer was reminded of Chernobyl not only by the proximity of the months, but also by lines like „у рыжай турбарэактыўнай ражцы” (in a rusty turbo-reactive wash tub) and the trolleybuses which „спяваюць свае ядзерныя маўчанкі” (sing their nuclear games of silence”.

<sup>66</sup> „The month is May / The grass is melting”.

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It may seem from the examples and commentaries in this article that Valžyna Mort is a very dark poet, but, in fact, her work is always varied and inspiring, combines sometimes grim themes and images with those that can only be describing as life affirming. The main hope of any commentator must be not so much elucidation, as to draw the reader's attention to the outstanding original texts themselves. Few, if any, contemporary Belarusian poets have the imaginative, linguistic, thematic and emotional range of this gifted writer.

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