



## Talking to My Body

Anna ?wirszczy?ska , Czes?aw Mi?osz (Translator) , Leonaard Nathan (Translator)

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**Talking to My Body** Anna ?wirszczy?ska , Czes?aw Mi?osz (Translator) , Leonaard Nathan (Translator)  
**Anna Swir's poetry is featured in the best-selling anthologies *Ten Poems to Set You Free* and *Risking Everything***

Anna Swir (1909–1984) famously said “A poet should be as sensitive as an aching tooth.” Swir was one of Poland’s most distinguished poets, and she was open in her feminism and eroticism, with poetry that explored the life of the female body—from the agonizing depths of wartime to delirious sensual delight. The *New York Times* wrote that Swir’s poetry pointed toward a “ferocious internal life.”

A member of the Resistance during the Nazi occupation and a military nurse in a makeshift hospital during the Warsaw Uprising, Swir once waited an hour fully expecting to be executed. Affected deeply by her experience, she wrote a poetry which rejected the grand gestures of war in favor of a world cast in miniature, a world in which the body and individual survive.

Co-translated by Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz and Leonard Nathan, with an introduction by Milosz, who writes: “What is the central theme of these poems? Answer: Flesh. Flesh in love and ecstasy, in pain, in terror, flesh afraid of loneliness, giving birth, resting, feeling the flow of time or reducing time to one instant. By such a clear delineation of her subject matter, Anna Swir achieves in her sensual, fierce poetry a nearly calligraphic neatness.”

## Reviews:

“The poems delight in all things physical, painting a passionate picture of the soul as a reified, pulsating entity that argues with the body.”—*San Francisco Review*

“*Talking to My Body* is an extremely rewarding book... Her best poems are so original as to deliver that mild shock we've come to recognize as real poetry.”—*Boston Book Review*

## Talking to My Body Details

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## From Reader Review Talking to My Body for online ebook

### **Jenni says**

Fairly obscure Polish poet translated by Milosz. Her poems are very direct, stripped, and sensuous.

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### **Jenn says**

Reading this book was a spiritual experience. It is a true favorite that rarely leaves my side.

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### **Philip says**

I have been struck by this collection. It's peculiarity, the collection. The poems themselves are organized into 5 sections, that in my reading, feel delineated by time and aspects of style, but held together by a point of view on life that I could not identify with. That is to say, I fell in love with many poems – in each section – I felt them on many levels of love and appreciation. And yet, so much of the work could only be intellectualized by my mind. Understanding where Anna Swir wrote from in her time, but not feeling another level beyond the immediate reaction. I understand this partly to be a regional concern, but also her "miniature" style, which appeals to me immensely, did not always make sense to me. I did very much enjoy the Afterword dialogue between translators Czeslaw Milosz and Leonard Nathan – brought a deeper sense of the work to me, they added poems from different times in her life that typically reside in other collections to fill out an understanding of Swir. This lead to me rereading many of the poems in the collection with a nuanced eye. This is all to say that I feel this collection offers a lot beyond discovering poems that one can love and appreciate, be touched by, effected by, etc.. Rather be struck by a whole life, a different way, an intimate look inside another and that other knowing damn well you're looking. And the translators couldn't have been better guides. Now, I can't wait to read Swir's war poems in Building the Barricade.

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### **Rachel Skye says**

Oh, yes and wasn't this just lovely.

Three days  
I starve my belly  
so that it learns to eat the sun.

Her words and the translation was just beautiful and so relevant.

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### **Rachel King says**

I love the sparseness, tenderness, and severity in these poems. As Milosz says in A Book of Luminous

Things, Swir writes love poems without being confessional. It's something to aspire to.

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### **Clara Moore says**

I quite like these... I stumbled upon the poem "I Starve My Belly For a Sublime Purpose" in "A Book of Luminous Things", edited by Milosz. I loved it enough to go looking for more of Swir's work, and am glad I did. The poem "Virginity" is incredible, in particular, but all of them are wonderful.

Important note: this translation of Swir's work is far superior to the translation in "Fat Like the Sun", which does include some of the same poems.

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### **Kaila Tacazon says**

Although her writing is really simple, I resonate with it. I love how she ponders her flesh and her existence and then reaches a mindful and sexual maturation in her 60s. What a queen. I'm doing one of her poems (not in this book) for my voice class.

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### **Caterina says**

This is poetry of rare purity and intensity, sensuous and spiritual. The body figures in almost every poem, in many different ways, sometimes as a topic *per se*, at other times as integral to living life -- from utter revulsion and a desire to be rid of it to the most exquisite, tearful joys of intimacy and acceptance. I love this book even more now than when I first read it many years ago.

Czeslaw Milosz called it a poetry of flesh, minimal like a drawing of the bodies of two lovers with background barely indicated. The body is central to my work as a visual artist, so I love that image. I'd also call it a poetry of what it's like to be alive.

The selections span several of her books. It's impossible to choose representative samples but here are a few. I love the first especially.

#### *Thank You, My Fate*

Great humility fills me,  
great purity fills me,  
I made love with my dear  
as if I made love dying  
as if I made love praying,  
tears pour  
over my arms and his arms.  
I don't know whether this is joy  
or grief, I don't understand  
what I feel, I'm crying,

I'm crying, it's humility  
as if I were already dead,  
gratitude, I thank you, my fate,  
I am unworthy, how beautiful  
my life.

Another favorite, so minimal and perfect, describing something I've felt so many times:

*I Sleep in Blue Pajamas*

I sleep in blue pajamas,  
at my right my child sleeps.  
I have never cried,  
I will never die.

I sleep in blue pajamas,  
at my left my man sleeps.  
I have never knocked my head against the wall,  
I have never screamed out of fear.

How large this bed is  
if it had room enough  
for such happiness.

And here are a few more, trying to be somewhat representative of the poems in this volume (which doesn't include her war poetry):

From *To Be a Woman* (1972)

*A Woman Talks to Her Thigh*

It is only thanks to your good looks  
I can take part  
in the rites of love.

Mystical ecstasies  
treasons delightful  
as crimson lipstick,  
a perverse rococo  
of psychological involutions,  
sweetness of carnal longings  
that take your breath,  
pits of despair  
sinking to the very bottom of the world:  
all this I owe to you.

How tenderly every day I should  
lash you with a whip of cold water,  
if you alone allow me to possess  
beauty and wisdom  
irreplaceable.

The souls of my lovers  
open to me in a moment of love  
and I have them in my dominion.  
I look as does a sculptor  
on his work  
at their faces snapped shut with eyelids,  
martyred by ecstasy,  
made dense by happiness.  
I read as does an angel  
thoughts in their skulls,  
I feel in my hand  
a beating human heart,  
I listen to the words  
which are whispered by one human to another  
in the frankest moments of one's life.

I enter their souls,  
I wander  
by a road of delight or horror  
to lands as inconceivable  
as the bottoms of the oceans.  
Later on, heavy with treasures  
I come slowly  
to myself.

O, many riches  
many precious truths  
growing immense in a metaphysical echo,  
many initiations  
delicate and startling  
I owe to you, my thigh.

The most exquisite refinement of my soul  
would not give me any of those treasures  
if not for the clear, smooth charm  
of an amoral little animal.

### *She Does Not Remember*

She was an evil stepmother.  
In her old age she is slowly dying

in an empty hovel.

She shudders  
like a wad of burning paper.  
She does not remember that she was evil.  
But she knows  
that she feels cold.

*The Greatest Love*

She is sixty. She lives  
the greatest love of her life.

She walks arm in arm with her dear one,  
her hair streams in the wind.  
Her dear one says:  
“You have hair like pearls.”

Her children say:  
“Old fool.”

From *Wind* (1970)

I give birth to life.  
It went out of my entrails  
and asks for the sacrifice of my life  
as does an Aztec deity,  
I lean over a little puppet,  
we look at each other  
with four eyes.

“You are not going to defeat me,” I say  
“I won’t be an egg which you would crack  
in a hurry for the world,  
a footbridge that you would take on the way to your life.  
I will defend myself.”

I lean over a little puppet.  
I notice  
a tiny movement of a tiny finger  
which a little while ago was still in me,  
in which under a thin skin,  
my own blood flows.  
And suddenly I am flooded  
by a high, luminous wave  
of humility.  
Powerless, I drown.

From *Poems About My Father and Mother* (Polish title: *Suffering and Joy*, published posthumously, 1985):

### *I Wash the Shirt*

For the last time I wash the shirt  
of my father who died.  
The shirt smells of sweat. I remember  
that sweat from my childhood,  
so many years  
I washed his shirts and underwear,  
I dried them  
at an iron stove in the workshop,  
he would put them on unironed.

From among all the bodies in the world,  
animal, human,  
only one exuded that sweat.  
I breathe it in  
for the last time. Washing this shirt  
I destroy it  
forever.  
Now  
only paintings survive him  
which smell of oils.

In a postscript Czeslaw Milosz said: "She is now regarded as a truly eminent poet of metaphysical orientation . . . obsessed with the perishability of the flesh. . . Opening myself to her verses, I have been more and more conquered by her extraordinary, powerful, exuberant and joyous personality. Reading her was like discovering in someone who is close to us an unsuspected, strange and admirable being. Perhaps I was even falling in love with her. What I found particularly attractive in her was her calm in accepting reality, whether it brought bliss or suffering. . . To have met such a person through her poems has inclined me to faith and optimism." Only having met her through her poetry, I feel the same.

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### **Stephanie Keil says**

good poems

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### **Amy says**

I came across a few of Swir's poems in an anthology and they stopped me in my tracks and stuck with me for years. I was recently reminded of her poem "I Starve my Belly for a Sublime Purpose" when I was sunning myself, and went in search of more of her work.

Her poems are deceptively simple. She's quoted in the introduction as saying "Style is the enemy of the poet,

and its greatest merit would be nonexistence." What results are spare and unpretentious poems where the words never get in the way.

As the title suggests, flesh and bodies are a recurring theme. There are poems about hunger, illness, madness, death, birth, about sex and love and family, absence and connection, moments of transcendent joy, or moments of grief and darkness. You know, the light fluffy things we like to think about all the time. But the frank and occasionally humorous way she approaches all these topics kept me from feeling bogged down.

There are almost no "duds" for me in this collection, and I know I'll be visiting it again and again over the years.

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### **Lorenzo Berardi says**

I've never been a great reader of poetry, but these nice little poems are helping me out with my Polish vocabulary and understanding.

Some compositions remind me of Szymborska in their apparent simplicity wondering on everyday's life and tiny but significant details, but Anna Swir (?wirszczy?iska) deals with post WWII feelings and family as well, focusing on her father who was a painter.

Both topics are found in the poem I liked the most, so far. It's entitled 'He Did Not Jump from the Third Floor' and reads like this in English translation.

The second World War  
Warsaw.  
Tonight they dropped bombs  
on the Theatre Square.

At the Theatre Square  
Father has his workshop.  
All paintings, labor  
of forty years.

Next morning father went  
to the Theatre Square.  
He saw.

His workshop has no ceiling,  
has no walls  
no floor.

Father did not jump  
from the third floor.  
Father started over  
from the beginning.

Bless Mi?osz who translated Swir into English (taking some liberties in metric) as well as the publisher who kept the original text in this edition.

And thank you to the second hand bookseller in Krakow who found this little gem for me when asked if he had anything in English (this book was the one and only)!

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### **Nicola says**

Beautiful, crystalline poetry. Intimate, quirky, but a feeling of everyone/anyone included. Swir achieves worlds in such short spaces. I admired the poems about her family for their directness. But I gravitated most to the poems about the body. Though still direct and piercing, these fleshy, sensual poems feel more playful; they often include irony and, even, metaphysics. The Polish poets seem the best at creating a provocative irony (v. the often shallow American brand); I think it might have to do with using irony in incongruous ways rather than sarcastic ways. Here's a quick taste of her irony:

I Protest

Dying  
is the hardest  
work of all.

The old and sick  
should be exempt from it.

Favorite poems: "Talking to My Body," "I Starve My Belly for a Sublime Purpose," "Myself and My Person," and "The Sea and Man." Favorite (harrowing) image: mother inking her white silk wedding shoes to go stand in a breadline.

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### **Tom Thompson says**

I've dipped into this book many times over the ten plus years I've owned it. But reading it cover to cover in the course of one sitting I finally took in the full scope of her work and the deep richness of its simplicity. It is a book about the body in its many forms and attentions—mammalian, metaphysical, medieval. But to talk \*to\* the body, of course, she has to stand \*apart\* from the body. That distance gives these short, direct poems a powerful charge, as they run between the poles of the material flesh—and its attendant wants and needs—and the open-eyed intellect.

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### **Elision says**

Dualism.  
Nice use of language and flow.  
Accessible.

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## **Shawn says**

Czeslaw Milosz brought Anna Swir to my attention in his *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry*. Hers are among the best poems I've read and *Talking to My Body* is among the best books of poetry I've read. An authentic voice. If you've wanted a reason to like poetry again, Anna Swir is it.

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