

**An Anthology of Twelve Attila József Poems translated into English
from the Hungarian Original**

by Miklós Nádásdi

You made a child of me

Mamma

Ode

With pure heart

Belated wailing

I saw something beautiful

The inventory is ready

They say

What you hide in your heart

Give me air

For a missed embrace

For my birthday

Biographic sketches

Attila József

Attila József was born in 1905 in Budapest, Hungary to Áron József, a soap factory worker and Borbála Pócze, a peasant girl. He had two elder sisters, Eta and Jolán. When Attila was three years old, he was sent to live with foster parents after his father abandoned the family and his mother became ill. From ages seven to fourteen, Attila returned to live with his mother until she died of cancer in 1919, aged 43.

While attending school, Attila worked many odd jobs and was a self-described street urchin. After the death of his mother, he was looked after by his brother-in-law, Ödön Makai, who paid for his education in a good secondary school.

In 1924, Attila entered Franz Joseph University in Budapest to study Hungarian and French literature, with the intention of becoming a secondary school teacher, but was expelled from the university after he wrote the provocative poem *Tiszta szívvel* (“With clear heart” or “With all my heart”).

In 1925, Attila moved to Vienna, Austria, where he made a living by selling newspapers and cleaning dormitories. From Vienna, he moved to Paris, France (1926, 1927) where he studied at the Sorbonne. It was during this period, he read Hegel and Karl Marx, whose call for revolution appealed to him. Apparently, he also enjoyed reading François Villon, the famous French poet and thief from the 15th century. During these years Attila lived on the little money he earned by publishing his poems supplemented by his patron, Lajos Hatvany.

In the late 1920s Attila returned to Hungary and continued with his studies at the University for a year; he also studied at Pest University for a year. Then he worked for the Foreign Trade Institute as a French correspondent and, later, was became editor of the literary journal *Szép Szó* (*Beautiful Word*).

In 1930, Attila joined the illegal Communist Party of Hungary (KMP). His 1931 poem, *Dönts a tőkét* (*Blow down the capital*) was confiscated by the public prosecutor. His subsequent essay “Literature and Socialism” (*Irodalom és szocializmus*) led to an indictment. In 1936, he was expelled from the Hungarian Communist Party.

From his early childhood Attila showed signs of mental illness and was treated by psychiatrists for depression and schizophrenia. Later, he was diagnosed with “neurasthenia gravis.” In modern

time, he was labeled by some as borderline personality disorder. He never married, and only had a small number of affairs with women, but frequently fell in love with the women who treated him. Attila died on December 3, 1937, aged 32, in Balatonszárszó, Hungary. At the time, he was staying at the house of his sister and brother-in-law. He was killed while crawling through railway tracks where he was crushed by a starting train. There is a memorial to him not far from the location where he died. The most widely accepted view is that he committed suicide, which he had previously attempted, but some experts say that his death was by accident.

Miklós Nádasi was born on January 29, 1932, in Budapest. He received an M.D. degree at the Semmelweis University of Budapest in 1956, the same year when, during a revolution against the Soviet regime, he escaped from Hungary to Vienna. The following year he immigrated to Canada with the sponsorship of Hans Selye, the scientist who developed the stress theory. He worked as his postgraduate student at the University of Montreal where he obtained a Ph.D. degree in experimental medicine, following 34 scientific publications. In 1964 he moved to Toronto and became the vice president of medical affairs of Glaxo, a large international pharmaceutical company (now GSK). He also established a medical practice as a staff member of the North York General Hospital in Toronto. He is married, has two children, four grandchildren and a great-grandchild. Presently he is retired and lives with his wife in Toronto.

POEMS

You Made a Child of Me

You made a child of me. Despite all the pain
that thirty bitter winters made me suffer through.
I am trying not to move, though in vain,
My limbs are dragging, pulling me to you.

I hold you in my mouth like a bitch her offspring
And try to escape from being suffocated.
The years that my fate turned into nothing
Are dumped on me by every minute wasted.

Feed me – see, I am starving. Tuck me in, -- I'm freezing.
I am ignorant – please help me to learn.
Your void runs through me like draft through a building.
Tell fearfulness to leave me alone.

You looked at me and I lost my senses.
You listened to me and it broke my voice.
Do something that makes me less relentless
And lets me live or die by my own choice.

My mother threw me out – I lied on the threshold –
I tried to hide inside myself, can't any more.
Hard stone under me, above nothing to hold.
Oh, I just want to sleep! I knock on your door.

Many people are insensitive, such as me,
Still in their eyes a sea of tears can swell.
My feeling of love for you grows immensely,
with it I started to love myself as well.

Mamma

I am thinking of mamma the whole week long,
when sitting at home or strolling along.

With the laundry basket in her arms
up the attic she briskly climbs.

I was then still an honest guy,
I stomped my feet, let out a cry.
Forget the laundry, why the bother,
I am the one she should take up there.

She hung the clothes on the line quietly
without reprimand or even a glance at me
and the pieces were flying up high,
swishing and glistening, ready to dry.

It is too late for me to whimper,
now I can see the giant in her --
in the sky her gray hair waves ever so light
while she is washing the clouds pristine white.

Ode

I am sitting on sparkling crest of a cliff,
the light breeze of the young Summer
like the warmth of a cozy supper
lingers adrift.

I train stillness to my heart -
it is not hard.

The distant past is around,
the head is bent
limp is the hand.

Up high the crown of the trees tremble
they are not the mountain's mane -
but they form the frame
of your shining temple.

The road is empty.

I see your skirt flickers gently
from the whiff of the wind.

And under the graceful branches

I see how your hair dances

- your tender breasts quiver

and as the waves of the river

bounce on the round white stones

- your teeth, as you start laughing.

2.

Oh, how much I love you,
who from the deepest hollows of the heart
was able to retrieve and unite
crafty loneliness and mighty wholeness.

You, who deserts me like the waterfall
leaves behind its thunder

while I, getting closer to the distance

on the peak of my existence,

scream down below and up to the sky

that I love you, dear tormentor!

3.

I love you like a child his mother,
like caves love the depth they cover,
I love you like a shrine
loves the light that makes it shine,
like the spirit loves fire
I love you like mortals love to live until they die.

I guard your every smile, word and movement,
like the Earth holds the falling rain.
Like acid burns the metal
I burned you in my brain.
You are beautiful and gentle,
your essence contains all the essential.

The moments clatter away loud
but you are soundless in my ear.
Stars light up and go out
but you stay in my eyes like tear.
As the air hides in the cellar,
your taste in my mouth takes shelter,
your hand on the glass is resting
showing its soft blue veins
fluorescing.

4.

Oh, what matter am I that all your might

can control like nobody?
What kind of soul and what kind of light
and what kind of amazing sight
opens on the fertile hills of your body?

And like a magic discovery,
I can descend into its deepest mystery.

Your blood vessels, like rosebushes,
tremble constantly,
bringing the eternal current so that
love can glow on your cheeks gently
and your womb can bear its fruits,
while in your stomach tiny roots
grow into its soil to produce
and store its bubbling juice
and the shrubs of your lungs
praise their precious use!

The eternal matter travels merrily
along the tunnels of your bowels
and the slag acquires rich life
in your diligent kidney wells!

Undulating hills emerge,
constellations ticker with urge,
lakes are moving, factories working,
million creatures bustling and jerking,
crawlers,

flowers,
pleasure and cruelty,
the Sun shines, Northern lights gloom,
you hide in you the doom
and the unconscious eternity.

5.

Like a blood clot
these words thus drop.
The existence is shaken,
only the law is certain.
But my busy organs that are awoken,
Are now ready to stop.

But 'till then, you, the chosen one
from a thousand million,
you, soft cradle, warm bed, strong tomb,
absorb me like a welcoming womb!

(How high is the sky in the distance,
Armies are shining inside its ore.
My eyes hurt from its brilliance,
I cannot survive any more.
I hear above my chest
my heart throbs without rest.)

6.

(Addition)

(I am on the train behind you,
perhaps today I shall find you,
perhaps my burning face will cool,
perhaps you will talk to this fool:

The water is running, get into the tub!
Here is the towel, I'll give you a rub!
Dinner is ready, the table is set!
Where I am resting, there is your bed.)

With Pure Heart

I've no father, no parent,
have no God and no homeland,
not a cradle and no shroud,
no lover, no one to hold.

For three days no food in sight,
not as much as a small bite.
My twenty years a good prize,
I sell it for a good price.

If no one puts in a bid
I'll let the devil have it.
Break in with pure heart I will,
if needed, I'll even kill.

They'll hang me when I am found

and bury in blessed ground
and deadly grass will grow out
above my beautiful heart.

Belated Wailing

I am burning in a fever of thirty-six degrees
and, mother, you're not here to watch my breath.
Like a sleazy girl when asked to please
you readily went to bed with death.
From soft autumns and faces of all kind
I try to put you together in my mind;
but I am running out of time,
the fierce fire burns all it can find.

Last time I went to Szabadszállás
at the end of the war,
because Budapest was in shambles,
no bread, no food, empty every store.
On the top of the train, without a ticket,
lying on my belly, I brought you chicken from
somewhere,
I brought potatoes and millet,
but you disappeared into nowhere.

You took it from me and gave it to worms
your sweet breasts and your whole.
It was all a lie, your phony kind words

you were using to chide me and to console.
My soup you cooled and you stirred,
You said: Grow for me, apple of my eye!
Now your lips taste greasy dirt -
 all what you told me was a lie.

I ought to have eaten you, not your supper!
 Why did you drag the laundry basket
curving your back and suffer?
only to straighten it out in a casket?
Why can't you give me one more beating?
You good-for-nothing, want to be non-existent,
I could snap back at you without thinking,
 but you spoiled everything in an instant!

You are a worse cheater than anybody
 who is cajoling and scheming!
You furtively abandoned the offspring of your body
you brought to this world yelling and screaming.
You are a thief! Whatever you gave
you took back in the last hour vilely!
The child wants to curse - he won't behave,
 mama, can you hear me? Revile me!

Slowly the light gets back into my brain,
 the legend disappears.
The child who clings to motherly love in vain
realizes how stupid he appears.
Every child born from a mother's conception

will be disappointed whatever he may try,
fight or surrender or use self-deception.

Either from this or from that he will die.

I Saw Something Beautiful

I thought of something beautiful, amazing
and imagined a rose, slight and tender.
Suddenly as I was just gazing,
reality hit me with a sledgehammer

But the sledgehammer is only a metaphor.
It is better to talk straight and plain.
I learned it from life long before
that solving useful problems is not in vain.

See, my instinct worked as a notion
when a man entered my place.
A voice roared in me like the ocean:
"He'll turn off my power" --it showed on his face.

The knife was lying on the table
-- I just sharpened my pencil with it --
if I stabbed him now, if I were able,
I would solve my problem in a minute.

Everything will be left in darkness.
I was very upset and sore.
Animals can protect their nests;
but this is a different kind of war.

To take arms would only appear
as weakness that brings defeat I reckon
and the kindness in me would disappear.
In a constitutional state money is the weapon.

Warfare now has a different mode.
The heroes do not carry swords.
A bomb today is a banknote
and pennies splinter when it explodes.

I was reasoning like this and soon
said goodbye and got out of sight
and the friendly stars with the full moon
together were laughing at me that night.

The Inventory is Ready

I trusted only myself right from the beginning --
it doesn't cost much when you don't own anything.
Definitely not more than it could
to an animal that falls down for good.
Even when scared, I held my ground as needed --
I was born, I mixed in and I seceded.
I duly paid everyone according to demand,
I loved all of those who gave me a free ride.
Woman who fed me with promises -- and some:
I believed truly so she had her fun!

I scrubbed decks and pushed carts for a period.
 Among clever gents I played the idiot.
 I sold rollers, books and sometimes bread,
 newspapers, poems -- whatever I could get.
 Not in glorious fight, not on a gentle rope
 but in bed I shall finish my life, I hope.
 The inventory is ready, whichever way will do.
 I lived -- and others have died of this too

They Say

I was born with a knife in my hand and then
 they say this is just poetry for some.
 Sure, this wasn't enough, I grabbed a pen;
 I was born to be human.

Those in whom faithfulness cries implicitly,
 they say those have true love in their soul.
 Oh, take me on your lap, tearful simplicity!
 This is only a game for me, no more.

I don't remember and don't forget either.
 They say how could that be?
 As when I drop something and it stays there,--
 if not I, then you'll find it for me.

The earth plugs me up, the sea washes me away:
 they say that I shall die at the end.

But it is only small talk and hearsay
that just makes me forever silent.

What You Hide in Your Heart

(For Freud's 80th birthday)

What you hide in your heart,
open it for your eyes;
let your heart wait it out
what your two eyes surmise.

In love -- the one who lives --
can die, so it is said.
But happiness one needs
just like a piece of bread.

The living ones are children always,
in mother's lap they hope to get.
They will kill if not embrace --
the front line is the bridal bed.

Be like the eighty-year old
who, as he bleeds
while being destroyed,
a million offsprings he breeds.

The broken thorn in your sole
has long been removed.

And now your dying soul
from your heart has moved.

What you expect with your eyes,
grab it with your hand.
And the one your heart hides,
kill or kiss at the end.

Give Me Air!

Who could forbid me to tell
 what bothered me on my way home.
Lukewarm darkness fell
 like velvet mist on the lawn
and, as I walked, under my feet,
like little children when beat,
 sleepless thin leaves moaned.

The shrubs were searchingly squatting
 where the city limits fold
while they were tousled by the autumn wind.
 Everywhere the cool mould
suspiciously squinted at the light and beyond.
Wild ducks quacked in the pond
 as I slowly strolled.

Someone could attack me. I felt a surge,

-- the grounds were so deserted.
And suddenly, from nowhere a man emerged.
If he would rob me I would deserve it.
He could really do me harm,
I had no strength to lift an arm.
But he left me there unattended.

They could tap into my telephone
and keep all my calls in sight.
They could watch when I am at home
and all my dreams could be filed.
They could surely just decide
to pull out my index card
and rob me of every human right.

And those poor frail villages in the country
-- where my mother was born --
they fell off the tree of bounty
like the leaves here -- forlorn.
To show their misery they rattle.
They have no rights, they lost the battle
and they turn into dust when fallen.

Oh, this wasn't how I imagined the order.
To my soul it was strange believing
that one is able to drag on better
by constantly deceiving.
And for people who are afraid to vote
for the right one, it is just a thought.

What makes them happy -- is cheating.

This was not how I imagined the order,
although often I did not see
why they spanked me in a corner,
when for one kind word so good I could be.
Somewhere far away, I knew it well,
I had a family and a mother.
These here are strangers to me.

I am a grown man, my teeth are hard,
filled with substance from outside,
like death has been filling my heart.
I am not clay yet but have thick hide
and, with my mature mind from within
I am not willing to give in
and give up my freedom, my precious right.

My leader, guide me from inside!
we are not savages but human --
not just a file a drawer can hide.
We have brains and desires, all in one.
Come freedom, give me the order I need
and, while all your wisdom I heed,
give some time for pleasure to your clever son

For a Missed Embrace

I was waiting for you like I did for supper
when my mother still came and stepped to my bed.
I was expecting you like a stupid youngster
is waiting for death, so desperate --
it didn't come, thank God -- you see how
happy I am, thinking of it now.

But it is even more stupid, I say
that you didn't come, though you will, one day!

Unrelenting demise shoves the world ahead
like the miner in the shaft pushing the coal,
once all the pieces he'd dug out were spread.
But deep down those who love are staying one whole.
What conflagration and drawn out sword
was able to dazzle me and hold
me back as the Moon passed through the night
from getting to you and grabbing you tight?

Among dead stars up in the sky with fervent
yearning I flew like pebbles tossed around --
How could I swim against the current
into your lap that's nowhere to be found?
While the clock was gabbling with deceptive speed,
you found a dancefloor tempting to your feet
and enmeshed by the rhythm's flare
you trembled -- without me being there.

Aren't you annoyed when your stocking has a tear?

You are upset and complaining, no doubt.
 See, it is the same what I have to bear
 when, from our love, an embrace is torn out.
 That artist quarrels with things that pass too fast.
 Prove it to him, but with me, that truly, they don't last.
 Find out what to do and do it.
 After all, as you know, I am not stupid

For My Birthday

I 'm thirty-two years old at present
 and this poem is a present

 bauble

 bubble:

a present which is a surprise

I wrote in the coffee house

 for me

 from me.

I am now thirty-two, though

I never had enough dough

 and that

 is that!

I could have become a teacher

instead of a pen-pincher

 that's sad

you bet.

But the head of college said, no
and he said I had to go,
so mean
a dean.

I was not worthy, he thought,
due to a poem I wrote,
moral
quarrel.

His sharp tongue was his weaponry
he used against my jeopardy
a threat
with fret:

"Listen to me, mind my word,
you'll never teach in this world" --
mumble
fumble.

If you're happy Mr. Horger
for I do not study grammar,
your fun
is gone --

My class will be the whole nation
and I'll give them education

my way
some day!

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