

# Gypsy Drill (selections\*)

## Poems by Attila Balogh

Translated from the Hungarian by Michael Castro and Gábor G. Gyukics

*"I gotta learn the form  
'cause I wanna avoid it."*

### Foreword

Attila Balogh was initiated as a poet at the age of twenty by Sándor Csoóri in 1976. His first book of poetry *Lenditem lábamat* (Swinging My Limbs) was published in 1980. In 1991 he again published a fistful of poems, and now this, *Gypsy Drill*, his first book in English translation, has surfaced. Attila Balogh is fighting the monster of subsiding into silence, and against this monster he has lined up an army of beautiful words. What is the cost of this beauty?

The shares of beauty aren't the best of values at the literary stockmarket nowadays because beautiful poems require beautiful feelings, beautiful thoughts, and beautiful ideas in our universal order where bad and good sharply divide. Here desperation can also be beautiful. Beautiful ideas are just as rare as ideas that disillusion us. Shocking terror—thanks to the media which brings it into our homes through television—becomes our everyday experience. If we took it into our hearts we would burn out, like the good-hearted whore who gives herself to her costumer with her full inner self everytime.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century the idea of beautiful poetry has been pushed backwards by a kind of lyric poetry that is well written, timely, faultless in its filth and constructed from the grotesque contradictions of the soul and the world. This began with Heine's late works and with Baudelaire, and it still continues. Beauty as aesthetic quality exists and fights on in less bourgeois societies only—with the support of still existing folk poetry (think about Lorca or Attila Jozsef.) In Hungarian poetry, it was László Nagy who was able to dress hideous ideas with beautiful words: when his lover was puking blood he said: "A fairy barks, 'Clean blood up!'" I always thought that this pathway had ended with him.

Yet Attila Balogh, this first generation intellectual who walks with a crutch and who came from the world of shacks at the end of the village, is also able to enhance the contradiction of hideous ideas and beautiful words. The life experience that can be filtered out of his poetry is so dreadful, that the realists of the nineteenth century—

Dickens, Gogol, Balzac—would turn yellow out of jealousy. Uncle Pista drags the handicapped little boy to the bathtub, "to cajole sensuality out from his pubic hair ... your freshly operated-on legs / floated in the water contorted", Uncle Pista pushed the reluctant boy until "the pressure was so strong / that blood flooded the water/ slowly coloring it, / and you swayed, semi-conscious,/ in this sea-whispering bathroom". Swaying, flooding in the bloody bathtub of suffering, the water whispers like the sea.

In another poem supper-scented Gypsy girls in ready-made clothes, with ulcerous legs and scabby faces hidden behind powdered make-up, are going to the city probably to pick up someone in a bar or a disco. The poet describes blood-colored earth that "reddens to the color of poppies, / in the corridor of my throat / the blood thickens into pearls, / crackling, it blows up to the surface / to become the moisture of my lips, / and there it shines / like a smashed flower-skull, / like an owl eye-socket in ruins, / under the ulcerous boots of dinner smelling, / ready-made wombed ladies / who grease their faces with scab-golden crumbs". Later, "the baby dropped on the ground explodes." It is a shocking image. I can't and I don't even want to know whether he means sperm or a real baby, then I read: "A star is the splinter of his skull, / white butterflies of the opened-up temple are the / snow on the land," and my bewilderment becomes extreme. How am I supposed to get from a broken-skulled baby with an open forehead to butterfly-snow? Or does the "white" attribute indeed mean sperm, which at one time, before it exploded on the ground, was the possibility of a child with skull and temple? Many times, reading the poems of Attila Balogh forces me to be a translator: I have to unravel the metaphors inside the content of the text. This is how mystic and cosmic poets must be read. But while they receive their inspirations through their visions of the metaphysical world, the inspiration of Attila Balogh comes from personal suffering. This is what receives a metaphysical shape and, if my analysis is correct, it leads us to an aching, lonely person who can't get rid of his sufferings. When I asked Balogh why was he looking for

\*Ed. Note: The original manuscript of *Gypsy Drill* consists of 41 poems. The poems published below are our selections.

beautiful images for his hideous experiences, he said: "All these hurt me so much that I couldn't bear them otherwise."

...*If someone tried to love you, / you loved yourself away from them,*" reproachfully says the mother in the poem titled "Preface", and so she defines the most explicable secret of this universal feeling which is the foundation for his poetry. This is the only poem without a number because the voice who narrates is supposedly not the poet. But in reality he is the one who speaks here, he loves himself away from his mother's love, he talks about such intimacies of which even a mother's not able to know. This is how he writes about the machine attached to his leg: "*you marched toward the living / with this cold machinery, / they took it away because you pissed in your pants, / they set you out in the middle of the corridor naked, / the thin, shining skin on your testicle / lit up the whole place. / In vain the girls in the wheelchairs laughed, / and poked you with strange crutches, / you didn't crawl out of the light, / you set there proudly / in this sparkling pain*". Self-pity and self-admiration join each other in extreme terror. The poet looks at himself from the outside. In the poem this—looking in from the outside—is emphasized by the pathos of the poet addressing himself through his mother. So the poet is determined that this viewpoint now in front of him is unlovable for people who see it from the outside. This is like sitting proudly in the harsh light with his exposed testicles trying to defy laughter. The Trinity of Attila Balogh's suffering—gypsiness, poverty and misery—become the everlasting fountain of his willed self-consciousness: "*and I feel myself so wretched / that I must / be beautiful / and proud...*"

Self-admiration and self-pity are the indispensable foundation of every poetry that can become unbearable and useless without some sort of transformation. In Attila Balogh's poetry this transformational quality takes the shape of a pathos that fights against the universe. To love him and to love with him—based on his poetry—can be as heroic as pulling down some kind of Bastille. The reason he loves himself away from his mother's love is that he can accept this kind of bravery only from himself. His conscience feeds a cruelty against his poetic self without which his self-admiration would only be a whining.

What I mean by the poetic self of course includes everything that the poet identifies himself with. Attila Balogh loves himself away from gypsiness, poverty and the misery that the Heine-Medin disease caused for him

from others. The particular beauty in which he bathes horror is a medicine, not only for the pain, but it also serves to lend dignity to certain occurrences and events from which we turn our heads away in everyday life. One can find plenty of exact phrases, along with beauty and unbelievably original expressions. The poet is able "*to feel the grandpa crutch in the cherry tree, / to stick a bird pipe inside the locomotive's whistle,*"—these are rare abilities that require great fantasy: he cajoles the deeper connection out of a situation and leads civilization back to nature. I admire these lines but I can't make a parallel with the other images and visions in the particular poem, "Numero XXXVIII." Then I realize that there is no direct connection among them. The particles of the poems don't unfold from each other; rather they come from a poetical inner feeling that unites everything, and they (the particles) connect only through this.

The poetry of Attila Balogh has no individuality, but his poetical world is undeniably individual and genuine. He creates a consistent relation with his main source of intuition—the ternary of his suffering. The crutch and the poverty are molded into a form that mysteriously becomes beautiful, but the indignation caused by the gypsy situation bursts forth rather rawly: "*who judge elegantly, / who smile at this accidental nation behind bars*" and "*we can be strong only if we smell like feces*". That's why it is that "*I am neither Madjar, / nor Yuropejan*". The motto of his first book and poem "Numero I" in this volume comes to mind: "*Well yes, gypsies broke / into the store. / I write, I'm an Hungarian, / I should break into the store.*"

Some fifteen years later he tells us he has to take a shit, "*after that I'll comb myself nicely, now I resemble the identical ones,*" namely, Hungarians who can only like him if he adapts. Is the vulgarity of the more and more brazenly present racism the reason why he doesn't think himself Hungarian, or did his experience play a part, when we discovered him and almost immediately dropped him from our memories, as is customary in our society? Does he think that he is being deported out of the Empire of Poetry because he is gypsy? If that's the case then it is the ignominy of every Hungarian. As far as I'm concerned I don't give a damn what he thinks he is, but I'm glad he still does think on the page in Hungarian and, now in this book, at last, in English.

—*István Eorsi* (poet, playwright, essayist,  
Hungarian translator of Allen Ginsberg)



## Numero I

*Well, yes, gypsies broke  
into the store.  
I write, I'm an Hungarian,  
I should break into the store.*

Gentlemen:  
this is Hungary over here.  
They have exportable gypsies,  
souvenir lice,  
hovels disguised as landmarks.  
My mother lives here too, with thousands of gypsies,  
they stammer in a kind of Asian language.  
Poverty steams well here,  
smells of tuberculosis, kidney failure;  
adobe walls moulder away  
like men's palms,  
like my mother's bread.

The Medicine-Boy gallops  
back from the Insane Asylum sometimes;  
his stallion is beautiful, like a powerful hack.  
My mother lives here too,  
with thousands of gypsies,  
the officials haven't sent out the welfare checks yet,  
but They live,  
and stammer in a kind of Asian language;  
inept geniuses help them.  
They can't escape,  
my mother lives here too,  
her armor was broken by time  
and she became a hunchback.

• • •

## Numero III

You've left me  
to argue with my mother's poverty,  
so I'll open the wall of her face  
and cajole youth out of her eyes.  
I still feel  
the mass of red flesh  
in my hollow tooth;  
because she fed me,  
she nicknamed carcasses food  
for me to eat;  
she hid me from my father's cursing,  
covered me with her chubby palm.  
You've left  
kicking the pebbles of the night,  
I kick your breathing footprints,  
the rhythm of your distancing footsteps  
rolls on my eardrum.  
You've left me  
to make friends with the cigarette butt  
I've inherited from my father,  
to hush the clatter of my crutch.  
You're a liar,  
you said  
you'd give me your throbbing belly-wall  
above the fence of your thighs  
because it's like  
my mother's panting  
when she lost the borrowed money.  
You said  
we'd build a crown on my head  
out of diamond  
and mud,  
because there'll be a wedding dance.

You lied,  
for my lovers are porn pictures  
who come alive in my dreams,  
my mother's the witness.  
I take a step towards you with my left foot,  
I tear your hair out,  
I slap both of your faces,  
I pluck the nicely combed fringes of your eyes.  
I came to demand a home,  
a two-by-two home;  
I got up,  
I attached the machine to my legs,  
I had to wash up,  
I had to wrinkle the water up to my face;  
you heartened me,  
but poverty's my first cousin,  
you couldn't bring down  
the pyramids of penury,  
you didn't search for the outline  
of my bare foot in the dust.

I'm not a poet  
I toll in the tongue of the bells,  
about fates stuck in hovels  
with the impulse of a Nativity play,  
below the gates,  
an eternal rebel  
against poverty.  
I have no nice clothes;  
I don't go to gatherings  
because it's required to be dressed nicely  
there.  
I decorate my self inside,  
my uniform is beautiful:  
I wear human skin.

## Numero VII

Aw, mother,  
your dreams fight on your face  
to ruin the avenues of your eyes  
—why are you pondering  
with cabbage-taste of kitchen-poverty?  
Only plate-famine remains?!  
Why have the pennies that short-change your tomorrows  
exiled your gracefully spooning hand?,  
Oh mother,  
how nicely round you were,  
and now you're skinned down to a skeleton,  
your coughing appetite disappeared  
in your last swallow.  
Stale bread intruded, stepping  
on the row of your dear teeth  
with muddy boots.  
Your salivary secretions no longer began.  
Once you got used to its taste,  
your tender gums were beaten by dry noodles  
while your jaw rhythmically closed and opened,  
though you haven't hurt anyone.  
You didn't announce the World War,  
peace isn't boring:  
bomb frenzy,  
staggering flights of humans,  
chocolate children's cries,  
a cigarette-butt-collecting teenager  
aren't needed here,  
—he got a fistful already—  
teen-girl-love raping porn pictures,  
private socialism  
aren't needed here:  
we need the real thing.  
I carry knowledge bombs in my weapon-hands;  
wishing for the death of concrete trees  
that attack my parturition,  
because their blinking took those women  
who washed blood off the stars.  
We rebel with insolent heartbeats,  
because this walkway  
leads to the Sun;  
I hurry towards it with crutch-like motions,

'cause the speed of the machinegun-fire  
that's killing workers' crowns  
isn't needed over here.  
So how dare we compare our pain  
to Attila Jozsef's?  
Why did we stop  
slandering this boozey-country?!  
for the worker gets drunk every payday  
and beats his wife to death,  
because there's a socialist cafe dive  
every three hundred feet.  
My dear mother,  
with our hard meat-decayed teeth  
we have to snarl here  
because this is the place where we fight daily  
with rising prices,  
because rich people  
are walking in the street,  
because their rugs are getting more and more Persian,  
their clothes Parisian.  
A crutch doesn't ride on a bicycle,  
I walked to you,  
I have the right to smoke next to your face,  
I came to respect your lard-smear bread  
and I'd like to ask you  
to prepare it for me here  
in the upper world;  
your hands are still like adobe,  
light rolls off them,  
gypsy carts won't march  
on the road of your palm;  
I'm alone,  
like a single violin,  
an empty purse.  
You're afraid of God too;  
don't worry, it's me who's here,  
I chase the ministers away,  
diplomats aren't looking for  
your wedding gown,  
We two are strong,  
my crutches were carved out of hard wood.

• • •

## Numero XII

I know,  
that poor people recovering from poverty  
glorify You  
in their pagan prayers,  
I know  
that You listen first  
to the song of the fallen.  
I'm not coming here  
to harm the law,  
but I'm afraid,

that honesty is only a decoration,  
I'm afraid,  
of camouflaged oppression,  
I'm afraid,  
because misery  
can dress itself up  
in leftover jewelry.  
I'm afraid of the law,  
of articles hidden

behind masks.  
I must love You  
bravely,  
because poverty can  
increase.  
I sing for those  
who throw  
mud  
at the sun.

### Numero XIII

Fire closed its eyes  
because the wind  
rocked it to sleep.  
The girls are sleeping too,  
though I haven't brought them  
the roses,  
that bloom at the ruined corners of stars,  
I haven't stolen Spring  
from God's garden,  
to plant it in their hair.  
I've stayed solitary  
like the vultures.

• • •

### Numero XVI

Here I am  
with my poems  
with table-leg dash  
standing; forever;  
the body can't move,  
sickness offended it.

Here I am  
cursing  
fried potatoes bursting out of a crying mouth,  
stealing  
wood at the threshold of a heart attack,  
for my mother to make fire—  
today I have to limp the same way  
I did last week;  
here the street is loud  
with the whispers of horses,  
in the field that's been raped  
by my limping,  
where one should run, only  
you got tired, mother,  
I carry your cooking  
in my teeth;  
I'm growing old with you,  
my crutch is also getting old slowly,  
it'll become a beggar-stick.  
Don't let your son live on the bread of the state,  
because he'll attend beggar university,  
but we're orphans now, mother,

like used water.  
Girls don't like me,  
don't like the clumsy way  
I swing my legs ahead  
at a strange angle  
like displaced shoes  
that house two feet by accident,  
—I move like this nearly always.  
But I must go,  
here among semi-famous people,  
to kill with armchair calm,  
though I didn't want a war,  
here where the cigarette and  
the meat is inflated in price,  
here where what's being published  
is not art but artists,  
here where music's a shooting pain,  
here I must win:  
Long Live Communism,  
and my mother's stockings won't get torn,  
Long Live World Peace,  
and my father's violin won't break,  
Long Live everything that's fair,  
everything that's saintly,  
but don't let me miss the tram  
because it's embarrassing  
when everyone is staring at me,  
and I don't want the Sun shining through your skirt,  
because your thighs are firm and beautiful.

## Numero XXII

The flutes of lilac bushes are playing music,  
they gasp their tenor-labors  
in my wind-pipe,  
but I won't cry, never,  
even though Vera stepped out of her garments,  
and jumped over into the universe,  
Magda got married,  
Eva ran to eat her lunch,  
and Attila Jozsef's  
building a railway for girls's hearts.  
I'm the only one here  
in the uncertain future, rocking baby carriages.

I bleed this Boticelli Spring  
from the battles of the sword lilies,  
I'm the first wish  
in my mother's tales,  
the king in her poverty,  
I flee in the running of metrical feet,  
I whisper my song to dog-eared paper;  
darkness stirs around under my skin,  
yet the situation is clear:  
my mother's skirt flaps about amid bicycle wheels,  
the working-class is learning to ride.

• • •

## Numero XXXII

Crumple the paper  
that was stained with the condition  
of love left behind:  
no girl,  
no thighs,  
no raw fleshed circular mouth of the belly  
that would take love in.  
Night fell again,  
I'm alone again,  
I crumpled the paper again  
—didn't even write a poem on it.  
But the girl-belly of  
my humpbacked violin is stretched out,  
on its worn-out strings a song spurts  
as I beat it with my male-bow,  
screwing its neck with wet fingers,  
—why do violins give birth?  
Aw,  
I don't carry life in my male-belly;  
you've succeeded, mother,  
make your belly nicely round.  
When with a servant-smile  
I shoved myself out of you  
to live,  
here,  
this ground here,  
the empire of man,  
you've succeeded  
raising your child above pawn-wristwatch-fate  
to gather your stars above the foreheads of hovels.  
With flapping skirt,  
you've succeeded  
appearing before parliament  
so they voted for green pea-stew  
to augment your bread.  
To give birth to four billion people  
with human suffering  
you push your puffed-up belly  
before the eyes of fate  
for it to see

the flower sadness of Caesarian pain,  
and all I got is this paper-love,  
a notebook page.  
Oh, I wish there was a woman,  
whose breasts are the heads of two orphaned girls,  
two one-eyed monsters  
whom I'd embrace until numb;  
I'd fight with her fingers until sweat flowed,  
I'd dare go from her wrist up to her face,  
I'd break down her wall  
to kiss the last kiss out of her,  
then I'd reach down to her belly  
to prove  
the male value of my fingers,  
to find  
the hidden sway in her dear waist,  
the tendons running from the bed of her crotch  
oh, these tendons,  
I'd like to have some in my skinny legs,  
oh, these thighs,  
they'd kick in the dash of lovemaking  
in place of me.  
It hurts me,  
like children  
listening to candy crushed  
under the sole of shoes,  
when pain walks along the row of your teeth;  
it hurts when the fragrance of a made-up bed  
doesn't flow in the air,  
hurts when children play death,  
hurts when nausea before labor  
bangs against your throat with iron muscles.  
You hurt me  
because I got tired  
of myself straining against  
the coward-white back of the sheet,  
so the bones inside me retired to rest,  
slowly rummaging  
among scraggy flesh.

## Numero XXXVI

In vain I embrace  
the forehead of the foal  
that bends over the consolation of streams,  
the women shivering through the cold of my bones,  
orphaned masses walking the continent  
sunk into battle  
rolling cannon balls  
against the flower-flu army of stiff meadows:  
green papillas of little girl heart-attacks trundle  
against swarming mercenaries of sword lilies,  
through the blood soaked meadow  
of the little boy's thrown pebbles,  
and these people squat  
behind those boots that squash everything  
from the deer-boned loins of babies  
to cavernous laps of women,  
like citizens sitting before the television-war,

and the administrative-peace,  
in this shotgun-shacked  
narrowed homeland,  
and people squat down to shit  
in the middle of the battle,  
children play Indians,  
but they don't want to starve,  
and me, I hide quietly,  
I twirl  
in my lung-sick bird-coughing,  
with this country buried in my eye-socket,  
and it's good in here,  
nice in here,  
I live on being alive,  
but I mustn't dream,  
because it'll come true.

• • •

## Numero XXXVII

On the bird-spine sheltered meadow  
the white coated ones are coming  
stepping fawn-skirt under the snow,  
they come in the meadow that guards the tumbling of horses,  
dragging wounded foal to a wheeled stretcher,  
I lie snowed against the belly of the field,  
army of dew-whores roll  
the green cannon balls of my loin,  
among grass bayonets hiding in the fog,  
my eyes gaze at the crushed belly of the bride  
below the mumbling snow,  
tanks rumble by,  
under their bodies  
the field is shattered buzzingly,  
this is the end,  
so what?

—it's winter, it's cold and it snows  
gypsies lean over warm meat,  
oh, I don't want to eat here with them  
because there are tiny oakums afloat in the soup

diffused,  
rotten  
and, hunkered birdlike, my Lord,  
I lie  
before the hills of your knees,  
help me write this poem,

to file the tiny pebbles  
on this paper,  
help, hey, how beautifully black I am  
again, and I must bow my head  
to red birds in a woman's lap,  
and hide  
my sorrowful black fingers  
behind pinetree skirts from here,  
because it stinks in here,  
stinks,  
like under the tongues of teenagers,

and this homeland gentlemen,  
and this homeland,  
is only a huge disgusting poem,  
I am only a poet  
and not a citizen of the word,  
I'd like to live where  
I'm allowed  
to smoke,  
and now what shall I do  
after I've smoked this cigarette?

—inside me, nothing else, but treason is enhanced  
it's based next to my heart in the corner  
and emigration sparkles,  
hey, it's the best.

---

**Attila Balogh** is a poet, writer and founding editor of *Gypsy Drill*, a cross-cultural literary magazine. He lives in Budapest.

**Michael Castro** is a jazz poet and founding editor of *River Styx* living in St. Louis. **Gábor G. Gyukics** is a poet currently living in Vienna. He and Michael Castro also translated an English language collection of Attila Jozsef's poetry: *A Transparent Lion* (Green Integer, 2006).