

Aleksandrs Čaks

SAMPLER

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Selected Poems

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translated from Latvian by

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First published in the United Kingdom in 2019 by
Shearsman Books
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
BRISTOL
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-674-5

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the Latvian Ministry of Culture which financed the translation of this book, and the Latvian Writer's Union under whose auspices the grant was awarded.

'Night visitor' is reprinted from *Touched by Eternity*, translated by Ieva Lešinska (Riga: Jumava, 2016), by kind permission of the publishers.

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Joy

Joy stirs up our blood
 like a cow wading through a spring.
It's like moist breath on a mirror, joy on our clarity.
Joy is part of an animal, joy is a burp.
Only an aeroplane, telescope, lift and – pain
Raise us up like prayers.

1924

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Ride in a Motor Car

Past the Air Bridge, the car leaps like a tiger, flashes like a boomerang.

It swallows miles like sweet berries, the swish of the tyres a friendly greeting.

The passing telephone poles and trees begin to look like fingers pressed tightly together.

We flash by like a falling star past gangs of boys and women who bear gossip instead of children.

The wind remains, this sadist and born thief – it steals thoughts, robs us of breath and pulls everything off our heads,

And the speed becomes a passionate man, he takes me, he possesses me, my heart goes numb like a foot.

So much open space in my heart, so much excitement, every rocking motion of the car mixes my hair with the blue of the sky, offers stars to my lips and moon's breath for my cheeks.

Past the bridge, past the bridge, the auto leaps like a tiger, flashes like a boomerang.

I salute you, you lacquered dolphin!
I wish my heart would beat at your speed.

1925

The Song of the Sky

Why are our eyes so pale blue? Why is our hair like straw in mid-August?

Because we like to look at the sun and the clouds. We love the wind, wind alone and hate the earth, we love the air that quivers above the earth, and the stars that evening brings us from outer space.

Because we do not love the earth, which we leave, opening our souls like eyes, like chalices toward the greatness of sky.

We hate the earth, bringing ourselves royally over it like a foot over a puddle, so that everything that the earth bestows upon us, passion, suffering, love, and hate, would run off us like water off a round ball.

We only love the wind, the playful wind that makes our hair so pale.

1925

SAMPLER

[Night]

Night.

I stand by the open window.

Monotonously the clock behind me counts the stars.

The moon hangs on the horizon like a monstrous drop of blood.

Fog creeps secretly through the bog to the hill like a platoon to a battle.

Silence stares from all corners and listens, agape, at my heartbeat.

1925

SAMPLER

Restlessness

Again the day, another day is over,
Just a few footsteps echoing in the street.
I sit alone at my table, sober,
My heart beats, yet desires peace.

It's burdened by a weight or strain
That always, always stings and stings.
It's that small fever – restless pain,
Which stirs up all that seems to wane.

Like a morning wind that churns the lake
It stirs my mind's lucidness
And wages war without a break,
And brings about my spitefulness.

1925

SAMPLER

Explanation

I am a scream of an era drowning in a sea of blood.

All these words, which pile up in my verses as if
drunk – they are splinters of teeth
knocked out of my gums by desire.

They have been seasoned like meat with my curses
and tears, which I have shed in pain and in hunger
and swallowed down instead of bread.

If you tore open my chest, you would not find a heart
there: a grenade has been thrown and
keeps exploding there, destroying the last vestige of
peace and lucidity, tearing off taps like buttons
from the pipes of bile and unrest.

1925

SAMPLER

Crumbling Time

Like old brick walls our time is crumbling,
Spider's webs are sparkling in the sun,
And yet it turns its toothless mouth
Toward all of those that smile in the sunlight.

Like old brick walls our time is crumbling,
Yet as it falls it wants to bury
All those who feel like grinning
As it evaporates like a morning mist.

Like old brick walls our time is crumbling,
And yet it's ready to set to and fight
With all of those who hate and curse it,
Before the new era rises radiant and bright.

Mid-1920s

SAMPLER

[Tonight I chased my heart...]

Tonight I chased my heart out on the street
To go earn bread, for hunger's nearby.
I don't have a santims for a bath
And desperation burns like a distant flame.
I am tangled up in life as in debt and feeling
My days pass by in thought and in pain.

Why guard clarity and fragile moments?
No, not such nonsense is not for our time,
Youth breaks everything like spare oars,
It lives impatiently, but without coming into bloom.
Roaring speed has arrived with aeroplanes,
We laugh and seek our peace from bullets.

I chased out my heart. Do I expect it back?
Sweet oppressive void where my heart once was,
Sweet tiredness has turned my feet to stone
And I can never be free of it.
And where could I look for my former heart
With this face distorted in pain?

1927

Placards

Placards, placards – city's soul –
colourful, garish like ladies' stockings,
blood red, yellow, and black,
they accost me from corners, gates and posts,
more insistent than harlots at night.

Placards, placards, city's sacraments,
schedules for plays, bars, and meetings,
I love you, love you as much
as in my boyhood I loved
football, boxing, and ice cream waffles.
Your motley essence,
your contrasts, your broken lines
are so close to my heart.

Placards, placards, best prescriptions
for my impatient soul.

Sirds uz trotuāra / Heart on the Pavement (1928)