

OLGA SEDA KOVA

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## The Subway, Moscow

Here they are, each one in his niche,  
besotted, lopsided,  
splotted with various boils, black eyes, bruises  
(never mind, it doesn't hurt anymore!):  
this one crouching,  
that one astride a garbage can,  
that one reclining like a Greek on a vase at the Louvre.  
They hope that they're invisible,  
that this too will pass.  
So,  
my good brothers!  
How was your banquet?  
A success?  
So was ours.

## Portrait of the Artist As a Middle-Aged Man

When, why, who  
with what housepainter's brush  
covered these features over,  
which were once meaningless as the sky,  
without purpose, end, or name—  
pounding storms, squadrons of aircraft, a child's jackstraws—  
the sky stirring the trees  
without wind, yet stronger than wind:  
so that they get up and walk  
away from their roots,

away from their earth,  
away from their kith and kin:  
o, there, where we do not know ourselves *at all!*  
into the meaningless never-darkening sky.

With what lime-plaster, what clay  
what meaning,  
profit, fear and success  
have they been sealed tight, dead—  
slots, oriel windows,  
loopholes in never-whitewashed stone,  
through which, remember, you looked and could never get your fill?

*Ach, du liebe Augustin,*  
dear Augustine, it's all over,  
all over, all ended.  
Ended in the usual way.

## The Angel of Rheims

for François Fédiér

Are you ready?  
This angel smiles—  
I ask, although I know  
That you are doubtless ready:  
For I am not speaking to just anyone,  
But to you,  
One whose heart will not survive the betrayal  
Of your earthly king,  
Who was crowned here before all the people,  
Or of your other Lord,  
The King of Heaven, our Lamb,  
Who dies in the hope  
That you will hear me again;  
Again and again,  
As every evening

My name is rung out by the bells  
Here, in the country of excellent wheat  
    And bright grapes,  
    And tassel and cluster  
    Trembling respond—

    But all the same,  
Set in this pink crumbling stone,  
    I raise my hand,  
    Broken off in the World War.  
All the same, let me remind you:  
    Are you ready?  
For plague, famine, earthquake, fire,  
Foreign invasions, wrath visited upon us?  
    All this is doubtless important.  
    But it is not what I mean.  
    It is not what I was sent for.  
    I say:  
    Are you  
    Ready  
    For unbelievable joy?

## Lullaby

Like a mountain dove in cleft stone  
Like a city swallow under the eaves—  
Which spend all day bustling, flying,  
    Then fall into a slumber  
    So profound,  
It's as if they were not yet born—

    So you too, my heart,  
    Nestling in hurt offense  
    Sated, warm, comforted  
    Sleep . . . slumber . . .  
    Don't listen to anyone:





## A Few Lines About My Life

I was born in Moscow on December 26, 1949. My first five years have always seemed to me the best period of my life; the other period that I like to remember was between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, the prime of my youth. Beyond those two happy moments, which had no direct relation to poetry but which were lived *within* poetry, I don't much like to remember all that is known as biography.

The most important personage of my childhood was my grandmother Daria Semionovna Sedakova. It was mainly she whose hands fashioned the fairy tale of my childhood. My book *Ancient Songs* is dedicated to her; it is, in a way, her portrait in words. It was also from her that I learned traditional songs—songs with refrains at the beginning and end—and prayers in Slavonic. These religious and folk elements are what I wanted to bring into *Ancient Songs*.

I went to an ordinary school in Moscow and studied piano, where I had no real success; however, my music teachers were the ones who led me to discover art, and in fact that whole domain of human life which the Soviet “scientific-atheist” and counter-cultural construction of existence never took into account. Bach and Chopin, and moreover Pushkin and Shakespeare, or Rembrandt and Leonardo da Vinci, all that came under the rubric of the “classics” was not forbidden, and they displayed their power! What they transmitted was enough to allow a person to judge the system of official values. For me, that system became repellent for purely aesthetic reasons long before I discovered its historical, economic, and other features. It's hard for us Russians to understand the states of spirit that produce Western counter-culture and assaults on tradition viewed as a repressive structure, when for us the least contact with tradition possessed an enormous power to liberate.

In 1967, I entered the University of Moscow, the Faculty of Philology, and was graduated in 1973. At the University, I studied Slavic folklore and rituals, Old Slavonic, and the linguistic analysis of poetic texts. In the bohemian spirit of those times (I considered myself a poet by the time I was fifteen), scholarly and

academic studies were at odds with creativity. But I loved, and still love, philology, and I can't imagine myself without those practices of word-perception. I thank the fate that gave me as professors the best Russian scholars in the humanities of my country, the philologists of the structuralist school of Moscow-Tartu, and Sergei Averintsev, a great scholar of the classical and Christian heritage, and a thinker who was spiritually at home in the whole of Mediterranean culture, which he loved and knew as a provincial loves his Godforsaken little town. He opened up the great expanse of ancient and Christian Europe to people of my generation.

The poets who had the greatest influence on me in my youth were Mandelstam and Khlebnikov, and later Rilke and Dante. I read the poems of Rilke, and the treatises and poetry of Dante, in the original and translated some of them—as I translated T. S. Eliot, Paul Claudel, Emily Dickinson, certain Polish poets, some English nursery rhymes, the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi and the first of his *Lives*. My initial translations were not published, nor were my first poems. Nor my first prose essays or my works in philology.

During the 1970s, I was a *samizdat* author (self-publishing during the late Soviet period). From my own experience, I can attest how congenial that spontaneous process of publishing was, and what an enormous distribution its products enjoyed—faint copies typed on onion-skin paper. *Wild Eglantine*, which for me marked the beginning of poetic work that was no longer an apprenticeship, was my fifth book of poetry. It “came out” in *samizdat* at the end of 1978; I saw dozens of copies created in Povolzhye, in Siberia, and other even more unexpected places.

Around that time, official culture and the “second” culture separated definitively, and the “second” culture—radically independent—worked as if inspired. One might describe it as a sort of poetic renaissance, a Bronze Age of Russian poetry, as some people call the period opened up by Brodsky. The Bronze Age established connections with the traditions of our country (with its Silver Age first of all) and with what Goethe called universal culture. This era seems to me now in retrospect to have been especially favorable to young poets: we felt a vital need for the *poetic word*, not just for political journalism like that which marked the 1960s, but for the noble, inspired word. It might be strange

and somber, like my *Eglantine*. Readers during those years didn't fear complexity or obscurity and weren't troubled by open pathos, as was the case later on when what was demanded was a literature of irony, and the Moscow conceptualists and practitioners of the absurd and other forms of parody became the heroes. The 1970s gave birth to the poetry of Elena Schwarz, Victor Krivouline, Ivan Jdanov, and some others who, in my opinion, are very gifted.

Those years—in the same circles of opposition—produced another renaissance, a religious one. The persecuted Orthodox tradition and the equally persecuted humanist culture came together—something that has hardly ever been the case in Russian history. Indeed, today the two tend towards the habitual opposition between “secular” and “Western” on the one hand, and “spiritual” and “soil school” on the other, an opposition that seems to me trivial, dangerous, and anachronistic.

After the changes introduced by Gorbachev, the “second culture” was dissolved and mixed back into the first; its protagonists were dispersed throughout the world.

Before the end of 1989, I had never traveled beyond the boundaries of the U.S.S.R.; the very idea of doing so seemed absurd to me. My first encounter with Europe (for me, it was Scotland) was truly a shock, happy and painful at the same time. However, these first encounters with Great Britain, Italy, France and Germany, with the world of our love that we once thought hopeless, the world of the *other side*, a Platonic world made up only of names—I'll call these first encounters the third happy period of my life. In recent years, I've traveled a great deal, and lived for some time in Rome, in Provence and in Keele, England; in 1994 I was invited to be a poet-in-residence at the University of Keele. Even today, writing these names—Arles, London—I can hardly believe it. It represents such an utter change, only someone who has lived in the absolute isolation of a totalitarian system can understand what such a change means. It is in fact a life after life, and I am not yet used to this second life.

*[Translated from the French by Emily Grosholz with Larissa Volokhonsky]*