

# Old Songs



OLGA SEDAKOVA  
Old Songs

1980–1981

Translated by  
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Foreword by  
Rowan Williams

S L / . N T  
B O O K S

## OLD SONGS

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# Contents

Foreword by Rowan Williams | vii

Translator's Introduction | ix

First Notebook | 3

Second Notebook | 23

Poems from the Second Notebook that couldn't find  
themselves a place there | 47

Third Notebook | 57

Additions to *Old Songs* | 75

Acknowledgments | 81



## Foreword

OLGA SEDAKOVA IS WITHOUT doubt one of the foremost Russian poets of her generation—an unusual generation, whose writing spans the end of the repressions of the Soviet era and the beginnings of a new age of angry, violent nationalism, often clothed in religious dress. Her detachment from these varieties of anti-humanism is consistent and deep; her Christian imagination is strong enough never to be simply reactive, nostalgic, or resentful. Like any good poet, she is most concerned with making the reader *attend*, both to the patterning and pacing of her words and to what they illuminate about being alive in the world. If there is, for her, a “consolation” in poetry, it is not a matter of simple aesthetic satisfaction or of encouraging “messages.” She sees her words as drawing us into a journey in which we shall certainly get lost. In our lostness, we may just become able to glimpse, in a sky or a mirror or a patch of grass on a hillside or a stray sound, the pressure all around us of immeasurable joy, a joy that does not need us and our feelings for it to be real.

Mirrors turn up often in these poems, with the subtext of reminding us of the difficulties we have in seeing ourselves, the enormous gaps in our knowledge of who and what we are; we need all sorts of accompaniment if we are to see our own faces with any kind of truthfulness. And—to pick up a resonant turn of phrase from one of these poems—part of what makes it impossible for Adam, even a penitent Adam, to get back into the Garden of Eden is that he has “wanted” what is already his—he has tried to grasp and possess his own being and that of his world, instead of journeying into himself and the world, journeying into language itself, so as to become more attuned to truth, and so to joy.

The poems in this volume are different from many of those that have appeared in earlier translations. Sedakova often writes with a long, “drifting” line, fingering over an image or a sequence of words interspersed with shorter, more insistent lines. Her vocabulary can be difficult, sometimes archaic. But these pieces are tightly constructed, with plenty of balladic energy and

## FOREWORD

folkloric pithiness, even when their content is teasing and complex. They very definitely succeed in conveying the sense of a forgotten directness of perception and relation—not a lost simplicity, exactly, but a larger and more human world shrunk and damaged by “adult” modernity. The way back is never the reconstruction of a lost golden age, but a new willingness to let go in the face of the pinpoint of luminosity that is still a gateway to life, to see that we can’t see who we are in our habitual ways of thinking. It is the simplicity and the superabundance of life in grace.

She is seldom an easy poet and putting her into English is hard work (my own efforts at this have sometimes left me feeling that every kind of verbal grace has vanished in the process); it is excellent that she has found here such a careful, skilled, and sympathetic translator. Sedakova is someone who, as both a poet and critic, deserves to be much better known in the English-speaking world—and just at present it is extremely important that we recognize the strain in Russian culture that is deeply subversive of the imperial and totalizing ambitions that continue to distort a great heritage of wisdom and imagination. Olga Sedakova is a writer of global significance, a premier voice of Christian humanism and sacramental sensibility, and the publishing of this collection is a welcome stage in the reception of her exceptional genius in the West.

—Rowan Williams



## Translator's Introduction

ON DECEMBER 7, 2016, Olga Sedakova joined Svetlana Aleksievich's "Intellectual Club" as its inaugural guest. Aleksievich, the Nobel Prize-winning author, introduced Sedakova, saying, "When you read her poetry, it's as though you walk out into a summer garden and suddenly you see that you're alive." When you read her, she continued, you understand you are not alone—that, indeed, you are surrounded by people who have shown you how to live with courage in and through a community of interlocutors. Sedakova then spoke about traditional Russian notions of evil. How, she asked, can so many Russians praise the genocidal Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin as having done what was necessary to win a world war? Russia needs two things, Sedakova said. It needs better tools for discerning good from evil, and it needs a "culture of discussion" so people can learn to discern together.

Sedakova emerged as a poet in the mid-1970s when Leonid Brezhnev headed the Soviet Communist Party. By that era of "Stagnation," people were no longer executed for speaking out; but frank discussion took place only in relatively sheltered circles—around the kitchen table, as people liked to say. For many, it was a time of hopelessness and suffocation, a time when alcohol was a common escape, when social and political ideals seemed abused beyond repair. Into this context spoke a tender voice with uncommon authority, a voice that makes a crowded room go quiet and everyone and everything lean in to hear language made new with trust and vulnerable hope.

People sometimes describe Sedakova as a "difficult" poet. There is no denying her erudition: she is one of a historic handful of Russian-language metaphysical poets, and she is a renowned scholar and translator. She is also part of a generation whose art reflects a "longing for world culture" reaching beyond the confines of their Soviet context.<sup>1</sup> Some of Sedakova's books of poetry advertise her ongoing dialogue with European and classical Chinese poetry and philosophy, such as *A Chinese Journey* (*Kitaiskoe puteshestvie*, 1986) with its epigraph from Lao Tse or *Stanzas in the Manner of Alexander Pope* (*Stansy v manere Aleksandra Popa*, 1979-80).

## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

And then there are her images, which can defy conventional physics. In one poem from *Old Songs*, the speaker muses,

I mean, life is such a small thing:  
it can pull its whole self together  
on your pinkie, on the tip of your eyelash.  
And death surrounds it like the sea.

If *Old Songs* are “difficult,” it is likely because we, her contemporary readers, struggle with their logic of the fairytale and the parable or with the poems’ unapologetically paradoxical proclamations. Sedakova wrote these verses in an era that viewed the Communist Revolution as having achieved the razing of bourgeois culture and economics to construct a new, socialist society with a new Soviet man and Soviet woman. Sedakova’s *Old Songs* resist this straight, ascendant line into the future. In one poem, the speaker says to the “Word” of its title (“Slovo”),

These eyes of ours can never see  
your truest, deepest color,  
no human ear can ever hear  
the rustle of your broad, broad folds.

The poetic word conceals in its folds the secrets of the cosmos and the wisdom of the ages. Hence also the constant presence of Sedakova’s beloved grandmother in this volume. It was she who first shaped the poet’s Orthodox Christian faith—not as a national identity, but as a way of perceiving and relating to the world, a mode marked by delight and deep attention.

Olga Aleksandrovna Sedakova was born in Moscow on December 26, 1949, into the family of a Soviet military engineer and thus into a family of some status. As a child, she published early verses in a Communist youth magazine. But once in college, at Moscow State University, she entered the artistic and intellectual Underground, developing close friendships with some of its most famous figures, such as Venedikt Erofeev, author of the virtuosically intoxicated *Moscow to the End of the Line* (*Moskva-Petushki*), and scholar Sergei Averintsev, who drew many hundreds to his semi-public lectures on Byzantine Christianity.

Sedakova went on to study not only philology but also ethnography, achieving the prestigious Candidate of Sciences title with a dissertation on the burial rites of the eastern and southern Slavs, which she defended in 1984. Written from 1980-81, *Old Songs* betrays more than a scholarly interest in folk wisdom. The following year, in 1982, Sedakova penned a poetic

## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

memoir in which ethnographic interest bleeds into a literary metaphysics. Entitled “Notes on and Recollections of Various Poems, and Also, In Praise of Poetry,” the piece recounts Sedakova’s life through her encounters with poetry. The events are internal and described as world-altering sensation. A key passage describes the moment Sedakova received her poetic calling at age fifteen. She and two high school friends travel to a village to see in the New Year. They make preparations for Christmas Eve divinations (January 6, by the traditional calendar).

But the old woman next door had filled our heads with such frightening stories about divination that by midnight we were afraid even to step on the floor, much less to tell fortunes . . . I cowered on top of the stove, rigid with fear. And this is when the happening happened. I could not grasp what was taking place then, nor can I now. And thus, I am unable to lay it all out in a comprehensible manner. But auditory or visual hallucination played no role here. What did play a role was something inside me. Here is the most intelligible way I can describe it: the stove turned out to be the center of the world, and this center was hurtling forward to someplace, or maybe, in fact, everything was hurtling past it. And this was not a sensation—it was an actual event: its reality did not depend on whether I sensed it or not, much as an incident out in the street does not.<sup>2</sup>

While Sedakova pokes light fun at her vision, the gripping image of the quantum rustic village stove projects an imaginary shaped by oral culture and modern learning alike.

For decades Sedakova’s poems were published only in samizdat—“self-published” formats copied by hand or typewriter and distributed amongst circles of trust and relative secrecy. Her readings took place in private apartments or art studios. An old friend of hers, literary scholar Irina Surat, recalls first attending one such reading: “I can say without exaggeration that it was stunning. It simply bowled me over, that reading. It was magic—that’s how it felt to me. Not a subject of philological interest but a phenomenon that was really and truly magical. That transfigures you and carries you away somewhere. It was the sensation of another world.”<sup>3</sup>

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Sedakova has written less poetry. But she has written more and more essays and cultural criticism. And she has never stopped translating. Common themes emerge across her prose, most prominently the need for more refined moral judgment and the

related quest to reconstitute Russia's social fabric. With her many national and international recognitions, including a prize awarded by Pope John Paul II, she is known as one of Russia's greatest living poets. Indeed, few of her generation are left—in Russia and beyond. The role of Russian poet is freighted with expectations. Iconic nineteenth-century poet Alexander Pushkin cemented a construct of the poet as one who speaks eternal truth when political repression and heavy censorship shut other mouths. He died in a duel at age 37 and was buried in secret by dark of night because the regime feared mass gatherings at a public funeral.

Sedakova not only speaks of the fearsome responsibility of the poet but has put herself at risk more than once—by signing a public declaration, in 2014, against the invasion of the Crimea, by writing a piece that went viral, critiquing Russian civil society negatively in the light of the Maidan uprisings in Ukraine. As I write this, she is hunkered down in Moscow, having decided to stay for now. She is horrified by what her country is doing to a nation some of her oldest friends and closest collaborators call home.

Sedakova is a revered figure in Russia—at least for those who value literature and intellect in the public arena. Some of her poetry hits a high, even odic, register that accords to the image of the learned, solemn voice of conscience. *Old Songs*, on the other hand, hits notes of humble knowing. I have, by now, translated a good deal of Sedakova's poetry. And as difficult as it can be to translate her more high-faluting works—with their classical structures, literary and philosophical allusions, and their refined diction—it is perhaps more challenging to translate poems like the ones in this volume.

The Russian of *Old Songs* draws heavily on Russian oral cultures. Think of your grandmother (or your great-grandmother, if you knew her—or your friend's grandmother) and her turns of phrase. Our family returns to a whole stock of these from my North Carolina grandmother, who grew up in a small rural town. "They say it takes a smart one to play the fool." "He's tighter than Dick's hat band." "That's pure-tee meanness." How would you, pray tell, translate these into Russian—especially when there is no real corresponding phrase?

The work of this translation has been to convey a sense of words worn down smooth as a river rock, handled for generations by passing currents, maybe grasped in a coat pocket to recall peaceful, shimmering summer days by the water. I have aimed to be as faithful as possible to Sedakova's words and images. But over multiple iterations, I have polished away what I could, trying as deftly as possible to add small echoes of something like oral tradition

in English—here a bit of fairy tale or nursery rhyme, there an aphoristic turn. Sedakova's accentual meter helps, with its regular beats but variable number of syllables. Folk songs and pop songs use such meter to keep time while using as few or as many words as they want. (Think Joni Mitchell.) I have tried to maintain that same pulse and freedom here.

Reading in English, you and I cannot access the particular “oldness” Sedakova references. But as Eric Hobsbawm and others remind us, tradition is ever new, always being reinvented.<sup>4</sup> This was as true when Sedakova wrote these verses into a late Soviet urban space as it is sending out an English version of them in 2022, with Russia destroying Ukrainian infrastructure as winter approaches to make up for its failures on the battlefield. May you find something “old” here that feels sustaining, or, on the other hand, like a pebble in your shoe. (The voice here does not necessarily mind telling you how things are, even when it escapes rational logic.) Sedakova is, after all, a student of the “Perennial Tradition,” which seeks in diverse ways to address contemporaneity as the eternal novice it is.

December 2022  
 Research Triangle Park, North Carolina

## Endnotes

1. Osip Mandelstam used this phrase in 1933 to describe the Russian Acmeist school of poetry, most active in the 1910s and '20s (O. Mandel'shtam, *Slovo i kul'tura* [Moscow: Sov'etskii Pisatel', 1987], 298). Later, writers of the late Soviet Underground adopted the phrase as a kind of motto.
2. Translation by the author. Readers can find a full translation of this seminal, autobiographical essay in Olga Sedakova, *In Praise of Poetry*, ed. Caroline Clark, Ksenia Golubovich and Stephanie Sandler (Open Letter, 2014). The volume also contains Stephanie Sandler's wonderful translation of *Old Songs*.
3. Irina Surat, unpublished interview, October 16, 2017.
4. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).



# Old Songs

# ПЕРВАЯ ТЕТРАДЬ

*Что белеется на горе зеленой?*

*А.С. Пушкин*

## 1. ОБИДА

Что же ты, злая обида?  
я усну, а ты не засыпаешь,  
я проснусь, а ты давно проснулась  
и смотришь на меня, как гадалка.

Или скажешь, кто меня обидел?  
Нет таких, над всеми Бог единый.  
Кому нужно—дает Он волю,  
у кого не нужно—отбирает.

Или жизнь меня не полюбила?  
Ах, неправда, любит и жалеет,  
бережет в потаенном месте  
и достанет, только пожелает,  
поглядит, как никто не умеет.

Что же ты, злая обида,  
сидишь предо мной, как гадалка?

Или скажешь, что живу я плохо,  
обижаю больных и несчастных . . . .



# FIRST NOTEBOOK

*What gleams white there on the green hill?*

—A.S. Pushkin

## 1. GRUDGE

What's this, then, bitter grudge?  
I nod off, but you won't go to sleep,  
I wake up, there you are, long awake  
watching me like a fortuneteller.

What, has somebody done me wrong?  
Not a soul, there's one God over all.  
He gives freedom to those who need it,  
and from those who don't—he takes it away.

What, has life not loved me enough?  
Ah, not true, it loves me, feels sorry for me,  
it shelters me in a quiet place,  
comes and gets me whenever it likes,  
looks at me like nobody else does.

What's this, then, bitter grudge?  
There you sit like a fortuneteller.

What, you say that I live badly,  
doing ill to the sick and unhappy? . . .

## 2. КОНЬ

Едет путник по темной дороге,  
не торопится, едет и едет.

—Спрашивай, конь, меня что хочешь,  
всё спроси—я всё тебе отвечу.  
Люди меня слушать не будут,  
Бог и без рассказов знает.

Странное, странное дело,  
почему огонь горит на свете,  
почему мы полночи боимся  
и бывает ли кто счастливым?

Я скажу, а ты не поверишь,  
как люблю я ночь и дорогу,  
как люблю я, что меня прогнали  
и что завтра опять прогонят.

Подойди, милосердное время,  
выпей моей юности похмелье,  
вытяни молодости жало  
из недавней горячей ранки—  
и я буду умней, чем другие!

Конь не говорит, а отвечает,  
тянется долгая дорога.  
И никто не бывает счастливым.  
Но несчастных тоже немного.

## 2. STEED

The wayfarer rides and rides  
down the dark road, and he never hurries.

“Ask me, steed, whatever you want,  
whatever you ask, I’ll answer.  
It’s not like people listen to me,  
and God doesn’t need my stories to know.

“It is a strange, strange thing,  
why does fire burn on earth,  
why are we afraid of midnight,  
and is anyone out there happy?

“I’ll tell you, but you won’t believe me,  
how I love the night and the road,  
how I love how they drove me off,  
how they’ll do it again tomorrow.

“Come forth, oh, time of mercy,  
drink down the hops of my youth,  
pull out the sting of childhood  
from the burning hot fresh wound—  
make me cleverer than all the rest!”

The steed answers without saying a word,  
and the long road stretches out.  
And there’s not a soul who is happy.  
But not many are unhappy either.