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On Leaving and Staying

In a way, we never leave the prisons of our minds. Even though I have now lived fifteen years outside Georgia, it still has power over me. The way I perceived the world when I was growing up, what I thought about, or how I accepted surrounding hierarchies, stereotypes, and beliefs, formed me. Another version of me was created by experiences after I left and began living in the United States, where I have been for all this time. Since I was only twenty-one when I left, I had the luxury of becoming a Georgian-American hybrid, combining the qualities of both the Old and New Worlds. It was an enlightening experience and a positive one. What was jarring, and yet liberating, was the manner of my mental change. I left a fairly comfortable, warm, blanketed existence for an unpredictable life on another continent. Yet I was confident that I had a bright future ahead of me. Living as an immigrant is not the easiest way of life, but it helps you grow and become self-sufficient. It pushes you to compare and contrast, to pick and choose, to understand, to relate, to open your mind.

The three unique heroines of this book did not have the luxury of leaving their familiar surroundings to change themselves. Although they all went through painful transformations in their formative years, they remained in Georgia for the most part of their lives and had to pluck up courage, outgrow their adolescent dependence on what others think, and listen to their inner voices. Tamara Kvesitadze, Rusudan Khizanishvili, and Natela Grigalashvili all became authentic, independent, acclaimed artists whose names are known outside Georgia and who used their emotional, physical, and artistic resources to become self-actualized women on their own terms. They did this by swimming against the currents of a well-established, common understanding of the position of women in their country. Georgia has produced only one strong queen and she serves as a perfect symbol for this book and is referred to in its title. King Tamar ruled in twelfth century and empowered her weak state endlessly split between its European and Asian neighbors. She chose to be



Rusudan Khizanishvili, Untitled, from the series *Every Day – I am Writing a Letter*, 2013–2017
mixed media collage, 35 x 50 cm



Tamara Kvesitadze, *The Queen*, 2000, fiberglass, wood, metal, clay, paper, foam, acrylic paint, 50 cm



On this photograph of *Man and Woman* the mechanics are visible through which the figurines are rotating. Photo: courtesy Sarah Moon

Because of the symbolic eloquence and elegance of how this eternal and yet always new, always painful separation was masterfully captured by Tamara, her sculpture was immediately sold during her exhibitions in Europe. After a major show in Tbilisi, the Georgian government commissioned Tamara to create a larger version of *Man and Woman*. It is now located in the seaside city of Batumi and proudly stands eight meters tall. Every day at 7:00 pm, the mechanical statues begin to move. In just twenty minutes the cycle is complete. *Man and Woman* brought widespread acclaim to Tamara.

Venice

In 2007, Tamara participated in the Venice Biennale, representing Georgia as part of the collective; and, in 2011, she represented Georgia individually as a mature artist. Her major work at this second Biennale

