

## Editors' Notes

THE INTERVIEWS WITH GEORGIAN POETS Ana K'alandaze and Lia St'urua conducted by Karen Lee Osborne provide a remarkable contrast to the range of American dilemmas represented by much of this issue's poetry and fiction, and especially in Sanford Pinsker's interview with novelist Jay McInerney.

It's difficult for us to imagine the actuality of Soviet Georgia beyond the superficial, beyond the advertisements we've seen portraying lean, rugged, yogurt-eating centenarians in brilliant native costumes. In the real Georgia, people are pained by poor harvests, bureaucratic blunders, and nuclear fallout. Yet in the midst of these realities, they still seem able to root their identities in an ancient cultural tradition, quoting poetry and debating the introduction of free verse.

In contrast, Lydia, the narrator in Eileen Drew's "Cropped," struggles to maintain independence from the values of a mother whose presence reaches all the way to a remote African village. Lydia can sting with "Mother, I'm not trying to be you." Still, she realizes how isolated and transitory her life is in the larger scheme. Five hundred years ago the savannah was forest: "It strikes me that if all the farmers were to leave, the trees would grow back." (In Soviet Georgia, five hundred years ago and five hundred ahead, the people were and will be writing, reading, and reciting poetry.)

The culture of Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* is even more ephemeral than Lydia's. Pinsker and McInerney analyze the phenomena of the many readers who glamorize the narrator's world, although he hurtles through each day in a cocaine haze, his vision and feeling blurred and blunted. One wonders whether Manhattan's trees will grow back when the success-worshippers are gone, or whether they will, instead, leave a morally scorched earth.

Some people's ideal is a night in the Lizard Lounge. Others value something more substantial. All of Ana K'alandaze's poetry comes from childhood impressions of her native landscape. And, despite her criticism of K'alandaze's excessive nature imagery, Lia St'urua confirms a poet's responsibility to people and country: "Even when I am writing about love, I am still writing for Georgians."

Our cover art, a bird of prey glazed onto a pottery bowl, is from David Marshall Lang's *The Georgians* (Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1966), p. 145. The bowl, from the twelfth century, is on display at the State Museum of Georgia in Tbilisi.

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## Contributors

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**Robert Bensen** has had poems recently in *The Partisan Review*, *River Styx*, and *The Agni Review*. His essay on Derek Walcott appeared in *TLR's* Spring 1986 issue.

**Randy Blasing's** most recent work is his translation of Nazim Hikmet's *Selected Poetry* (1986). His collections of poems are *To Continue* (Persea Books, 1983) and *The Particles* (Copper Beech, 1985).

**Debra Bruce's** first book of poetry, *Pure Daughter*, was published in 1983 (University of Arkansas Press). Her poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Open Places*, and *Prairie Schooner*.

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**Eileen Drew** has a story forthcoming in *Triquarterly* and one in *Nimrod* which won the 1985 Katherine Anne Porter prize. She attended the MFA program at the University of Arizona, where she has taught.

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(Continued on p. 127)

KAREN LEE OSBORNE

## Ana K'alandaze and Lia St'urua: Two Contemporary Georgian Poets

WE AMERICANS FORGET ALL TOO EASILY that nations painted in a single color on our maps seldom reflect a corresponding monochromaticity of culture. The two poets interviewed here are citizens of the Soviet Union, but have a cultural background very different from that of the Russians to the north of their homeland. Since that culture is so little known outside the USSR, a few words about it are in order.

The Georgian nation, as far as can be told, has been settled in its present day location—south of the Caucasus mountains and east of the Black Sea—at least since the early Stone Age. A high level of civilization was already flourishing there when St. Nino introduced the Christian religion in the fourth century. The earliest known texts in the Old Georgian language date from the fifth century. One of the most striking aspects of Georgian culture—ancient, medieval, or modern—is its capacity for accepting the influence of more powerful neighboring civilizations without becoming imitative or derivative. Rather, foreign elements are transformed into something distinctly Georgian, frequently at a level of craftsmanship exceeding that of their Greek, Persian, or Russian sources. One has only to consider a few examples to become convinced: the writings of the fifth century philosopher-mystic "Pseudo-Dionysius" (actually the Georgian monk Peter Ibericus, as the scholar Šalva Nucubize\* has demonstrated), the great eleventh century cathedrals S'vet'i-Cxoveli, Alaverdi, and Nik'orc'minda: the remarkably modern, humanistic world-view (bordering on heterodoxy) expressed by Šota Rustaveli in his "The Knight in the Tiger's Skin" (c. 1205); the Symbolist-influenced poetic language of Galak'tion T'abize; and recent productions from the Georgian film industry, considered the finest in the Soviet Union. (The interested reader is urged to consult David M. Lang's excellent books on Georgian history and the journal of Georgian culture *Bedi Kartlisa*, published in Paris.)

A second aspect of this culture, just as important and no doubt related, is the intensity of the bond Georgians feel toward their home-

\*The [3] symbol is transliterated as the sound "dz," as in "bids." The symbols [s], [z], and [c] represent "sh," "zh," and "ch." Apostrophes indicate glotalization of the preceding consonant [Editor's note].

land, people, and language. Georgians were probably in Georgia when the ancestors of the American Indians had not yet crossed the Bering Strait. The stones and sticks scattered alongside the Aragvi River thus take on a significance for Ana K'alandaže and her Georgian readers that we of more recent history find nearly impossible to fathom. The same can be said for the ties felt by the three million ethnic Georgians to their ancient, bewilderingly complex language—something like a cross between Classical Greek and Navajo—and its 1500 years of written literature. The average Georgian carries a surprising amount of that literature in his head. In past centuries it was not unusual for people to memorize all 1600 stanzas of "The Knight in the Tiger's Skin"; even now virtually anybody one meets on the streets of Tbilisi can quote extensively from Rustaveli, as well as from Nik'oloz Baratašvili, Ak'ak'i C'ereteli, Ilia Č'avčavaže, Važa Pšavela, and various twentieth century poets. The best-loved of these are almost always referred to by their first names, even in scholarly articles, as Ilia, Ak'ak'i, Važa, Galak't'ion.

Not surprisingly, there is a denseness of allusion and resonance in Georgian literature, a heavy reliance on shared context.

If you ask Georgians on the streets of Tbilisi to name contemporary poets, one of the first names you'll hear is that of Ana K'alandaže. She is much loved for her traditional verses—elegant, restrained poems about nature and her native region of Guria. And if you ask what is new in Georgian poetry today, Georgians will mention free verse—though not all of them like it. Lia St'urua is the first popular Georgian poet to write in free verse.

It was our good fortune to meet with both poets, who represent something of the diversity to be found in this ancient city of contrasts.

The first interview took place on the evening of November 12, 1985, at Lia St'urua's high-rise apartment in a prestigious area near Tbilisi State University. The interview was arranged by our colleague at the university, Nico Kiasašvili, himself a translator of Joyce and a member of the Writers' Union. We were accompanied by Nico and his daughter Maya, who has translated Tennessee Williams' *Night of the Iguana* for an upcoming production. After the interview, we sat down to an assortment of Georgian desserts, and our hostess recited a few of her poems in her native Georgian. Lia St'urua has published several books of poetry; three of them have been translated into Russian. Born in 1939, the daughter of two doctors, she is married to the famous sculptor Elguja Amašukeli, whose statues are national landmarks.

Lia St'urua's enormous black desk demands the attention of anyone entering her study, its ornate gold scrollwork and finely carved legs lending an ancient elegance to the otherwise modern apartment. Here St'urua writes her very modern poems, as free of ornamentation as possible. This kind of contrast characterizes the poet and the reactions of her readers. For some she is "too modern." The first Georgian poet to write extensively in free verse, she claims Whitman as an early influence. She has also read (in Russian translation) Allen Ginsberg, William Jay Smith, Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell. Pasternak and Tsvetayeva are two of her favorite Russian poets. Among Georgian poets (as a professor of Georgian literature at Tbilisi State University, she knows their work well), she admires Galak't'ion T'abizze; St'urua wrote a book about the function of color in T'abizze's poetry.

KO: *One of your favorite Georgian poets is Galak't'ion T'abizze. How does he differ from the rest?*

LS: The main thing I found striking in Galak't'ion was his absolute freedom in expressing ideas. Just before Galak't'ion there were the Georgian Symbolist poets, influenced by the French Symbolists. He too became a part of this group, the Tsisperi Q'antsebi, or Blue Horns. They demanded an unprecedented degree of freedom for the poet—so much that they put themselves in a frame. This is why, by and large, they remained a group of poets rather than distinguished individual poets. But Galak't'ion was a genius. Only Galak't'ion managed to make these symbolist ideas of color and music truly Georgian.

*And you yourself have taken a much freer course. You are the first Georgian poet to write in free verse.*

Yes. At first, I used rhyme and assonance extensively. But, just as everyone's moods change, my mood changed. I was influenced by T'abizze's polyphonus method. But later I felt I had to say things in my poetry which I couldn't express within the strict boundaries of that method. Free verse allowed me to express these ideas. When I was 19 or 20 years old, Whitman was my idol. I read him, and later T. S. Eliot, in Russian translation. I was also very much taken with the stream-of-consciousness technique. I admire Faulkner very much, especially his use of rhythmic structure in *The Sound and the Fury* and his other novels. He achieves a kind of music through his repetitive, rhythmic structure. Stream-of-consciousness in free verse is like listening for a fibrillating heartbeat—you can't hear a person's unique heartbeat unless you listen very carefully.

*You felt that traditional forms and rhyme kept you from hearing the currents of feeling beneath the surface?*

Yes. There were some periods when the rhyme itself irritated me so much that, even when I accidentally wrote a rhyme, I would throw it away. I was reacting against the traditional Georgian musical harmonies.

*So it wasn't only rhyme that bothered you.*

No. It wasn't only rhyme, but also the rhythm and the meters of the traditional methods. All of these helped to beautify the poetry, to make it too ornamental and less expansive, less intellectual. I want to write a poetry as clear and free of ornament as I possibly can. To be honest, rhyming probably doesn't interfere with expressing emotion, but for me it did.

*What about metaphor and images?*

Metaphor can be useful, or it can be too ornamental. Contemporary poetry has become more earthy, more matter-of-fact, more everyday and even trivial. In such poetry metaphor can seem merely decorative if you don't feel a powerful emotion in it. If I feel a metaphor has intense emotion, then it's good. For example, I've read some poems by Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath in translation, and I find myself most interested in Plath's images; they're quite vivid. She is like a painter, giving the reader graphically what she sees—and she sees very intensely. I feel a strong kinship with Plath because of this.

*Sylvia Plath wrote poems about extreme emotional states. Do you see this as the primary purpose of poetry?*

Well, I think it's necessary to feel those intense states. I don't know whether it's good or bad, but I know I have to be hurt, I have to be shocked very deeply in order to write poetry. Gabriel Garcia Márquez is one of the most interesting prose writers I've read, and he uses fantastic situations to get this intensity in his novels. It's the same with me, and perhaps it was the same for Plath. I have to be emotionally ripe. This was also true of Tsvetayeva, I think. I prefer Tsvetayeva—especially poems like "The Leaning"—to Akhmatova for this reason. Tsvetayeva's pain is a bleeding pain; it's vivid, whereas in Akhmatova the pain is refined, intellectualized—she seems somehow an outsider to her own emotions.

*Both Plath and Tsvetayeva committed suicide. Isn't it risky for poets to pursue this bleeding or intense pain?*

Well, I certainly don't advise poets to kill themselves, but seriously, nobody can predict how or when one might end one's life. Of course, I might jump out of my window—this apartment is high enough—any time I choose. But the important thing is that you mustn't restrain yourself. To restrain yourself is inadvisable in poetry. It's quite a cliché that every poet says it's difficult to write, that emotions are painful. But frankly I can't imagine any creative person as happy and writing poetry at the same time. You can have all the externals, but they don't matter: it's how you feel within that counts. Some poets who *do* experience great difficulties, of course, like Akhmatova, present the difficulty, the pain, in a very refined way—too refined, I think. Yes, it's risky, but a poet must not be afraid of expressing intense emotion.

*So you would advise young poets not to exercise restraint?*

The life of a poet is like a very narrow thread strung over a chasm. The poet, while walking on the thread, must balance carefully. But I would advise poets not to be afraid of walking on this thread, not to be afraid of hurting and breaking themselves. Because after every fall, every failure, a poet (if he is good) will get up and renew himself. He mustn't ever stop, because to stop is to die. And if one becomes famous and then stops, afraid to try anything new, afraid to go further, this is wrong. It is better, sometimes, to fall, to break, to hurt oneself, to feel the pain in order to get something new. Maybe the pain will trigger something and yield new insight.

*Do you view some of your poems as failures?*

Yes. And when I feel they are failures, I tear them up without any remorse. I throw them away, even if there is an image or a phrase worth saving. Even when I look through some of my older published poems, I feel I would leave many out. Only a few remain that I'm proud of.

*If you're hard on yourself, you also have had to contend with the hostility of other poets and critics, because you were the first to write free verse, and you are a woman who challenges convention by expressing her feelings freely, even when they aren't "sweet."*

In the beginning they did find me shocking. When I was about 17, I used a vulgar phrase in one of my poems. It caused quite a shock. Readers didn't expect it from a woman. Probably I used it because I was young and I was showing off, thinking, if Mayakovsky and Rimbaud can put vulgar words in their poems, then why can't I? It caused a reaction, and the authorities told me not to write like that. A very

traditional poet said that I was corrupting the young people. But nowadays everyone allows that a woman can write what she feels. When I first started writing, Georgian poetry was divided: there was the poetry by men, or the "serious" poetry, and there was poetry by women. And male poets were particularly hostile to me because I somehow intruded upon their world and broke the boundaries. Even now, some of the men are hostile, but their hostility is more veiled. Even the male poets more or less have to accept my existence because I've become well known. [Otar Chiladze, one of the most respected Georgian writers, wrote the introduction to one of her books.]

*Which living Georgian poets do you feel a sense of kinship with?*

I like Svebediani very much. He's older than I am, and very traditional in his use of form and rhyme, but I feel he is a kindred spirit. I also like Besik' Kharanauli, who is perhaps an even better novelist than he is a poet, but he is a very good poet. I like his work because the world he creates in his images is unique. He uses fewer metaphors than most. And he is less trivial in his problems. Although my work is very different from his, I like his poems very much. In general, there's too much homogeneity in Georgian poetry today.

*What about Ana K'alandaze? Her work is also quite different from yours, isn't it?*

Yes. I think she uses too much nature imagery, and she writes about old problems, not the modern world. However, I admire her because during the time when Georgian poets were required to write slogans, she was one of the few poets who refused. But now she writes less and less.

*Isn't the sense of place and identification with Georgian heritage something that not only makes Georgian poetry difficult to translate but also creates a strong sense of responsibility in the Georgian poet?*

All poets feel a responsibility toward their people and their country—which are one and the same. The responsibility is quite deep here. Even when I am writing about love, I am still writing for Georgians, although in the process of writing I never consciously think of my audience or readers. And I am absolutely against the practice of some poets and artists who take official posts. For example, my husband is chairman of the Georgian Artists' Union, and it takes too much of his time. I would never take on anything like that. I need to sit alone and write: I need the freedom to do that. My teaching position is not so demanding as is his position—and I'm teaching literature, doing something I enjoy. If my husband manages to create one sculpture in

five years, he's accomplished a lot. So, although there is always some sense of responsibility, a poet must have the freedom to sit and write and she must write for herself.

*What are you working on now?*

Well, I don't know if I should tell you this, but . . . all my life I have considered sonnets to be the most restrictive form, and yet, for the last seven days I have been writing only sonnets, one each day. Seven is my lucky number. After these seven, I will get back to my free verse. It has been an interesting interlude.

*What do you see as your goals for the future?*

Throughout my entire career of writing poems, I've been trying to improve my technique and my poetic vocabulary. I find pleasure in the process of writing, in the preparation, as I try to perfect my language. I don't have any single goal or theme. The real goal is self-improvement or self-refinement, making myself and my poetry better. The process of refinement is never fully achieved. Poetry is the only written form in which you have to polish every word. It's the most perfected form of language.

Unlike the sophisticated, well-dressed, cosmopolitan Lia St'urua, Ana K'alandaze, though also a long-time resident of Tbilisi, still clearly shows her village roots. Born in 1924 in the valley of Khidistavi, in the Gurian region of western Georgia, K'alandaze is descended in part from the group of Poles who settled in Georgia after the Crimean War. Her father was a distinguished scientist who became chief administrator of pharmacies. Her mother was a teacher. In 1941 K'alandaze came to Tbilisi to enroll in the university, where she graduated in 1946 with a degree in Caucasian languages. While still a student she was "discovered" by the poet Simon Cikovani, who insisted that she give a reading of her poetry at the Writers' Union. At the age of 21 she became an instant sensation. Her poems were published in newspapers, and a war-weary people was ready for peacetime and for her lyricism. Her most productive years were 1945-46, when many of her best poems were written. She has published six books (all entitled, simply, *Poems*) from 1953-1985. Some have been translated into Russian by the famous Russian poet Bella Akhmadulina. A member of the Writers' Union since 1946, K'alandaze, unlike St'urua, has taken an active public role, serving on the union's organizing committee and on the editorial board of its paper, *Literary Georgia*. She has twice received the Order of Merit and has

been elected twice to the Tbilisi City Council and three times to the Tbilisi Workers' Council.

On the evening of November 29, 1985, we gathered at the home of our host, Nico Kiasašvili. In sharp contrast to the articulate, professional St'urua, K'alandaže was hesitant to talk, often relying on understatement and wry silences to communicate her opinions. Dressed quite simply in a plain brown suit (not the foreign-made clothes many fashion-conscious Georgians wear), with a single strand of pearls and a minimum of makeup, she looked like somebody's mother, not the famous poet whose words are on everyone's lips. (She actually has no children.) She seemed hardly to be aware of the fuss everyone has been making over her. In fact, she works as a devoted lexicographer on the Georgian National Dictionary (like the English O.E.D.) in the Linguistics Institute of the Georgian Academy of Sciences. Reluctant at first to answer questions about herself or her poetry, she was more willing to talk about her native region.

AK: Guria is very rich in soil. The landscape is very beautiful, and it is better preserved than other parts of Georgia. Not as many foreigners come there, so it has changed less. It has haunted me since childhood, because childhood impressions are of course the strongest and most enduring. All my poetry comes from that, really. Many of my poems come simply from the Gurian landscape. I've never thought about ideas. I just write from what I've seen, and mostly from what I saw there. It's always been that way, and it's always come easily to me. Those childhood impressions have followed me all my life.

KO: *But you came to Tbilisi to study at the university and have stayed ever since. Do you return to Guria regularly?*

Yes. And I'd like to go more often. Do you want to know how I wrote my first poem? I'll tell you. My aunt was a teacher of Georgian literature here in Tbilisi. But in the summers she would come to our village. One evening my girlfriend and I were sitting outside our countryhouse, and my aunt was telling us a story. While we were listening, suddenly the mountains became very bright. An enormous moon rose over the mountains. My aunt noticed my staring at it, and she asked me if I liked it. "If you like it," she said, "maybe you'll write a poem tonight." And by the next morning I had completed two stanzas, and I called it "First Moon." That was in 1935, when I was 12 years old. And I wrote it simply to please my aunt.

*And did you keep writing poems for her?*

Later, when I was a student, I began to write poems I never showed to anybody, not my friends, not even my aunt, even though she was my special friend and the one I always told my secrets to. But somehow she knew anyway, and when I finished school, she said, "You have to show your poetry to somebody: you can't just keep it to yourself." And so I began showing my poems to some people. The five years I spent at the university were my apprenticeship years, my years of fermentation. I learned a great deal. Everybody asked me why I was in the linguistics department and not in the literature department. But I said that I was preparing to write, and it didn't matter whether I was in the literature department, because in the linguistics department they taught me about language, and that is what a poet needs to know. I studied Old Georgian and knew it very well. I studied with Arnold Čikobava and Ak'ak'i Šhaniže. [Both are famous linguists.]

*Do you recommend that young poets of any country and any language study linguistics, or is this especially important to a Georgian poet?*

Language is very important for a young poet. In the U.S. or other countries, poets are free to write in dialects. We in Georgia can't do this because we are a small nation and we must write and use one literary language. We can't afford to write in different dialects.

*What about Važa Pšavela's use of Khevsurian dialect?*

Važa actually wrote both in Khevsurian and in Georgian. His poetry uses the Khevsurian dialect, but his short stories are written in standard Georgian. And even his dialect is relatively easy to understand. Not all dialects are so accessible to the reader. Eteri Tataraiže's poetry is very difficult even for Georgians to read. Some poets use dialects that make the reader's job too frustrating. Važa's dialect, however, is one of the most beautiful. If you translate it, you lose the beauty. I myself was inspired by the Gurian folk dialect I heard all around me as I was growing up. But I write in Georgian.

*What poets have you read in translations, and what do you think of the translations?*

The translator can be the poet's enemy. The same translator can capture one poem beautifully and then completely fail with another one. And sometimes a mediocre poet does a better job than a great poet could. I think of Blok, who didn't want to translate anything. He avoided translation work as if he knew it wasn't for him.

Ivan Machabeli's nineteenth-century translations of Shakespeare into Georgian are superb. His translation makes it seem as though

Shakespeare wrote in Georgian. Dante is also well translated. The Georgian translation of Poe's "The Raven" by Čičinaze is also very good—as if it was written in Georgian. I've read Frost, but he is badly translated, I think. And there are hardly any good translations of Pushkin into Georgian. I've heard that Emily Dickinson has been translated into Georgian, but I haven't read the translation. [The Georgian poet Dali Intskirveli translated Dickinson, but Intskirveli died a few years ago, and few seem to know of the translations.] I like the Russian translation of Emily Dickinson very much. She creates her own universe. [Dickinson is popular here. A Georgian production of a play based loosely on *The Belle of Amherst* has been popular in Tbilisi recently.]

Each year now the Machabeli prize is given for the best translation into Georgian. Even in Moscow there is no such prize for translation into Russian. David Tseridiani recently won the prize for his translation of François Villon. It's an excellent translation.

*What do you think of the translations of your work into Russian? And at least a few of your poems have also been translated into English, German, and French.*

The first translation of my work was by Bella Akhmadulina, and it is a very great translation. Languages have their own natures, and each translation turns out to be different. And I suppose that ultimately the act of translation is a matter of chance. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. One has to make allowances for the different natures of different languages. I try to be tolerant of the differences. And I'm only able to judge the Russian translations.

*How important is it to imitate the rhyme scheme of the original when your poetry is translated?*

If it's impossible to capture the rhyme, it's better to translate without rhyme and to maintain the poetic quality of the original. This is better than not to try for the music at all. I've heard that an American critic said it is necessary to stay as close as possible to the text. And it's true that I wouldn't want my poems altered so much that I couldn't recognize them—in that case I would rather not be translated.

*Then the translator becomes your enemy.*

Yes. However, it's not crucial that a translation be exactly like the original in every word, but rather that it be true to the spirit of the poem. An example is Čičinaze's translation of Poe's "The Raven." If you didn't know it was a translation, you would still find it a good poem written in Georgian—yet it doesn't violate the original.

*You've said that studying Old Georgian was better preparation for your career as a poet than studying literature would have been. Still, can you name some Georgian poets who influenced you?*

Well, of course, they all did. No one in particular.

*Would you say you were influenced also by Russian poets? What you do think of Akhmatova, for example?*

Well, Akhmatova's a great poet who hardly needs my praise.

*And what about Tsvetayeva?*

Ah, Tsvetayeva, well, that's . . . more complicated. [She obviously does not wish to elaborate. But it seems logical that Akhmatova's restraint would be appreciated by another poet of restraint, just as St'urua's own intensely emotional poetry seems more similar to that of her preferred Tsvetayeva.]

*It seems that in your verse you often use understatement or a formal restraint—as in the "Ladybug" poem, for example. This seems to be true of your conversation as well. What you don't say is as important as what you do say.*

That's interesting, and also true. [When she refuses to say more, we regard this as yet another example.] How did you know this about me? Did you read the tea leaves?

*Do you have special routines you follow, working conditions in which you like to write?*

No. Perhaps the inspiration is the same for all my poems, but I don't know. It's a mystery. It simply comes to me, and that's how it's always been. I don't know how it comes or what makes it come. Unlike a novelist, a poet doesn't need to make plans for poems. Sometimes I'm just walking in the street, and a poem will strike me. It always comes very suddenly. And I walk along and memorize the images and the lines that come to me, and when all the lines and possible variations are clearly in my mind, then and only then do I begin to write it down.

*Only after you've remembered it all in your mind, line by line?*

Yes. Unless it's a very long poem, and I don't write many long poems. In that case I might begin writing it down as it comes to me. But I rarely revise a poem. Even the "Tamar" poem ["Tamar in the Distance"], which is quite long, wasn't revised much. We're lucky we don't know how we write poems, I think.

*Do you have any theory about the reasons for the great popularity of your poetry?*

That also is a mystery. If I knew the answer to that, I'd know everything.

*You have been very active in public life, as an elected member of the City Council and the Workers' Council, as a member of the organizing committee of the Writers' Union, and also as one of the editors of Literary Georgia. Do you believe that poets are obligated to take on a public role?*

Well, in Georgia, from the historical perspective, poets have always played a more important role than they have in other nations. Many of the great writers in Georgian history were also public figures. Often kings themselves were great writers. For example, David the Builder [King David IV, 1089-1125] was a fine poet, as were King Teimuraz [late 1600s] and King Vakhtang VI [1700s].

Here in Georgia, the statement, "The pen is mightier than the sword" has always been taken literally. Men went into battle carrying copies of Rustaveli with them.

Even today, a poet has a public effect whether or not he or she deliberately takes a public role, because the nature of Georgian readers is such that they take poetry seriously. It always has a public significance. You may have noticed that Georgia is unlike the large European nations in that *everyone* here reads poetry. It's not read only by the educated elite. Whenever there's a poetry reading of any kind, people will stand in line to fill the auditorium. [A recent evening devoted to the poetry of Titsian Tabidze, the great modernist poet who died in 1937, drew a huge crowd.]

And Ilia Čavč'avaže taught us that the poet must take an active role in the life of the nation. Only two in the nineteenth century—Ak'ak'i Č'ereteli and Čavč'avaže—could do both. They were very gifted. There are always only a few who can take the major public role these two assumed. And in a small nation we need some of these. You see, some problems which are very important in a small nation may not seem so important to a big nation—for example, the problems of using one literary language rather than many dialects. But Ilia and Ak'ak'i were fighting for one language for all of Georgia because they were trying to unify Georgia—they knew the importance of having one literary language.

*And in your own work, you also are trying to unify Georgia?*

Yes. I'm always dealing with the Georgian word. Quite simply. That alone. The Georgian word.

LIA STURUA

## The Victim of the City (1984)

Whenever something bad is about to happen  
 I dream of a crane  
 standing, not in the meadow like a daisy,  
 but in the street, on one foot,  
 where it is twice as white and elongated  
 yet no one sees it—  
 it is lost somehow against the background of the city . . .  
 The city: traffic of men  
 and machines.  
 so endless and senseless  
 like fetching water in a sieve,  
 stopping is the equivalent of dying;  
 and in such a place who cares about a crane—  
 tossed out of some stir-crazy dream—  
 or a man  
 who extends his neck like a crane  
 so they'll notice him  
 (if he were to spread out his wings  
 he would look rather crucified  
 and arouse a thousand questions,  
 wonder, sympathy, . . .)  
 So, all winged creatures must be erased  
 from the paperlike colorless sky  
 so as not to interfere with the people striding forward  
 not looking back or to the side—  
 their foreheads leaned against the horizon.  
 But if any of them were to dream  
 of a crane, vivid  
 like a daisy  
 held by a green meadow in its hand,  
 or if any of them were to stop for a minute—  
 forehead thrown forward, hatchet-like—  
 it would no longer be possible to pass by, as strangers do,  
 a deficient man's hypocrisy  
 or a misshapen woman



who extends her neck like a crane  
 so they'll notice her;  
 and now the city will practice on such a one  
 its gift for ignoring  
 which has become almost an art. . . .

## He saw a naked woman (1980)

He saw a naked woman  
 for the first time in his life,  
 and told his parents  
 that millstones crossed over his chest  
 and fell there, jaundiced. . . . His mother  
 stood by the window in such a way,  
 bread and a cutting-knife in her hands,  
 that the light sucked her in  
 up to the very end  
 up to the longish clusters of fingers and toes.  
 Only later, on the surface of night  
 a slice of bread bobbed up and down . . .  
 and then a solitary man said  
 –how easy it is to speak the truth!  
 If they would throw stones into the pupils of our eyes  
 as into a well,  
 if the waters would gather above our heads,  
 the millstone's weight still will fill our chests  
 and the light, insatiable, unbroken  
 sucking in our bodily forms  
 up to the tips of our fingernails . . .  
 Then, on the surface of time  
 perhaps a word will bob up and down–  
 the only one  
 you should expect  
 from a millstone-crossed chest . . .

## There must be something (1984)

There must be something for the sake of which  
 you would offer up yourself–  
 either the silk of banners  
 or words which glide like silk . . .  
 although the city harangues you day and night–  
 your familiar enemy–  
 you are fortunate (they say)  
 because you have organized your existence.  
 You lack neither a name  
 nor life's little pleasures;  
 but, when you think about this question–  
 who knows? for it is in the picture-richness of words  
 that you are bound, as though by chains . . .  
 So, you sincerely wish to be a butterfly  
 more than any other living thing  
 because it neither eats nor drinks  
 nor takes thought for any other shameful necessity,  
 nor does it take account  
 of whom it is stronger or weaker than–  
 that is accordingly might tremble or flatter–  
 it flutters about for its own sake, and dies  
 in its world of flowers . . .  
 The mental equipment in its velvety body  
 was not installed by God  
 and so it does not know that winter  
 plasters over the world of flowers with lime  
 as unbelievers cover over the frescoes in a church,\*  
 and compels the proud, powerful wolf  
 to run to and fro like a starving beggar,  
 while letting the craven rabbit  
 roll in the drooping lap of luxury  
 and learn the potential of its warren . . .

\*The plastering over of frescoes has, unfortunately, been an all-too-frequent occurrence in Georgian history. The Russians are the most recent perpetrators of this iconoclasm.

Winter is harsh, one-sided—  
both falsetto\*\* bud and baritone volcano  
terminate on its starched white-bordered chest . . .  
And isn't it better than such running around  
or shivering in one's warren:  
the butterfly's transitory world, brief as a flutter—  
one moment multicolored, the next moment twilight-colored—  
where it is possible to offer up yourself  
for banner or man  
or soil or book.

Translated from the Georgian  
by Kevin Tuite

\*\*The terms translated "falsetto" (k'rini) and "baritone" (bani) refer to the high and low (drone) voice respectively in traditional West Georgian folk singing.

ANA K'ALANDA<sub>3</sub>E

## January Flowers at Uplistesikhe (1961)

Dried stems of alien flowers  
left alone in a rocky gorge—  
such sad drooping heads: how so?  
Still, faded beauty suits them . . .  
Why weep for stolen crowns,  
precious stones, plundered, lost?  
Nothing worldly stirs desire—  
in heavy grief of soul they slumber . . .  
Stone-heart cliffs, malignant winds  
—so they seem to us—stand guard.  
Without crowns, possessions none,  
they are sheltered in their womb . . .  
Roaring winds and blowing clouds—  
this is what their souls reflect?  
Then they will take up new leaves  
and their crowns return once more.

## By the Aragvi\* (1980)

scattered stones fill me  
with weird-craft  
sticks too . . .  
opium snowing . . .  
you snicker!  
worthless one—  
a lot you grasp  
of this!

\*The Aragvi is the principal river in the mountain provinces of Pshavi and Xevsureti, located due north of Tbilisi. Remnants of the pagan religion once practiced throughout Georgia before the introduction of Christianity are particularly strong in this region.

## The cathedral glowed (1960)

The cathedral glowed with a brilliant glow.  
 Fire filled it, and glistening eyes . . .  
 A voice intoned, the cupola thrummed:  
 –“Store up treasure which no moth destroys.”  
 The taper’s flame thy winsome face  
 With other-worldly light has fanned.  
 The voice intoned again and again:  
 –“Build thou not thy house on sand.”  
 The distant flash of cherubic life  
 With greenish hue above thee swirls . . .  
 The old man Matthew is whispering still:  
 –“For thou art the salt of this world.”  
 The cathedral glowed with the early dawn . . .

## A cool spring’s cut-crystal

a cool spring’s cut-crystal  
 shimmers . . .  
 in sunlight of somnolent  
 autumn,  
 a godly aroma suffuses . . .  
 from walnut-tree foliage,  
 fallen.

Translated from the Georgian  
 by Kevin Tuite

## Speak, Ladybug!\* (1945)

The roses preserve some drops of rain,  
 the road too is wet with rain . . .  
 I warm in the sun, like an anchorite in the wilderness,\*\*  
 and I watch a ladybug  
 upon my knee;  
 with bent knees  
 it resembles a flower . . .  
 Why didn’t you get wet, if it rained last night?  
 Where did you sleep?  
 Speak, ladybug, where are you hurrying so joyfully?  
 Speak, ladybug!

.....

The roses show the last traces of rain,  
 the road too is wet with rain . . .  
 I walk in the garden, like an anchorite in the wilderness,  
 and the ladybug—  
 who knows where it is?

\*The ladybug— ჭიამარია—is looked upon with favor by Georgians; children sometimes invoke it to find lost items (much as we invoke St. Anthony).  
 \*\*The third line of the poem (“Me vtbebi mzeze, vit udabnos mc’iri”) may well be an allusion to the life of St. Grigol Xandzteli, a 9th century nobleman-turned-monk who founded an important monastery in southern Georgia. Among other restrictions, the monks who resided there were not allowed to heat their cells with fire in the winter; only solar heat was permitted.