

In the Elementary School Choir
By Gregory Djanikian

I had never seen a cornfield in my life,
I had never been to Oklahoma,
But I was singing as loud as anyone,
“Oh what a beautiful morning. . . . The corn
Is as high as an elephant’s eye,”
Though I knew something about elephants, I thought,
Coming from the same continent as they did,
And they being more like camels than anything else.

And when we sang from *Meet Me in St. Louis*,
“Clang, clang, clang went the trolley,”
I remembered the ride from Ramleh Station
In the heart of Alexandria
All the way to Roushdy where my grandmother lived,
The autos on the roadways vying
With mule carts and bicycles,
The Mediterranean half a mile off on the left,
The air smelling sharply of diesel and salt.

It was a problem which had dogged me
For a few years, this confusion of places.
And when in 5th grade geography I had pronounced
“Des Moines” as though it were a village in France,
Mr. Kephart led me to the map on the front wall,
And so I’d know where I was,
Pressed my forehead squarely against Iowa.
Des Moines, he’d said. Rhymes with coins.

Now we were singing “zippidy-doo-dah, zippidy-ay,”
And every song we’d sung had in it
Either sun or bluebirds, fair weather
Or fancy fringe, O beautiful America!
And one tier below me,
There was Linda Deemer with her amber waves
And lovely fruited plains,
And she was part of America too
Along with sun and spacious sky
Though untouchable, and as distant
As purple mountains of majesty.

“This is my country,” we sang,
And a few years ago there would have been
A scent of figs in the air, mangoes,
And someone playing the oud along a clear stream.

But now it was “My country 'tis of thee”
And I sang it out with all my heart
And now with Linda Deemer in mind.
“Land where my fathers died,” I bellowed,
And it was not too hard to imagine

A host of my great-uncles and -grandfathers
Stunned from their graves in the Turkish interior
And finding themselves suddenly
On a rock among maize and poultry
And Squanto shaking their hands.

How could anyone not think America
Was exotic when it had Massachusetts
And the long tables of thanksgiving?
And how could it not be home
If it were the place where love first struck?

We had finished singing.
The sun was shining through large windows
On the beatified faces of all
Who had sung well and with feeling.
We were ready to file out and march back
To our room where Mr. Kephart was waiting.
Already Linda Deemer had disappeared
Into the high society of the hallway.
One day I was going to tell her something.
Des Moines, I was saying to myself,
Baton Rouge. Terre Haute. Boise.

www.poetryfoundation.org, poem from *Falling Deeply into America*. Copyright © 1989
by Gregory Djanikian. Used by permission of Carnegie Mellon University Press.

Gregory Djanikian - Bio (poetryfoundation.org)

Gregory Djanikian’s collections include *Dear Gravity* (2014), *So I Will Till the Ground* (2007), *Years Later* (2000), *Falling Deeply into America* (1989), and *The Man in the Middle* (1984). His poems have also appeared in numerous magazines and journals, such

as *Poetry*, the *Nation*, and the *American Scholar*, as well as on television, when he was featured on PBS's *News Hour with Jim Lehrer*. He earned a BA from the University of Pennsylvania and MFA from Syracuse University.

His work explores, among other subjects, the private and public legacies of family, history, and culture, often through meditations on his own Armenian heritage and childhood emigration to the United States. His poems can be sad, revealing, and funny all at once.

His poems also investigate how language, especially the American idiom, is enriched or reinvented. He has a keen ear for what he calls the "unexpected syntactic constructions" and "surprising turns of phrase" that immigrants contribute to English. His honors and awards includes fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Eunice Tietjens Prize and Friends of Literature Prize, and the Anahid Literary Award from the Armenian Center at Columbia University. Born in 1949 in Alexandria, Egypt, he now lives in Philadelphia, where he directs the creative writing program at the University of Pennsylvania.