

## GREGORY DJANIKIAN

Armenian-American poet Gregory Djanikian was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1949, and raised in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, where he moved with his family at age six. In “Immigrant Picnic,” first published in *Poetry* magazine in July 1999 and later collected in *So I Will Till the Ground* (2007), he takes a lighthearted look at the jumbled tongues and traditions in evidence at a family Fourth of July barbecue. Djanikian’s earlier collections of poetry include *Man in the Middle* (1984), *Falling Deeply into America* (1989), *About Distance* (1995), and *Years Later* (2000). He teaches English and creative writing at the University of Pennsylvania.

### Immigrant Picnic

It’s the Fourth of July, the flags  
are painting the town,  
the plastic forks and knives  
are laid out like a parade.

And I’m grilling, I’ve got my apron,  
I’ve got potato salad, macaroni, relish,  
I’ve got a hat shaped  
like the state of Pennsylvania.

I ask my father what’s his pleasure  
and he says, “Hot dog, medium rare,”  
and then, “Hamburger, sure,  
what’s the big difference,”  
as if he’s really asking.

I put on hamburgers *and* hot dogs,  
 slice up the sour pickles and Bermudas,  
 uncap the condiments. The paper napkins  
 are fluttering away like lost messages.

"You're running around," my mother says,  
 "like a chicken with its head loose."

"Ma," I say, "you mean *cut off*,  
*loose* and *cut off* being as far apart  
 as, say, *son* and *daughter*."

She gives me a quizzical look as though  
 I've been caught in some impropriety.  
 "I love you and your sister just the same," she says.  
 "Sure," my grandmother pipes in,  
 "you're both our children, so why worry?"

That's not the point I begin telling them,  
 and I'm comparing words to fish now,  
 like the ones in the sea at Port Said,  
 or like birds among the date palms by the Nile,  
 unrepentantly elusive, wild.

"Sonia," my father says to my mother,  
 "what the hell is he talking about?"  
 "He's on a ball," my mother says.

"That's *roll*," I say, throwing up my hands,  
 "as in hot dog, hamburger, dinner roll. . . ."

"And what about *roll out the barrels*?" my mother asks,  
 and my father claps his hands, "Why sure," he says,  
 "let's have some fun," and launches

into a polka, twirling my mother  
around and around like the happiest top,

and my uncle is shaking his head, saying  
“You could grow nuts listening to us,”

and I’m thinking of pistachios in the Sinai  
burgeoning without end,  
pecans in the South, the jumbled  
flavor of them suddenly in my mouth,  
wordless, confusing,  
crowding out everything else.