THE Moment AND THE Poem

There's a rich music in the poetry of Gregory Djanikian, along with hard-won wisdom, a generous spirit, and a "clarity that does not negate complication."

BY BETH KEPHART

PHOTOGRAPH BY CANDACE DICARLO

The music was there from the beginning.

It has been there, always.

In the Arabic, French, and English he heard in the streets, the shops, the schools of his early childhood in Alexandria, Egypt, and in the Armenian the family spoke among themselves, the native language entered "like a house in the coldest weather."

In the poems his mother read to him—Matthew Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman," Poe's "Annabel Lee," Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade"—in French and English: *Memorize these.*

In the architecture he might have studied; in the welding arc of his night-shift factory work; in the children he taught; in the conversations he has had about "love, life, contradictions, paradoxes, ways of seeing, ways of behaving ethically that are not doctrinaire." In the mottled light in a quiet house on a suburban street.

The music has been there. Always. Easy.

It is the act of locating the words themselves, isolating them from the "collision" of possibilities, that makes the work of Gregory Djanikian C'71—lauded poet and director of Penn's undergraduate creative writing program—so hard, and so enduring. The care that must be taken about the choices. The restless questing for new phrasing. The yearning for a poetic moment, turned. The hope that, in the very shape of the language on the page, meaning will be found—meaning and the kind of "clarity that does not negate complication."

It is an organic process. It finds its way, yielding poetry like "Violence," which opens his sixth collection, *Dear Gravity*, published last spring by Carnegie Mellon University Press.

"Violence" begins like this:

> Sometimes it can't be avoided
> even though you might decline
> the invitation to step outside—
> sometimes you *are* outside
>
> maybe in the repose of your garden
> among rose petal and fern, but the whole
> unvarnished spectacle of do
> before you're done unto unfolding
> as spider devours beetle, beetle, aphid,
> and the cat red in the tooth and claw.

It ends this way:

> And if anyone asked you now
> you'd confess you're damage too,
> you're for wreckage of heart and bone
> wrenching out the smallest penance.
> Above you, purple bruising the edges
> of the sky. Even the heavens.
>
> In another moment, someone
> might come looking for you,
> touch you on the shoulder
> and you'd flame up.
>
> Nothing seems so improbable
> as the world of a few minutes ago.
>
> Here's the night full of stars.
> Behind each one, the darkness
> you can never see.

It says: We cannot precisely account for violence. We can only accept our gradual and necessarily incomplete understanding of its power.

Djanikian's poems have appeared in *Poetry, The American Scholar, The Georgia Review,* and many other publications, and have been frequently anthologized. The writer and his work have been featured on the PBS *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* and *Radio Times* on Philadelphia's NPR station, WHYY, and been honored with a National Endowment of the Arts Fellowship, the Anahid Literary Award from Columbia University's Armenian Center, and multiple residencies at the Yaddo artists' community.

Djanikian's quietly ambitious poems have no hint of bravado about them, no accessorizing affectations, no excessive modifiers—but they are never small. They are, instead, the legacy of a man famous for his listening, a man who is unafraid of color, a man who dwells among the ones he loves in landscapes—an Arizona ranch, a farm in Vermont, a home of unpretentious beauty in the Philadelphia suburb of Narberth, Pennsylvania—that help him see. He has never envied the ordinary conceits of fame. He has not mangled his life so that he could confess it all later.

He has lived.

He has looked.

He has asked questions, and he has listened.

He has written poems that he believes in, poems that others believe in, too.

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Stephen Dunn has called Djanikian "a gardener of the human spirit." In a recent conversation, he reflected further: "His work is full of charm. But it is also willing to take on the complications of marriage, the horrors of genocide, the complications of being alive. His poetry keeps growing; I am always eager for a new Djanikian poem."

"Djanikian creates art," says Gerald Costanzo, the director of Carnegie Mellon University Press, which published Djanikian's five previous collections—*The Man in the Middle* (1984), *Falling Deeply into America* (1989), *About Distance* (1995), *Years Later* (2000), and *So I Will Till the Ground* (2007) ["Arts," May|June 2007]—as well as *Dear Gravity.*

"Greg uses a great deal of figuration in his poems and understands that a poem that ends by being somehow just the conclusion of what it began to be—rather than becoming 'something more or something else'—isn't a very good poem. What he creates is difficult to do."

"Greg is a kind man and a deep soul and it shows in the work," says the Dominican-American poet and novelist Julia Alvarez, who has known Djanikian since his graduate-school days at Syracuse University in the 1970s, "especially in his latest book of poems, *Dear Gravity*, fully at home in the language and in the life, big-hearted and wise."

The grandson of a survivor of the Armenian genocide of 1915, the son of a mother who loved words and a father who knew business, the brother to one sister, Djanikian was born in Egypt and moved to the United States when he was young, his family settling in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Read between the lines of the poem, "At American Customs," from his award-winning fifth collection, *So I Will Till the Ground:*

> You take the smallest breath,
> inhale a scent of something new,
> like carpeting that's plush,
> or the plastic in all the furniture.
>
> Outside it is cold November
> when the threat of snow
> which you have never seen
> holds the clouds gray...

In 1967, Djanikian arrived at Penn as an undergraduate in pursuit of a reliable career. Having scored well on a high-school design exam, he believed architecture would satisfy both his creative inclination and his father's hopes for him.

But in a freshman-year poetry class with an instructor named Gerald Meyers, Djanikian found his future rearranged. He'd come to class with work influenced by the poems he'd memorized as a child. Meyers encouraged a less melodramatically florid approach, suggesting that "poetry doesn't have to sound like poetry to be poetry," Djanikian recalls. He recommended more contemporary poets—including Sylvia Plath, Galway Kinnell, Richard Wilbur, Donald Hall, and Theodore Roethke—and Djanikian read and learned from them.

Two years later, the poet and teacher Daniel Hoffman—the Felix Schelling Professor of English Emeritus and longtime guiding force of Penn's creative-writing program, who died in 2013—deepened Djanikian's affection for the art and, perhaps, secured his calling when, after a couple of unsuccessful attempts, he allowed Djanikian to join the poetry workshop he taught.

In a reminiscence for a festschrift in Hoffman's honor that appeared in the online journal *Per Contra*, Djanikian recalled this experience. "It was difficult being an exile from it, feeling that the high mysteries of art were reserved for the enviable few ... whose raw talent or sheer tenacity had earned them an invitation into that lucky apprenticeship," he wrote. "It took me three tries to finally cross the threshold of his classroom and it began for me a life-long devotion to the craft of poetry."

"He was a generous mentor and counselor, sincerely interested in our work," Djanikian adds now, "commiserating with us when we stumbled, full of great pleasure when we prospered, and over the years became a friend whose love of others was a great testament to his love of life."

After Penn, Djanikian spent two years working at his father's factory, while he bolstered his poetry portfolio. He evokes that time in *Dear Gravity*'s "Arc Welding on Night Shift," which appears just after "Violence." It begins:

> We were lighting up the factory,
> the hot-white current
> striking through wire and steel.
>
> "I'm a hooded assassin," Tubbsy said laughing,
> bending over and pulling the trigger.
>
> Some of us were sheathed in thick denim,
> some in heavy leather, the sparks
> burning small craters into our gloves.
>
> If we weren't careful with our aim
> we could run wire clear through our palms.
> If we raised our hoods too soon,
> we would tear all night from the blindness ...

By the time Djanikian arrived at Syracuse University's MFA program in creative writing, he was, according to Alvarez, "miles ahead of the rest of us."

There was, she continues, "an elegance to his thinking and a thoughtfulness and care to his whole approach to writing, to reading, to revising, to editing our poems. He just seemed to be exercising a deeper listening, not swayed merely by what was in style or a fad or a cool but mannered/inauthentic stance. I admired him and, yes, I was a little in awe of him."

Another classmate—Fred Muratori, a poet and reference/instruction librarian at Cornell University—recalls meeting Djanikian in the fall of 1973. "I remember Greg seeming a bit older than the rest of us, more distinguished somehow. With his jacket and tie and well-trimmed beard, he resembled a professor more than a student. Greg's deep, sonorous voice and precise diction—a few of us thought he was British—added to the impression. But that conception was soon tempered by Greg's warmth, his kindness and generosity of spirit, and his obvious love for and wonder at the new world a good poem can make."

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Muratori still remembers the day Djanikian read "After the First Snow," which he calls a "breakthrough poem, a lyrical meditation that exemplified the fusion of craft and inspiration we were all striving for." So extraordinary was the moment that Muratori "broke the spell by promising to buy Greg a beer as a gesture of gratitude for writing such a terrific poem," he recalls.

On a rainy afternoon in a room built of wood and light and the lingering aroma of a well-used fireplace, in a house in which horses are constructed out of feathers, metal, charcoal, and oils (the work of Djanikian's wife, the artist Alysa Bennett GFA'85), I ask him whether he remembers that moment. He strokes his beard, adjusts the glasses on his whitening hair, and admits that he does. His calico, Thelma, leaps to his defense. He smiles.

"That is the first time I really loved what I had written," he confesses—shyness in this, shyness in any fraction of self-congratulation. "Loved because I felt that I was at last speaking my own language. That the experience I had had of walking through the snow translated well into the language that I used. It didn't seem like a lie. There was no disjunction between the moment and the poem."

I ask if he might recite the poem, wanting to hear it in Djanikian's own wonderful voice—which, like his work, is authentically drawn from the deep well of his considered life. (You can hear samples at http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound, the extraordinary collection of video and audio recordings created and maintained by Penn's Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing, which includes several of his readings.) Always more interested in others than he is in himself, Djanikian has not made a habit of memorizing his own poems. He begins but falters after a dozen lines, begins again, now leaves out one word—*hypnotic*.

"Hypnotic?" he says, when the line is read back to him. "Did I use that word? I wouldn't use it now," he says. "It over modifies the line."

But look at these lines, these lovely lines, in Djanikian's breakthrough poem:

After the First Snow

As if in a dream,
you suddenly find yourself walking
in a still country
of snow and moon and trees,
cold and uncomfortable,
blindly pushing
as if your life depended on it
to shelter somewhere on the far side of a field,
or to a place half-conceived,
or perhaps forgotten,
and you find yourself looking down, focusing
on nothing
but the hypnotic, even movements of your stride
and the snow-covered boots
that fall on nothing but snow,
and as you chart your next
turn, you begin to realize that only
your movement
distinguishes you
from this ambush of stillness,
the arrangement of parts, each still
in itself, uncommunicative,
the collapse of motion,
relativity, proportion, order,
and as the mind abandons
the grace and fluidity of motion,
your movements become irregular
and unattractive,
and you begin to stiffen, grow tired,
and gradually,
as you feel your own weight
tottering
above your legs, you begin
to submit, and before the last turn,
near a cluster of bare, empty-headed
trees, stop,
and let all resistance pass out of you,
and as your mind stretches toward that expanse
from where you could have come,
the snow begins to shape itself around you
and you become a part of the whiteness
and the cluster
yet wholly distinct and still
as if in a dream,
as if you had never seen this place
of snow, of moon, of trees, here
as though nothing were yours,
not even
the slight sounds
of your breathing.

While at Syracuse University, encouraged by a faculty that included the poets W.D. Snodgrass, Phillip Booth, and George P. Elliott (also a novelist and essayist), Djanikian grew more steadfastly toward the poet he hoped to be. He moved toward a greater quiet, reconfigured the words on his pages, and married the visual artist who loves the horses, Alysa Bennett, whose work and mind would influence his own.

After earning his degree, Djanikian taught poetry to schoolchildren in central New York and composition courses at Syracuse University. He spent a year helping to build the creative-writing program at the University of Michigan, then returned to Philadelphia, where his old teacher and now friend Daniel Hoffman invited him to teach English 10, the introductory creative-writing workshop, as an adjunct. He's been at Penn ever since.

By 1993, Djanikian was stepping into the retiring Hoffman's shoes to lead the creative-writing program. While the job has its share of crises—the student unhappy with the minus on the end of the *A* a teacher has given; courses not fully enrolled; budgetary stresses—there are many more rewards, Djanikian says.

Creative writing is part of the Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing, directed by Al Filreis, the Kelly Family Professor of English and faculty director of Kelly Writers House ["The House that Writers Built," July|Aug 2006]—who, with his own beard and poetic passions, is sometimes confused with Djanikian.

"Greg has worked closely with the staff of the Kelly Writers House so that creative-writing workshops and public presentations at the old house on Locust have perfectly converged,"

says Filreis. "The result is that young writers learn their craft and then witness experienced writers perform and discuss their work before an audience of other writers and supporters of the arts. Greg has all along believed in this kind of apprenticeship for his students."

As the director of the undergraduate creative-writing program, Djanikian manages and mentors the widely varied personalities and interests of the writing faculty. (Disclosure: this writer among them.) He seeks teachers who are "good writers who have exuberance about the work they do," he says, and trusts their instincts in the classroom. He expects that Penn students will be helped to write journalistic essays, or review a play or musical event, or understand the structure of a story, or write a documentary essay. Ultimately, Djanikian wants to help make students comfortable with language—so comfortable that "they will have the tools to make language pliant."

A popular teacher of poetry himself, Djanikian assigns the poets he loves—Stephen Dunn, Jane Hirshfield, Louise Gluck, Tony Hoagland. He asks questions, gauges responses, seeks out the images, the concentrated language, "the delectable morsels." What is the poem talking about? he will ask. What lies at its core? How, for example, does Stephen Dunn in the poem "Here and Now"—in which the speaker learns to "let heaven go its mythy way" in favor of a more immediate connection ("For you and me/ it's here and now from here on in.")—meld the *you* and the *I*, create a sense of vulnerability, write without reliance on any single doctrine or belief? How does the poet achieve *resiliency,* one of Djanikian's favorite words?

"What makes Professor Djanikian an amazing professor is his ability to make poetry interesting and relevant for everyone," says Eric Xu, a rising senior majoring in biochemistry and minoring in creative writing, who has taken two of Djanikian's workshops.

Students in the class wrote a poem each week, Xu says. Most, like him, were new to the form, and he says he "struggled for the first few weeks trying to figure out what makes a good poem." With Djanikian's guidance, he came to realize "I was trying too hard to incorporate extended metaphors and symbolism into my poems" and his writing improved, he says. (For an example, visit thepenngazette.com.)

"Professor Djanikian asked us to consider the language (how does it sound?) and spontaneity ('to let one idea lead you to another') in our poems and to not worry too much about whether it makes sense," Xu adds. "There is an implicit understanding in this class that language is alive and has a consciousness of its own, and I think the most important thing I took away from both workshops is the ability to identify what poetry is *not*—to be honest with myself and say 'this is contrived poetry.'"

In his work with students, Djanikian continues the tradition of generosity that long ago was shown to him. He teaches everything he knows, takes great pleasure from a student's growth, is happy when a student who has shared his classroom emerges as "a better reader, a better writer, a better thinker."

"When you know a poem by heart, that poem is in the body. It is there when you are walking down the street, or standing in a shower, or walking through the woods."

"When you know a poem by heart, that poem is in the body," Djanikian says. "It is there when you are walking down the street, or standing in a shower, or walking through the woods. The words come back. It's like someone else is there with you, reciting the words. Donald Hall says a poem is an inside person talking to an inside person. It's a melding of consciousness that is done in solitary-ness."

Djanikian's poems, in particular, are intimate. They knock, step in, and stay. They assert the familiar in unfamiliar ways. When *Dear Gravity* arrived at my own front door, with a handwritten note—*It gave me a chance to move away from the historical/political work in the last book (which is close to my heart), and to look, perhaps, more locally at what affects me, enraptures, and undoes me*—I stopped everything to read. I knew that the poems would calm me. I knew they would teach me. I knew that I would find in them someone who has traveled most intelligently down many roads and who would take the time to help me see them.

The gentleness is there, in this collection. But so is the deeply necessary wisdom—that conversation between the writer and the reader, like a dialogue between friends. "Greg Djanikian is one of the finest hosts I've ever met," Stephen Dunn says, and one feels that open-heartedness in these deliberate, but ever-musical poems.

One last example, from "Writers' Block" in *Dear Gravity:*

> ... Whatever you choose, the hope is
> to begin with something open-ended,
> some small parabola of thought
> which might suddenly zoom you
> in a gust of inspiration
> upward on hoof and wing
>
> where you might rarely travel
> in your prim and Sunday clothes,
> but from under whose sleeves
> there might appear
> in one epiphanous moment
> the utter stranger
> you have always been.

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