

**How I Learned English** By Gregory Djanikian

It was in an empty lot  
Ringed by elms and fir and honeysuckle.  
Bill Corson was pitching in his buckskin jacket,  
Chuck Keller, fat even as a boy, was on first,  
His t-shirt riding up over his gut,  
Ron O'Neill, Jim, Dennis, were talking it up  
In the field, a blue sky above them  
Tipped with cirrus.

And there I was,  
Just off the plane and plopped in the middle  
Of Williamsport, Pa. and a neighborhood game,  
Unnatural and without any moves,  
My notions of baseball and America  
Growing fuzzier each time I whiffed.

So it was not impossible that I,  
Banished to the outfield and daydreaming  
Of water, or a hotel in the mountains,  
Would suddenly find myself in the path  
Of a ball stung by Joe Barone.  
I watched it closing in  
Clean and untouched, transfixed  
By its easy arc before it hit  
My forehead with a thud.

I fell back,

Dazed, clutching my brow,  
Groaning, “Oh my shin, oh my shin,”  
And everybody peeled away from me  
And dropped from laughter, and there we were,  
All of us writhing on the ground for one reason  
Or another.

Someone said “shin” again,  
There was a wild stamping of hands on the ground,  
A kicking of feet, and the fit  
Of laughter overtook me too,  
And that was important, as important  
As Joe Barone asking me how I was  
Through his tears, picking me up  
And dusting me off with hands like swatters,  
And though my head felt heavy,  
I played on till dusk  
Missing flies and pop-ups and grounders  
And calling out in desperation things like  
“Yours” and “take it,” but doing all right,  
Tugging at my cap in just the right way,  
Crouching low, my feet set.  
“Hum baby” sweetly on my lips.