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The Straight and Narrow

by J. Patrick Lewis

The Greatest Destroyer of Banality

The World Has Ever Known

[Found Poem]

From Maxim Gorky's Log

Frantic as bees, three bustled gentlewomen afloat in their finery, await like school girls the famous man of letters. Chekhov arrives. His rooms take on an ethereal glow. Eager to hear his silver prose, one of the women asks:

"Anton Pavlovitch, what do you think? How will the war end?"
"Probably in peace."

"Well, yes ... certainly! But who will win? The Greeks or the Turks?"
"It seems to me that those will win who are the stronger."
"And who, do you think, are the stronger?" all the ladies asked together.

"Those who are the better fed and the better educated."
"Ah, how clever!" one of them exclaimed.
"And whom do you like the best?" another asked.
Anton Pavlovitch looked at her kindly, and answered with a meek smile:
"I like candied fruits ... don't you?"

Lives of the Explorers

No Balboa but Balboa's dog Leoncico
was first to reach the mountaintop
and gaze upon the Pacific.

John Cabot promised to give away
islands, even to his barber.

Magellan walked with a limp.
Columbus had red hair.
Marco Polo got homesick
but only after twenty years.

Amerigo Vespucci thought
Noah's Ark too small to hold

all the species of Brazil.

Ponce de Leon drank the sparkling water from a spring on Key Biscayne, thinking it would make him younger. He was wrong.

What Do You Mean My Poetry is *Jejune*?

Let me explain: Your poems are better than anything Keats or Shelley wrote posthumously, more self-conscious than John Clare, the self-consumer of his woes, as confessional as Cal Lowell the 22nd time he was institutionalized for heartbreak. Your poetry is logical Gertrude Stein; Dame Edith Sitwell without a hat; E.E. Cummings (capitalized); Auden, except when he wore his house slippers.

Your poems are as cerebrally *jejune* as Delmore Schwartz scolding skyscrapers, determined as Hart Crane swimming to Mexico, or mysterious as an Oulipo poet. My advice: distill them down down down until you have boiled all one hundred twelve poems into a single haiku but with fewer than seventeen syllables.

Arm Wrestling with Wittgenstein

Our elbows rested on his TRACTATUS, the masses screaming genius surrounded the table of elements, placing bets. Ludwig's arms muscled the air around him. "I am fascinated by the behavior of kites," he whispered, taking me for a fool, though anyone could see it was an excluded middle, an exercise in pure distraction from the elephant in the room—his brilliance.

Then this:

"Do you have any idea how embarrassing it is for a young man new to the universe, whose only siblings are music and suicide, to arrive by train in Cambridge and be met by half the world's intellectuals slaving for a bowl of fresh truth?"

As he pinned me to the boards, he said nonchalantly, "Later, one of those wags had the cheek to say of me, 'God has arrived. I met him on the 5:15.'"

J. Patrick Lewis's poems have appeared in *Gettysburg Review*, *New England Review*, *New Letters*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *new renaissance*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Fine Madness*, *Light Quarterly*, and many other literary journals and small magazines. He has published 68 children's poetry and picture books to date with Knopf, Creative Editions, Atheneum, Dial, Harcourt, Little, Brown, National Geographic, Sleeping Bear Press, Chronicle Books, Scholastic, Candlewick, and others. His first book of adult poems—*Gulls Hold Up the Sky*—is forthcoming from Laughing Fire Press. Lewis holds a Ph.D. in Economics from The Ohio State University. He taught for thirty years at the college level before becoming a full-time writer.

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