

NISSIM EZEKIEL 1924-2004

NISSIM EZEKIEL 1924-2004

NISSIM EZEKIEL 1924-2004

## Placing Ezekiel

KAISER HAQ

Nissim Ezekiel's strange ordeal is over. He died on 9 January, in his native Bombay. I say "strange ordeal" because we cannot imagine what it is like to be stricken with Alzheimer's, to have one's mind reduced to a tabula rasa on which nothing can be inscribed. We sometimes pontificate that if one can live in the moment one becomes truly liberated. Alzheimer's disease must be the reductio ad absurdum of such smug philosophizing. But the real ordeal of the disease is perhaps borne by those who love and respect its victims and have to care for them.

I knew him only slightly. I met him thrice at international literary events—in Lahore (1985), Edinburgh (1986), Glasgow (1990). A few letters were exchanged. He sent a couple of poems for *Form*, a magazine, now defunct, with which I was associated. I showcased him in my anthology, *Contemporary Indian Poetry* (Ohio State University Press, 1990). But more significant than these personal contacts, is what I owe to him as an exemplar in the practice of the craft of verse. And so it is only fitting that I should mark his passing with a few notes towards a definition of his position in literary history.

For those interested in biographical details pertaining to Ezekiel, Raj Rao's *Nissim Ezekiel, The Authorized Biography* (Viking, India, 2000) provides ample information, though the book is shoddily written and callow, and reminded me of Wilde's aphorism about Judas as biographer. Here, a few facts should suffice by way of a biographical context.

Ezekiel belonged to the Bene Israel, the oldest of India's Jewish communities. He studied English literature at Bombay University and became a college lecturer. In his youth he came under the influence of M. N. Roy, but soon after Partition turned away from politics to devote himself to literature.

Ibrahim Alkazi, the theatre director, then became his mentor and paid for his passage to London, where he spent three watershed years and published his first book of poetry, *A Time to Change* (Fortune Press, 1952). On his return to Bombay, he worked for the *Illustrated Weekly of India* and in advertising before becoming an academic once again. He eventually retired as Professor of American Literature at Bombay University.

He married and raised a family, but then separated from his wife. The 1960s wrought a sea-change in his lifestyle, turning a strait-laced sceptical rationalist into a drug-taking promiscuous believer. At the same time he registered the impact of the Beats and related literary movements.

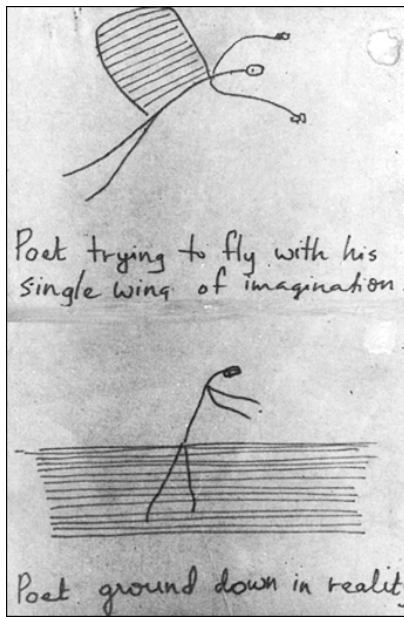
Besides poetry Ezekiel wrote plays, art criticism, short stories, columns and articles, and hundreds of reviews. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Prize and the Padma Shri.

Never afraid of controversy, Ezekiel supported Rajiv Gandhi's ban on Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and, in Bangladesh, Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja*, arguing that these books had more contempt than criticism, and only served to increase the resolve of the forces of reaction and bigotry. By the time he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 1998, Ezekiel's poetic career had attained a kind of completeness that is unlikely to be affected by any unpublished/uncollected pieces that may be appended to future editions of his *Collected Poems*.

The history of Indian poetry in English splits up neatly into two phases: pre and post-Independence. Nissim Ezekiel is the first poet of the latter phase, in terms of chronology as well as significance. By absorbing the lessons of modernism and making his poetic debut in an idiom that remains fresh after 50 years, he showed the way to his younger contemporaries and to subsequent generations of Indian poets. It is not only a question of direct influence, though that is considerable; just as crucial is the reaction he has provoked in younger poets, some of whom exhibit what Harold Bloom has diagnosed as the anxiety of influence. Ezekiel's position among contemporary Indian English poets is therefore that of a patriarch, admired by some of his children, resented by others. Indeed, he has been called "the Big Daddy of Indian Poetry." Someone in a mood for coining phrases could justifiably identify all contemporary Indian English poets as the tribe of Ezekiel.

The poetic achievement of Ezekiel and his tribe, in the context of contemporary world poetry, is not inconsiderable. In the Indian context it is remarkable, for two reasons. First, they have given us a body of verse that evinces the naturalization of the English language to the Indian situation, something earlier Indian English poets did not quite manage to do. Second, they have breathed life into the Indian English poetic tradition as a whole. This is a significant point in literary historical terms and requires some explanation.

It is common knowledge that Indian English poetry has a history going back nearly two centuries, but such a history is one thing, a tradition quite another. A literary tradition comes into being when writers interact not only with those of their own generation, but also



An Ezekiel sketch

with those of the past, thereby creating a complex pattern of influences, rejections, intertextual connections and disjunctions. Pre-Independence Indian English poets lived in isolation. They had virtually no literary interaction with fellow Indians, either contemporaries or predecessors. Their sole inspiration was the poetic tradition of England, the colonial "mother-country," into which they longed to be assimilated—a futile hope, for that tradition barely acknowledged their existence. The poets came, one by one, they wrote, and vanished. They tried to write like contemporary English masters and produced sunburnt imitations. Derazio and Michael Madhusudan Dutt echoed the younger Romantics, especially Byron. Toru Dutt and her family (almost the entire extended family: her sister Aru, her father and a couple of uncles, were versifiers) followed the Romantics and Victorians. Manmohan Ghose wrote like his fin-de-siecle contemporaries, Sarojini Naidu like minor Victorians and Edwardians. Among these poets, the later ones didn't even know the work of their predecessors, far less respond to it; Toru Dutt had heard of Michael Dutt but never saw his work. Their attention was directed entirely towards their English masters. If at all one describes them as a tradition the caveat should be added: "a tradition of mimicry."

One might interject that the situation remains the same after independence. Isn't Ezekiel shaped by the influence of Eliot, Pound, Yeats and Auden? G. S. Sharat Chandra by W. C. Williams, and the Black Mountain School? Mehrotra by the Beats and surrealists? Well, yes and no. Contemporary Indian English poets may absorb diverse influences, just as their peers in other countries do. But they also engage in antagonistic struggles with each other, and with older Indian English poets. In their response to pre-Independence Indian English poets, they have been stringently critical, but not entirely without sympathy or even appreciation. This critical examination has incorporated the older poets into a living tradition.

Thus R. Parthasarathy points out in the introduction in his anthology *Ten 20th Century Indian Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974), that Toru Dutt achieved "The concretization of something as amorphous as nostalgia" in her best-known poem, "Our Old Casuarina Tree," and Sarojini Naidu had "perhaps the finest ear among Indian English poets for the sound of English."

Nissim Ezekiel, in one of the last interviews he gave, conceded that earlier Indian English poets, like Sarojini Naidu, even though he had "doubts about certain words and phrases she is using," deserved to be read today because her "subject is 100% Indian." He agreed with the interviewer Nilufer Bharucha, that "voices like hers... need to be reclaimed."

Though Ezekiel is generally acknowledged as the first modern Indian English poet, this is not strictly accurate. That title rightly belongs to Shahid Suhrawardy, author of *Fallen Leaves* (London: Michael Joseph, 1910) and *Essays in Verse* (CUP, 1937). The first book is that of an aesthete, the second of a modernist. In "When Thunderclouds About Me Break," dated 1914, the following quatrain belongs to the same terrain as Eliot's "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady":

Whilst I sit darkling in my room,  
Beating against the prison-bar,  
You come and fling into the gloom  
A bright inconsequential star.

In order to relate Ezekiel to Suhrawardy, it will be helpful to refer to Spender's classic work, *The Struggle of Modern*, where he distinguishes modern from contemporary writers. The former view their world as problematic, in a way different from past ages, and seek radically innovative styles and techniques to deal with it; the latter see no rupture between the present and the past and are therefore happy with inherited literary forms and techniques. In early 20th century poetry Eliot and Pound were innovative moderns, while the Geor-

gians were contemporaries who were happy to use a conversational idiom and an iambic metre. The moderns soon became literary history, after which poets like Larkin and Ted Hughes brought back a kind of neo-Georgianism, but with a difference. These new "contemporaries" were more self-conscious and critically aware than the older ones; in other words, they had absorbed important lessons from the moderns.

Ezekiel is in many ways comparable to his post-World War II English contemporaries of the so-called Movement. Among them he is closest to D. J. Enright with whom he shares a cool, ironic, satiric style that combines aspects of the "modern" and the "contemporary." In terms of the history of Indian English poetry, Ezekiel's poetry combines the modern element introduced by Suhrawardy with the "contemporary" elements of two interesting but little-known forebears, Joseph Furtado and Fredoon Kabraji, author of *A Minor Georgian's Sons* and *A Cold Flame*, both published by the Fortune Press in London. Furtado was a Goan poet who wrote in a lively idiom incorporating Indianisms:

Fortune teller, memsaib!  
Tell fortune very well,  
Past, present, future tell,  
A only one rupees  
All fortune telling fees  
Fortune teller, memsaib!  
("The Fortune Teller")

Furtado anticipates Ezekiel's use of Indian English, but the latter is more self-conscious as befits someone whose sensibility has been strained through the modernist sieve.

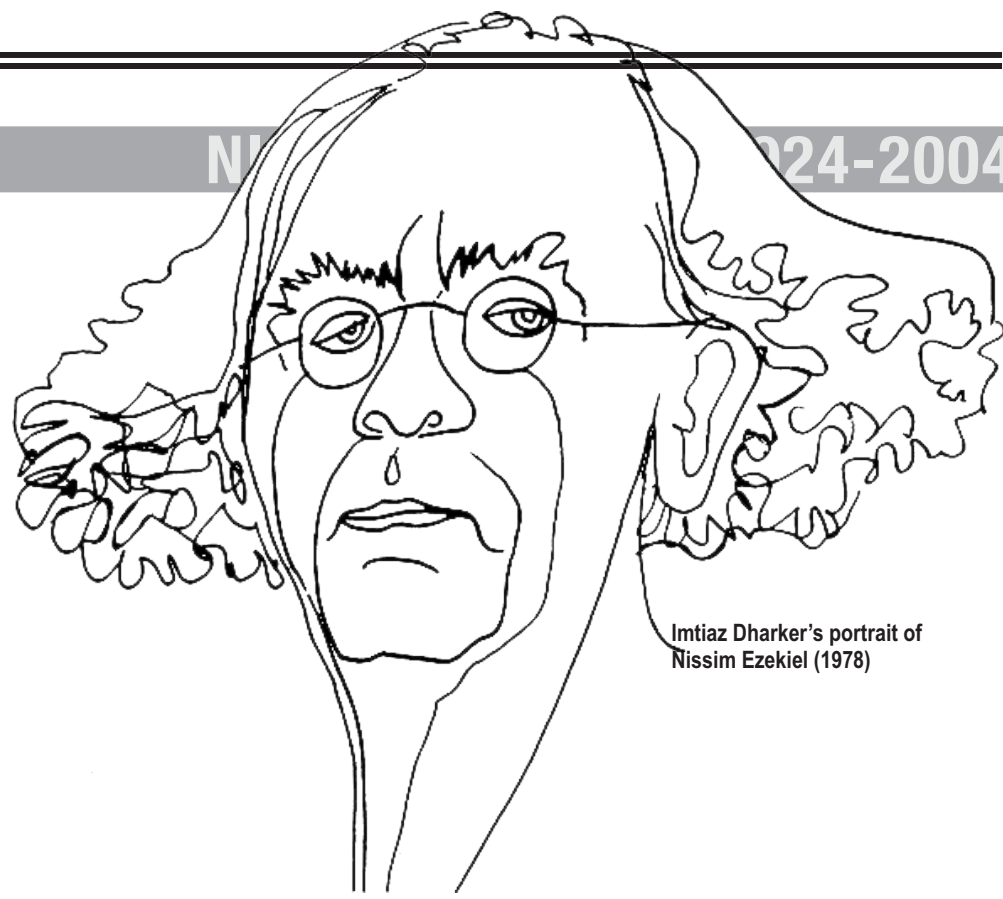
Nissim Ezekiel's *Collected Poems* present the harvest of forty years, and demonstrate the consistency in his work as well as its technical and tonal evolution. From the start Ezekiel used both strict forms and free verse, but unsurprisingly the latter gained in importance in his later work. Much of his first three collections is a little heavy-footed, perhaps because he is desperately holding out against the lure of a freer style, such as is characterized by William Carlos Williams, to whom he writes:

I do not want  
to write  
poetry like yours  
but still  
love  
the way you do it.  
("For William Carlos Williams")

The most successful of Ezekiel's attempts in conventional forms came in the early sixties, in such poems as "Urban," "Enterprise," "Marriage," "Jamini Roy," "Philosophy," "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher." A relaxed lyric grace, subtle imagery and irony come together in a manner illustrative perhaps of what the British Movement (Larkin, Enright, Davie) stood for:

To force the pace and never to be still  
Is not the way of those who study birds  
Or women. The best poets wait for words.  
The hunt is not an exercise of will  
But patient love relaxing on hill  
To note the movement of a timid wing.  
("Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher")

From the same period we have "In India," with its insistent three or four beats to a line, and mixture of metrical and free verse. Bruce King



Imtiaz Dharker's portrait of Nissim Ezekiel (1978)

mention's that Ezekiel "often likes four iambic feet to a line" (*Three Indian Poets*, 26). He is particularly successful in using the form with satiric intent,

I went through this, believing all,  
Our love denied the Primal Fall.  
Wordless, we walked among the trees,  
And felt immortal as the breeze.  
("Marriage")

"Night of the Scorpion" illustrates Ezekiel's easy mastery of free verse as early as the early sixties. With its matter-of-fact opening ("I remember the night my mother/ was stung by a scorpion"); its use of repetition (... his poison moved in Mother's blood, they said./ May he sit still, they said./ May the sins of your previous birth be burned away tonight, they said.); its gentle comedy ("My father, sceptic, rationalist, trying every curse and blessing"/), it bids fair to remain a favourite with the common reader and the anthologist.

From "Poems (1965-1974)" we notice a lightening up in the movement of Ezekiel's verse. Concomitantly, he moves out of the study and incorporates language coming from the lips and pens of others. His hilarious, and slightly controversial, poems in Indian English are said to be based on what he actually jotted down of the speech of Gujarati speaking imperfect English, among them the Principal of Mithibai College, the source of "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa, T. S." Also somewhat controversial is what I would describe as the poems of womanizing, like "Nudes 1978." Then there are the "found" poems, derived from newspaper reports, and the "poster" poems, which are more like collections of aphorisms. All in all, Ezekiel was undoubtedly the first major figure in Indian English poetry who found a resonant, authentic Indian voice. This would not have been possible without his existential commitment to the place of his birth:

I have made my commitments now.  
This is one: to stay where I am,  
As others choose to give themselves  
In some remote and backward place.  
My backward place is where I am.  
("Background, Casually")

Of Ezekiel's other works, his plays have had a mixed reception, but probably deserve more attention than they have so far received. They are rather Shavian in their preoccupation with ideas, and in the absence of Shavian wit do not make for very successful theatre. His essays, represented in his *Selected Prose*, will always be relevant, especially the masterly "Naipaul's India and Mine," a subtly-textured argument that will enhance any reader's understanding of the complexities of South Asian reality. As poet and man of letters Ezekiel's position in any postcolonial canon is more than secure.

Kaiser Haq teaches English at the University of Dhaka.

## Nissim Ezekiel: 'you missed out a comma in the fourth line'

MENKA SHIVDASANI

Sometimes, in the chaos of too many deadlines and responsibilities, you stop a while and think "I must meet this person who has been so important to me". Then the daily madness takes over --the meals to be cooked, newspapers to be sent to press, the child's homework--and you tell yourself that one of these days you will-- you must--make the time.

Last October, another poet friend and I decided to visit Nissim Ezekiel in the nursing home where he had been for more than six years. A young relative of his, a photographer, wanted to join us, to take pictures of the great poet for posterity. That visit never happened, and now, it never will.

I tell myself that Nissim would not have recognized us, anyway. He would have been his usual warm and welcoming self, but asked us, though we had met a hundred times, who we were. He had been a victim of the debilitating Alzheimer's disease for years; his memory had begun failing him much before he was admitted into the nursing home.

The Nissim I knew, when I was 16, and he was 55, was a very different man. He was India's best-known Indian English poet, and the first to try and break the mould. In school, we had studied his poem, *Night of the Scorpion*, and when word came that this "real live poet" would actually be doing a reading and that there would be room for 20 of us, our class of 15-year-olds was thrilled. Everyone wanted to attend the reading, even those who did not care much for poetry. We had to draw lots, and I, perhaps the keenest of them all, lost out. At

15, it was a trauma that I found difficult to handle.

A year later, straight out of school, I met Patanjali Sethi, then training officer of The Times of India. He read my poems and gave me an introductory letter for Nissim. Clutching that letter, and with my poems written out in my best schoolgirl handwriting, I went to see Nissim at Bombay University. I was convinced he would tell me this was great and profound poetry, full of pain and longing, and all the philosophy that only a 16-year-old can spout. He read the note, then glanced at the works of genius I had handed him, tossed them back across his vast table and said: "Type them. You can't evaluate a poem if it is hand-written."

I was shattered. Surely this was his way of telling me not to waste his time! I mumbled that I would come back again, and made my way out, vowing never to return. "Write down your name and phone number before you go," he called out just as I got to the door. I did as he asked, and left. Over the next two weeks, I struggled with a battered typewriter that was older than I was, painfully typed out my poems, and decided I would never see Nissim again.

Two weeks later, the phone rang. "You were going to come back with your poems, weren't you?" asked the voice at the other end.

When we met the next day, he read my poems (so perfect they were with all the derived rhymes and rhythms of Wordsworth and Shelley!) and said: "They're okay." This was a refrain I was to hear every week for the next six months, whenever I showed Nissim a new poem. Then one day, seeing the crushed expression

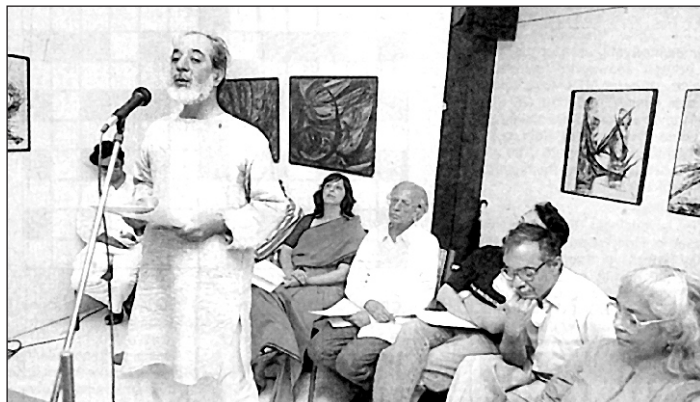
on my face, he said: "Look, for your age, you are very good. But if you get it into your head that there is nothing more to learn, you will be finished." Then he told me of poets he had known who had started out well, but were still writing at age sixty exactly the way they were when they were sixteen. "No matter what level you are at," he said, "you should always go a little higher." It was a lesson that I learned for life.

Another time, when I wrote a grand poem about unrequited love, he looked at it, smiled and said, "You missed out a comma in the fourth line." Is this man nuts or what, I thought to myself, and said indifferently, "Really? That's just too bad." I put it in anyway, and wondered why I was wasting my time.

This was a frequent criticism-- a comma here, a full stop there, a colon where I had put in a semi-colon instead... "What's all this got to do with the real thing?" I asked him once in frustration, and he said: "This is the age when you perfect the craft, so it becomes an automatic part of your writing. When you're 17, you have a lot of time to think about the great philosophies of poetry. First, get the grammar right."

In time, and largely thanks to his approach, I learned to look at my work just as critically as he did. In fact, I began to get so self-critical, I often tore up what I wrote. "Don't be so harsh on yourself," he said. "You have some really good work there."

Once, I told him about a poem that just wasn't happening right, no matter what I did with it. "I've reworked it four times!" I yelled. "Is that all?" he responded. "There are poems I have rewritten more than ten



A Bombay Poetry Circle meet in 1996. Menka Shivdasani at the back sitting beside Nissim Ezekiel.

times and I still wasn't happy with them."

If Nissim criticized your work, he was equally open to criticism of his own. "I've written some new poems," he told me one morning, "but I don't think I should show them to you." It was the series, *Nudes*, and he was convinced I would be scandalised. At 17, and very much-- at least in my own opinion-- a woman of the world, I told him that nothing shocked me. So he showed me the poems and waited quietly for my reaction. Some of the more explicit lines did, indeed, shock me, but naturally I was not going to say that! "You've missed out a comma in line five of the first poem," I told him, and he laughed. "You've learned my lessons too well, you so-and-so!" he declared.

Another time, he handed me a proof of *Night of the Scorpion* the very same, much anthologized poem that I had learned in school. "Help me with this," he said. "Some magazine wants to publish it but I can't stand the sight of this poem now." Nissim had moved on, but as all poets know as they evolve, their poems will always be frozen in

time and critics will ask pointless questions or give meaningless praise long after the poet has travelled into different lives.

After eight years of frequent discussions, he asked me why I wasn't coming out with a book. When I told him I did not think I was ready yet, he was astonished. "Young people write poetry for two years and think they are ready," he said. I told him that with poetry I could take my time, and he cautioned me against taking too much. When, two years later, I finally told him I was ready for a book, he was delighted, and helped me to put the manuscript together.

Helping a young poet came naturally to Nissim, and many people took this for granted, including a pimply-faced boy who once barged into his office and shouted: "You haven't read my poems yet? But I gave them to you a month ago!" Far from throwing him out, or at least rebuking him, Nissim looked embarrassed, and mumbled an apology.

When we started the Poetry Circle in Mumbai in 1986 for young poets, he immediately

offered whatever assistance he could both in terms of providing feedback to the often halting, flaccid poems people brought, and in a more concrete sense. We needed a permanent venue so that people knew where to go every second and fourth Saturday, even if no circulars about the meeting reached them. The P.E.N. office, over which he had presided for years, became our home. It was here that we had met during all those long years of struggling with poetry, and what better meeting ground could there have been? Ten years after we first began holding Poetry Circle meetings here, Nissim's presence became much less frequent, and he himself was much quieter. When he finally stopped coming, through no choice of his own, the P.E.N. office seemed an empty place, full of dusty books on dustier shelves and a vacuum that would be impossible to fill. Already, there is talk of closing down the P.E.N. office; after all, why should a literary body take up so much prime real estate!

Once, in this very same room, I had told him I wanted to do a Ph.D. "A Ph.D? Don't be silly!" said this man who had once taught my M.A. English Literature class. Then, over the next three hours, he brought up the topic every time someone entered the room at the rate of once every 15 minutes, since this was like headquarters for young poets and academics. "Ha, ha, ha, this girl wants to do a Ph.D," he told each visitor. Finally, when he noticed my annoyed expression, he pointed to the dusty tomes. "See that thick volume on that cupboard?" he asked me. "That's a Ph.D thesis that somebody has given me to read after spending ten years on it. If you do a Ph.D.,

you will get so bogged down with research, it will kill your creativity. What you should be doing instead is writing good poetry. Just continue to write good poetry."

These are words I frequently remember, as the daily dramas and deadlines close in. There is so much that we get caught into, so many flurried and fleeting tasks. What survives in the end are the words on the page, the spirit that brings them alive.

Even memory, as we learned the hard way watching Nissim, is a cruel and temporary thing. My first inkling that something was very wrong came one evening, soon after Nissim turned seventy. I had offered him a ride home from the P.E.N. office; he was otherwise accustomed to the five-minute walk to Churchgate station and then a train, often stopping to buy vegetables on the way.

As we approached his home, I asked him where it was exactly so the driver could take the correct turn. Nissim could not remember. I asked him the name of the street on which he lived so we could ask for directions. Nissim, who had lived in that home almost his entire life, had no idea. After driving around a busy street at peak hours several times, I had no choice but to drop him at the railway station that he was so familiar with. It was his own suggestion because through sheer habit, his legs would take him along the exact route that he had walked for so many decades even if he had no clue what his destination was. He thanked me profusely for the ride, and when I told him it was nothing compared to what he had done for me, he insisted he had done very little.

Then one terrible morning, an agitated Adil Jussawalla,

(another leading Indian English poet), called to say that Nissim was in hospital. "He's finished," Adil said.

I visited Nissim a few days later, and he could still recognize me. Sharing the room with a few other patients, he was sitting up in his bed with nothing more than a tumbler of water by his side and a small plastic bag on the bed. I got him a writing pad and pen--surely the Muse was still with him--and some orange juice. He put the notepad aside but grabbed the juice in delight.

A few years later, he was still confined, only now it was a nursing home. Some of us went to see him, shortly after the launch of a festschrift in his honour, edited by Vrinda Nabar and Nilufer Bharucha. Nissim had not been allowed to attend the function, and did not recognize us, but was thrilled to see a cake that we had brought him, refusing to share it with anyone else.

It was the last time I ever saw him. Perhaps I was not strong enough to handle it, but this was not the Nissim I knew, and I wanted to remember the Nissim who had made such a difference to my life and to my poetry.

In 1988, when he won the Padma Shri, I had written him a congratulatory note, adding with tongue firmly in cheek, "I did not know I was hobnobbing with greatness."

"The next time you see greatness," Nissim drily responded, "try to recognise it."

The tragedy is that most of us can only do so when it is much too late.

Menka Shivdasani is a founder-member of the Bombay Poetry Circle. She has published two books of poems, *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* (1990) and *Stet* (2003).