

## NISSIM EZEKIEL 1924-2004

A tribute to a poet without publishing some of his poems is like writing about the moon landing without mentioning Neil Armstrong. Thus was our tribute to Nissim Ezekiel--one of the founding fathers, if not *the*, of modern Indian English poetry--on January 24th, which perforce was published without any of his poems since we ran out of space. So here are three of his poems.

### Background, Casually

**1**  
A poet-rascal-clown was born,  
The frightened child who would not eat  
Or sleep, a boy of meager bone.  
He never learned to fly a kite,  
His borrowed top refused to spin.

I went to Roman Catholic school,  
A mugging Jew among the wolves.  
They told me I had killed the Christ,  
That year I won the scripture prize.  
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.

I grew in terror of the strong  
But undernourished Hindu lads,  
Their prepositions always wrong,  
Repelled me by passivity.  
One noisy day I used a knife.

At home on Friday nights the prayers  
Were said. My morals had declined.  
I heard of Yoga and of Zen.  
Could I, perhaps, be rabbinic?  
The more I searched, the less I found.

Twentytwo: time to go abroad.  
First, the decision, then a friend  
To pay the fare. Philosophy,  
Poverty and Poetry, three  
Companions shared my basement room.

**2**  
The London seasons passed me by.  
I lay in bed two years alone,

And then a Woman came to tell  
My willing ears I was the Son  
Of Man. I knew that I had failed

In everything, a bitter thought.  
So, in an English cargoship  
Taking French guns and mortar shells  
To IndoChina, scrubbed the decks,  
And learned to laugh again at home.

How to feel it home, was the point.  
Some reading had been done, but what  
Had I observed, except my own  
Exasperation? All Hindus are  
Like that, my father used to say,

When someone talked too loudly, or  
Knocked at the door like the Devil.  
They hawked and spat. They sprawled around.  
I prepared for the worst. Married,  
Changed jobs, and saw myself a fool.

The song of my experience sung,  
I knew that all was yet to sing.  
My ancestors, among the castes,  
Were aliens crushing seed for bread  
(The hooded bullock made his rounds).

**3**  
One among them fought and taught,  
A Major bearing British arms.  
He told my father sad stories  
Of the Boer War. I dreamed that  
Fierce men had bound my feet and hands.

The later dreams were all of words.  
I did not know that words betray  
But let the poems come, and lost  
That grip on things the worldly prize.  
I would not suffer that again.

I look about me now, and try  
To formulate a plainer view:  
The wise survive and serve--to play  
The fool, to cash in on  
The inner and the outer storms.

The Indian landscape sears my eyes.  
I have become a part of it  
To be observed by foreigners.  
They say that I am singular,  
Their letters overstate the case.

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.

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1. Bene Israel tradition has it that their ancestors took to oilpressing soon after arrival in India. Hence Shanwar teli, Saturday oilpressers, i.e., who did not work on Saturdays.

### Night of the Scorpion

I remember the night my mother was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours of steady rain had driven him to crawl beneath a sack of rice. Parting with his poison - flash of diabolic tail in the dark room - he risked the rain again. The peasants came like swarms of flies and buzzed the name of God a hundred times to paralyse the Evil One. With candles and with lanterns throwing giant scorpion shadows on the mud-baked walls they searched for him: he was not found. They clicked their tongues. With every movement that the scorpion made 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. May your suffering decrease the misfortunes of your next birth, they said. May the sum of all evil balanced in this unreal world against the sum of good become diminished by your pain. May the poison purify your flesh of desire, and your spirit of ambition, they said, and they sat around on the floor with my mother in the centre, the peace of understanding on each face. More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours, more insects, and the endless rain. My mother twisted through and through, groaning on a mat.

My father, sceptic, rationalist,  
trying every curse and blessing,  
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.  
He even poured a little paraffin  
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.

I watched the flame feeding on my mother.  
I watched the holy man perform his rites  
to tame the poison with an incantation.  
After twenty hours  
it lost its sting.

My mother only said  
Thank God the scorpion picked on me  
And spared my children.



Ezekiel's 'Night of the Scorpion' painting by Kristina Chambers,

### Note on Nissim's Very Indian Poems in Indian English

Rajeev S. Patke

Ezekiel's poems in Indian English show him venturing successfully into modes no longer preoccupied with the self, in which he can empathise better with the unsympathetic aspects of his linguistic and cultural milieu. In these poems, what is being said is refracted through how it is said. The ugly can be taken on its own terms when its self-conceit is treated with derision, while derision is made tolerable when lances by sympathy. Exaggeration hovers just this side of distortion, imitation never quite slips into full caricature. The humour is benign because the butt of each joke is non-malignant, even if the joke nurses a little malice:

### Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.

Friends,  
our dear sister  
is departing for foreign  
in two three days,  
and  
we are meeting today  
to wish her bon voyage.

You are all knowing, friends,  
what sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.  
I don't mean only external sweetness  
but internal sweetness.  
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling  
even for no reason  
but simply because she is feeling.

Miss Pushpa is coming  
from very high family.  
Her father was renowned advocate  
in Bulsar or Surat,  
I am not remembering now  
which place.

Surat? Ah, yes,  
once only I stayed in Surat  
with family members  
of my uncle's very old friend,  
his wife was cooking nicely . . .  
that was long time ago.

In India also  
Gujaratis, Maharashtrians,  
Hindiwallahs  
All brothers--  
Though some are having  
funny habits.  
Still, you tolerate me,  
I tolerate you,  
One day Ram Rajya is surely  
coming.

You are going?

(The Patriot)

What makes these Indian archetypes funny is not merely how they mangle the language, but how they lack in self-awareness. What makes them human is the warmth and feeling behind the sentiments they express, which even the disfigured language will not hide. The expressive possibilities exploited in these poems may be limited (in comparison to

what poets from Africa or the Caribbean have shown possible in dialect, patois, pidgin, and creole); they may verge on the sentimental; also, they could easily lead to an effect of the *ad nauseam*. But they also break the stranglehold exercised on poetic style by the notion of a standard language. In them, performance exceeds competence. To have opened this small account with rag-bag syndicate of the ostensibly sub-standard forms of linguistic practice, allowing poetry to explore parts of the human structure it had not earlier known it could accommodate or inhabit, is no small part of Ezekiel's contribution to post-Independence investment in poetry.

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Coming back to Miss Pushpa she is most popular lady with men also and ladies also.

Whenever I asked her to do anything, she was saying, 'Just now only I will do it.' That is showing good spirit. I am always appreciating the good spirit. Pushpa Miss is never saying no. Whatever I or anybody is asking she is always saying yes, and today she is going to improve her prospect, and we are wishing her bon voyage.

Now I ask other speakers to speak, and afterwards Miss Pushpa will do summing up.

## SHORT STORY

## Dhaka 2011

### The Short Story Contest: Reader Requests

Our short story contest/revue are now ended, but not our readers' curiosities about those writers who have vanished into air, into thin air. What about all those other submissions, they ask. Feelers have been put out, queries posed, missives written, couple of emails wired, regarding those entries. Reproduced below is one such handwritten request representative of the whole:

Dear Editor  
It's good to go through your note on the recently held short story contest. 'New Year's Celebration' deserves the merit of winning the contest. My sincere congratulations to the writer, Ms. Munjulika Rahman.  
Meanwhile, I would like to propose to publish, if not all but some selected entry-stories (you feel suitable) in the literature page. This will be a great entertainment for the readers.  
Thanking you

Yours sincerely  
Zahidul Haque  
Associate Professor  
Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University  
Dhaka

It would be only the most hard-hearted of editors who could refuse such a plaintive request for some literary 'entertainment.' So here it is, another submission by Aramis\*. Though this story does not work at the level of characterization, though its first paragraph arouses expectations that it robustly fails to fulfill later, though its parodic effects are nil, yet it is interesting at the level of words, in that the language used--its odd adjectival and adverbial hoists--seems at times a scaffolding supportive, almost, of the theme. And it does provoke a question: what will Dhaka be like in 2011?

As for Mr. Haque, I fully expect an entry from him in the next contest.  
----Editor, Literature Page

**R**AFIQ leaned back in his blue velvet seat with the hard round back and looked randomly out at Gulshan Avenue down below, the late evening rain brightly splashing amid the raucous traffic and the brushing, shopping crowds. The Bones Café seemed quiet upturned tonight, lots of heated blades flashing, the music softly lashing. Rafiq always felt it was the girls who brought the welcome bundles in public places. Like the one standing at that booth with her friends, wet slick look all the way up to her eyes but, despite appearances, endearingly innocent in that Bengali way. He sipped his coffee and looked out some more.  
It wasn't long before Anis came twisting his way through the press of tables and bodies and thrust out his hand.  
"Hey, old man. Great to see you."

of the Dhaka-ite.  
"Not that interesting"  
"How come? There doesn't seem to be any shortage of wives on the lam."  
"Yeah but they always turn out to be somebody's kissing cousin, so it's alright."  
"Didn't you trace that kidnapped boy for the Biswas family?"  
"Yeah. I got lucky I guess."  
"You don't believe much in success anyway do you?"  
Rafiq was getting irritated, not for the first time with Anis.  
"So what's up? What can I do for you?"  
Anis moved into his wave of vision decisively.  
"You've heard about the Anjali case?"  
Rafiq was now crashingly alert. She'd recently been arrested, a woman of wealth and position, but too barbed to hold for long. Rumours had been swirling in the city. She'd got into trouble over a man, over a business deal, over crime, over political intrigue. No one knew for sure. And here was Anis, in on it, as one should have probably expected; it was right up his street, the cat whose eyes sat up in the dark.  
Rafiq felt sure Anis knew. For the first time he felt the advantage slipping away from him. The pregnancy, the miscarriage, and they had given each other a wide berth ever since, so many years ago that it didn't seem real and what different people they had been, young clowns, before she shot away into the firmament. And now here was this pressing open of the flesh without preparation. Rafiq's face became hardened with hurt. He seemed to see, on either side of Anis' reedy grin, little fangs emerging. They hadn't picked on him for the meeting by accident.  
"So what about it?"  
"Well. Nothing much except that she's asking for you. Any idea why that might be?"  
Perhaps they didn't know after all. Bless her tiny heart.  
"We do know each other."  
"Haven't seen you around ever. And we've been keeping tabs on her for over 20 years."  
"Maybe it was earlier than

that."  
"Don't tell me you went to school with her."  
"Yeah. Scholastica in the 80's"  
"What was she like then?"  
"Ahead of her time."  
"Anyway, we want you to go see her."



"And?"  
"Give her a message. This time she's mixed up in something way beyond her. And we're not playing games. She's holding back something that she shouldn't be. I'm not sure why. But we're damn well not going to let her get away with this kind of bitch defiance."  
Rafiq had never seen Anis so openly angry before.  
"Why do you think she'll listen to me?"  
"You better make sure she does if you care for her."  
"So now I'm in the dock too?"  
"OK, OK I'm sorry. Just let her know it's serious. And we don't have too much time."  
"Am I supposed to know anything about what it's all about?"  
"Better not. Except that it

involves Brigadier Arif. You've heard of him?"  
Brigadier Arif, the psychopath who ran DGFI.\*  
"Where I do I go to see her? Is she behind bars?"  
"No, we're releasing her tomorrow. You can go to her house. You know where that is?"

The door was opened by a manservant dressed in a white coat, black tie and black trousers, set off by a shining head of black hair. The chandelier blazed light on the foyer and the mirrors burned. Rafiq's feet slipped easily on the marble floor. Her living room was vast and he settled his rumpled press on the soft welcoming sofa which stretched out at both ends. There was even an alcove with a Greek bust. When she came tripping in she was wearing a red and black patterned brocade long dress with high collar, sleeveless. Her dark skin radiated, her wavy brown hair was in a short shapely coil, a merry grin on her crooked lip.  
"Rafiq, what fun to see you."  
They came near and clasped hands, facing each other.  
"You're looking great Anjali," he let his gaze flow over her.  
They sat comfortably, his right knee in hull proximity to her left. They didn't waste time reviewing the past but talked of cushioned nothings. Finally Rafiq broached the matter that hung between them.  
"Did you know they would send me to you?"  
"Well it just came to me on a whim. And when they asked me if I wanted to inform someone about my arrest, the usual formula, I couldn't think of anyone but you, you're the closest I have to family it seems."  
"Yes it's strange but I can understand that too."  
"Besides I wanted to talk it over, my problem, with

someone. And you're someone in this kind of business."  
"So you knew I had become a private eye?"  
"News about you did make its way to me from time to time."  
"Yet you never got in touch?"  
"What would have been the use?"  
Rafiq realized with a shock that he had not been expecting her to talk to him as an equal.  
"Anyway how are we going to get you out of this jam? Care to tell me about it?"  
She twisted long bare arms in front of her, the gesture of a cat crossing over into the 10<sup>th</sup> Dimension of waking sleep.  
"How do I know it's safe?"  
"You don't."  
"Well there's this man, you see. He's from..."  
"No. Stop. Don't say anything which can identify him."  
"OK. Let's say Mr. X. He's a foreigner. He's found out about some really hush hush work that Bangladesh is doing which his Government, if it found out, would really blow it's top about. And I mean go totally insane."  
"So how come his Government doesn't know about it?"  
"Because X hasn't told them. Instead he's blackmailing Bangladesh for money to keep his mouth shut. One payment. One million Dollars. In untraceable ways that he knows."  
"Wow, that's pretty," Rafiq was aghast at the scale of the undertaking. "And you, I see, you're the go-between."  
"Obviously. It would be too risky for him to be known to them."  
"And do you know the secret too?"  
"No, not the actual secret. That would be too risky for me."  
Rafiq worked out the perfect symmetry of the scheme. As long as she knew something they needed, but not too much, she was protected. If anything happened to her, there was the possibility that X would blow them out of the water by revealing the secret. And as long as they didn't know X's identity they couldn't do

repelled him. She had always had a sizzling line in words and he feared the whiplash when she saw what he had become. Heavy set, morose, with the glazed eyes of a fish. Well she needn't be so superior. She was in a right mess too. But he wondered why she was being so difficult. In her years at the top she had never shown much inclination towards principle. She had slid her way from bed to bed if the gossip columns could be believed. And picked up a lot of survival instincts along the way. No but the main thing in his view which dwarfed all others was: She had asked for him!

anything about it. Even after they had paid out they didn't know if X wouldn't betray them anyway; but that was something she had promised on his behalf and it was part of the game that such low acts were excluded.  
"I think they were thinking of torturing me, when they had me. But they didn't dare", she said stoically.  
"Anjali, I'm amazed you're involved in something like this! You didn't even need the money. Do you know what you're up against?"  
She looked at him absolutely and he saw it all. X had reached a part of her, the frenzied silk, made up of regrets, and dangers which raze to the hard stubble, legs and swords crossing, blown enveloping. There was nothing she could do but follow. He must be a man of cool daring and skill, a songbird who could clear the webs. One of the hard elect.  
She let Rafiq out herself. In the half open door he saw her silhouette against the light as he turned to leave. He felt uncontrollably plucked that it had fallen to him to serve her.  
"There,there," he patted her hands.  
From then on everything moved swiftly. Rafiq went through all the surveillance reports and the character analyses, and the photos. It wasn't difficult to spot X. By then he stood out for Rafiq like a beacon and he wondered why nobody had been able to see it before.  
One day there was a report about a junior diplomat of an unnamed Very Powerful Country who was badly hurt in a mugging incident and had to be airlifted out for medical treatment, never to return. Anjali, it was learned, had something of a breakdown. But she recovered, even though it took six months, or more. As for Rafiq, his padding registered only that she was not of his burdens.  
Brigadier Arif congratulated Anis on his expert touch.  
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Aramis\* is the pseudonym the writer wished to adopt if his short story was published. His name, address and mobile number were all duly given.