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For Elkana

Nissim Ezekiel

The warm April evening
tempts us to the breezes
sauntering across the lawn.
We drag our chairs down
the stone steps and plant them there.

Unevenly, to sit or rather sprawl
in silence till the words begin to come.
My wife, as is her way,
surveys the scene, comments
on a broken window-pane.

Suggests a thing or two
that every husband in the neighbourhood
knows exactly how to do
except of course the man she loves
who happened to be me.
Unwilling to dispute
the obvious fact

that she is always right,
I turn towards the more
attractive view that opens up
behind my eyes and shuts her out.

Her voice crawls up and down the lawn,
our son, who is seven,
hears it—and it reminds him of something.
He stands before us,
his small legs well apart,
crescent-moon-like chin uplifted
eyes hard and cold
to speak his truth
in masterly determination:
Mummy, I want my dinner, now.
Wife and husband in unusual rapport
state one unspoken thought:
Children Must be Disciplined.
She looks at me. I look away.

The son is waiting. In another second
he will repeat himself.
Wife wags a finger.
Firmly delivers verdict: Wait.
In five minutes I'll serve you dinner.

No, says the little one,
not in five minutes, now.
I am hungry.
It occurs to me the boy is like his father.
I love him as I love myself.
Wait, darling, wait,
Mummy says, wait for five minutes
But, I am hungry now,
declaims the little bastard, in five minutes
I won't be hungry any more.

This argument appeals to me.
Such a logician deserves his dinner straightaway.

My wife's delightful laughter
holds the three of us together.
We rise and go into the house.

ABOUT THE POET

Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004) was born in Mumbai.
He is today perhaps the best known Indian poet
to have written in English. He had his education
at Wilson College, Bombay and later at Birbeck
College, London. A professor of American Literature at
Bombay University, Ezekiel has written several poems and
some plays. A proficient critic, Ezekiel lectured at a number
of universities in the U.S.A. and the U.K.

UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

1. Comment on the subtlety with which the poet captures the
   general pattern of communication within a family.
2. Poetic effect is achieved in the poem through understatement
   and asides. Discuss this with examples.
3. How is the idyllic juxtaposed with the pedestrian in the poem?
4. Explain the undertones in the statement:
   'Wife and husband in unusual rapport
   State one unspoken thought':
5. Comment on the capitalisation of all the words in the line:
   'Children Must be Disciplined'.
6. What makes the urgency of the child's demand seem logical?

TRY THIS OUT

1. Paraphrase the poem and notice the change in effect. Comment
   on the deft touch with which the poet transforms ordinary events
   into evocative poetry.

SUGGESTED READING

The Night of the Scorpion and Other Poems by Nissim Ezekiel.

The Limerick

The limerick is a small five line poem, expressing a single thought. It is usually funny with a punch or joke in the last line. In fact, the limerick is to poetry what slapstick is to comedy.

The rhyme scheme is 'a a b b a' : the first and second lines rhyme with the fifth, while the third and fourth lines rhyme with each other.

One reason why the limerick is popular is that almost anyone can try his/her hand at it. May be you could too!

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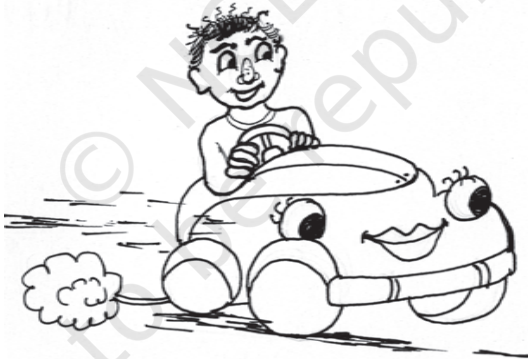
A novice was driving a car
When, down the road, his son said "Papa,
If you drive at this rate
We are bound to be late—
Drive faster!" He did, and they are.

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Earth's plan had a hopeful beginning
but man spoiled its chances by sinning.
We hope that the story,
Will end in Earth's glory
But at present the other side's winning!

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There was once a man from Peru
Who dreamed he was eating his shoe
He woke up with a fright
In the middle of the night
And found that it was perfectly true!

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There was a teacher named Ms Brass
Who was blessed with an unruly class
They slept and snored
And completely ignored
Theorems like Pythagoras.