To this enigmatic list of what is here to be “enjoyed”, one may just as easily, and perhaps with greater justification, add poetry. To this proposition Ezekiel’s *Collected Poems* stands as abiding testimony.

Ezekiel’s first collection of verse, *A Time to Change*, appeared in 1952, in the infancy of India’s emergence from the womb of British rule, and with it Indian poetry in English, which had long been pregnant with possibilities, finally found a voice that commanded attention. A language placed in a foreign environment takes time to root itself, and at first finds expression with greater ease in prose than in verse, as the appearance of Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938) and G.V. Desani’s *All About H. Hatter* (1948) showed. If we accept that a language is never really of the soil until it flowers into poetry, then Ezekiel’s *A Time to Change* (1952) and *Sixty Poems* (1953) must be invested with even greater significance than we might ordinarily be inclined to ascribe to most works of poetry. It is perhaps no accident either that the first blossoms of the birth and growth of modern Indian poetry in English should have come from the pen of a poet who, while very much an Indian, belongs to a community that in India was very small to begin with, and has in recent years become almost negligible, a veritable drop in the vast ocean of the Indian population. Born in Bombay of Jewish (Bene-Israel) parents, Ezekiel wrote in “Background, Casually” (p.179) of how he “went to Roman Catholic school, / A mugging Jew among the wolves.” Ezekiel may have had to contend with his Jewishness, as any other Indian writer may have to contend with his caste, religion, or ethnic background, but he appears not to have had to struggle, unlike many other Indian poets writing in English, over the choice of writing in one language or the other. English is, it may be supposed, Nissim Ezekiel’s language of mother-wit.

We further learn in “Background, Casually” that at twenty-two Ezekiel went abroad, and in the two “London seasons” that passed by, “Philosophy”, “Poverty”, and “Poetry” were the “three companions” that shared his basement room. Knowing,
or imaginged, that he had failed “in everything, a bitter thought”, Ezekiel left

in an English cargo-ship
Taking French guns and mortar shells
To Indo-China, scrubbed the decks,
And learned to laugh again at home.

“How to feel it home, was the point.” Like almost any Indian returning “home” after a fairly long spell in the West, Ezekiel felt exasperated. Those infernal Hindus, all one and the same, talked too loudly, and much worse.

They hawked and spat. They sprawled around.
I prepared for the worst. Married,
Changed jobs, and saw myself a fool.

All a man requires, Ezekiel has written in “A Time to Change” (p.4), is

To own a singing voice and a talking voice
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two.
Accommodated to their needs and changing moods
And patiently to build a life with these.

A wife he had acquired, and equally prepared Ezekiel became to accept his fellow Indians, dissolve into the Indian landscape, and make his home a “real home”.

Indeed, it is Ezekiel’s commitment to the land of his birth that his verses so visibly sing of, and that in such a manner as to make his poetry profoundly communicative and deeply moving. Of the commitments he has made, Ezekiel says:

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. (p.181)

Elsewhere this commitment surfaces in “The Egotist’s Prayers”,

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in an invocation addressed rather nonchalantly to He who is the dispenser of all favours and boons:

Confiscate my passport, Lord,
I don’t want to go abroad.
Let me find my song
where I belong. (p. 213)

The specificity of “where” he belongs is not left in doubt: “I cannot leave the island, / I was born here and belong” (“Island”, p.182). A poet of the city, Ezekiel finds that he cannot walk far away from Bombay: its magnetic pull keeps him at arm’s reach. His Bombay, a

Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
is nonetheless the metropolis of thousands of starry-eyed dreamers who arrive at its gates expectant with hope, but
“whose wages are in words and crumbs” (“A Morning Walk”, p. 119). Ezekiel can yet remember Bombay as one might a luscious mango, and far away in Edinburgh he longs for it as the fruit

on which I’ve lived
winning and losing
my little life. (p.293)

That island on which the poet expends his “little life” is no little place: it hurries him to “daily business”, and he goes about

minding the ways of the island
as a good native should,
taking calm and clamour in my stride. (p. 182)

Ezekiel takes “calm and clamour” in his stride just as the island too flowers both into “slums and skyscrapers”; the development of the island is homologous to the growth of the poet’s mind: each appears to reflect the other.

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Ezekiel, however, is a poet neither of the skyscraper nor of the slum. He can attain great heights, but rarely does so; similarly, the descent into the world of slums is rarely attempted. He feels deeply for the slum-dwellers, beggars, hawkers, and pavement sleepers—he is in fact a poet of great sensitivity and refined sensibility. But not for Ezekiel the extremes of human existence; neither skyscrapers nor slums will do. Buildings exist to house people, whatever the makers and wielders of the neutron bomb may have us believe, but how can a skyscraper, which obfuscates the central reality that we and everything else that matters are of this earth, or a slum, where dignity is offended at every turn, and men and women liable to forget how far they can soar to untrammeled heights, suffice for human habitation? Home is what one returns to, but such a home must needs be a house. The house of poetry that Ezekiel inhabits occupies a middling ground between a skyscraper and a slum; his poetry is never staggering, never hyperbolic, but equally it never fails to envelop us in its warmth, its humanity, and its homeliness.

Just how is Ezekiel a poet of the mean? In everything he does, Ezekiel strives for a certain equipoise, a certain reasonableness and tranquility of mind. One must learn to flow with the river’s tide, not only struggle against it, for

Both poetry and living illustrate:
Each season brings its own peculiar fruits,
A time to act, a time to contemplate.

Ezekiel wants neither the “yogi’s concentration”, nor “the perfect charity/Of saints nor the tyrant’s endless power”, but only a

human balance
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour. (pp. 39-40).

This “human balance” too, like beauty or the “matador’s dexterity”, must be “acquired”, but it must be so acquired as to be effortless, almost as a fruit in its own season. These are lines from “A Poem of Dedication”, but this dedication—to a

woman and to his art—is present in every poem. In “Prayer” we read:

If I could pray, the gist of my
Demanding would be simply this:
Quiétude. The ordered mind.
Erasure of the inner lie.
And only love in every kiss. (p. 54)

To ask for “only love in every kiss” may be to ask for unexamined sincerity and perfection, but perfection is far from Ezekiel’s mind. He asks only for the “erasure of the inner lie”, for the kiss that is not tarnished by the lust that knows no love or by a mechanical everydayness that shows no feeling. Elsewhere Ezekiel writes of

Preserving love against the secret worm,
To do this would be wise—
But the old are still as a fallen tree
And the young have shining eyes. (p. 100)

Here is an admission that the preservation of love against “the secret worm”, the “inner lie”, the corrosiveness and self-deception within every human being, is not easily gained, and no more easily gained than wisdom, which eludes the old, who have little to teach but of their follies, as much as the young, who lack the knowledge derived from experience. Perhaps to even strive for perfection is not quite human, and that is not only because “life is imperfection”, but because that would be akin to thinking the thought “out to the end”, which “would be the end of thought” (“Sotto Voce”, p. 51). This is also to say that thought cannot always be taken to its logical conclusion; if it is, it can only be at the risk of enforcing silence, of rendering some voice mute. A life between action and contemplation, not merely hovering helplessly between the two, but partaking of both, is one way of bridging the foibles and vicissitudes of human experience; and another such bridge, which we must engineer to construct, is to

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Let reason and emotion fare
As man and wife; let them quarrel,
Make love or live occasionally
Apart, and then be reconciled,
But let them not, indifferently,
Empty the house of words and music,
Partners of a marriage in decay. (p. 12)

Yet such engineering must never be altogether deliberate or
contrived, for the stillness of reason and emotion reconciled, the
stillness of those moments after love-making, must descend upon
us.

The stillness for which the poet yearns is not the stillness
which comes of a helpless resignation or the acceptance of
defeat. It is the stillness which stands in opposition to turbu-
ulence, the turbulence generated by an air that struggles to move,
threatens to explode, and agitates to be heard. In false move-
ment is stagnation, in a false plenitude is only the emptiness. As
Ezekiel writes in “Commitment” (p. 26),

There is a world of old simplicities
To which my calling calls me, turbulence
Is stilled in it and slowly understood,

and by such understanding is turbulence transmuted into holiness.
Ezekiel has no desire for the exotic or the extravagant; it is the
humdrum and the commonplace to which he is attracted, and
he has the gift and the humility, all too uncommon, of seeing
the holy in the commonplace. “I miss in my movements / the
stillness I read about / in mystics and saints”, says Ezekiel, and
he wonders, knowing that “holiness matters”; whether he must

go in search of it
to an ashram, or settle down alone
on the top of a mountain,
with an assured income of some sort
and a servant to do the cooking[

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or whether there is “a different way” (p. 272). Such a way he
has imagined

a different way
in which things become holy
as they remain the same.

“A Different Way” is a poem from the eighties, but it may
well have been from his first collection, A Time to Change
(1952), for there he had addressed himself “To a Certain Lady”
in rather similar terms:

Life can be kept alive
By contact with the unknown and the strange,
A feeling for the mystery
Of man and woman joined, exhaustion
At the act, desire for it again;
By contact with the commonplace,
A feeling for the touch of wood and water,
The sight of pictures on the wall,
Books, carpets, curtains, glass,
The simple things that make a home. (p. 28)

“A Different Way” does not celebrate “difference”, unless it be
the difference of knowing that humanity must, if we may carry
a metaphor from the market in this age of inexorable capitalism,
invest in a common fund. In “Transmutation”, Ezekiel boldly
asserts:

Do not, in your vanity, the tenuous thread
Of difference flaunt, but be
Asserted in the common dance... (p. 56)

The common dance is to hold on to life with “obstinate attach-
ment to the world” (p. 27), and to go on with the true business
of life,

The epic of walking in the street and loving on the bed...[

sensing, touching, feeling, seeing, kissing.

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It is not domesticity as such that Ezekiel eulogizes, but rather the sensuality in everyday life, a sensuality that we scarcely think exists, and that Ezekiel helps us to recover. Sensuality is an operative word, the underlying mode of expression and being, in much of Ezekiel's poetry and it explains why he is never more passionate than when he is writing about woman. Love may be idolized by Ezekiel, woman seldom is, but nonetheless she is the very incarnation of sensuality. The poems sing lustily but never crudely of breasts, thighs, buttocks, of all the other "landscape images" that a woman's body evokes, and of the smells of her body. We imagine and feel the hair in her armpits, the dampness between her thighs, the free and frank desire in her breasts as they rise to the occasion, we can sense also the ineluctable moment of adoration after undress, the arm gently stroking her back, and the limbs intertwined. "I see you here", Ezekiel appears to recall, "stretched out,"

not as complex pulls and tensions,

muscle, bone, skin, resilience

but as person, always

human in your naked unposed poses, resisting form. (p. 249)

The sexual act is not all: to be "nakedly beautiful", and in the presence of naked beauty, is another kind of fulfillment (p. 248). Nor is the sexual urge the only motive: as Ezekiel thinks of her body in its nakedness, the "details" interesting him as much as the "total form", he reckons that his motives are

sexual,
aesthetic and friendly

in that order, adding up to bed with you.

What matters that the skin is white, "black or grey / would do just as well." The poem continues:

The eyes are large,
so are the breasts—

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The friendly motive infects all of Ezekiel's work, but this is one infection that we all would gladly catch. The "different way" is to tread, not in the footsteps of the saint or the hedonist, but the largely forgotten path of friendliness. Ezekiel's Collected Poems is one of the very few works of contemporary English poetry that fills us with the spirit of friendliness.