



artwork by dhrubo eash

## The Fowler In Him

HASAN AZIZUL HUQ

(TRANSLATED BY JYOTIPRAKASH DUTTA)

Now he is opening the window. It must be morning outside. Because the old man on the third floor is coughing and a crow is sitting on the cornice. Besides, the sounds of sweeping from the main street, the clinking of the rickshaw bells and a thickly-wrapped cry of the old *koel* make it clear to him - the morning is waiting right out there.

He goes to open the window. The two sharp teeth of the window's cleat reach out to bite him in the finger. Without opening the window and gritting himself against the pain, the man comes back to the bed noiselessly. They were scattered all over the disheveled, dirty bed - his elder daughter is lying in an east-westerly fashion, the son points north-south, and his wife is all scrunched up in the corner.

Sitting on a corner of the bed, he prays for a glass of cold, dazzling water. It's time for the *neem* blossoms, he remembers, and while muttering "I long for *neem* fragrance" is instantly taken back to his horrifying dream. In his dream at 3:00 am this morning there was pitch darkness, not the slightest bit of wind and he was sunk in the darkness up to his throat. Stuffed, the lump of flesh that sheltered his heart thumped against the wall of his ribs, and in his desperate urge to escape this prison he wakes up to find his wife's right hand resting on his chest. With anger, bitterness and hatred, he flings away the hand - the hand, alas that modest, weak, veined hand of bones strikes the wall with a thud. In the darkness he does not see the gentle wave of pain that flits across her face, but when she turned towards the wall and lifting her two hands clumsily tried to embrace somebody he knew who it was. It makes him feel very tired, blind. His bed like a ditch, his offspring like a bunch of newborn, blind litter of puppies, and the lumpy, torn, foul-smelling bedsheet - the clothesrack, the clothes, table made of cheap wood, the tin suitcase, those old newspapers make him so weary, so tired. But astonishingly, it is then that he remembers that it is time for *neem* blossoms and that the *shajna* tree in the neighbouring judge sahib's courtyard was blooming with countless white flowers.

The thought makes him get up. He again goes over to the window and after pulling straight up the cleat forcefully bangs on the shut window with his left palm. The cleat suddenly releases downward with a loud, clacking sound. Now he opens the window, and not *neem* fragrance but a strange,

astonishing, cold morning breeze rushes in. Standing there by the window, like a famine-stricken man, like a *ganja* addict trying to get high, he inflates his chest and takes in a lungful of the crisp morning air.

"I'll go out, I'll go out right now, in my bare feet, with just a shirt on. I'll go out, these words start humming like bees in his ears.

His eyes are fixed on the endless sky now. He stares at that gray star. Listens to the old man's whimper and the rooster's crow. He turns his face and looks at the children, at his wife. He takes his shirt from the dress rack, comes out in bare feet, and it feels so wonderful, he thinks.

Which way do I go, now that I am out of the house, he thinks. Down this road are those big buildings - bank buildings, merchant offices, in which in a corner is a table where I live my life like a rat, that big, ugly building, and to the south down the other way is the road where on one side is the open, swelling drain and on the other is the launderer, grocery shops, the ravens - but on the northwest corner is a tunnel on whose path lies red brick chips, custard apple tree, the blooming *neem*, sparrows, *mynah* birds and then a little way ahead a small, open fields. On the road lie pearl-like dew drops and green grasshoppers. Therefore I'll go this way, the man thinks and with that heads down that path. Dewy grass bows down under his feet. He likes everything he sees. Everything seems so close to his heart.

At one time he goes out of the town limits. On the vast meadow bordering the town the misty veil is lifting quickly. The distant bank of the river is still not visible. One or two birds are waking up from sleep. There is not a single soul around. The meadow lies alone by itself, and the sun starts to spread its rays on the east. He breathes heavily while standing, and smelling the morning, feeling the grassy carpet down with his hands, moist with dew. Since there are no onlookers he takes this opportunity to start running, and as he runs he starts to scream a poem aloud. When his protruding stomach stops him, denies him any further freedom, and he has trouble breathing he tries to firm up his biceps but stops suddenly, wincing from the pain. But he beams with pleasure at having enjoyed all that freedom. Staring at that tall deodar tree in front of him in an absorbed way he now feels as if youth again is greening over the old cage of his heart. He sits in silence looking at the sun.

The meadow is sinking down in this rapture, the

sky starts to widen and finally is lost. Just as he becomes still, absorbed in his thoughts with bright fawns like arrows starting to frolic inside him, the faces of the women of his dreams floating like lotuses, with other trivia becoming a clear picture then possibly right at that time someone from behind him, "Hey there, how's everything? What's going on here, eh?" rebukes him. The middle-aged lawyer is out on his morning walk. And has asked the question standing right behind him. The lawyer can hardly stand erect on his feet with big Alsatian dog straining mightily on the leash. In a light blue suit Mr. Lawyer looks wonderful. He stands up on his feet with a startle. Turns his face and sees the morning walker. Then lowers his eyes to his dusty, cracked feet, lightly pats down his dirty cheap shirt with a hand - all with surprising promptness - bends forward a little, joins his palms and starts to bow and scrape. The vast meadow is so obscenely open that he finds no place to hide.

Mr. Lawyer transfers the leash to the other hand, and comes so near to him. The man starts to cringe within himself like a stray dog. "Having a morning walk, eh," Mr. Lawyer says, "having a morning walk - is that right?" - as a brittle smile rises to his lips and the grayish eyebrows hang above the cruel stare. "My dog needs a morning walk to feel hungry," the lawyer says in a gentle manner, and then floats away with the dog.

The man starts falling right then. The sky seems dark again. Birds fly away.

He keeps standing with his big blank eyes like those on meek Bengal cows. He feels the place where his muscular efforts caused him pain, he feels his protruding belly and his old, rotten ribs. Now he feels hungry - bathed in sunlight he returns home. The whole town is awake already - the hen pecking at the rubbish, the servants and maids quarreling while fetching water from the municipality tap. There's the tubular yellow *karabi* flower in bloom in someone's courtyard. He looks at all these while returning home. But as he walks the unevenly placed bricks on the muddy way leading to his home, the breathing trouble starts again.

He lets out a horrendous scream, "Where are you? Give my tea, hurry." His wife comes out. Her foolish face utters in surprise, "Where did you go so early in the morning?" He keeps staring at his wife's face with the anxious look of a criminal.

Tea and puffed rice are served. He chews the puffed rice sitting on the verandah thinking whether