



# fiction

## The Inseparables

by Akhtaruzzaman Elias

**A**SGURI' Sitting on the carpet Asgur Hossain was pouring the drops from the bottom of empty bottles on his tongue. When Sarwar Kabir's whisky-soaked voice resounded on the other side of the big drawing room, the Alsatian in the veranda reacted first. Asgur trembled in fear. Saying good-bye to guests Sarwar Kabir had just been to the bedroom. He would not have dared touch the bottles if he could have guessed that he would come back so soon. Even ten minutes earlier he was caressing Argus in the veranda. If he could have guessed that Sarwar Kabir would come back so early, he would have continued with that. It was the luck of Asgur that his boss did not simply notice when he did his favourite things. Sarwar Kabir was canned with 'Dimple' or 'Shiva's Regal'. If someone started now to discuss literature, constipation or his own brilliant academic career, he could easily pass the whole night without even lying down.

Controlling the stagger Asgur stood up and said, 'yes!'

Sarwar Kabir did not look back at all at his sucking of the bottles. 'Sit down here,' he said and half-lay on a sofa. It was clear that he would not get up so soon. Asgur surveyed him with an oblique glance, but could not read his mood. Mrs Jasmine B Kabir might have been in a bad temper; perhaps he could not have managed her. He was so powerful an officer that a part of the income of the millionaires came to the state treasury through his hand. And he had to pass at least four or five nights a month in the drawing room for the mood of his wife, half-lying or only leaning on a divan or a sofa. The sufferings of the man made Asgur so sad that he wished he had the same instead of him. And he was thinking of the days when he would be lucky enough to have such sufferings.

'Asgur, could you do something for me?'

Sitting on a stool Asgur became tentative. At the same time he looked, overwhelmed, at his boss and was surprised to see his politeness. He was only the friend of a brother-in-law of his sister. Was it a family relation? In fact, Asgur was there in search of a job. He could have ordered him straight. But he showed genuine modesty instead. Asgur said nothing as he did not know what to say in such a situation. Sarwar Kabir asked him, 'It's nothing enough, isn't it?'

'Yes, it's a quarter to one, twelve forty-three exactly.'

'Only?'

Asgur was obliged to smile as Sarwar Kabir smiled, 'No, it's not night enough. It's winter, you have the whole night ahead.' Asgur could understand that he would have to go five miles away to buy whisky. In odd times, Sarwar Kabir did not have these things done by the staff of his office where he was a kind and considerate boss. One of the brothers-

in-law of his sister had done those things for a year. And he got the reward of his devotion of ten or twelve months. Sarwar Kabir helped him get a job in an American shipping company. Asgur came to the house of Sarwar Kabir thanks to that Sikandar and he would also have something only if he could stick to him. Asgur decided to keep aside at least one bottle if he had to go to buy them now. He also visualised where and how to keep that.

'Who said it's cold? Don't you see I am sweating only with a panjabi on?' Yes, that was true. Asgur could have walked naked through the streets if he had taken so much of 'Shiva's Regal'. Sarwar Kabir asked him, 'Don't you feel the breeze of spring?'

'Yes, the month of Falgun is coming.'

'Right. Falgun's coming. Isn't it?'

'Yes, next month. In the middle of February.'

'That's right. Anyway, I'll bother you a little.'

'It's nothing, Sir, I've to go to Agrabad?'

Usually he called him 'Kabir Bhai' but felt easier to call 'Sir' while carrying out an order.

'You can go anywhere, even to Agra or Delhi. You've to bring some oranges. Now.'

'Oranges, now?'

'Yes, I don't know what happened suddenly to Pinky. She wants to eat oranges now. Normally she takes nothing at night, not even a glass of water. She says there's fat even in water. I told her several times to take at least some fruits. When I opened the fridge I found apples and bananas but no oranges.'

'Would apples do?' Asgur asked the question and immediately got afraid lest Sarwar Kabir might take him for a lazy good-for-nothing young man. So he corrected it at once. There can be acidity if one takes oranges at night.'

'There's more chance of acidity in apples.'

Then the advice about bananas would be risky. And the position of bananas in their society was not clear to him.

Leaning the head on the sofa Sarwar Kabir said, 'She wants oranges. It helps her reduce her weight. You know, sourness kills fat.'

'Yes it does.' He was always enthusiastic to master his hard Bengali as well as his English.

'Take the car out,' Sarwar Kabir gave him a one-hundred-taka note and said, 'Maybe the driver is sleeping. The poor chap worked all the day, now he should be damn tired. See if he gets up.'

'I'll drive myself rather.'

'Good,' Sarwar Kabir took a 'Far Eastern Economic Review' from the shelf of the table and said with a small smile, 'very good. Go.'

When he was taking the car out, the Alsatian barked a little. Asgur called, 'Argus!' The call was rather harsh. Did Sarwar Kabir hear it? At once he called more softly and caressingly, 'Argus!'

This time the voice was rather low. Did it reach Sarwar Kabir's ears?

No fruit-shop was open in Chak-bazar. Who would wait for him with oranges in the dead of night? So he turned right towards the south-east. The drive was excellent. All the streets were clear. He passed so many times Sarmon Road; he drove on that street even when he was learning to drive with Sikandar in an old Jeep of 'Zaman International'. But it had never been so strange. The hills looked mysterious through thick and thin mists. Sometimes there shone several lights on the hill 'Joy', now those lights faded for mists. Sometimes one ray of light divided itself into two or three and they played hide-and-seek. The light from the headlight of the car melted and spread piercing the mists. That dull darkness seemed so strange. As the windows of the car were open, cold breaths of the hills entered through them and hit him. He hesitated to close them, as if someone would be angry. The trees on the hill were fading away; suddenly he saw the dark reddish moon in a position of hatching eggs on the leafless branch of a bald tree. It would be a scandal if the moon fell from the hill breaking the branch. Asgur withdrew his eyes from that scene and accelerated to high speeds. Did the fear of ghosts attack him again? Only four years earlier he had been living in a tin-shade house in the suburbs, almost remote suburbs, adjacent to the post-office at the place of his father, a postmaster. Now the banana-trees were trembling at the laying of eggs of the dark reddish moon very high on the maladied branch of the leafless tree. Now he could not afford that fantasy and those fears. Yet that fear was more attractive to him than the adventure for oranges.

Even the dogs of Reazuddin Bazar were sleeping. They got up from mild sleep at the mild sound of the car and looking at Asgur they started to bark. He felt like kicking them. But Asgur should have been grateful to them because at the chorus of barking someone opened his shop and came outside. He seemed to be an employee of the shop. First he did not care much. Asgur presented himself as an acquaintance of Ibrahim Showdagor. He brought secretly transistors from the port to sell to him. His name worked.

Then he drove straight to Madarbari. He thought that Sarwar Kabir should have the oranges a little bit later. It was not so easy to get oranges at one-thirty. But in Madarbari at the house of Asgur everyone was sleeping. When his father had been working in the post-office near the police station or the railway station he had been used to jumping and saying, 'who's that?' even when a lizard walked on the tin of the roof. And now that man had sound sleep as he had a building constructed with the money he had saved by leading a miserable life all those days. After retiring from service he had nothing to do except sleep all day long. Asgur got angry to think of that.

He knocked at the door and shouted, 'Open the door, open the door!'

His mother opened the door with drowsy eyes and she was the victim of his wrath. 'Do you all die when you sleep? I knocked at the door, I kicked, yet why did no one get up? Why doesn't the calling bell ring? Did you take out the bulb? The bulb of the calling bell was taken out and installed in the kitchen as the bulbs often fused. Asgur's father only shouted when he was told to buy them. His mother could not answer as she got nervous at the shout. The bones of her jaw got fixed while yawning. And she had to hide that in fear. She said with her lips covered with saliva, 'The bulb of the kitchen fused suddenly.'

'And it's me now to buy one? There's no man in the house?'

Apart from his father, was there any man in the house? Azhar, his younger brother, was too young. He was in class four in school. His only sister was married and living in Dacca. So the onus of buying bulbs fell on his father. Golam Hossain was coming that way to join the conversation between the mother and the son. He had also something to say to his son. But he sat on the chair of the dining room near the corridor lest his son might frown at him.

Asgur entered the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. His mother said, 'Stay a little and eat. I'm heating the curry.'

Asgur got very angry to see inside the refrigerator. The shelves were full of courgettes, aubergines and those cheap things. Did Asgur bring the fridge with so much risk to put such stuffs? He required a lot of efforts to convince a seller of an American ship, then the people of customs, police and a lot of harassment. And in that fridge they put those bloody stuffs! Asgur took the aubergines and the slices of courgettes out of the fridge and threw them on the floor and he put there almost a dozen of oranges. He would be able to manage Sarwar Kabir with two dozens. His mother leaned to take the vegetables and put them on the table. Asgur closed the refrigerator and looked back at his mother said, 'You won't eat, papa?'

'Those things?'

'Old boy!' said his mother in a drowsy voice, 'There's a curry of 'tanga' fish and 'puin shak'. Eat papa.' These were the favourite things of Asgur. But hearing the menu he got sad and angry. He did not even look at his mother.

Afraid, Golam Hossain was observing his son. The fear was clear in his thin and dark figure. Asgur could not approve of that fear. A month earlier he had seen the father of Sarwar Kabir. He was a different type of father. A high government official of the British and the Pakistani regimes, he had a stalwart face. He came from Dacca on the second flight of the day. Asgur drove to airport to receive him. Getting into the car he said, 'Tuku is very busy, isn't he? Is the Finance Secretary still in Chit-

tagong?' What a great son but he said nothing except 'Tuku' about him. Golam Hossain lowered his head and said, 'Papa, I was looking for cement all the day, but did not find.'

'You did not get?'

'No, the works of the floor of new room were stopped. I paid the labourers for nothing.'

Asgur knew that both the sentences of his father were false. He did not look for cement because he would have to pay then himself. And the man, who was reluctant to pay the labourers even if they worked all day long, said he had paid them only for coming. Was it so easy? Asgur found a chance to show his anger as his father lied, 'Why did you pay them for nothing? Couldn't you tell them to go away in the morning?'

When Golam Hossain was staring indifferently Asgur lowered his voice with contentment, 'Where will you have cement? Go to lazuddin's shop at Kalibari on Monday. They'll give you twenty-five bags of cement if you refer to my name.'

'Price?' Golam Hossain asked without looking at him. Asgur was disgusted at the meanness of the man and said, 'They'll be paid earlier.' 'Will I bring them in a pushcart?' at that anxiety of Golam Hossain he took out three ten-taka notes from his hip-pocket and threw them on the table. He would have a little problem if Sarwar Kabir asked for accounts of the hundred-taka note. Sarwar Kabir, however, was not a man who would give money and ask for accounts. On the other hand, next two days he would tell him to buy things without giving any money. That meant those people had all the accounts in the mind. Asgur was thinking how to manage that money and standing there, put his right leg on the chair and started to peel off an orange.

'Eat rice. If you take oranges now, you won't be able to eat rice.' How long would he bear those typical Bengali sentences of his mother? They thought they should eat a lot of rice whenever they felt hungry. The wife of Sarwar Kabir was passing day after day without rice. Did her health break down or did she become more beautiful? Sarwar Kabir was right in saying that one could do nothing without a definite aim. The aim in life of Jasmine Kabir was to get slim. All her thought, her happiness and sorrow and even her philosophy, everything evolved a common centre - to present herself attractively in clubs and parties. She had to sacrifice for that, however. Dieting was not the only thing; she had to avoid lying down whenever she felt like sleeping even when she felt like having sex. Could that retired postmaster and his wife understand their devotion to win over things like hunger, sleep and desire? No, those people were incorrigible. Asgur heaved a sigh. It was no use talking to them. He made steps to go outside. Seeing the dirty T-shirt of his father he stopped and said with a frowning, 'Why do you put these things on? Those ex-

pensive sleeping suits I bought, will you take them to the grave?'

There was nobody in the drawing room of Sarwar Kabir. When the guard opened the door, Argus barked a little and lay down recognising Asgur. Now how would he send the oranges in? Asgur made some sounds as if he were coughing. He called Abdul several times but got no response. He was afraid to call more loudly lest he might break someone's sleep. Did boss get angry? He should not have been to Madarbari. If Ma'am had slept without eating, there could have been several reactions. For instance, sleep was impossible to be good without eating. Bad sleep meant hangover and hangover meant bad temper. And if she was in a bad temper she could say anything to her husband. That meant Sarwar Kabir would also be in a bad temper. Then what would happen to Asgur? The previous day he wanted to remind once of the job in 'McDonalds and Robinson' but could not do so as his boss was not in a good mood. It was not so difficult to manage the job. He would have the job immediately only if Sarwar Kabir phoned them once or twice. They embezzled a lot of money, crossed all the limits to theft. Sarwar Kabir was very much angry with them. One of their directors was trying hard to manage Sarwar Kabir who made him hang about. The more he would hang about the more Sarwar Kabir would have commission. It was the perfect time now; he could manage the job for Asgur only if he wanted. And why did Sarwar Kabir make Asgur hang about? Asgur had done a lot for him. Buying oranges at midnight was a petty thing. Who could count how many risky things he was doing for him? He had to tackle one-fourth of the commission that came in kind from big firms. He had to bring things directly from the port. Were these so easy? Asgur was not reluctant to work hard; he did not hesitate even to take risk. But all these, did they not deserve a good job? First few days he made Asgur hang about with the hope of a job in the 'container service' of 'Adriatic Bengal Bay Line', a big company, with high salary and heavy commission of underworld business plus a furnished flat in Kulshi. Furnished meant not only beds, chairs and tables but also a refrigerator, a washing machine, utensils, kitchen gazettes, even several sets of bed sheets every year, bed covers, curtains and so forth. He would even manage an Alsatian if he wanted. In that job there was risk, seventy-five per cent of the business was with smuggled goods and it was not sure whether the company would give him full protection if he got caught. It was normal when they would give so much facilities. But the brother-in-law or the nephew of a minister got the job. Would that relative of the minister give such services to Sarwar Kabir? Sometimes Asgur thought he would go away.

To be continued

Translated by Swapan Barman

## poems

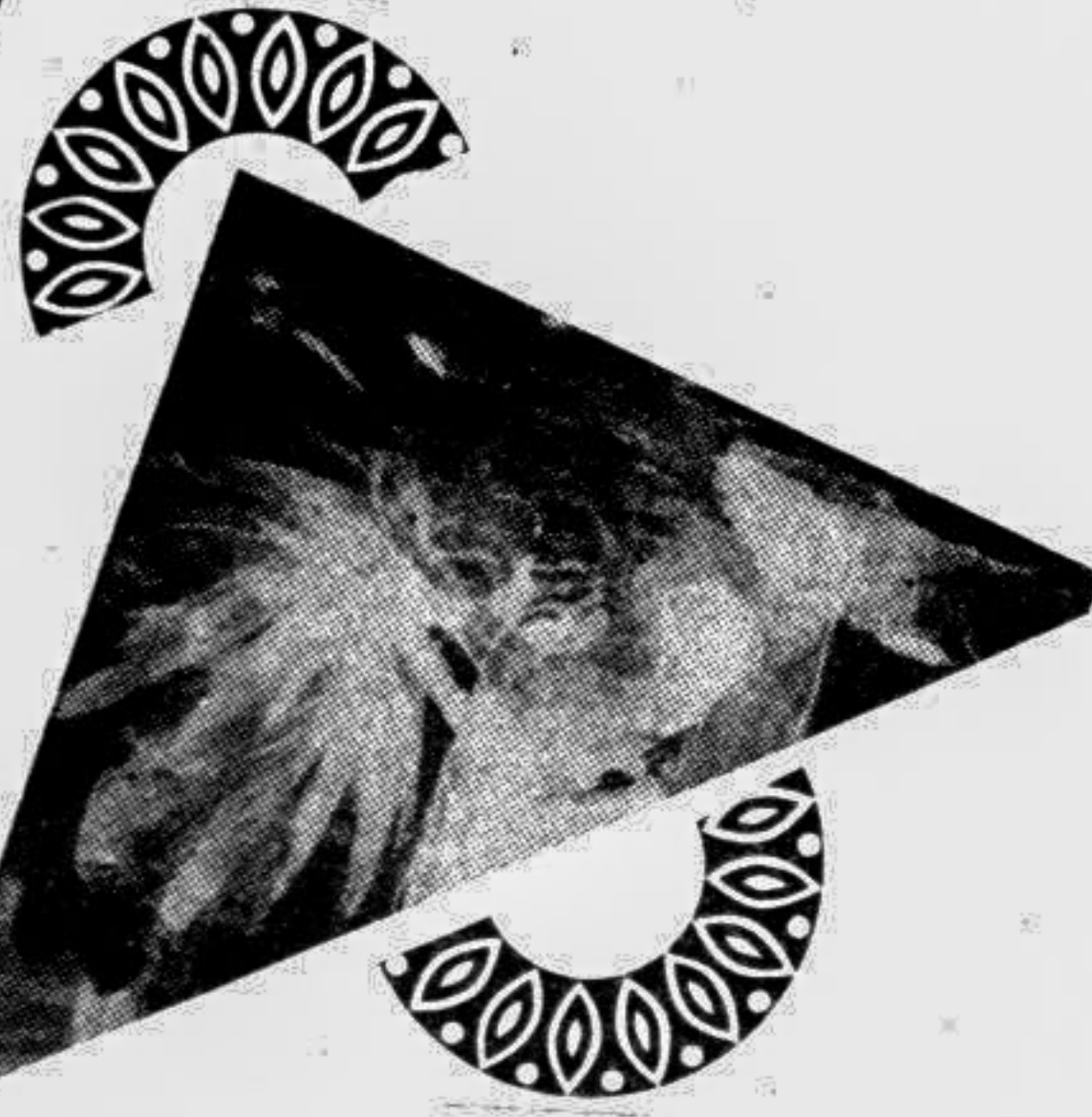
### Song Lyrics of Winter by Rabindranath Tagore

#### Shiter Hawa

The winter wind quivers Amlaki branches.  
Leaves shiver as if in rhythm, and drop off one by one  
Till trees look barren and forsaken  
And Amlaki fruits no longer can stay hidden.  
All day long I wait for Him  
Whose whim it is to empty and fill up again.  
Every now and then winter seems to be calling:  
At what dawn will I know its time to give up everything?

#### Elo Je Shiter Bela

Winter days are here and the year is ending.  
Get set for reaping and gathering crops in.  
Hurry up, hurry up, fieldloads of work remain  
And while we tarry, twilight sets in.  
The work of harvesting must come to an end,  
When the evening star lights up the heavens.  
Prepare a place lovingly in your courtyard then  
For one who will be your night's companion.



#### Poush Toder

Poush calls you all to its festival — come, come away.  
Miraculously, its baskets fill with ripe harvests this day!  
Village wives in paddy fields are stirred by the wind.  
Wondrously, golden sunlight all over earth is spreading.  
The sound of flutes playing in fields the heavens delight.  
Open, open all doors — who would not see such a sight!  
Ricestalks bathe in the dew and light breaks into a smile  
Earth's joy overflows and the wonders of life beguile.

#### Eki Maya

What perverse art made you hide yourself in decrepit winter?  
My soul can't bear the scene, can't endure the sight at all,  
Maharajah, will you be so miserly with yourself  
In the midst of your own teeming creation?  
Not knowing whether you will receive its offerings or not,  
The wintry wind moans in the forest like a mournful veena  
Why lavish yourself on some desert landscape?  
Where have you concealed your cornucopias?  
How can cuckoos sing in withered leaves and barren branches?  
Timorously, we muse on your mute message and empty assembly.

Translated by Fakrul Alam

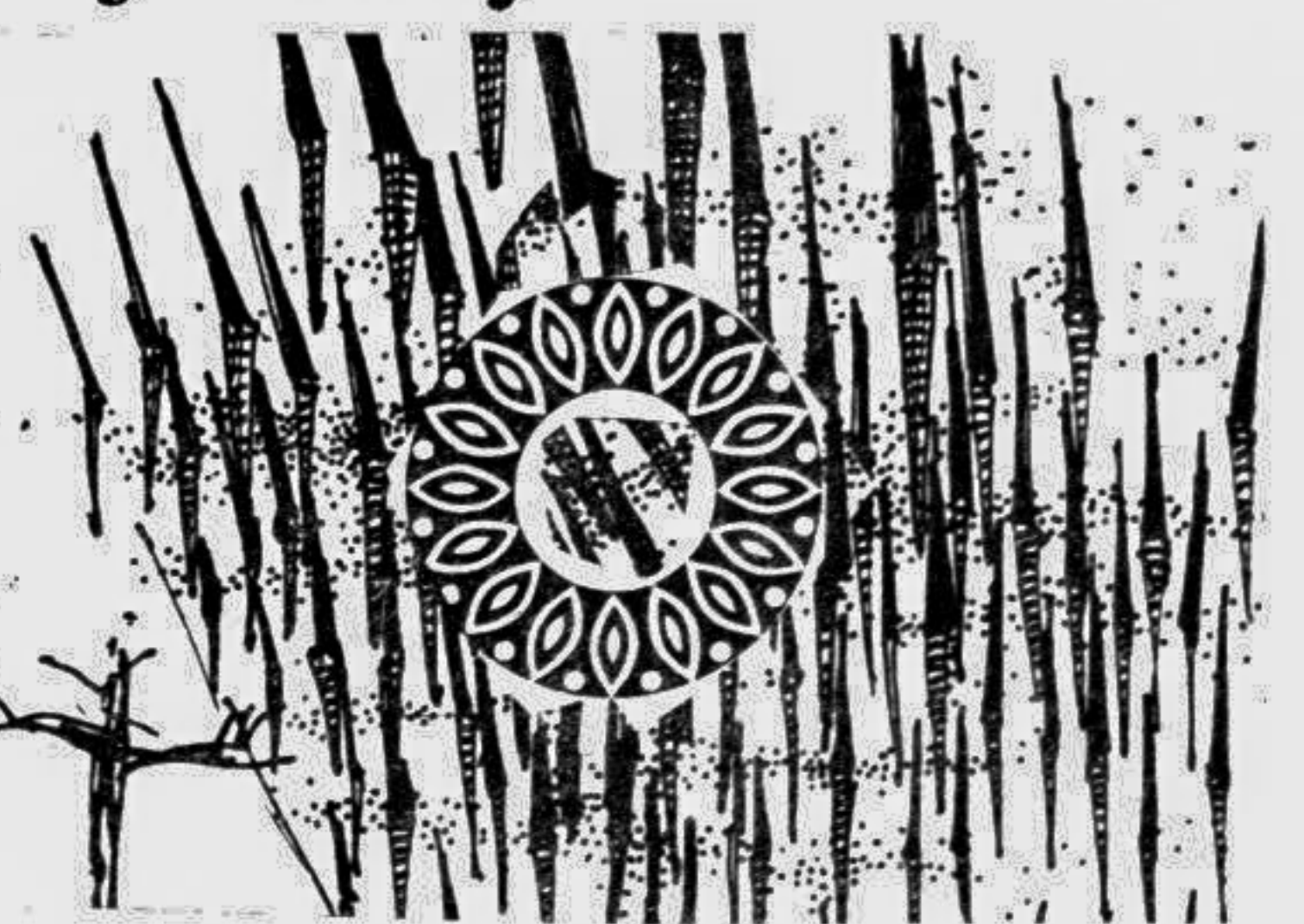
### Three poems by Al-Mujaheedy

#### Silhouette

I have found eternity —  
Who will warmly receive this rare vessel?  
Who stays beside me — Look unto me,  
Listen to its echoes as they sound repeatedly.  
In the verdurous gloom of the prairie  
Wander I — I touch your body  
I look at the reflection and  
In the silhouette I hear the impatient sonata.  
In the temple of your heart, build domes,  
Oh, temptress, and sing your sensual songs in praise

#### The Cleft Moon

Divide me tonight  
Like a slice of the moon  
Tomorrow night, hold me close in your solitude:  
Like the uncleft moon.  
Whatever your proximity says to give me, obey—  
Give to me...  
Whatever my proximity makes you want, obey—  
Take all...  
Come, let us satisfy this world  
Scatter over it our expressions, our desires.  
Undivided...  
Uncleft...  
Come, let us blind the world's eye.  
Let the world become speechless  
at our nudity.



#### Some Lines in Free Verse

See how incompatible  
Looks your end line!  
The distant sky moves even farther away.  
How depressing  
All looks! The picture of the horizon!  
Your beginning was  
Like the end;  
When you tapped the wind  
Roses would shower down  
Slowly the petals formed groups  
I would only pick them up in armfuls  
My hands would fill  
And yet, no garland-maker would approach.  
Garlands of words would not create a poem in free verse  
Only depression  
Would fill each letter. Where lies the source of the sea? In each wave.  
Words. The word, its waves  
Merely enmeshed you.  
See how  
Incompatible  
Seems your end line?

Translated by Arifa Ghani

