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Writing Sample

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Excerpt from Benares and In Babylon.

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some bushes, his every movement shattered into fragments.

When I tell Salma that there's almost too much to see, she stops for a moment by the fence of a maize field. It's hard making out her face, the road isn't that well lit, but I can tell she's looking at me wide-eyed as she murmurs, 'Another time.' She takes my hand, plays with my fingers, then suddenly cuddles up to me like a child, her arms round my neck. I think of the desert again and a thousand little things that I immediately forget, but the feeling of leaving remains, overwhelming me afresh.

We can see other fields and a few scattered houses painted white with blue shutters and a shed that looks like a fairground booth. A paraffin lamp is hanging at its door, feebly illuminating some vine-clad arbours and patterning the occupants' faces with rings of light and inky shade. All the men have gold teeth and their eyes seem to roll like madmen's. Salma tugs my arm and asks if I'm scared; it must be a thieves' den. Her expression changes when she sees a striped hammock at the back of the shed and a photograph of a baby hanging on one of the varnished wooden walls.

A light moves down the steps and casts the shadow of a thin silhouette with a battered old headdress on the crumbling walls. The figure cracks her fingers and

neck and brushes past a child who is raking the gravel. She switches off her pocket torch and launches into her tirade with an amused laugh; she seems from another world. Then she opens the slatted door and slips out into the moving crowd. It's dark again under the trees and not a breath of wind stirs the leaves.

Salma turns the corner by the wooden building and looks at the people in the street. Two women are sitting on the ground, their backs against the roller door of a warehouse. They are talking nineteen to the dozen, fanning themselves with bits of cardboard. Two lovers are leaning on a fence with their arms around each other: a young girl in a party dress and a boy in a t-shirt and jeans with pockets on the knees. They are looking at a long, brightly coloured queue stretching towards a cinema ticket office. Hovering in front of a bistro, his legs trembling, a grey-haired colossus of a man is singing in a deep voice. He's wearing new boots, a suit with gold buttons and a cowboy hat perched on the back of his head. Salma balances herself on the edge of the pavement and tells me about the people in Baghdad who think they're in a film and get all their gestures and expressions from actors; it's their way of looking at life through rose-coloured spectacles. 'Or maybe it's because they like stories,' I say.

Some children run out into the road, as if they're

lost, babbling away in caustic, shrill voices and letting out harrowing screams that burst my eardrums. They have a wooden mask, a green painted stick and an umbrella, which they are trying to frighten each other with, and they tear off down the slope, screaming even louder. There's a squealing of tyres as a lorry comes out of a bend and brakes viciously to avoid the smallest of the children. The driver curses Ratface who runs to his mother who is calling him loudly. His cheeks are covered with red blotches and his dark eyes seem to shine with a demented joy.

Salma pushes open the door of the bistro and glances around at the piles of suitcases and canvas bags, the puffy, sleepy faces lined with wrinkles and cracks, the open trunk full of provisions, and the hats, glasses and bottles, full and empty, on every table. Steadying himself on a walking stick, a man quickens his step and goes to speak to a woman in uniform who is holding tightly onto a wall. Her expression becomes distant and she seems to answer with a hint of regret. Beyond them the pillars are blue stone and the floor is covered with greasy bits of paper. And in a corner of the restaurant, between two tubs of sand dotted with cigarette butts and plastic cups, a child is alone with its marbles and a dog is lying on its back, gazing up at the lights and the insects playing with their shadows.

We sit at the bar near a group of teenagers and order a beer, a house cocktail and some vegetable fritters. Old framed photos on the wall show overjoyed railway workers standing in front of a steam train, a station master waving his little grey flag and sycamores along the avenue as tall as the station buildings.

'The Karbala train is late,' the barman tells us in a lazy voice. He jerks his chin at the occupied tables with their places set too close.

Near the emergency exit a hawker is trying to sell cheap shoes to three silhouettes in black. We can hear sums being mentioned, outraged responses, talk of losses and money to be recouped and then a girl butts in, interrupting the hawker with an abrupt motion of her hand. She is wearing a yellow dress and would like various different pairs of high-heeled shoes.

Salma crumbles a fritter and tells me that she has always dreamed of driving across Iraq, stopping wherever she wanted. I ask her if there are places she'd like to visit and she tells me about Najaf, the city of grave-diggers, Fao, the ghost city and Bassorah on the Shatt al Arab with its marshes and reed palaces, because it's a terrible waste not knowing your own country.

'How about you,' she says, twisting round on her stool, 'how was Babylon?' I put my tankard down on the bar and shake my head: I have almost completely

forgotten, but it will come back later, or else I find it difficult to talk about. She doesn't insist, but brushes her hair off her forehead and looks at an old woman who is begging in silence, squatting in a striped loin-cloth.

We hear gunshots when we get outside. Dogs begin barking and running in all directions and bats leave their branches and fly in circles over our heads. A woman picks up a screaming child and walks back and forth across the garden, from one bench to the other, fanning the child with a handkerchief. I peer at a dark path along which men are walking in nightshirts. The trees seem to have been turned to stone; there's not a breath of wind and in the distance one can see the light of the street-lamps falling like sheets of rain on the passers-by and the flags.

'Someone's calling you,' I say, stopping by a wooden pole. Salma stands on tiptoe and stares at the passengers of a stationary bus. A man has stood up, taken a few steps on the broken paving stones and now he calls her again from the opposite pavement. He is wearing baggy trousers that are frayed at the bottom and a luminous flowery shirt.

'My neighbour,' she says, raising her arms in a victory salute. 'He looks like a singer but I have forgotten his name.' He goes and sits back down on his bench

near a canal in which flowerbeds are reflected, while she beats time, drumming her fingers on the parapet. One of her knees is jiggling under her dress and she looks from the man to the pole. 'Yes, you're the same.'

We talk about the people who are being displaced or fleeing the country. Most end up in makeshift camps, packed in like rotten fish. Salma has an uncle in Iran and cousins in Amman. She'd have liked to go too, but her parents had no money. She kicks a tin can furiously, sending it skidding down the bank; anyway, she couldn't live anywhere except Baghdad. We hurry past a bushy hedge and watch children going to their homes in a dark little alley. There's a lot of laughing that goes on and on and whistling and merry, mocking calls.

'Sticks and dirt,' she says, referring to the courtyard of a white-washed building. The pediment is cracked and the vegetable garden overgrown with weeds.

A man appears at a turn in the road, bent double in the dust as he strains to pull a cart. He's like something projected by a magic lantern: you can't hear his footsteps or the cart's wheels; there's only two sets of shadows going up the street in strange silence. They lengthen as they cross the bridge, and then disappear behind the railings of a garden in full flower.

'A smuggler,' Salma tells me. She slows down in front of a shop window and distractedly reads the adverts.

Suddenly her face becomes gloomy and lines appear around her mouth. 'They're hand in glove with the police. Not that that stops them blowing each other's brains out now and then when resentments build up.'

We can see the church's reflection in the shop window; its courtyard is full of cars and dogs strolling along by the wall. On a table by its gate, a hunchback is unwinding crepe streamers and a strip of printed material that looks like parchment. He rolls his eyes when he sees a child on all fours in piles of dead leaves and roughly gestures at him to go inside. A man takes off his hat as he passes under the porch and goes through the spring door that is framed by crowns of thorns. He falls on his knees in front of the altar rail and seems to stare at the brown cotton ribbon hanging above the pulpit between two garlands of marigolds from the marshes.

It's the heat that's driving people out-of-doors. Lovers walk under the trees of the avenue, a man with frizzy hair on his chest is sitting on a little ruined wall, taking the air, and a girl in high heels is click-clicking merrily along by a building's front door. It's the heat, the migraines and those bombs no one can forget. A glass door opens at the end of a passage with a slightly vaulted ceiling that is lit by the weak, misty glow of a lamp. A woman in a brightly coloured dress leans on the door and calls in a childlike voice to an old man

who is drowsing on a venerable divan. He mops his forehead under his broad-brimmed hat and yawns unceremoniously as he contemplates the crows flapping their wings in the trees.

'I've never been to Babylon,' Salma says, her eyes turned on a narrow path, which winds through an overgrown garden and then perhaps down to the river. But she remembers photos in her school books and Nebuchadnezzar who she used to think was a horse like Pegasus. She smiles and leads me to the bottom of the garden. She stays silent for a moment, lying on the grass near the rock; a delivery tricycle spins on the spot, tyres squealing, then rides off amongst the flowerbeds with a jingling of little bells.

'The river air will do us good,' I say, passing a building with a clock with figures on it and casement windows. We squeeze between billboards to get to the wall which we lean our elbows on as we watch a ship docking. Men covered in medals like admirals gather on a part of the bridge that is lit by multi-coloured lights. We can't hear what they are saying but it must be important; their eyes bulge as they talk and they wave their arms about as if they're looking for buoys to grab hold of. Some raise their heads: a voice from a loudspeaker announces that the anchor has been dropped, they can disembark.

'An argument,' Salma says to me when they start trading blows. 'It's too hot.' She rubs her face with the sleeve of her dress, as if she's wiping off the grime.

'How do you say "sun" in your country?'

'We say "sun".'

Her lips part in a vague smile as her unblinking eyes remain fixed on the mêlée. A few passers-by stop; some heads even appear at the windows of a building facing onto the dock. I put my hand on her shoulder and whisper in her ear, 'But we call streetlamps "first lights".'

Barlen Pyamootoo was born in Mauritius in 1960. In 1976 he moved to Strasbourg where, after completing his literary degree, he became a part-time teacher. In 1994 he returned to Mauritius where he currently runs a publishing house. He is also in the process of completing his third novel.

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