



James Lower

BY THE RIVERS,
WE REMEMBER

“My Grampa beat the Bible into me,” I said, tracing out all those years behind me since I’d seen him last, the thousands upon thousands of miles between that desert and the place I called home. “There’s a Psalm that goes, ‘By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered....’ Comes to mind now, don’t it?”

A few miles from base, we’d pulled the Humvee off for a moment’s peace to cool our day-drenched cams and catch the view. Three of us, all soldiers, all a month out of heavy raids west of Baghdad, reclined on the slope of a scree hill backed by the Euphrates, watching as the blazing white fire of the sun dropped low over the scrubland. Below us sprawled the remains of Babylon: an unearthed skeleton of a city, no roofs, only mortared walls dug out of sun-baked dust, labyrinths of hallways and temple chambers that blackened as shadows crept up into every crevice. We’d come, the three of us, to sit there by the river that bends where Babylon once sat, only we didn’t come to weep and remember Zion. We came to somehow, God willing, forget, if only for the time it took the twilight to fade.

I sat, arms lain across drawn-up knees, the sunset deepening in my skin, my rifle set across the rocks but always within reach. Jonas and Pearle stretched out to my left, quelling their own fight shudders for thoughts of home. They couldn’t care less about the ruins, I couldn’t shake the trance they put me in. I couldn’t shake a thousand similiar sunsets across my family’s east Georgia fields, of my Grampa’s knuckled hand drawn back as he rasped verses and psalms at me. When I shipped out the first time, he crushed my hand in his and said, “Don’t



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deny what's come before you, boy. That desert's older than you ever grasp, and I wanted the fields of my family, the sunsets on my Grampa's porch, somewhere far from the mortared cities of the desert. There was no hope to forget what I had seen there. My fate was in the remembering, in the sitting by the bends of rivers to think of home.

Feeling my way around a corner, I ran into a tumble of eroded bricks, another breach in the city walls. I clamored out, emerging from the darkness into cool open air. The storm had passed quickly, leaving clear and quiet stillness in its wake. Above me a crescent moon hung in the midst of countless stars, hovering indifferently as I sprinted into the open.

Racing up and over the scree hill, I reached the road, the tire tracks of our Humvee blown clear as if they'd never been there. Jonas and Pearle had gone, still circling to somehow find me or returned back to report me missing, gone AWOL, the fight too much for me to bear. I ran down the asphalt screaming, so much sand and time stretching between me and where I meant to run. From the Gate of God to the shores of a newer world, where great temples and towers still glittered and crumbled and fell, all of it, in the end, becomes blowing sand. All I knew was that I was running forward, screaming my lungs out across ancient lands, with no one around to hear me except the ghosts following close behind.

the mentions in the Bible. It was closer to home than I could

“Listen, I’m feelin you,” said Pearle as he flipped on his helmet and scraped to his feet. “Place is Biblical and all that for sure. But don’t worry your little head too much about it. We gotta get back for chow.”

“Yeah, boy, gotta embrace the suck,” Jonas said, grabbing his rifle and pivoting up. “And check it, damn if that ain’t a Taz devil whipping up across the river. Time to run for cover, y’all.”

I turned to look back over our hill and sure enough the horizon blurred as rising fogs of sand rolled towards us. Though it was a ways off, we’d have to floor it to get back to base for proper shelter.

“Make your peace with it,” Pearle said, standing over me. “We’ll give you a minute, but that’s all, bro. Be down streetside when you’re ready.”

As the two of them jogged down the backside of the hill to the Humvee, their boots scattering pebbles with every step, I stood to take in the ruins one last time. “By the rivers of Babylon,” I mouthed and closed my eyes.

That’s when it came, that wave, that pulse of dizziness I’d been fighting off for weeks. This one hit hard, bringing with it visions of that barren stretch of highway up north, the one we’d been caravanning down when we tripped the mine. The asphalt beneath us had disintegrated in a flash, pouring upwards to swallow me whole, a rushing cloud of smoke, debris, and heat, the shock wave crushing through my chest, my organs, knocking my helmet off, backwards, lost. The flashback took me, filling my ears with a deafening hum, shuddering through my muscles like electric current. Though I reached for it, I lost my balance and pitched forward, blind, tumbling down the scree toward the city. The rocks dug through my cams, scraping

and me along with it.

about this city of ghosts that awakened to draw in the night my feet. Now there was something more, something familiar first tour when I felt the oil fields rush and boil beneath something in those shadows struck a chord in me, like on my looted ever since the city finally fell a thousand years back. their foundations crumbling into sand, trampled down and veined with alleyways. Only apparitions stood in their place, procession gates, the tower and temples, the hollow box-houses to relieve past glories. I tried to make out the cityscape: the As we spoke, the shadows lengthened, the ruins seeming this place you can’t get out, a’ight?”

too, D. Nobody’s clean no more. Nobody. Don’t get so deep in “Ain’t shit changed then,” Jonas said. “Shit’s on our hands earth. Think of all the blood that’s been split here.”

“I ain’t preaching, y’all,” I said. “Shit was center of the ancient kin, I still couldn’t stand them sometimes.

Those were my brothers, my squad, and even though eighth hellish months of clearing Fallulah’d brought us closer than You’d be wise to listen up.”

Pearle said, spitting into the dust. “Dec here’s trying to preach. “Man, you don’t know nothin’ bout no reggae songs,” suffarabs, right?”

know this from that reggae, maybe. Suckin the blood of the Jonas said, his bright Boricua face turned away. “Only “Hell, Darnell, they don’t read the Bible ‘round here,” something in them seemed to know me, too.

“I did know those ruins long before I laid eyes on them. That desert’s older than you, boy.

Plunged into darkness, the boy’s steps rasped away from me, fading around hidden corners to leave me lost.

Immediately the visions came, creeping across walls and from out of crevices to swarm towards me. I started to run as if to dodge them, but my foot caught rock and sent me sprawling across the ground. Quick flashes of rifle fire gave way to screaming. I saw them all, shadowy bodies hunkering in doorways and behind walls, aiming at me as I had aimed at them. I heard the grunts they made when a round exploded into their chest, their cause lost, their blood given back to the sands beneath their feet. Scanning that city block up north, those first minutes fresh after an air strike, smoke and debris settling across what had been a row of houses. I only caught glimpses through the fog, crumpled limbs beneath the rubble, running blood stark against the fine white dust that covered it all. Cries rose up all around me, wailing, too many voices sounding for each other, for any kind of help. I heard them clear as day in the dark tunnels inside old Babylon. They joined with others, more distant cries, the long forgotten wanderers of the city, all wailing, all pleading for some answer. They called out for me, for my head or my help; I couldn’t tell which. I got to my feet and staggered back through the dark, the twists and turns of the labyrinth destroying any sense I had for direction. Grampa’s rasp rose up to fill my ears. “By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept, when we remembered.”

The boy was gone. He’d led me into the heart of the ancient city, and then abandoned me to its awakening. Hell, he could’ve been a flash too for all I know, a mirage I stumbled after and followed through the gates. Babylon meant more than this stretch of scrubland south of Baghdad, more than

My words didn't seem to register with him.

For other Hajis, "I'm due back before nightfall. Before dark."

"No, no, no," I replied, stepping back and scanning around

squinting but unafraid.

He was close, standing as tall as my chest, his knowing eyes all spindly arms and legs, his olive face gleaming in the willight.

"Come, Bab-Ili, it waits for you." It was a boy, 12 maybe, but froze once I caught sight of my sudden company.

at my boot for the blade sheathed along the inside of my ankle, of the hill, abandoned for anyone to find. Cursing, I clutched but fingering only sand. It still sat across the scree at the crest thick with local accent. I started, my hands snatching for my rifle

"You come to see the city, Bab-Ili?" a voice said from behind, towards me, vanishing, then creeping out again.

fluctuating shadow casting down its face and across the ground a tall and crumbling city wall only thirty yards ahead, its dim began to clear, and I could see again. The ruins were close now, every scrape. My head throbbed with sharp pain but gradually bruises throbbing all over my body, fresh scabs hardening in over that hill to catch the Humvee. I clambered to my feet, hadn't hit yet, but it was close now, and I'd have to hump back its light deepening in shade according to the wind. The storm sand danced through the air and across the last glows of sunset, It was a biting wind that brought me back. Wispy flows of

to smack the rocks, and all went quiet.

the slope leveled out and threw me flat. My head whipped back down, down to the base of our hill, only sliding to a stop when into my knees, my shoulders, my back, and I tumbled down,

As I dusted off my thighs and moved to hike back up, he spread his arms, smiled, and said, "The night comes early with the storm, my friend. Come. You will be safe in Bab-Ili."

I was reminded of how the kids over there made me uneasy. I'd seen plenty of them from the turret on patrol, their unnerving brown eyes passing underneath the nozzle of my rifle, never fixated on the barrel though, only on me, only on my face, my brown skin. This boy had seen the back of his father's hand, maybe even lost some loved ones to the violence. He had those old soul eyes that knew more than a child should.

"What was that you called this place?"

"Yes, yes, Bab-Ili. It means Gate of God, you know? Come see now. Might not be tomorrow." His little boy voice deepened, sounding closer than he really was. "By the rivers, you sit down and cried, no? You remember?"

His words caught me.

"Where'd you hear that? You know the Bible?" He nodded, slowly, slipping his little hand in mine to lead me forward. His touch felt cold, calloused, as if the life in him was too far buried to warm the skin.

"I'm older than you know. I read parts on Bab-Ili. You must come. I show you."

As the boy tugged me forward, the sky filled with plumes of sand. Still woozy, I turned back to see clouds of dust engulf two shadowy forms flailing on the hillcrest, their shouts reduced to hints upon the wind. "Don't deny what's come before you," I heard my Grampa say. He felt close right then, the wind wailing in my ears, the sand stinging across my cheeks. I knew there was no choice but to hunker down inside those ruins and pray I got out in one piece.

So we filed across the scrubland, a boy leading a soldier, staggered figurines small against the desert. The wind's bite grew fierce, rippling strands of dust across the ground.

"You were born in the desert then?" I asked, squinting down at the back of the boy's neck, its fragile slope, considering how freely I could break it if this led to ambush.

"All my life," he shouted, throwing his voice back over his shoulder with quick turns of his profile. "It is all I know, but I live and breathe it."

As the wind worsened and pushed me off our trail, I thought of all I knew so well: Georgia hay fields grown tall and green, the creaking of porch swings, heavy heat with a sweaty glass of tea to ease it. I lived and breathed a world so far removed from this place before me. The boy simply leaned into the gale, tacking a course into its teeth to reach our cover. As I followed along, I sensed more flashbacks simmering just below the surface, and I begged them not to come.

At last we reached the ruins, following the wall around until we reached a breach, a wide fissure marked by crumbling blocks of clay. The boy balanced his way onto them, his linen smock snapping loudly, and then he pulled me forward. I noticed details in the rocks, panels of ordered symbols scored across them, a forgotten language carved out by faceless hands. I didn't want to enter. I wanted to get back to base, to wait out my days until I could get back home. But there was no other way but forward, no other place to go but in. The boy laughed, snatched back my hand, and pulled me inside.

In an instant, the rush in my ears fell as a thick darkness swallowed me whole. I lost his hand and flailed around for it, my boots scraping across a sandy floor. The city seemed to swell

gust whipped in from the breach and snuffed out the light.

tired of his cryptic talk, I moved the torch toward him, but a

"We cannot know how it ends. Only its beginning." Growing

"Their story is still being written," he said from the shadows, a story behind them?"

"What do you know about these?" I asked the boy. "Is there

down my spine.

its flanks, the clay cool enough to run chills up my arm and its teeth bared as it froze in mid-stride. I ran my hand along a deep blue. Moving to my left, I came to the image of a lion, ceiling and dusty floor. The walls were tiled, glossy clay painted hallway of some sort, what amounted to a tunnel with its stone the boy, still wary of what I couldn't see. We seemed to be in a I gripped the torch in my left hand and turned away from storm here. Look at the walls, the painted tiles. Very old."

"Take this so you can see," he said. "We are safe from the hand disappeared into the blackness.

when he held the torch out to me, everything except his little glistening eyes and the profile of his face in the shadows, but just leave me in the dark like that." I could just make out his "Damn, kid," I said, walking towards the light. "Don't halo of the corridor around us flickered into view.

he'd found, the end of a stick wrapped in fabric, and a small to float on its own in the dark. The boy held it to some torch The scuff of a march released a scrambling of light that seemed "You will," the boy said, somewhere deep inside the dark.

guidance. "Hey! Where'd you go? I can't see."

"I can't see in here," I said, staggering forward for some

stirred down the corridor to my right.

around me, feeling more dormant than abandoned. Something