

TAREK EL-ARISS

# *The Beachcombers*



*Your fate is to remain forever prisoner between water and fire.*  
*The Soothsayer, Nizar Kabbani<sup>1</sup>*

*He sleeps in the sunlight, one hand on his chest,*  
*Tranquil. In his right side, there are two red holes.*  
*The Sleeper in the Valley, Arthur Rimbaud<sup>2</sup>*

Beirut is a city that goes into the sea, which envelops and contains it. Its coast is rugged, *modern*, protruding into nature. Beirutis push the sea away like they push an overwhelming mother. They claim their space and assert their independence by dumping garbage and pouring concrete. And the sea hates back by cradling foreign fleets that bring bombs and bondage. The sea of Beirut disguises fire beneath every wave, a combustion with every ebbing, spoken in different tongues. This incendiary sea tortures Beirutis with lamentations over exiled lovers and outlaws seeking other shores. The sea drowns them in tears, sparking their desire to join those who departed and to disappear with them beyond the horizon, never to resurface.

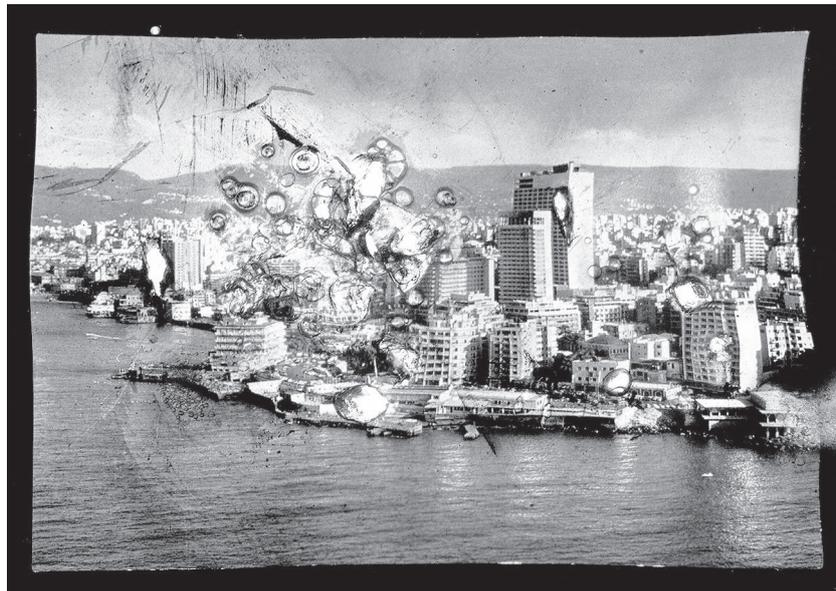
Yet Beirutis find ways to reconcile with the sea. Their coastline is home to private beach clubs nestled at the foot of rocky cliffs. For many Beirutis living through the 1975-1990 Civil War, these beach clubs became the only outlets for them during months and years of siege and enclosure. This essay tells the story of those who withstood the war by playing a dangerous game—a forbidden game—in the sun. It is about a fearless class that was unwilling to give up its privileges, risking the lives of its children for a swim, a tan, and a short drive to the beach. I reflect on these Beirutis' violent and perverse affront to war by choosing to cohabit with it. I try to understand what valuables they were seeking by going to the beach every day, from May to October, from morning to evening. My reflection, which arrives after years of inspection and introspection, depicts the work of memory. This memory is accessed through a portal, a red hole in the head of a handsome youth named Ahmad.

#### THE BEACH

When one thinks of Mediterranean beaches, one imagines France's Côte d'Azur or the Greek Isles. These beaches have captured people's imagination and inspired dream and fantasy, love and conquest. In the film *Summer Lovers* (1982), young men and women dive into Santorini's blue sea, blissful yet full of dangers. In Alexandria, the iconic Stanley Beach was immortalized in Youssef Chahine's film, *Alexandria... Why?* (1979), recalling the city of his youth, a melting pot of Arabs, Europeans and Jews. Menaced by World War II, these Alexandrians came together at the beach, fishing, boating, swimming and flirting on the Corniche, which stretches for miles. Chahine blends sea and war to portray his own Alexandria: personal, fantasized and accessed through special currents and tides going in and out of rock constellations strewn along the coast.

Further north and further east from Alexandria, Beirut boasts a vibrant beach culture, where people swim and snorkel, play backgammon and palettes.<sup>3</sup> This culture could be traced back to the first part of the twentieth century, with such beach cafés as Qahwit Daood. One of the last survivors of these traditional cafés is Qahwit al-Rawda or Shatila, which continues to attract families, artists, and tourists in search of a bygone era. The coast is so much a part of Beirut's identity that a mere rock formation has become its icon. Like Paris' Eiffel Tower or New York's Statue of Liberty, Sakhrit el-Raouche (Raouche's Pigeon Rock) figures on the Lebanese currency, affirming the city's attachment to its rocky shore.

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By the 1950s and 1960s, a cast of simple beach clubs, poured with concrete, appeared – Bain Militaire, Long Beach and Sporting, to name a few, adorning Beirut’s coastline. In the 1980s, such beach resorts as Summerland and Coral Beach appeared, introducing a glitzy model with various nightclubs, restaurants and tennis courts. Gloria Gaynor sang at Summerland in 1980. That night, my parents were readying to attend the concert as the Israeli Army, it was rumoured, were preparing to bomb the Palestinian refugee camps across from the posh venue.

The war gradually infiltrated Beirut’s beaches. When the city was divided in 1975, the beaches that survived were on the west side of the demarcation line.<sup>4</sup> In fact, one of the first battles of the war revolved around a cluster of beachfront hotels and became known as the Hotels War, vividly described in Ghada al-Samman’s novel, *Beirut Nightmares* (1997). Some beach clubs ceased to exist, surviving only as memories in the minds of a previous generation (Saint Simon, Saint Michel), while others remained open, flaunting their bombed-out shells (Saint George). The war raided Beirut’s beaches but couldn’t wipe them out. In fact, the fighting turned them into the only outlet for those trapped in a city encircled by hostility and deprived of greenery. Beirutis flocked to these beaches not for the glamour they afforded but as an alternative to the dullness of war. Going to the beach became an act of survival, an act of creation, in a city where the social fabric was disintegrating as a result of a violent conflict that would last fifteen years. For many, the beach was the last stand against an ever-tightening noose.

#### WEST BEIRUT

During the Civil War, my family decided to stay and struggle on. My father, who had studied and lived in the USA, was never going to leave Beirut again. Perhaps he was afraid to leave, like the father in Ziad Doueiri’s film, *West Beirut* (1998). During the Israeli invasion in 1982, my father was proud of being one of only seven physicians who had kept his hospital running, performing all kinds of surgeries. Defying water, electricity and fuel shortages, he sold his inheritance and spent from his savings throughout the protracted conflict. We continued to go to school, however intermittently, and the parties, dinners and occasional trips abroad were a staple of our life at war. Crossing checkpoints to visit friends and family in the East, or travelling to Syria or Cyprus to catch a plane when Beirut’s airport had closed down, we confronted violence with an illusory courage and obstinate *joie de vivre*. In retrospect, I wonder if we shouldn’t have left. Surviving the way we did forced us to suppress fear and eliminate its symptoms. My father always insisted that we were the courageous ones. We never went into the shelter no matter how close the bombs fell; we stopped militiamen from squatting in empty apartments in our building; and we flouted shortages by buying water which we’d store in the kitchen, the attic, and once, in the bathtub. We stocked food and toothpaste, detergent and spices. During one of the worst episodes of the war, my father bought dozens of Perrier bottles and cans of boiled potatoes, which were all that was left at the only supermarket he found open that day. I remember witnessing the shopping bags reveal strange food items that were to be incorporated into our war diet. We found a way to live around war, on its side, at its limits, in-between bombs and abductions, fuel and power shortages. And we had the sea and the privileges of those Beirutis who could go to the beach every day, especially when work was slow and school was closed.

My father, who passed away suddenly in 1987, went to his clinic from nine to one, most days. Before leaving work, he would call me – when the phones worked, that is – asking if he should pass by the house and take me to the beach or if I was going to ride with my mother. Having lost our mountain home at the beginning of the war, the beach was all we had left. By the end of the

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summer, we were freakishly tanned. People had different recipes for tanning oils, some involving Pepsi and beer, others, peroxide and *mercurochrome*. We also had the iconic *Ambre Solaire*, which gave way to *Lancaster*, the potent tanning paste that left a bronze hue on new skin. Being white during the summer was an anomaly, a disease, a sign of staying in and capitulating to war's violence. When the beach season started, I remember my mother and sister sitting in an isolated location, all the way at the end, by the rocks, ashamed of their white skins. It was only when they got some colour that they would join the rest of their friends and become like everyone else, equal in the sun.

At the beach, I fished, snorkeled and collected seashells for my sister, who used to display them on a little blue table by her bedside. I remember making the dough for fishing – yes, I used dough – melting butter and mixing it with flour and water. I spent hours fishing. I was alone in my world, at my designated position. I would mostly catch small fish called marbled spinefoot, which used to sting my fingers when I took them off the hook. The stinging, I was told, could only be relieved if one urinated on the wound. At the end of the day, I would bring home my fish, insisting on cleaning and cooking them myself. I remember cutting their little bellies with my mother's cuticle scissors, and then frying them in a kitchen dimly lit by a *lux* (camping lantern), due to power cuts.

The beach was a space that was no longer a site of leisure and recreation but a space for inventing a reality adjacent to that of war. This new reality, however, came at a great price. How many times did we have to pack and rush home when the situation suddenly deteriorated? How many times did we endure the sounds of explosions, pretending they were too far away? Though we put on new skins and masks of courage, we were exposed, naked in our vulnerability, desperate to be together. So we played and gossiped and flirted. We used to swim in the *piscine naturelle*, also known as *crique el-moj*, which was a pool-like enclave that created a current effect, sucking us in and out. It was for the bold kids, the good swimmers, who would dive in to catch the wave, only to reemerge with cuts and bruises.

Our glittery bay that eyed the horizon, trapped between water and fire, provided us with the illusion of freedom. It made us carefree, alive, boisterous and courageous in ways that we were not and could no longer be on the outside. In this space, life grew again, defying war, for a short while. So we tanned and groomed and snorkeled, inventing a reality that was a little more meaningful, a little less violent. These activities were not just an escape from war but rather a quest for something valuable that was lost and needed to be found, reinvented, ever so gently, every day. We were like those beachcombers, looking for valuable objects on the shore.

### COMBING

Recalling this today, beachcombing gives new meaning to our daily rituals in the sun. Also, the Beachcomber was a famous nightclub at the Coral Beach Hotel, where people danced and drank Jamaica cocktails throughout the conflict. In the language of war, combing designates a military operation that cleanses areas of rebels and intruders. As for *musht* (which also means comb), it refers to the machinegun's magazine, full of tightly stacked bullets that would fly hysterically in all directions. The sound of bullets, which used to lull me to sleep during the war, awakens me today and triggers my associations about our combing rituals at the beach in Beirut.

Combing also means to render orderly the hair. It is the morning ritual that inaugurates the day, announcing its beginning and setting its rhythm. One of the first tools available to mankind, the comb neutralizes disorder, stemming through continuous and methodical movements the parasitic and the unwanted. This beautifying weapon maps the human and identifies its limits and what

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lies beyond them. With every stroke, the comb produces and excludes the louse, the other, and the outside. Combing is thus a form of weeding, a resistance against scavenging plants trying to take over the lawn, the garden, the beach at the edge of the city, which we cultivated daily with much love and great diligence. The comb's repetitive pulling on the hair, from the root out, straightens, organizes, and eliminates the louse, war, and anxiety.

*Oh comber comb her hair  
Gently gently and don't cause her pain  
For she is a noble girl  
Who's used to pampering<sup>5</sup>*

This traditional lullaby that we used to hear as children is sung for the bride on her wedding day. It pleads with the comber to go gently on the hair and comfort the girl who is used to pampering. Combing thus involves a pain that needs to be tempered, attenuated. This pain arises from breaking apart the embracing curls, intertwined in tiny knots. It is also the pain of separation as the girl readies to leave home. Combing contains the girl's anxiety by reaffirming the familiar, recreating home, our home at the beach during the war.

Fishing, swimming and tanning are the kinds of combing we performed during this time. Other species practice combing or grooming as well. Monkeys and gorillas, our close kin, groom not only to delouse but also to express loyalty, love, affection, remorse and distress.<sup>6</sup> Our combing and grooming in a war-ravaged city allowed us to restore a social bond that belonged to a different time, a different species. They allowed us to restart civilization, building it anew around swimming, tanning and fishing. From this vulnerable space, where bodies were exposed to the sun and to the stray bullets of the Lebanon's Civil War, a new community arose through daily practices of intimacy.

There are several Sayings by the Prophet Muhammad about combing that come to mind as well. In one instance, the Prophet compares the Muslim community to the comb's teeth: "From the time of Adam to this day humans have been created equal like the teeth of a comb, with no advantage for the Arab over the Persian, the red-skinned over the black, except in their piety."<sup>7</sup> According to the Prophet, the comb is a model for equality, closeness and intimacy. The comb is blind to race and ethnicity, and to the sectarian and political divisions that consumed the Lebanese during the war. The comb brings them together, makes them equal, naked, equally vulnerable and equally tanned. Beirut's beachcombers survived war and divisions as God had created me, naked, bare, equal in front of God, in the sun.

In another Saying, the Prophet aligns combing with smelling and remembering in a liminal state between life and death, heaven and earth. On his nocturnal journey to heaven (*Isra'*), the Prophet remembers smelling a sweet fragrance, and asking the angel Gabriel about its provenance. Gabriel replied that it belongs to the comber of Pharaoh's daughter. This woman revealed her true faith when the iron comb dropped from her hand and she exclaimed; "In the Name of God!" (*bismillah!*). When her mistress heard her, she inquired about the woman's faith and whether she believed in a god other than Pharaoh. As the comber proclaimed her belief in the true God, she was thrown into the fire.<sup>8</sup> The dropping of the comb exposes the comber's identity and transports her to heaven, where the Prophet smells her fragrance, learns of her story, and relays it to the believers. Combing thus describes the work of memory, of remembering what the Prophet said and experienced on his journey. It's also the recounting of episodes, anecdotes and encounters by sifting through the past in a state of vulnerability.

Today, my comb has dropped as well, revealing a lost world that continues to live in me. The beach life we invented in the midst of war is a landscape drawn by a painter through successive brushstrokes, cajoling the canvas, the screen, the scene of writing my war experience. The movement of water going in and out of rocky enclaves regulates the work of memory. With every wave and every bubble forming at the surface, this movement uncovers new images, old ones. The foam that kids like myself used to recreate in their bathtubs with bubble bath, going under water and provoking a wave that would flood the bathroom, is the theatre of memory, its primordial stage. As they burst, the bubbles expose the past in all its playfulness and pain. Today, these bubbles lead me to the beachcombing we practiced in Beirut during the war, and to 1985, the year of the jellyfish.

#### THE YEAR OF THE JELLYFISH

We had never seen jellyfish before, or perhaps it was me who didn't remember seeing them. When they came, they contaminated the water by spreading their stings like an aquatic minefield. These creatures, which people attributed to pollution, were messengers of great calamity. It was as if the gods had sent them to punish us for our hubris, our affront to war, our denial of the *real* pain of others. The jellyfish arose from below, from afar, joining the carnival of war. The Barbarians, for whom the Romans longed as they partied on the hills of their eternal city, had finally appeared in the shape of sea creatures that would sting and awaken us forever. It was our day of reckoning.

That summer, Lebanon was consumed by the Camps War, which pitted Lebanese militias loyal to Syria against Yasser Arafat's Palestinian fighters and their Lebanese supporters. For Beirutis, Arafat and his men were thought to be wealthy, flush with petro-dollars pouring in from the Gulf States. As militiamen were besieging the camps and firing at its inhabitants, Palestinian fighters would hurl at them Cadbury chocolate bars and exotic fruits for respite. These were the anecdotes from the Camps War, jokes and rumours that veiled the spectacle of slaughter.

That year school closed early, extending our beach season. Only the boldest were at the beach: my family and a few others, a couple of dozen children and adults, going about their daily combing. As I was swimming in the *crique*, I started hearing the whistling bullets fly over our heads. The camps were not far, a couple of miles away, but far enough for Beirutis who had mastered the art of compartmentalization. The other children and I tried to continue as usual until we saw someone pointing from the restaurant overlooking the beach. Yelling and pointing! Yelling and pointing! He was pointing at a man lying in the sun close to where my parents and their friends used to sit. In the commotion, people started running, not knowing what had just happened. It was Ahmad. He was shot in the head.

Ahmad was the son of our close family friends, the eldest of three boys and a girl. In his early twenties, he was tall and handsome, a courageous swimmer and an avid beachcomber. He worked on his tan and on his butterfly strokes all summer long. The bullet, nestled in the back of his head, caused Ahmad to go into a coma and then into a vegetative state, only to die some ten years later. I remember visiting him in the hospital in Beirut and then in London, having to put on gloves and a mask to enter his room. They never extracted the bullet from Ahmad's head. They couldn't. The bullet became part of his being. His grey matter wrapped itself around it, cradling it like a lost child that had finally found refuge from war. Ahmad cradled this foreign object, holding on to it as if holding on to life itself. The beachcombing we all practiced could not keep war away or remove its offspring from Ahmad's head. War had finally come to us and forced us to embrace it on its own terms.



### COMBING AS REMEMBERING

1985 put an end to our combing rituals, our daily inventions of the social at the edge of the city. The illusion of cohabiting with war in this carefree enclave had finally been shattered. That summer, my sister married and left home; the woman who raised me and who had been living in our house for seventeen years left as well; the Lebanese pound was devalued overnight, squandering whatever was left of my parents' savings; and my brothers went abroad after graduating college. 1985 inaugurated my adulthood at the age of twelve. The bullet that put Ahmad to sleep awakened us all from our dream in the sun. We knew we could no longer swim, fish, and play palettes. War had finally caught up with our game at the beach.

Ahmad's bullet lives in my head. Its burning metal prevents me from forgetting or taking the currents and tides for granted. The hole in his head became my portal to a life I suffered, loved, and lost. I can't say I was traumatized by war; perhaps I don't allow myself this experience. I have accepted the fact that the bullet cannot be removed, that it's there, alive in me as I hold on to it in my own way. It became a point of entry and exit through which memories come and go like air, water, and waste. I can't pour concrete on it as Beirutis usually do. Through ebbs and flows, the memory that comes from afar, swimming towards me, is embodied in writing, in this essay. Its movement mimics that of water, going in and out of the *crique*, which controls the flow of the waves and of the bodies jumping to catch them. As the waves crash on the rocks, they reveal the valuable, the painful, the bruised bodies of bold swimmers, and the aging beachcombers finally embracing their vulnerability. Like the war-scars that mark a few remaining buildings in Beirut, Ahmad's bullet scars me, and allows me to remember and to forget my childhood, my life at war.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Qari'atu al-Finjan" (my translation); see <http://www.adab.com/modules.php?name=Sh3er&doWhat=shqas&qid=287>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/Rimbaud1.htm#\\_Toc196916307](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/Rimbaud1.htm#_Toc196916307)

<sup>3</sup> Beach racket ball

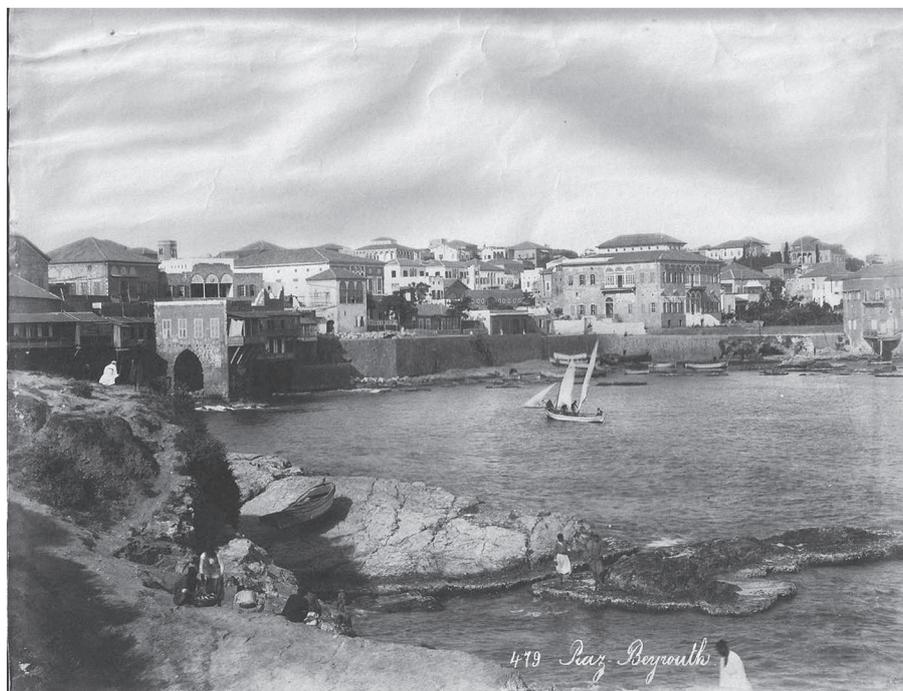
<sup>4</sup> Like Berlin, Beirut was artificially divided in 1975 into two zones reflecting the new identities of war, Christians and Muslims, east and west. New resorts were built in the east, along the coast north of the city

<sup>5</sup> Folk Song, "Ya Mashta" (my translation); see <http://www.shakwmakw.com/vb/showthread.php?t=327479&page=3>

<sup>6</sup> Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 1, 21. The ability to gossip, writes Robin Dunbar, set humans apart from their animal kins, placing grooming at the origin of language

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.islamweb.net/hadith/display\\_hbook.php?bk\\_no=503&pid=128452&hid=22](http://www.islamweb.net/hadith/display_hbook.php?bk_no=503&pid=128452&hid=22)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ekabakti.com/mss\\_searcho.php?txtSearch2=%E3%C7%D4%D8%C9&B1=Find&topic=mss&utf8=1&ruziyah=hadith#](http://www.ekabakti.com/mss_searcho.php?txtSearch2=%E3%C7%D4%D8%C9&B1=Find&topic=mss&utf8=1&ruziyah=hadith#)



This essay is a response to several thematic threads of the 2019 *Sharjah Biennial*, *Leaving the Echo Chamber* – being *Making New Time* and *Trialing Time* – on the invention of time during a period of war, of Beirut in the 1980s.

*Making New Time:* Ours is an age of constant speed; we barely have a moment to breathe. Time is the irreversible, indefinite and continued process of existing in the world. Yet technological, social, and political change has altered the means by which we relate to images, objects, and the concept of history itself. Spatial and temporal orders have shifted with the advent of a reality that moves like mercury in and out of our hands (our bloodstream) and into an abyss, a space of chaos – but also toward a new portal, a space of possibility: Reality and history have been augmented by the realm of the virtual. This process encourages us to look back with a critical eye at the history of material cultures as we think we know them. With all this in mind, how do we slow down and “experience” the experience? How do we make “new time”?

*Trialing Time:* History is that most elusive of things. It proclaims to account for our time, but it is marred or at the very least contorted by the subjectivity of others and of notions of what might constitute tradition. Can we invent new modes of time in the face of competing narratives? How do we negotiate the trauma wrought by perpetual conflict, and by the echo chamber that circulates around it? Embers turn to dust. (See <http://sharjahart.org/biennial-14>)