

## Taxis pour les Galaxies

By Anna Wallace-Thompson

*Des taxis pour les galaxies*

*Et mon tapis volant dis?*

*-Noir Desir*

When you land in Beirut, the plane descends through a blanket of white clouds, entering a giant basin, a colossal satellite dish of a city, lined on three sides by white and grey buildings reaching up the sides of the mountains, adorned with a tangle of TV antennae and cables. It is an ink drawing of unbelievably stark lines and clear spaces. The sky is bright blue with clouds and the breeze is so fresh and clean, you breathe deeply, clearly. We dropped our bags, hugged and screamed in happiness in front of the airport. Two girls embarking on an adventure, returning to Beirut with the ease of returning to an old lover who treated you well.

Leena, my Eddy, may I be your Patsy? I can? How Ab. How Fab. Then let us explore Beyrouth together. Darling, darling, sweetie-darling. Eddy, Eddy, Eddy. Prêt-à-porter, prêt à tout, pass the Bolly-Stolly and let's go.

To describe the ecstasy of a lazy afternoon walk cannot do it justice. The streets are lined with small shops no larger than closets. Street cafes serve strong coffee and crisp white wine. The streets are chock full of cars. The grey pavement is cracked, uneven. Beirut had us for five days. For five days we lived in a parallel universe. The stonework of AUB bathed in the late afternoon sun and the twisting streets between Hamra and Centre ville. Armed guards and tanks on the occasional street corner. Little boys selling chicklets. How everything and everybody has a sad story. Are we spoilt? *Bilaaks*. Maybe. Traipsing down the roads with our Costa coffees and designer handbags? *Peut-etre*. Perhaps. Winding roads up and down hills, bougainvillea falling in lazy cascades down walls covered in graffiti. Humour, anger and sadness, plastered on the walls of Beirut. You see the same walls in Pompeii: A human continuum of communication, the human heartbeat from ages past. Beirut is buildings and bullet holes. Houses that are falling apart, about to be demolished or shiny and new. A forest of buildings piled one upon the other amongst church and mosque, prayer calls and tolling church bells. I am oblivious to the city's intricacies, floating above its subtle tensions in a cloud of conscious naivety.

Our first evening begins with fits of giggles in a hotel room. How can two women make a room look as though a hurricane has descended, mere minutes after unpacking? Do we need all these creams and perfumes? Crumpled clothes in rainbow colours, lipstick, shampoo, anklets, hair brushes, fans and flowers. It leaves you breathless. We are like warriors armed with face paints and weaponry, ready to greet the night in full plumage, a pair of brilliant hummingbirds seeking

honey.

You in your psychedelic scarf, Eddy, and me in my orange and black dress and we're off. Tiger tiger burning bright, in the forests of Beirut's night. Dinner in Barometre, fattoush and fried potatoes. The girls drink white wine and Almaza beer while the boys drink arak. There is laughter in the air, the lights are warm, the walls terracotta. After dinner we dance down Hamra Street hand in hand to Katy Perry's *Hot n Cold*, blaring from the open windows of a car. The jeep trails us slowly down the hill, crawling through the traffic, our own personal pop soundtrack. Eddy and Patsy tripping along with cigarettes and the freedom of libertines. "Cause you're hot then you're cold, you're yes then you're no, you're in then you're out, you're up then you're down." Weightless, it is pure elation. I am free of this mortal body and we move to the music, oblivious to all else.

Danny's is small. It is a closet. Bar on one side and seats against the opposite wall. There is barely space to walk between the two, yet somehow Danny's seems to hold three times the number of people it was designed for. In the corner a DJ plays music we recognise. Goodbye house music! Goodbye trance! Hello Nirvana, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Michael Jackson and Seattle grunge! We drink wine and I sit next to him, he who has been there with us all along, and mouth along to Anthony Keidis: "Hit me, you can't hurt me, suck my kiss. Kiss me, please pervert me, stick with this." He smiles that strange smile, at once loving and benevolent, amused, bemused, confused, and looks at me. Eyes the colour of pale blue alpine flowers glint in the half darkness. They are the colour of ice, the colour of the sky, the colour of wolf's eyes. The wolf and the tigress are alone in a sea of people. Dark wood and white wine and sounds of laughter. Patsy and Eddy together in Beirut. The clinking of glasses. Eddy, Eddy, Eddy, protect me. When he looks at me with those eyes I am paralysed. How many women have you brought here before me? Don't answer. It doesn't matter. Tonight we can pretend we are in love and that I am the first and you can buy me a rose and hold me tight like lovers do. We are half in love already, so what does it matter if we make up the rest? Kisses in the darkness. So let the battle begin, for we are both lords of the jungle. What happens when two Titans crash? Will the earth move? Will the heavens break? Will we find paradise or fall through the cracks?

*I found you wanting  
Like everyone  
Always trying, happy lying  
'Cos I'm no stranger to the ways of the world  
I felt like crying  
I felt like dying  
We took a coffee, you took it so strong  
Shaded from the neon*

*I could still see your eyes*

What things have those eyes seen? Beirut lover, will I ever see those eyes again?

We dance the night away. Hamra, Gemmayzeh; Beirut never sleeps and nor do we.

Beirut, do you dance to forget? You are so beautiful. With all your scars, there is so much beauty. Do you dance to celebrate your sadness or do you celebrate renewed life?

You were right.

I can feel it too.

Beirut means waking up to blue curtains flapping silently, slowly, gently in the morning breeze. Sunlight filtering through and off a Moroccan lamp in a wooden canopy. There is the incessant sound of cars honking somewhere in the streets below, a cacophony of engine and motor discord that is part of the relentless pace of life. The streets of Beirut are a Phillip Glass symphony in surround sound. Tangled sheets, the smell of last night's love in the air and on your skin. Cardamom coffee in the afternoon after sex, little cups of molten joy, one, two, three, until the pot is empty and it is time to make love again. High above the city in your aerie, the sound of French songs and the smell of paintbrushes left too long in water. How can you know that song? It's one of my favourites; I picked it out for you so long ago, after we first met. I picked it out as your song and it would make me smile to hear it, so how could you know? I thought it was my own sweet secret: *"Je n'ai pas peur de la route, faudrait voir, faut qu'on y goûte, des méandres au creux des reins, et tout ira bien là..."*

Then you sang my favourite line. For a moment time stood still as you sent lightning through my heart as your lips innocently and perfectly formed the words. Lightning, like a knife. But I stood my ground and smiled at you instead and didn't even let out a whimper.

How did you know?

Black desire.

Black coffee.

Black humour.

Black hearts.

In my head, *Cherry Baby* reaches a solo. High notes on the guitar, so divine and intense, a sweet solo, on the edges of consciousness, the foggy border of pleasure-pain. A sweet cherry solo for sweet cherry baby.

An afternoon at De Prague. Melted brie in a terracotta pot with toast. Glasses

of Blanc de Blancs. Eddy with her laptop and Patsy with a book of Hollywood portraits. Brando, Grant and Hepburn in an elegant black and white world, free of the complications of today. The window is open; outside, the building across the street has bright red window shutters and we fantasise that we actually live there, instead of our sterile apartments in Dubai. Two girls, one a painter, the other a writer. In the mornings you will sing and I will play the piano, Eddy. In the afternoons we'll sit here in the café while I write my stories and you design on the laptop. Cigarette smoke will curl in lazy spirals between us, before dispersing into the air. In the evenings we'll drink and dance and have brilliant conversations with beautiful, brilliant people. We sit and dream away on our cherry red leather sofas and polished wooden floor and order another glass of wine before he comes for us and we go back to traipsing down the streets of Hamra, now our second home, with all their smells of *manaesh*, car exhaust fumes and open trash cans. Women's perfume mingles with the smell of leaves in the trees and the smell of the city; it rises from Beirut's very pores through the concrete streets, like heat off bare skin, the smell of the Mediterranean in spring. I carefully walk across the road to throw my gum in the bin and the wolf cheers. He spreads his arms out to encompass the streets, indicating their function as vessels for countless cigarette butts and pieces of gum and grins, eyes flashing, bemused and my heart stops, just a tiny bit.

*Found in the gutter  
With a knife in her back  
Letter said sorry, please don't worry  
She had a lover  
With danger in his eyes  
I tried to tell her  
But she had the wildest heart*

Beirut is the night. It is a million glimmering lights twinkling in the faraway mountainous darkness and off a hundred thousand rooftops. It is navigating cement pavements amongst the cars. It is the chaos and beauty and complex living thing that lies sprawled underneath the velvet sky. It speaks to you through the faces of its people, through graffiti and posters on walls, through pockmarked buildings still blighted by the scars of war. Roman columns rising in an empty plot of land like the great sun-bleached ribs of a carcass. It is ghosts of memories that people like me cannot see, but that inhabit every street corner. It is ice-cold *jallab* and the sound of an Oud. Frivolous clothes, jewellery and bags. Seeing a Hummer next to the same model of olive green Mercedes your father owned back in 1987. *Manaesh* after midnight. A red red rose. Carrots with lemon juice. Mexican beer Beirut-style, poured into a glass frosted with salt, lined with lemon juice, Fuck Corona. Pulsing music. Cigarettes. And most importantly, it is a heart, beating,

banging, pulsing, fighting, pushing, shouting, crying, screaming, BURSTING: "I am alive, alive, alive!"

*Show me, show me*  
*Show me how*  
*Show me, show me*  
*Show me how*

*Oh cherry*  
*Oh cherry baby*  
*Oh cherry*  
*Oh cherry baby*

Thank you, Beirut, for bringing me back to life. When so many have taken life from you, you still found breath to give to me: I, who do not belong, but love you nonetheless, and will return. Beirut... Beyrouth... enfold me in your embrace forever, here, by the shores of your blue Phoenician sea.



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Based in London, Anna Wallace-Thompson is a Middle Eastern contemporary arts journalist who grew up predominantly in Dubai. Writing for *Canvas*, *The Art Newspaper* and *Frieze*, and featured in the anthology *Des Autres/Of Others*, she is currently working on a collection of short stories inspired by the region.