In summer 2006 I returned to Lebanon for a third time. I had lived in Beirut for almost a year in 2002–2003, during which time I fell in love with the city, as so many people do—the generosity, resilience and joie de vivre of so many Lebanese people, the lively artistic scene, the intensity with which so many historical and international forces cross this small country. I built strong friendships then. I returned in 2004, and again in June 2006, this time to study Arabic at the American University of Beirut. On 14 July, in response to Hizballah’s action of taking two Israeli soldiers hostage and shooting across the Lebanese–Israeli border, Israel began an intense bombardment of Lebanese infrastructure, starting with the airport, as well as places where Hizballah supporters lived. A privileged outsider waiting to be evacuated, I was also helpless, afraid, and furious at the pro-Israeli tone of the international media. So I wrote daily letters to family, friends, and a growing email list of interested people. This is an edited version.
decision is a gamble. I was walking aimlessly up a Beirut street on November 12. It had been a long day at work, a day in which the medical students I'm overseeing joked that my birthday falling on Friday the 13th must be an omen. I went along with the joke, not knowing it would end up as a fulfilled prophesy less than a few hours later. I did not hear the explosions. I did not hear the sound of lives breaking, families shattering or normality fading less than 10 minutes away from where I stood.