



Eight Letters

Photographs by Julia Pereira

There are few opportunities for social mobility and quality education for Lebanon's 400,000 Palestinian refugees. Many have never been allowed to see Palestine, but they remember the village from which their families hail. Palestinians in Lebanon are banned from over seventy professions, systematically oppressed, largely restricted from citizenship, and suffer brutal violence. Recent peace negotiations, dominated by Israeli and American interests, are bleak and largely ignore the refugee crisis in hopes of them disappearing, forgetting, and assimilating into the places they currently live.

The plight of the Palestinian refugees is a moral and practical concern. Their struggle for justice, human rights, dignity, and return, supported by UN resolutions 194, 242, and 3236, are the epitome of a global social justice movement and cannot be ignored.

This summer I had the privilege of teaching English and art to brilliant students in Rashidieh, a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon situated ten miles from the border of occupied Palestine. While in Rashidieh, and also Shatila and Bourj el Shamale, I took photos that depict facets of life in the camps and the squalid conditions that Palestinian refugees must live in while their beautiful homeland, Palestine, is occupied.

In the camps, everything is connected. Whether it's the martyr poster that brings to life the stencil of the resistance fighter situated next to it; the abrupt displacement and constricted living conditions built on the freedom and fluidity of the sea. Or the chaos of Lebanon that borders the orderly crop rows of Palestine. Or the student who can recite Mahmoud Darwish poetry off the top of his head but can't draw or explain his homeland. Or the suspended net of physical and metaphorical power lines in Shatila that see more outages than operation and restrict upward mobility. Fences and walls make inaccessible that which is dear: the freedom of water, the warmth of home, the invigorating presence of what makes life worth living.

The people of the camps are beautiful and resilient but their quality of life is saddening. This photo series is titled "Eight Letters" for "refugees" and the idea of "homeland," both of which contain eight letters and also refer to "In The Presence of Absence," a prose piece written by renowned Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish.

