

SACRILEGE

Edward Salem

IN THE HILLY outskirts of Ramallah, I struck a boulder with a sledgehammer in the extreme summer heat till I was too exhausted to continue. For several days I returned, set a camera angle, and swung the heavy hammer over my head at the huge rock, the blunt bell of metal on stone ringing with each strike. Hours in, my hand limply dragged the sledgehammer across the earth to batter another side of the boulder. Each strike was weaker, the call to prayer blasting from loudspeakers in the near distance. I chose a remote location to minimize the chance of prying eyes and self-consciousness while I filmed myself, hoping to be able to call what I did performance art. When I had taken the boulder down to half its original size, I collected the fallen pieces of broken rock. These I took home and wrote on with fade-proof, fine-lined ink, in Arabic: *Why isn't there a Third Intifada? Why isn't there a Third Intifada?* I wrote this question as many times as I could fit on each rock.

I had planned a number of follow-up actions—I'd scatter a pile of the rocks in Ramallah's town square at rush hour for passersby to squint at, pick up, and turn in their hands quizzically; I'd hurl

EDWARD SALEM

the ink-scrawled stones at a gallery's white wall and let them lie on the floor where they'd haphazardly fall, the dented drywall becoming part of the artwork. In retrospect, I would've fared better had I written the question only once on each dusty stone rather than covering their jagged, uneven surfaces in black language, like it couldn't be said enough, bringing the question into question. Instead, my hand got tired of the tedious task. My eyes kept twitching as I stared at the diminutive words, like Stan Brakhage hand-etching title cards on thin filmstrips for artisanal effect. Outside, the air was filled with prayer, and it was getting on my goddamned nerves. So I wound up producing fewer stones than I'd hoped. In the end, I simply laid them on the limestone threshold of the doorway of the Sakakini Cultural Centre, so that you'd have to step over them to enter and crouch low to know what they said.

A year later, I was living in Paris, looking for a new idea. I'd translated Guy Debord's anti-capitalist slogan *Ne travaillez jamais* into Arabic and spray-painted it onto the same wall on the Rue de Seine where he'd painted it in French in 1953. His version was about French freedom from wage labor. My version was about Arab unemployment in France.

My friend Fern visited me in Paris and accidentally ordered a thirty-eight-euro beer. Fern was what he called an itinerant experimental 16mm filmmaker. He'd also visited me in Cairo, where we'd gone day-tripping with a Spaniard, Pedro, who made conceptual art

SACRILEGE

about food waste at the level of the grocery store. We went to some of the less famous pyramids several hours from Giza. The entrance was a small opening about thirty feet up. As it was off the beaten path, there were only two other tourists, a fashionable mother and daughter from Russia or Colombia, I can't remember. The Egyptian attendant stayed outside smoking a cigarette, placing our fresh bills in the pocket of his billowy shirt as the five of us crawled in the cool dusty dark, making jokes that echoed backward. We couldn't turn back, we were crawling single file with no guide, and I think we all felt a little panic building until we made it into the antechamber, which was dull and underwhelming relative to our giddy relief at getting out of the narrow passageway. The rest of the pyramid was sealed off, so we amused ourselves with robust, room-sized echoes, made *woom-woom* and *yip-yip* sounds like baboons inflating and deflating balloons. The mother and daughter smiled at the unremarkable walls and at us, and though we had settled down, or maybe because we had, they quietly said goodbye and headed back through the passageway well before we men were ready to.

When we were alone in the old stone room, lit by only a single bare bulb, Fern, Pedro, and I got a little deeper, trying to collaborate to say something meaningful. We saw tourists' names carved into the time-smoothed, dark stone walls, and Pedro and I grumbled in disgust at the desecration. Not long after, Fern nonchalantly announced with a lilting, self-questioning tone that he wanted to take a piece of the pyramid home with him as a keepsake. As I tried to think of anything remotely sympathetic to say to dissuade him, he began kicking a ledge toward the bottom of the antechamber

EDWARD SALEM

wall, backing up to gather velocity, kicking again as forcefully as he could, pausing to unburden himself of the camera leather-strapped across his chest, setting it on the floor a few feet away, and stomping again with full force, as if trying to kill a venomous snake.

It was not like buying moon rock or meteorite. It was not like a World War II soldier jarring handfuls of European soil to take home to his wife if he survived. It was not like how I'd scooped oblong pale peach stones and a bit of red earth from my ancestors' land into a ziplock sandwich bag to place on a small tray on my dresser at home in Detroit. It wasn't like that. Pedro and I were stunned silent, trying to formulate how to tell our friend that we deeply objected. Maybe Fern didn't get in quite as many kicks as I remember, but when we finally spoke up, he smiled nervously and tried a few more times to kick loose a fragment for his taking, talking to us through it, pausing midsentence to kick with his black leather slip-on Vans, till he was either tired or ashamed or just finally realized there would be no easy give to the old smooth stone, and we crawled single file back through the cool, claustrophobic passageway till the smell of cigarette smoke tinged the air and I was the only one of us who understood what was called out in hard-edged Egyptian dialect.

I REMEMBERED ALL this walking in Paris with Fern, camera strapped across his chest, on our way to see Anish Kapoor's *Leviathan*, 115-foot-high bulbous purple womb-like orbs in the Grand Palais. That's when the new idea came to me. I didn't know

SACRILEGE

why I had such a grudge against the Louvre or the Grand Palais, but I knew it was the same ill will I had toward the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was there with my hatred of mansions and state buildings. I hated the glass pyramid outside the Louvre with its inelegant skeleture of rebar crisscrossing glass, appropriating an ancient form, chintzy as the plastic Eiffel Tower tchotchkes you could buy at any shop in Montmartre. The idea that came to me, walking with Fern past the stone structures of the city, was that I would buy a sledgehammer at any common hardware store, carry it to one of the less busy corners outside the Louvre, and strike at some ledge of the exterior till I freed a fragment of stone to steal, skulking away, escaping into a getaway car before a citizen's arrest could take place, before one of the yellow-jacketed security guards buzzing about the busier entrances was shouted over to tackle, tase, arrest, and deport me, *l'arabe*, or speed-walking to the subway stairs like a mole in hopes of making it back to my apartment undetected, setting the broken hunk of Lutetian limestone on the dining table to mull what message I'd scrawl across it with fade-proof, fine-lined ink.

I told a new friend, Marie-Eve, about my plan, and she nearly gasped. Her mouth tightened to a smile that turned into a frown. *Tu peux pas*, she exclaimed. *C'est sacrilège!* And then, *t'es arabe*, they'll deport you, they'll mistreat you. *Ils vont t'accuser de terrorisme.* I let the idea marinate a few weeks and, to make it realer in my mind, bought an overpriced sledgehammer at the Fnac. I leaned it in the corner of the living room and meditated on the idea, less and less seriously, realizing that living with the sledgehammer

EDWARD SALEM

had defanged the idea by making the risk too banal. A crime as art is less thrilling when you become too mindful of the bureaucratic hassle that may follow: fines and legal fees, a day or two in jail, prosecution, deportation, arranging for my things to be boxed and shipped, scrambling to make new living arrangements in some other country.

I carried the sledgehammer to the courtyard of my apartment building to discard it in the dumpster. Rather than touch the filthy lid, I rested it against the stinky metal. I looked up at apartment windows squared in honeyed light, night owls like me, or else the kinds of people who leave lamps on to deter late-night break-ins and hypnagogic hallucinations, or who need more than a tiny night-light while getting up to pee. I had the delightful intrusive thought to slam the sledgehammer into the side of the dumpster, to wake the sleeping denizens with a thunderous metallic clash. I thought of when I was sixteen and new to France and followed a sex worker into another dark courtyard. In a slanted patch of sconce light, I saw her Adam's apple, and because circumstances wouldn't allow me to process my new feelings or acclimate to the shift in my desire, I heard myself blurt out apologetically, *Non, merci. Allons-y*—I was new to the language—*allons-y*, I said, as she took a step forward and—*non, non, merci*—I stopped her—*allons-y, allons-y, merci*—slightly sharper as she reached her hands out and stared at my face in total confusion—*allons-y, non, allons-y*—delicate now, vaguely pleading, unsure, my hand blocking her repeated attempts to begin what we'd come to the quiet courtyard to do. Then I said it firmly, loudly—*allons-y*—and my voice echoed off the stone walls

SACRILEGE

so that I heard, finally, the reason for her look of utter bafflement and the strange dance—*allons-y* meant “come here” or “let’s go,” not “go away,” as my nervous teenage mind had thought.

I remembered *allons-y* a decade later when I thought *yalla*—“hurry” or “let’s go”—the night I ran to hide behind another dumpster on another secluded road. I was taking the long way home, walking through the hills outside Ramallah past the poet Mahmoud Darwish’s memorial stone near a landfill where I’d seen dogs scavenge for scraps—when I heard, then turned to see, a pack of thirty scruffy, never-bathed wild dogs trotting toward me in the darkness down the newly paved, jet-black asphalt, a gift from the neoliberal USAID. A momentary feeling of mortal terror slithered down my spine and found me running toward the nearest object to hide behind, a solitary dumpster surrounded by blackened grass and ash and filled with burnt garbage, as it was local custom to set trash alight. I crouched and held still as the dogs approached, panting a chorus in the night, and when the horde began passing by where I had made myself small amid the sweet charred smell, they were beautiful. They were boy dogs and girl dogs, young and old, traveling in numbers for safety, a clan that moved as one through the outskirts of town, taking their chance to stretch their legs and see some of the side streets when the cars were asleep and no one was out, no one getting offended at the sight of them, or shouting in high human voices, or throwing stones and empty soda cans to scare them away.

EDWARD SALEM

Goose bumps rose on my arms as I saw them off. I walked the same smooth asphalt road the next afternoon, the sun a blinding white asterisk in the cloudless azure sky, cradling a sledgehammer toward the poet's memorial past the landfill.
