

Three sketches

Ed Emery

1. Refugee solidarity – Porte de la Chapelle, Paris

15 February 2019

Porte de la Chapelle. Outer periphery of the city. The asphalt track of what should be the cycleway, running alongside the tramway. There are long, low iron railings that demarcate the road from the central reservation. All the way along, the asphalt of the road next to the railings is pitted with the scars of small fires of some more or less distant past. The “why” of those fires is self-evident. On the low iron railings, men are sitting. Sitting and thinking of nothing in particular. Sitting and staring into the middle distance. Barely in conversation with the men sitting next to them. On the ground next to them, each to his own, small rucksacks which hold their entire worldly possessions. These are France’s migrants, immigrants and refugees. These are the people who have arrived from many parts of the world seeking for a better life.

I sit on the railings with them. Desultory conversation. With Syrians, Eritreans, Libyans and others, about the circumstances that bring them here.

Overhead is a bridge. The railway crosses the roadway. Another central reservation. Once grassy, now dry trodden mud. I’m watching it, idly musing, and become aware of large rocks parked right there. Curious, I think. Rocks – why that? There is no apparent logic. Because the rocks are all in a cluster. But then I realise – the rocks are situated directly beneath the railway bridge. This is precisely where France’s refugees and migrants would have huddled, in their makeshift tents, to gain shelter from winter’s winds and rains. The rocks have been placed here as an anti-migrant measure, to stop the little camps. Part of the same logic as the evacuation of the Calais jungle. The harshness of state policy.

From a distance I make out words that appear to be spray-painted on the rocks. “*Fraternité*”, “*Liberté*”, “*Egalité*”. The watchwords of the French republic – brotherhood, freedom and equality. Curiosity aroused, I cross the tramway to take a closer look.

A shock to discover that the words are not in fact painted. They are sculpted. Inscribed onto the rocks. Carved with hammer and chisel onto these big lumps of limestone. Bold, out-standing letters. And what we have here is simultaneously a statement of irony and an outcry of moral indignation. The rocks physically embody the racist anti-immigrant exclusions practised by the French Republic, and at the same time they represent an *in memoriam* for the many thousands who have died while making their dangerous sea-borne journeys to reach safety on these shores.

Somebody, at some time, has thought fit to carve these rocks of repression and inscribe them with an alternative meaning – of love and liberation. I decide to photograph what I see.

The rocks do not give up their messages easily. I pick my way around them once, and think that I have captured them all on camera. The men seated on the railings watch me from a distance (at least this lunatic enlivens their landscape). But then I notice a small carving that I missed the first time around, and that leads to another, and another. And, in particular, at every ten minutes of my circulation the sun has moved across its horizon, and has thrown new things into relief that previously I had missed. For instance, an inscription in a vertical plane – someone must have lain prone to carve it – that reads in French: “In memory of all those who did not manage to arrive.” Where it meets the ground is the skull of a dead rat, lying there like a *memento mori*, but also testifying to

the fact that this was once a (living, laughing, eating, shitting) community, bound by the solidarity of passage, and the exigencies of indigence.

Of one carving in particular I must make report. In the horizontal plane, it is inscribed within a chiselled frame. The first thing that catches the eye in the glare of the afternoon sun is a small upturned half-moon shape. It is a boat. In the boat are three figures. These figures are migrants, refugees. Storm-tossed on the Mediterranean. The rest of the carving is a swirl of wind and high-curling waves. It is only when I check the image in camera – controlling exposures etc – that I realise that the swirl of wind and water is in fact a huge sea monster intent on devouring the occupants of the boat.

What we have here is truly astonishing.

The various different carvings are clearly done by different hands. One, in square lettering, pronounces “Refugees are welcome”. Another is a carved heart with the one word, “Love”. Elsewhere, barely finished faces appear out of the lichen that is beginning to encrust the carvings. To the right, a magnificent face, in large profile, of an African, done in the Phoenician style. On other rocks, the words “Solidarity” and “Refused”, testifying to welcome but also to state exclusion. And then a single large inscription – bright and distinct and apparently cleared of lichen – which reads “*Karim – 1998-2018*”. Beautifully lettered, with strong descending curves. And leaving no doubt that here we are in a moment of deeply-felt and artistically framed *in memoriam*.

It is also, in the best tradition of French situationism, a *détournement*. The aesthetics of subversion.

I have a sufficiency of photographs to represent the moment, and some of them I have reproduced in this present piece of writing. But for what happens next I have no images – only words.

I turned momentarily to survey my public. It was a moment of intense shock. What previously had been a landscape of men quietly engaged in their thoughts, or strolling in the sun, was now entirely naked, stripped bare, not a person to be seen. The reason was not hard to find. At the head of the pass stood three riot police, with their heavy truncheons in hand. The afternoon’s round-up was about to begin.

White riot police vans appeared in the street. Disgorging other police, similarly equipped. They blockaded the pavements and proceeded to check the identity papers of anybody they could capture – those who had not scooted into the middle distance – and harass people, and drive them away, and, as far as I could see, to take some of them into custody.

What was being enacted here was control of territory. People who have no place to go – and their exclusion from the last places where they might possibly, eventually find a standing point. Why do these men sit on the iron railings? Because they have no right to sit on the public benches. I watched as three police approached two black men sitting at a tram stop. “Move on!” The men protested. The police explained forcefully, and in the French manner (this being a country of *droit*): “You have no right to sit here.”

No rights, precisely.

A young man, a black man, wearing a hoodie and carrying his possessions. His features recall those of the rock carving. He has been removed by the police. As he passes me, he says: “What am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to go? At night we have to go and hunt among the buildings to find places to sleep. And then they come and chase us out. What does this Macron want us to do?”

The answer is simple. Macron and his fellow racist countrymen just want you to fuck off and die. If they could, they would set for you the same kind of poison traps that they set for the rats that are your night-time fellow residents in this place.

We had arrived in Paris with the intention to go and play music for and with the refugees and migrants encamped in small makeshift tent towns scattered around the French capital. But, as of mid-January, those camps were evicted in a major police operation, and now these people drift – a multitude of isolated and individualised singularities – in the desolate urban spaces of the outer suburbs. So even moments of solidarity become hard to sustain.

In Lebanon there is a valley in which invading armies, over the passage of time, from Alexander the Great to the present, have left their names inscribed as engravings carved into the rock. The inscriptions are preserved and prized as a national monument. These present carvings will soon be overcome and infilled by dirt and vegetation. They should be preserved, in that same spirit. They are precious.

Karim, whoever he was, died young. And his memory is preserved here.

As carved onto another rock, “*Salut a toi le Soudanais*”.



Figure 1: Porte de la Chapelle – *Head of an African*



Figure 2: Porte de la Chapelle – *Storm at sea*



Figure 3: Porte de la Chapelle – *“Humanité”*



Figure 4: Porte de la Chapelle – *Head of a man*



Figure 5: Porte de la Chapelle – *Storm at sea – detail*



Figure 6: Porte de la Chapelle – *“Au memoire de ceux qui ne sont pas arrivés”*

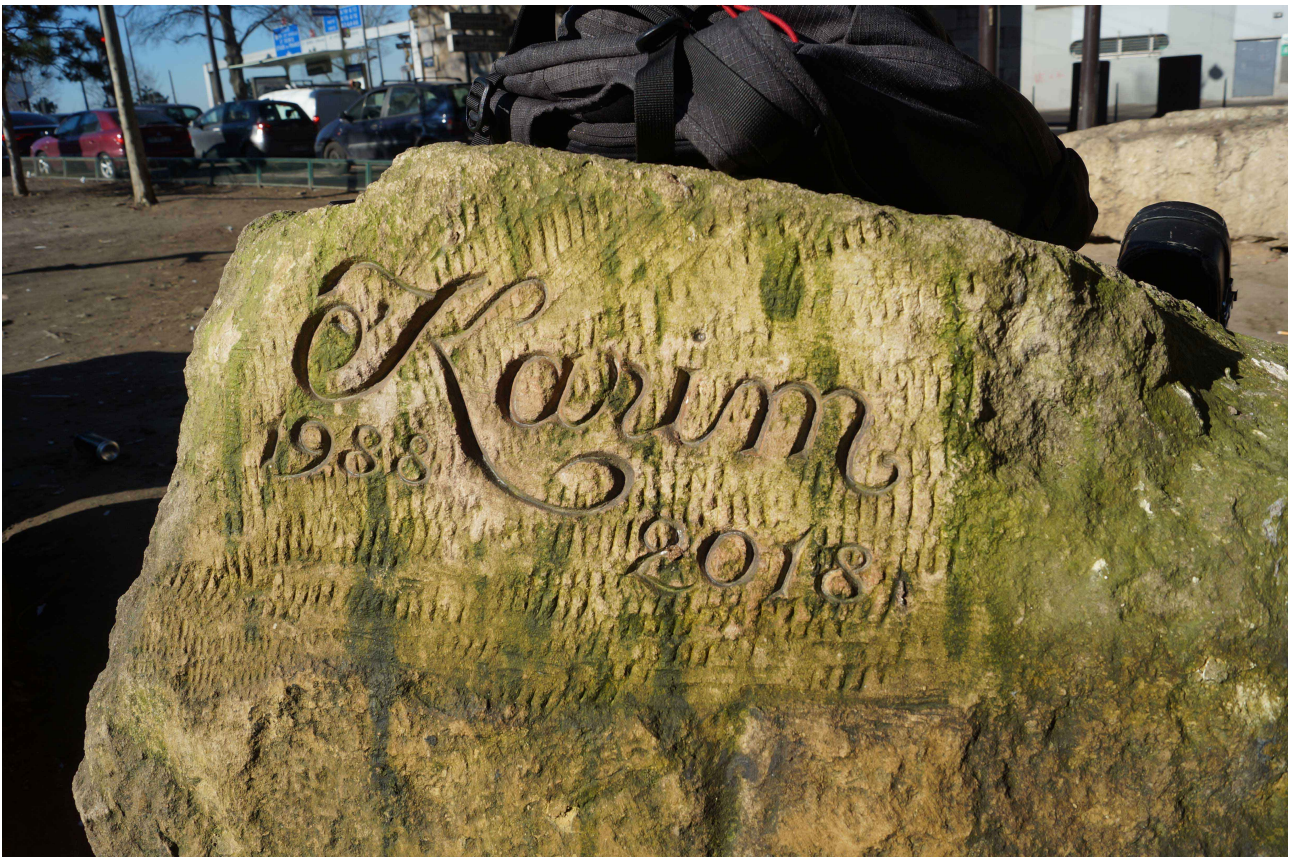


Figure 7: Porte de la Chapelle – *“Karim – 1988-2018”*



Figure 8: Porte de la Chapelle – *“Solidarite”*

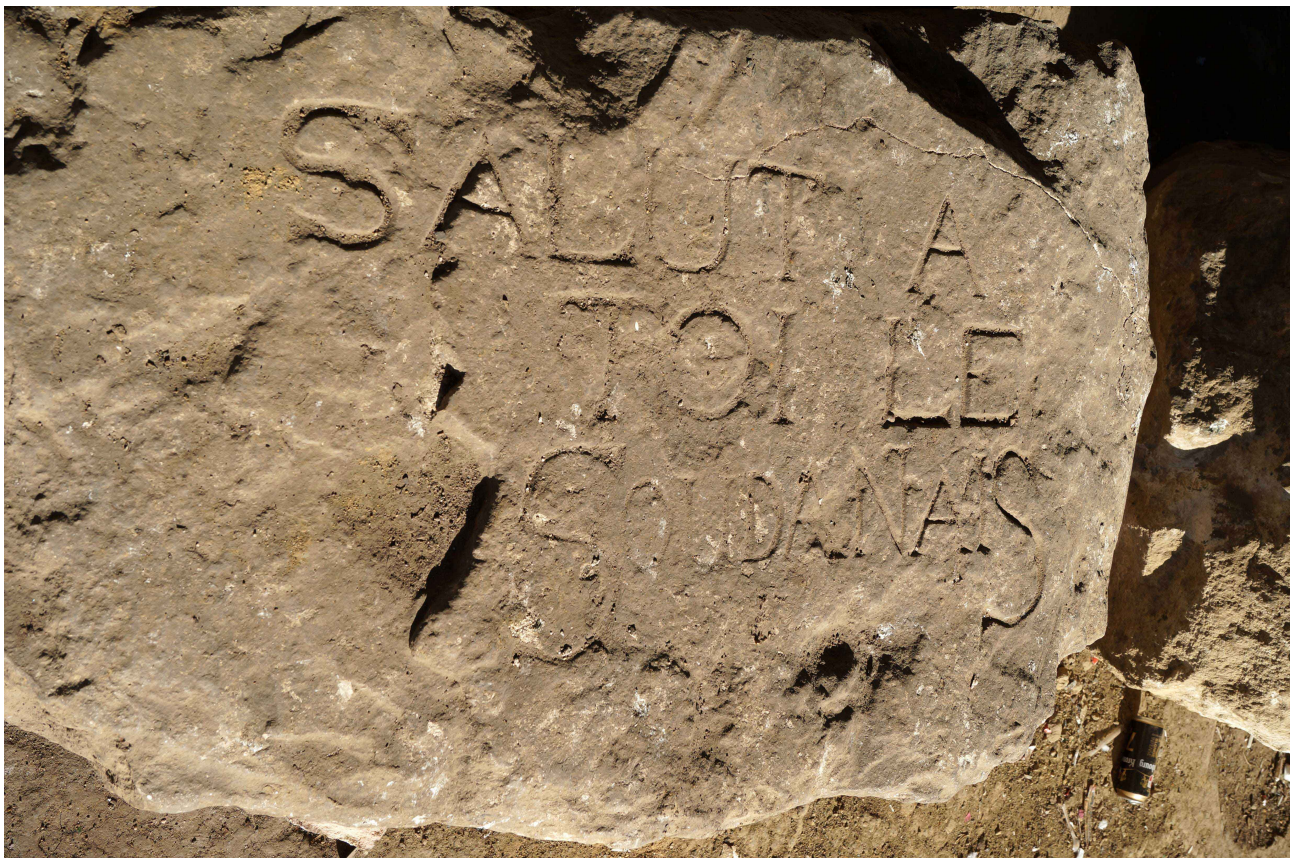


Figure 9: Porte de la Chapelle – *“Salut a toi le soudanais”*



Figure 10: Porte de la Chapelle – “*Fraternité*”

Wave over wave, sea over bow

18 September 2020

Silence. Not a breath of wind. Out on the water, the ascending call of a lone screech owl in the night. The still point of the great turning world. The full moon pulls up the tides and today is the highest tide of the year.

Each day I rise at dawn and work at my makeshift desk. My window faces south. I sit in the middle of a parabola. The sun rises above the cliffs on my left and sets on my right, behind the lone oak tree on its little island – sometimes hazed in mist, sometimes fiery-furnace red. The moon also rises on my left and sets on my right, moving regularly through her phases. The tide comes and goes twice a day, receding far into the distance to become a trickle and then inwelling massively and imperiously, coming in from the East and stopping just short of my wall.

Will the wall hold or will it not? Ancient stonework going back in time. Rough rubble, patched together by inexpert hands. Red Devonian sandstone that was once volcanic, embedded with grey stone because then, for an aeon or two, it became the bed of a river. Sweating in the noonday sun to bring sand and cement to fill the gaps. Hold it right there while I hit it, well I reckon that ought to get it.

The wall does not hold. The wall has imperceptible cracks. My mind is somewhat elsewhere, absorbed in things. Desolation Row. The Futurists wanted to do away with adjectives. Let the noun stand on its own. Why does everything have to be “like” something else in order to be appreciated? Wordsworth on *The Daisy*: “Oft on the dappled turf at ease / I sit and play with similes”. Is there a worse rhyme in the whole of English verse? Shelley waxed lyrical and dressed the west wind in all kinds of fancies. That is a nonsense. The west wind blew for days, beating my walls and windows. It destroyed my plants, reduced each of them to brown stunted stubs where previously they were rich in greenery, with red flowers that played in tune with the red flag at the water’s edge. The flag of the Chicago martyrs and all that followed. Brutal, that wind.

Afternoon, and the bait diggers are raging. They’ll be heading north to fish cod on the Bristol Channel. Raging and sweating in their long thigh waders (lethal if you fall over in the water... the air rushes to your heels and suspends you upside down till you drown). Forking doggedly in the mudbanks on the receding tide. Hunting worm. Red lugworm, ooze around your fingers, throw them against something hard and they stiffen. White ragworm a little treasure if you can find them ‘cos cod are crazy for them. Two hours they’ve dug. Look, they say, pathetic! The banks are stripped bare, they say. For why? Because the local worm man has got there first. Takes ten pound a day, they say, ten pound a day and he sells them in town. Ten pound a day, every day since lockdown began, they say. And all you want is a bit of worm to put on your hook to catch your supper. Look at this. Two hours and I’ve got seventy. Two hours over on the other side and my mate got only thirty-six. Why does he need to take ten pounds? What makes me angry is that he brags about it. Ten pounds! And anyway, they say, he’s got a heart condition and he’ll be dead soon, so why does he need ten pounds?

But now it is night. With a beer on the bench, and the red glow of the fire, and a good supper in prospect, my mind is on other things. How do you tell the call of a whimbrel from the call of a curlew and why is the plural of salmon salmon? Until thought gives way to a new sound in the night. A trickle, a gurgle, a runningness of water that is closer at hand than it should be. I step out of the door. Indeed, the wall has not held. On the other side my dinghy, hitched to her mooring post, is riding high, almost taller than me, or so it looks. The knot will hold because it is a clove hitch, the most beautiful supple-conceived knot in the universe, a simple flick of hand-over-hand and she holds for ever. But on this side, between ancient concreted sandbags that must have been laid in the war, the stubborn, insistent force of incoming tidal water is pressing through the cracks that it has found. A seeping, a trilling, undramatic, almost pleasing, and at all events unstoppable. Already my back yard is under six inches of water. The potatoes, the leeks and the onions will not like this, but the camomile and the sea spinach will welcome it because it is their vocation.

And the trickle sound is because the waters have found the hole which the rabbit dug next to the front door post last year, and they are gushing down it with gay abandon.

In short, we are flooded, and there is nothing that determination or the wit of man can do about it. Nothing except enjoy the heat of this late summer night, and rejoice in the ultimate permeability of closures, blocks and borders. Wade in the water. Tidy the bits that have floated loose from my woodpile. Pray that the salt water has not reached the newly planted grape vine, because she will definitely not like it. And then go inside, back to the fire, and read a book and listen to the water swilling beneath the floorboards.



Figure 3: Window at dusk

Droit de voyage, droit de séjour

1 December 2020

The musician sent me a photo of his kids. Lovely kids. Somewhere en route, on their travels. They look tired. The older daughter speaks good English. She translates for her dad.

On the North Kent coast, the vigilantes (they call themselves the “Coastbusters”) are out in force. They are hunting down illegal immigrants. When they find them, they smash them with hammers. These immigrants cross from northern France. They have been declared an “invasive species”, a “fouling species”. They have no place on British soil. These hapless travellers are the Pacific oyster, *Crassostrea gigas*, and the people of Kent have declared war on them.

At Scardovari in the Po delta south of Venice, Lucio has been experimenting. The Pacific oyster has an interesting breeding pattern. Depending on the balance of genders in their community, they may switch between being male or female. In the summer months, when the time is right, the female releases up to 200 million eggs into the water. These are then fertilised by sperm that the male releases into the water. The resulting larvae then spend up to three weeks looking for a place where they can settle and grow. They are very particular about their choice of surface for settlement. Preferred options are ground-up sea shells (cultch), other sea creatures (winkles, cockles, other oysters), roof tiles, house bricks, even old tyres. Lucio’s stroke of genius has been to get lengths of old plastic cargo strapping from supermarkets, wrap them into a coil, and put them into sacks. The oyster larvae swim along, settle on the plastic strips, and after a while you find yourself with a healthy crop of oysters. In the Mediterranean it works. On the coast of southern England every year larvae travel across from France into English waters. We tried Lucio’s system here but it doesn’t work. A puzzle.

Kent, a hotbed of anti-immigrant activity. While Coastbusters are out killing foreign oysters, British anti-immigration groups have been sending vigilante boats into the English Channel to watch for small boats arriving from France with migrants on board. “Migration Watch”, they call themselves. As if they are visitors at a zoo, they watch and film refugees and migrants as they struggle to get through the Channel waters to reach England. Sometimes desperately baling out water, sometimes sinking, and always hoping against hope.

Dateline Kent, 2 September 2020: The BBC reports that more than 400 migrants have crossed the English Channel in small boats – a record for a single day. “Border Force has intercepted 416 people, including young children, on board 28 boats, the Home Office has confirmed. Some of the migrants were carrying children too young to walk.” During August, more than 1,468 migrants made the crossing by small boat in August, with one group landing at Shakespeare Beach, Dover.

The problem for the British government is that there are transnational human rights laws that protect the rights of refugees. “We will address the rigidities in our laws that make this country a target and a magnet.” Thus spake Boris Johnson, our flatulent Primo Ministrone. Every time he opens his mouth, his arse speaks. Complains that our human rights laws are too restrictive and need to be replaced. Shut up, *du Arsch...*

Pacific Oysters were deliberately introduced into the UK as early as the 1890s, to bolster the ailing Native oyster fishery. Then, in the 1960s, the UK government gave active encouragement to their further development. Initial trials had concluded that Pacific oysters could grow, but would not be able to reproduce in Britain’s cold waters. However, with global warming, sea temperatures have risen and have reached a threshold which enables

reproduction. To such an extent that the Pacific oyster is found as far north as northern Norway, and the UK now has substantial oyster fisheries.

In fact, it is remarkable that we have any oysters at all in our rivers. On the River Teign in Devon, for instance. Just five years ago, in October 2015, there was an outbreak of oyster herpes virus – the same virus that had decimated the oyster fisheries in France and Ireland. It has no health implications for humans, but it kills Pacific oysters. Indeed, local oyster cultivators say that about 98% of the Pacific oysters on the Teign were killed at that time, numbering about a million in total. A specially heartbreaking time for those who had worked so hard to develop the local fishery.

However during the past five years there has been a recovery. The local Pacific oysters have developed immunity. It is possible that these are larvae that washed in from France – these oysters have distinctly French DNA – and that the immunity was developed over there. The benefits of illegal immigration.

The musician was banned from playing in his own country. He was tortured. They plunged his right arm into boiling water to prevent him playing. Faced with death threats, he decided to take his family and leave. The long, desperate, costly trek to France, in the hopes of finding refuge in Britain. They lived for several months in the Jungle refugee camp. All around them, migrants were daily attempting the harsh, desperate, life-threatening crossing of the border. Many migrants died. Recently migrant support activists have begun a project of counting the numbers of those killed by the border. *Compter les morts*.

I did not know how he and his family reached England. For sure the means were illegal, since there are no other channels for entry. All I know is that I received a phone call the other day. The young daughter, translating for her father: “Hello, we are in London.” Settled, and, as far as I know, with permission to stay.

And he sent me that photograph. The children are in a big space, sitting on the floor. The space looks like a shed, but then I realise that it is the back of a container lorry. That must have been how they made their entry into England. The children look tired but secure in themselves. Only when I magnify the picture do I realise that they are sitting on hundreds of cartons of Petit Filous (“Little Rascals”). These are French yoghurts targeted at children. Curiosity took me to the company’s website (Yoplait, a dairy cooperative founded in XXX). It is full of picture of Happy Children. And it proclaims: Born to Play Free: “We’re helping parents to inspire their kids and to help them rediscover their imagination through free play.” Who knows, perhaps the parent company will be proud of having brought these three children to the possibility of a new life in England.

I hope that my musician friend will not be offended to find that I speak of him in the same breath as speaking of oysters. This has been a moment of reflection, a moment for thinking about the permeability of borders, and the unstoppable nature’s flows, and also hopes for better futures.