

# TRAVELS IN TRASHLAND

Journalist Alexander Clapp set out to follow our trash to the end of the trail. Two years and five continents later, his debut book illuminates the surreal second life of the things we throw away.

Interview by Trey Popp | Excerpt by Alexander Clapp

Few experiences are as universal as throwing away trash. In 2018, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency, Americans jettisoned nearly 2,000 pounds of garbage for every man, woman, and child in the country. Our plastic waste from that year exceeded the nation's total body weight—218 pounds per person, up from 60 pounds in 1980. There's little reason to think that those numbers have fallen since then, and every reason to think that they've continued to climb. But the most staggering thing about our garbage might be how little we know about where it ends up.

That's what Alexander Clapp C'13 set out to discover. For two years the Greece-based journalist crisscrossed five continents, wending his way into the murky netherworlds of the global waste trade. What he found was a "strange, evasive, unbelievably massive business" whose

through-the-looking-glass logic was gradually illuminated by encounters with Tanzanian plastic pickers, Aegean cruise-ship dismantlers, Javanese recycling gangsters, and Ghanaian boys who burn Western smartphones for cents an hour—or scam their erstwhile owners for thousands of dollars a pop. (See excerpt on page 37.)

The result is *Waste Wars: The Wild Afterlife of Your Trash*, which came out in February from Little, Brown. Eliciting praise from publications ranging from the *Guardian* to the *Atlantic* to the *Financial Times*—which called it "courageous and important"—Clapp's first book is an engrossing and unsettling exposé. It crackles with lively first-person reporting and, in its most effective sections, knows better than to simply blame this dirty business's bad actors (plentiful though they may be) for the sin of burning, burying, or burdening the world's most vulnerable people with waste that every single

one of us creates. And although the byzantine maze of the global trash trade occasionally leads Clapp down blind alleys, *Waste Wars* serves up enough revelations to make up for it. As the *Washington Post's* review concluded, "You will never look at plastic bags the same way again." And that might also go for cruise ships, iPhones, recycling bins, and the landmark US environmental legislation of the 1970s—whose counterintuitive dark side is as disturbing as many of the dystopian scenes Clapp witnesses in this book.

Clapp, whose reporting has appeared in outlets including the *New York Times*, *The Economist*, and the *London Review of Books*, connected with *Gazette* senior editor Trey Popp in March to talk about how he got interested in trash, what he learned from his travels, and how he thinks about plastic bags now that he knows what happens to them after they're wheeled to the curb. ▶



**What sparked your interest in the fate of our trash?**

Fair question! Most people don't spend two years of their life traveling around landfills and slums digging into what happens to our garbage.

I majored in Ancient Greek and Latin at Penn. The week after I graduated, I booked a one-way ticket to Athens. I wanted to get out of Van Pelt Library. It was the height of the financial crisis, and I started writing about the economic situation in Greece for British and American magazines.

I also began spending more and more time in Eastern Europe. And here I began seeing something really strange. Trash was *everywhere*. Plastic had scarcely existed in many of these places under half a century of communism. But now you couldn't go anywhere without seeing it. Along roads, clogging rivers, disintegrating in the countryside. I remember thinking, *How?*

And the more I looked into it, the stranger it became. Because a lot of that plastic waste I saw had actually arrived to Eastern Europe from Western Europe. One half of Europe—the rich, environmentally self-congratulating Europe—was in the business of offloading its waste onto the other half—the poor, environmentally devastated Europe. And it was a contradiction that only expanded in scale the more I examined the problem. Simply put, for more than a generation now, half the globe has been shipping much of its unwanted waste to the other half. Rich countries make waste; poor countries take it. I became determined to understand why this bizarre exchange had started—and why, even when we acknowledged that it was wrong, it had never ended.

**When I was a kid in South Carolina, I can remember driving through rural areas where junk was routinely stacked in people's yards—anything from broken-down cars and rusted appliances to discarded toys and furniture and compost piles. It was an easy thing to look down your nose at. I can also remember hauling trash**

**bags to a local dump during beach vacations—which was no one's favorite part of them. Now, in 21st-century Philadelphia, I probably wheel at least 100 pounds of garbage to my curb every month and never have to think about it again. I'll bet you can guess which of these situations is most convenient and aesthetically appealing to me. But after spending two years exploring the global waste trade, how do you think about them?**

"Never have to think about it again"—yes, exactly. But it eventually does go somewhere, right? Your question gets to one of the underlying engines of the waste trade: There's psychological self-assurance in believing that your waste is disappearing into thin air, or possibly even helping the planet in some way. It makes all our consumption habits more palatable. And this is by design. We now have access to decades of the petrochemical industry's corporate memos and internal meeting notes. This idea—that the plastic you put into a recycling bin could in fact benefit the planet—was known to be nonsense in the 1980s. Petrochemical companies knew it wasn't true. But they also knew how much money it could make them.

**But isn't some plastic recycled—or re-used in some way? In the book, you describe Chinese farmers picking through piles of plastic for polyethylene, for example, which can be melted and molded into new products. So from a chemistry perspective, at least, some types of plastics are recyclable. What's the problem?**

Most plastic in the world gets burnt or landfilled. Less than 10 percent of all the plastic ever discarded by humanity has even attempted the recycling process. And even that is a misleading statistic. Germany claims 57 percent recycling rates, for instance. But that figure assumes that all the plastic waste exported from Germany for "recycling" is actually getting recycled. It's not. A lot of it is just heading to places like Romania or Turkey and getting incinerated. Germany gets to claim it's getting "recycled" nevertheless.

Now some plastic, it's true, can be "recycled." PET is typically cited as the best example. This is what those Chinese farmers are scrounging around for in waste shipments that arrive from the US. But even PET figures are dismal. Less than 30 percent of it has historically gotten recycled.

Let's look a little deeper at the problem here. Even most of those plastics that can be recycled cannot be recycled an infinite number of times. Eventually they degrade beyond any ability to be resurrected. This means that "recycling" is never preventing final disposal. It is simply delaying it. And, because the manufacturing of new plastic invariably requires the input of virgin material for production, the "recycling" process is also never curbing waste outputs. It is only ever increasing them. Simply consider that every country on Earth that claims higher and higher "recycling" rates with each new year is simultaneously producing more and more waste.

And don't forget: Even if this process did in fact work, it is still ultimately toxic, leaking additives and contaminants into local water supplies! And it is also wrecking our oceans. We have studies from Vietnam that demonstrate that as much as 10 percent of plastic that is mechanically "recycled" is lost in the process, turning into billions of microplastics which head into local water systems, then the ocean. For good reason will there be—by weight—more plastic in the ocean than fish by 2050.

Here's the quiet part out loud, which almost no one is willing to be honest about: The best solution to our plastic may be to just landfill it.

**How did the US environmental movement influence the disposal of trash?**

It's a remarkable paradox. There's a long history of buying and selling waste. But the crucial shift happens in the 1960s and '70s. In a bid to reduce the output of certain forms of toxic residue, legislation in the United States and Europe made the



costs of disposal of those materials exorbitantly expensive. It's a bit like raising the price of cigarettes in an attempt to get people to stop smoking them.

So far, so good. But this Western environmental "progress" came with a dirty little secret. It didn't apply to poorer countries. By the 1980s, something bizarre had started happening. Western nations—and municipalities and corporations—had begun contracting toxic waste management out to middle men who shipped these residues to the developing world. The cost of disposing of a ton of lead paint in Ohio in 1985? A thousand dollars, give or take. In Africa? Two dollars, perhaps less.

Almost overnight a huge industry arose, one that profited off opening up the environments of the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries for destruction. We've still never really come to terms with the damage it has caused.

**Most Americans have been conditioned to divide waste into two conceptual categories: useless garbage and recyclable material. Do you think that's a useful way to look at it, or is there a better one?**

I think it's still a convenient distinction. There are many materials that are genuinely recyclable: steel, cardboard, paper, aluminum. One can create real circular economies out of these things. Where we start to get into trouble—and, looking back at the history of advertising and recycling, one might say we were *deliberately* led into trouble—is with materials like plastic or Styrofoam or Tetra Pak, or things like electronics or batteries. Most versions of these things cannot be safely or effectively or profitably recycled. Most really are just trash. And all are full of dangerous toxins and additives. They are messy. They pile up. They cannot organically break down. They are expensive to landfill. The solution has often been to turn them into someone else's problem.

**You just cited a couple primary impediments to recycling: doing it safely, and**



**"The best solution to our plastic may be just to landfill it."**

**doing it profitably. What kinds of waste are the biggest headache from a safety standpoint—and did you come across anyone who was making any headway toward making recycling them safer?**

Toxic waste in steel drums. Airplane fluids, for instance, or asbestos. There is exactly zero upside to such waste. Its fate is simply to be dumped in a field or river or, if possible, incinerated in a cement kiln. For good reason have we historically had to bribe developing countries gargantuan sums of cash to take this stuff.

**How about profitability—what's an example of a material that's technically recyclable but too expensive in a practical sense? And what would it take to make it financially feasible?**

Let's take old cruise ships. These are valuable. They are made of thousands of tons of reusable steel. They also have other reusable things like wood deck paneling. But to dismantle them is extremely dangerous—by some measures, the most dan-

gerous job on earth, statistically deadlier than mining—and incredibly polluting. And it's labor intensive, requiring thousands of dismantlers who are willing—or forced—to be exposed to all manner of toxins and hazards for months on end.

These are deemed unacceptable costs within those developed countries where cruise ships often operate. So the solution is to dispatch them for dismantling to places where those costs are lowered—that is, where labor is paid a pittance—and where those hazards are considered acceptable—where the toxins that are packed within modern cruise ships can simply be torched on a beachhead when the local environmental inspector takes his lunch break.

If you wanted the work of ship dismantling to be done in those countries that reap the overwhelming benefits of global shipping, you would likely have to automate the process. That requires tremendous technological and capital investment. As with so much else, it's easier, and cheaper, to just make it someone else's problem, to hand a Bangladeshi laborer a handsaw and pay him a few dollars a day to do it. ["Skeleton Coast," May/June 2015.]

**Are there any types of waste that rich nations—or poor ones for that matter—actually try to hold on to?**

Scrap metal is a good example. Many countries around the world now have export bans on it. This stuff is valuable. They don't want it exiting their borders. I remember traveling to Kenya in 2022, when the government had just put a ban on scrap metal's export. Anyone caught shipping the stuff was facing a heavy jail sentence. You had guys who once spent their existences rolling shopping carts around Nairobi piled with dirty cutlery and car fenders—who were now too scared to continue doing so.

One reason why scrap metal is so valuable? It's genuinely recyclable.

**From mountains of smoldering electronic waste in Ghana to former Indonesian rice paddies piled knee-high**

**with single-use plastics originally jettisoned half-a-world away, you plunge your readers into some mind-boggling scenes. What discovery surprised you most during your travels?**

The obscurity of this huge, billion-dollar, globe-spanning business that we all contribute to in one way or another.

Let's consider for a moment how our products are made. It's not always pretty, right? But there's at least a modicum of transparency. Companies like Nike or Apple are legally obliged to tell us where they are sourcing their materials, where these things are being put together, who is doing it. You look inside an H&M shirt and there's a tag that says, "Made in Bangladesh," or whatever it is.

But as for the fate of what happens to all these things? Your iPhone or your old Coke bottle or that old H&M T-shirt? The contractors and brokers that handle our waste are under zero obligation to tell us what is really happening to it—whether any of it is actually getting recycled, as they often claim, or whether it's simply getting torched in a cement kiln somewhere in Malaysia. There's a tremendous amount of money to be made in lying to you about the fate of your trash. And it's problematic for other reasons, too. Because it is the disposal process where all the nasty toxins and additives that have been injected into everything get unleashed into the atmosphere, bodies of water, soil, food supplies. A lot of this stuff is eternal. Once it's entered those environments, good luck ever getting it out.

**One way to think about trash is that it's something everybody generates, nobody really wants, but almost anybody is allowed to receive. How does this combination of factors shape the way it moves?**

A congressman from New Jersey once answered this question best: Like water flowing downhill, our trash tends to travel the path of least resistance. It tends to make its way to those places

with the fewest inspectors, the least stringent environmental regulations, the most corruption, the cheapest labor. When you think about the trash trade, imagine the drug trade, only operating in reverse. Waste travels from rich countries to poor. The incentive is rarely to stop it. It's to let it travel unchecked. After all, rich countries are losing a liability when trash exits their borders.

Then there's that old adage: One man's trash, another's treasure. But, with a few notable exceptions, this just isn't true. Our garbage really isn't very valuable!

So where's the money here?

The money is in moving trash, relocating it, getting it away. Waste is not very profitable. Waste *diversion* is stupendously profitable.

**So who tends to make the most money?**

Well, you have Western municipalities which are saving a fortune off waste export. To landfill a ton of plastic waste is expensive. To export it abroad is not just cheap. There can even be margins of profit in it. You can contract a waste broker and sell this stuff to an importer in Vietnam or the Philippines for pennies. And a lot of these containers which have just arrived from Asia to the United States or Europe bearing all these cheap goods are often heading back empty, right? Why not fill them with trash? The transportation costs of shipping waste have historically been negligible.

**Did you encounter any communities that receive waste knowing full well that it might jeopardize their own health or their own land, but make a reasoned economic decision to do it anyway?**

Most communities in developing countries don't think about these problems in such abstract ways. Waste is a job, just like farming was for however many thousands of years. Workers I met in Indonesia or Tanzania are worried about feeding their families. They tend to give you a bizarre look if you ask about toxicity or health problems, almost as if to

say, "That's the least of my problems." They're just looking to make ends meet.

**You titled your book *Waste Wars*. At a global level, is trash disposal an inherently conflict-riddled enterprise?**

I think trash displacement is inherently conflictual. And, again, it comes with a contradiction. As richer countries attempt to "clean up" their environmental footprints, it often comes at the expense of poorer countries, who are bribed or simply deluded into accepting our waste. It should come as no surprise that the countries that claim the highest recycling rates—Germany, for instance—are also the greatest exporters of waste. "Recycling," in this sense, just means making it someone else's problem.

While we now have robust discussions about transitioning to green energy, we still don't really talk about the ecological devastation spawned by our production and consumption habits. This problem isn't going anywhere.

**In the process of researching and writing this book, did you learn anything that caused you to change your own behavior?**

How destructive plastic is. I don't have any particular background in environmental studies or chemistry. But the more I learned about plastic, the more experts I spoke with, the more studies I looked into, the more horrifying this stuff became to me. Plastic exists for a reason. It is astonishingly cheap and convenient. But it comes at unsustainable cost. It's a ticking planetary time bomb. No matter what you do with plastic—whether you burn it or recycle it or landfill it—it never truly disappears.

If you don't care about the fate of the planet, fine. But presumably you care about yourself. And this stuff is wrecking us. It's being found in our brains, our blood, our bone marrow. This is just what we know about so far. It's an absolute nightmare.

# Catfisher Lagoon

A dispatch from Agbogbloshie, where electronics go to die.

From an airplane window, the city of Accra resembles a great brown-gray mass tacked to the littoral of West Africa. Veiny streets of ochre dirt cut through disorderly chunks of mudbrick and corrugated iron. At the city's southern edge, where Accra brushes up against the Gulf of Guinea, are a handful of thick granite monuments. They were erected in the early 1960s to commemorate Ghana's independence, sub-Saharan Africa's first successful decolonization movement. Shortly after midnight on March 6, 1957, a young revolutionary named Kwame Nkrumah [GED'43 G'44]—the son of an Asona goldsmith—proclaimed the release of the former Gold Coast from the British Empire. “At long last, the battle has ended,” Nkrumah told hundreds of Ghanaians who had massed in the center of the world's newest capital city. “We have awakened. We will not sleep anymore.”

Today, the monuments to Ghana's independence jut out from the Atlantic coast and exude a vacant pageantry. There is Black Star Square, a tarmac parade ground that stretches out into sun-struck emptiness. There is Independence Arch, built in 1961 to greet the arrival of Queen Elizabeth, Ghana's erstwhile ruler. There is Accra Sports Stadium, a sepulchral coliseum that rises forth from the sizzling pavement like a stale wedding cake. It's unusual to find anyone else in this section of Accra, no matter the hour of the day, apart from a few bored guards armed with assault rifles and tasked with removing anyone caught dozing on benches. On either side of the monuments, along peninsulas stretching into the Gulf of Guinea, strongholds that once held enslaved people cast their shadows over the thrashing waves of the Atlantic.

Accra grows denser and denser as it pushes inland—so dense, in fact, that in the decades after Kwame Nkrumah oversaw his country's independence, a succession of “ring roads” were constructed in repeated attempts to encircle Ghana's capital and delineate its outer limits. One highway was paved in the mid-1970s, another in the late 1990s, both in vain: For half a century now, Accra has kept on pushing its way through the bush, undeterred. A city that 60 years ago boasted a population of some 300,000 is today a megalopolis of more than three million, a bead along the belt of West African urbanization stretching from Abidjan to Lagos that is poised to become, by 2100, the most populated coastline on the planet.

Tucked deep within the bowels of this unruly mass sits the market slum known as Agbogbloshie. It's a notorious place, a household name among security analysts, cybercrime experts, and environmental agencies the world over. For the US State Department, Agbogbloshie has proved a headache for security



and intelligence safekeeping ever since it made itself known to Western authorities nearly two decades ago; in 2008, a team of researchers from the University of British Columbia traveled to Ghana's capital and chanced upon Northrop Grumman military contracts amounting to \$22 million on hard drives rusting in an Agbogbloshie market stall that looked much like any of the thousands of others that crowd the slum.

In the years since, dozens of other sensitive and precious documents—NASA mockups, Homeland Security memos, TSA spreadsheets, Defense Intelligence Agency files—have been recovered off secondhand computers discovered in the marketplace. It's probably a fraction of what's to be uncovered at Agbogbloshie. A recent Harvard study estimated that the value of the data that ends up in electronic waste streams could be as high as \$13 billion a year. No small chunk finds its way to Accra.

That's the valuable material Agbogbloshie receives—accidentally or otherwise. Then there's the valuable material it *takes*. For the FBI, the slum is a den of identity thieves and financial catfishers. Their culprits tend to be enterprising young men in Ghana who have spent their lives rummaging through the piles of keyboards, desktop monitors, and smartphones that waste brokers in rich countries have shipped to Agbogbloshie; they are seasoned at restoring these busted electronics back to life—and, on occasion, using them to conduct epic long-range fraud against residents of the countries that sent them.

In 2017, after hundreds of thousands of dollars failed to reach the accounts of a Memphis-based real estate agency, its realtors came to the belated realization that dozens of their email addresses had been spoofed and used to siphon off brokerage payments from recent home buyers across Tennessee. The culprit: a group of fraudsters from Ghana. Other thefts are of a more intimate nature. Communities of Ghanaian teenagers, so-called browser boys, spend their nights luring Westerners into sending them gift cards, new phones, inheritances. In 2021, a 77-year-old man in Annandale, Virginia, matched on a dating website with a woman who claimed to be a widow in her thirties. A little more than one year and \$500,000 in wired cash later, the man contacted local police with concerns that the widow may not have existed. She didn't; instead, he had sent the money to a network of scammers in Ghana whose total earnings over the previous two years, concluded Virginia prosecutors, likely exceeded \$40 million. Indeed, even if you have never heard of Agbogbloshie, it's possible that someone in Agbogbloshie has heard of you. If an email has ever landed in your spam folder informing you that you've been designated as a handler of a West African prince's



lost banking fortune—*I can't transfer this fund to my personal account rather I want you to assist me!*—there's a good chance it was dispatched from one of the several thousand corrugated-metal shacks that make up the residential sprawl of Agbogbloshie.

As for environmental agencies, Agbogbloshie is a byword for ecological ruin. The New York City-based Pure Earth is an NGO that tracks toxin levels across impoverished countries; it routinely lists Agbogbloshie among the most polluted places on the planet. Chemical analyses of Agbogbloshie's chicken eggs have determined they are probably the most poisonous on Earth. According to the World Health Organization, a child who consumes poultry in the slum there will absorb 220 times the European Food Safety Authority's daily limit for intake of chlorinated dioxins, chemical compounds that can prove highly damaging even in minute quantities. "One can assume they"—the residents of Agbogbloshie—"will be looking at a drastically reduced life expectancy," Matthias Buchert, a chemist at the Institute for Applied Ecology in Darmstadt, Germany, has claimed. During afternoons spent in Agbogbloshie, it's not unusual to observe cows destined for the slaughterhouse chewing through last meals of yams mixed with plastic. According to researchers who have studied a similar phenomenon in India, the olfactory appendage of a cow—the vomeronasal organ—struggles to differentiate plastic coated in food from food itself.

Yet the most confounding thing about Agbogbloshie may just be its location. One would expect a place of so many competing notorieties to be tucked far from the center of a bustling national capital, at sanitized remove from the UN agencies and World Bank offices that, on the face of it, make it their purpose to prevent such dire places from existing. And yet Agbogbloshie is *right there*. It sits at the beating heart of Accra, a mere mile from the daunting granite monuments to independence that seemed to celebrate the birth of a Ghana bent on never becoming the object of Western exploitation again. Indeed, driving toward Agbogbloshie is an almost hallucinatory experience. A string of high-rise luxury hotels offers their guests acres of manicured gardens and womb-temperature swimming pools. Gradually the road gets bouncier. The air gets smoggier. The buildings get shabbier.

A bridge is lined with men hawking secondhand clothes. Below them is the Korle Lagoon, a stagnant channel that may take one a moment to realize is actually a body of water. Across its surface stretches a thick canvas of garbage. It jiggles now and then as pristine white egrets touch down upon floating chunks of Styrofoam, sending ripples through the flotsam and a surge of black water splashing into a mushy bank that scampers with rats gnawing through shopping bags in search of scraps. The Korle Lagoon doubles as a latrine. From the Okai Street bridge, next to a vendor selling toothpaste and brushes from a red pushcart, men unbuckle their pants to piss while nearby a line of wobbly makeshift outhouses has been constructed out of wormy wooden doors.

A cramped tongue of land extends for more than two miles into the Korle Lagoon. The residential section of Agbogbloshie, known as Old Fadama, is home to approximately 60,000 Ghanaians who have largely reached Accra from their country's desert northern fringes. Shielded from the sun by thousands of overlapping corrugated roofs, hundreds of passageways weave through Old Fadama, across the peninsula, forming a beehive of humanity tucked out of sight from Accra itself. There are tattoo parlors and seamstresses and public latrines adorned with murals depicting women squatting on toilets. Small mosques bristle with minarets that pierce through the metal-roof expanse like arrows through armor. In secluded nooks, shirtless boys gather around televisions that play karate movies and soccer matches. A refuge from the sunbaked city beyond it, one can wander the warrens of Old Fadama for chunks of the day without seeing the same shanty twice—or the sun at all. On three sides it is surrounded by the waters of the lagoon. Along the other, eastern edge, where Old Fadama runs back up against Okai Street, one finds the largest food market in all of Ghana, a great open-air bazaar known as the Onion Market. It sells not just onions but also yams, juices, coconuts, palm leaves, cookware.

Why have tens of thousands of Ghanaians relocated hundreds of miles from their ancestral villages in the north to live in such a place? The answer is to be found in the narrow strip of land that separates Old Fadama from the waters of the Korle Lagoon.

Every morning in Agbogbloshie, with the exception of Sundays, thousands of male residents of Old Fadama trickle out from their shanties and make their way toward the Korle Lagoon's banks. There, they hammer and shuck their way through a perpetually replenishing reservoir of secondhand electronics that have reached Ghana from the richer countries of the world.

First there is the phone dismantling station, Agbogbloshie being the destination for huge quantities of foreign and domestic smartphones that, owing to exhausted batteries or cracked screens, or any number of other problems, no longer work. They may be "condemned," as broken electronics are known in Agbogbloshie, but they still possess worth in the form of precious metals and parts. Those valuable elements must now be extracted and separated. At the phone dismantling station, men are arranged in circles in groups of five or six. One strips printed circuit boards from old Android phones and tosses them onto a glittering pile of green silicon. He then passes what remains of the phone to the man to his right, who uses a pair of tweezers to unpick its camera, delicately dropping it into a plastic water bottle on the ground beside him, where, I notice, several other such bottles are arranged in a neat row, each filled to the brim with amputated smartphone cameras. I stay for an hour to watch the men pass condemned phones round a circle. The phones lose more and more of their parts as they get farther round the circle, until they arrive at the final man, whose role is to toss their plastic encasements atop a growing anthill of smartphone

carcasses teetering along the edge of the lagoon. Then, just as the piles of phones requiring dismantling appear to be dwindling, that day's work nearly done, men aboard motorized wheelbarrows—the Nigerians who run much of the electronic waste market, I later learn—pull up to deliver dozens more rice sacks full of condemned phones. They toss them onto the ground as though they are bags of dirty laundry.

For decades the toil of dismantling at Agbogbloshie was done in a vast scrapyard on the distant bank of the Korle Lagoon. In July 2021, infuriated by Western press coverage of the area, and determined to end the work done there, Ghana's government sent in bulldozers, brutally levelling the site over the course of several days. The electronic dismantling never stopped, though. It merely relocated closer to the residential quarters of Old Fadama itself, along a dirt ribbon of track that runs the course of the Korle Lagoon. Some 15 feet wide, the path is an unrelenting vehicular torrent, juddering with motorized tricycles and pickup trucks and retrofitted tractors and choking with their comingling exhausts. Every morning, their drivers ferry hundreds of tons of mangled appliances (ceiling fans, washing machines, motorcycle engines, refrigerators) into Agbogbloshie; every afternoon they motor some of the world's most precious materials (cobalt, copper, gold, platinum) out—a 10-hour turnaround that extracts highly valuable material from Agbogbloshie, and eventually Ghana, and leaves little behind save a hazy mass of pollution and pittance wages. My feet crunch over shards of computer-screen glass and cracked iPad covers and stray Hewlett-Packard mice; a pink bra has been stamped into the mud by so many thousands of footsteps to the point of resembling a fossilized crustacean. Itinerant barbers bearing white plastic stools roam around doling out buzz cuts for 10 cedis, or a buck. Women shimmering in tribal dress meander through the morass, selling juices out of plastic laundry bins. The constant clank of hammers laying into electronics pulses through the scene like a heartbeat. *Clank! Clank!*

About halfway down the peninsula, the appliances that have arrived on those motorized tricycles and pickup trucks are being bashed to pieces. Hundreds of young men—known in Agbogbloshie as “dismantlers”—sit in dozens of small circles straddling gutted microwaves and disemboweled computer monitors. Most are wearing knee-high colored dress socks and open-toed sandals, which poke out of great rats' nests of electrical wiring crowding the ground. The dismantlers have one job: For eight to nine hours a day they pound fat gavel hammers into the seams of old ceiling fans, motorcycle mufflers, speaker systems. The work has a factory-line monotony to it, only it is the exact opposite of assembling. It is a *de*-manufacturing line, reducing all the amenities of our modern world—the air conditioners that cool our offices, the

refrigerators that preserve our food, the motors within the mowers that shear the grass of our lawns—back into their constituent elements. It's a juxtaposition that, even after weeks spent in Agbogbloshie, never ceases to be jarring: The work of the dismantlers may be pre-industrial and backbreaking, but what lies beneath the strokes of their hammers tends to be some of the world's most advanced technology. And while a streamlined process of automation might have manufactured most of these products, it is human labor—of an almost unimaginably archaic kind—that remains one of the few ways to get rid of them.

I watch as a Japanese refrigerator engine gets obliterated in the span of several seconds with rhythmic discipline, its dismantler capable of locating the seams in its sides without hesi-

tation and, three or four hammer smacks later, cracking its torso in two. Gathered in the center of his circle are mounds of filthy gadgets. Smashed TV screens abut cordless electric teakettles. Webs of wiring seem to lasso the piles of junk together like spiderwebs. Along the edge of the circle, a young dismantler is halfway through the work of disassembling an industrial Epson office printer when its cartridge sprays his socks with firecracker bursts of pink and turquoise ink.

I leave the appliance dismantlers and keep walking. On the side of the path facing the Old Fadama slum, men are taking their breaks, lounging horizontally along banks of interconnected steel chairs that appear to have been lifted from an airport or bus terminal. A couple are putting back Club beers. As the path continues, after every thirty feet or so, I see one huge Alpha & Omega-brand scale after another, each of them capable of weighing up to 500 pounds of copper or aluminum. All around me, Frafra tribespeople—identifiable because they tend to be shorter than most other residents of Agbogbloshie—work fastidiously, hunched over at 100-degree angles, plucking sparkling shards of emerald silicon circuit board off the ground and depositing them in nylon sacks.

Finally, after nearly two miles, the Korle Lagoon path rises to a five-story mountain of unsorted waste that lofts high above Agbogbloshie like an acropolis, a trashy summit befitting a society that owes its existence to the processing of refuse. Lording over the slum, taller even than the minarets of its mosques, the garbage mountain bakes in the harsh beating glare of the sun. At its base, men doze beneath tarps held up by wooden stilts, battalions of flies buzzing around their eyelids. Around its peak wander the belated entries to the great scavenging hunt: gaunt cattle and bony dogs, rooting through pastures of plastic in search of scraps of yam.

A five-story  
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