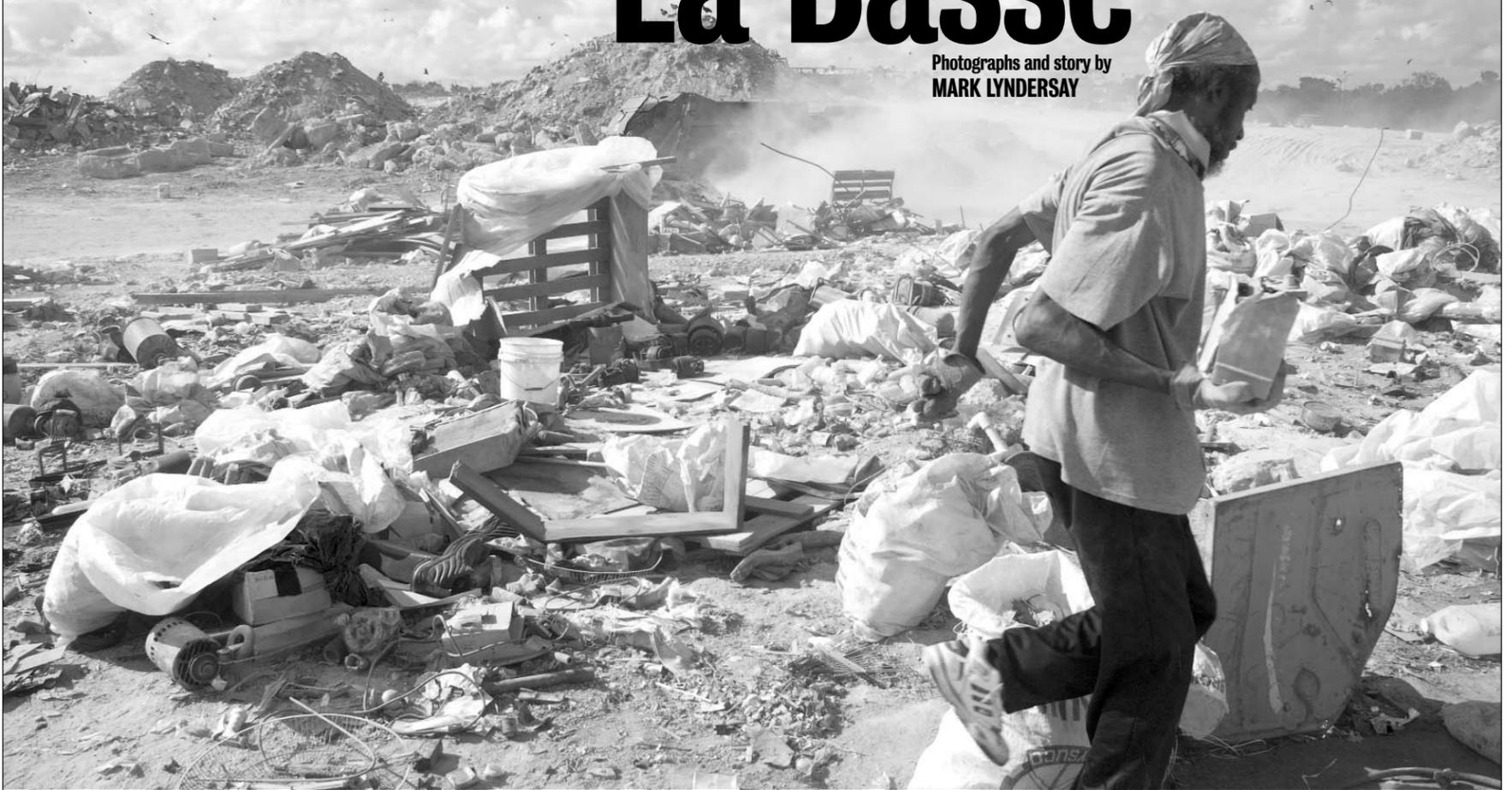




# Livin' la vida La Basse

Photographs and story by  
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"PLAITS" hustles to tidy the sorting area before more material arrives.



"FISH" takes time out to prune his nails in the tiny shack that houses the personal amenities of Fats' workers.



"FISH" kills time between sorting operations sweeping the constantly moving rubbish away from their workspace.

AT RIGHT: A load of metal begins its journey back to the world, where it will be packaged and shipped abroad for recycling.

**T**HE thing that stays with you is the dust. It's a fine misty dirt churned continuously by the never-ending procession of trucks trundling up the hill to dump their loads. It makes its way into everything, and even through my dust mask, it seems to stick to the roof of my mouth.

While you're there, in the Beetham Landfill, it seems like just an annoyance, but it's the essence of the place, rot pulverised and ground into a powder that becomes part of the atmosphere.

Fats is running late for our appointment and Fish, a wiry man with a shock of bedraggled hair, is killing the time sweeping away the rubbish that's constantly blown by the wind into the shack that serves as the site house for the operation.

Plaits is tidying the front of the space, where the bags of salvaged rubbish are brought for sorting and processing. In a deep crouch, Plaits is sifting through the rubble wire by wire, pulling the last remnants of value from the overspill of yesterday's delivery. "Hey!" Plaits yells. "I found a policeman!"

He takes the metal rod and sticks it to the side of an oil drum. The magnet makes it easy to tell iron from other metals when sellers come with mixed bags of metallic salvage.

Iron, along with copper and aluminium are key finds, along with bottles and paper. The finds must be sorted according to value, with white paper, for instance, commanding more value than paper that's been through a four-colour printing press.

But even for the salvagers working at the landfill, there's a lot of rubbish. "We don't deal with plastic," Plaits says.

After Fats arrives, we make our way to the top of the hill, an artificial mound of constantly flattened and covered garbage where the dumping of "heavy" rubbish is being done.

Ossie "Fats" Stout is a big man who gets the kind of respect that only tough fairness can command. He's been working here for ten years, after coming in to get some wood to build a fowl coop and realising that the work, though hard, was more rewarding than anything else he had been doing.

As we walk up the gentle slope, our feet making puffs of beige smoke with each step, he explains the flow of the work. Professional recyclers package and ship the metals from the dump in bulk after sorters like Fats gather them into huge nylon weave bags. Fats buys his raw material from pre-sorters, who organise the captures made on the front line by the bareback men who work the dump site itself.

These are the men who work 24/7 on the site, ripping open garbage bags ripe and rich with a smell that's so thick it's almost a taste as they tumble from the trucks.

It's a ballet of sorts for them, wading through rubbish that can reach ten feet high, working next to corbeaux that have long lost their fear of men and constantly keeping an eye out for the huge trucks constantly backing into their work area and the tractors that push and compact the freshly dropped rubbish.

The conditions look inhuman, but even in this surreal abstraction of a working day, a real camaraderie is alive among the quick suspicious glances of a hustle in progress.

Fats is undoubtedly my passport. On his say so, defences relax and

people tentatively begin to talk about what they do. I smile and wave as I'm introduced, at first self-consciously and then with a real admiration for the enormity of the work that's being done here.

These are the men (and women, delivering refreshments and sorting) who do what we won't. They extract from our leavings value that has created a real business of salvage, sifting anything that might be returned to the engines of manufacturing out of our rubbish. It's the anti-Cepep, work that made itself, evolving from individual hope into a social need.

And what these people, who work at a job that few of us would choose, all say is that it's honest work. Some say it emphatically, with a desperate passion that speaks of the abyss they face without it, others with a gentle smile of confidence and pride.

At the top of a man-made mountain of garbage, coated with a dust that becomes cloying mud after a heavy rainfall, far from the eyes of a city that disgorges itself daily here, is a real community that has built a livelihood out of what we leave behind.





"NINJAMAN" tears apart an old calendar to prepare it for recycling.

*It's the anti-Cepep, work that made itself, evolving from individual hope into a social need.*



After ten years of working at the landfill, "FATS" (right) and his colleague work the landfill without shoes.



OSSIE "FATS" STOUT at the dump site where the materials he will later sort are being gathered.



"CHOI SIN" works the front line at the dump site, pulling bottles from the fetid bags.

BELOW: The Doctor of Metal separates metals with his hands and an iron rod.



New salvage material, freshly collected waste, tumbles from the back of a dump truck.



A football field's worth of bagged glass bottles waits for collection.