

TALKING TRASH

with JOSH LEPAWSKY

interview by Rafi Arefin & Heather Rosenfeld
illustrations by Heather Rosenfeld

by way of introduction...



JOSH LEPAWSKY IS A PROFESSOR AT MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY STUDYING ELECTRONIC WASTE. HE VISITED MW IN APRIL AS PART OF A SPEAKER SERIES ON WASTE AND GEOVISUALIZATION.



RAFI AREFIN IS A GEOGRAPHY GRAD STUDENT STUDYING WASTE IN CAIRO. HE SUGGESTED DOING A COMIC INTERVIEW WITH JOSH. HIS ALTER-EGO IS A PUG.



HEATHER ROSENFELD STUDIES TECHNOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE. SHE MAKES COMICS AS PART OF HER RESEARCH PROCESS, AND HER ALTER-EGO IS OPTIMUS PRIME.

HI! SORRY I'M LATE!

NO
PROBLEM

I'M AT...
YOUR
DISPOSAL

hehehehehe





SO, HOW DID YOU GET INTERESTED IN WASTE?

I BECAME INTERESTED IN ELECTRONIC WASTE THROUGH STUDYING

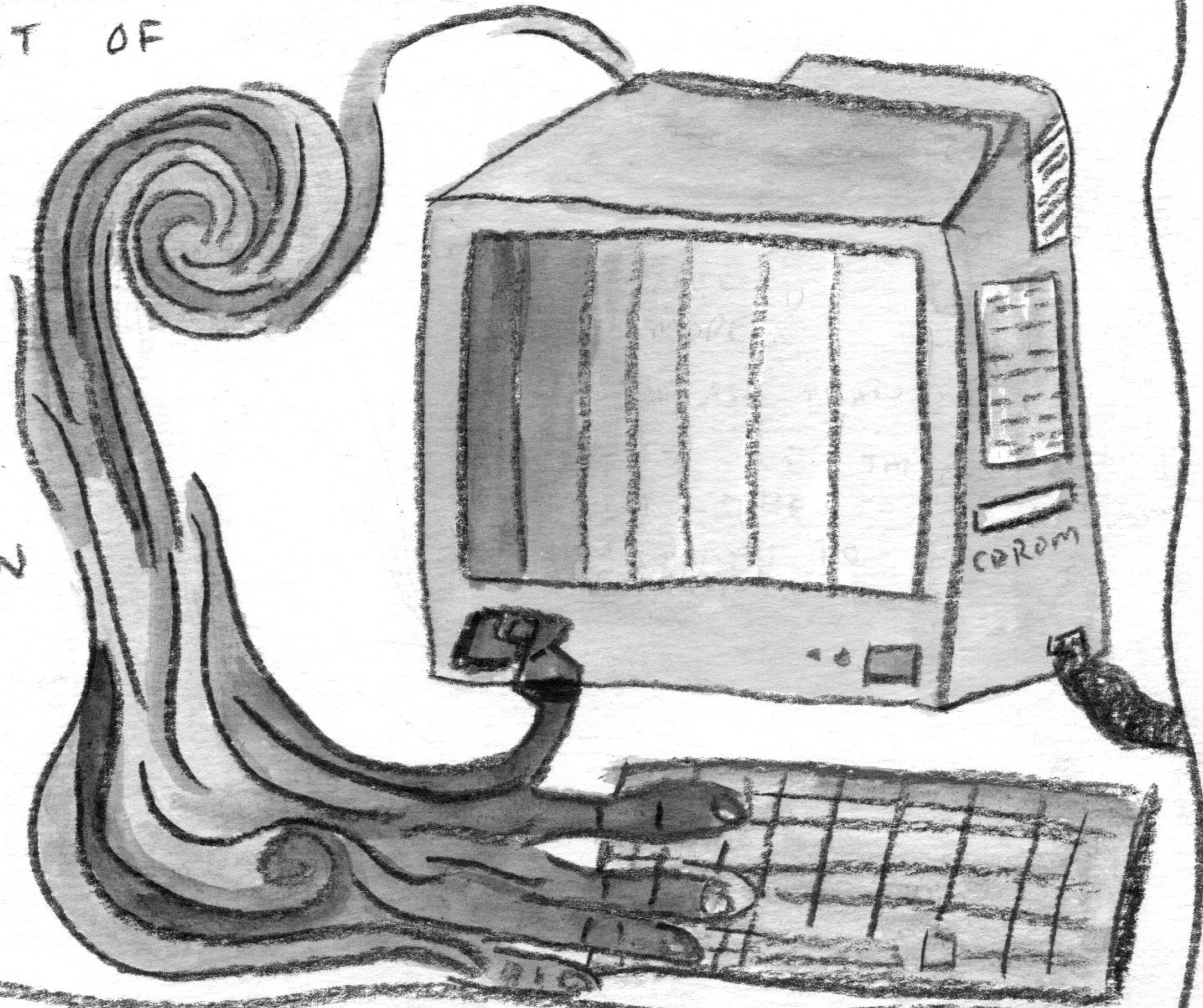
THE GEOGRAPHIES OF CYBERSPACE AND DIGITAL ECONOMIES. I DID MY MASTERS ON WILLIAM GIBSON'S NOVEL *Neuromancer* AT QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY IN ONTARIO



IN THE MID-TO-LATE 1990S, THE INTERNET WAS JUST
BECOMING MAINSTREAM. THE TERM CYBERSPACE WAS JUST
MAKING ITS WAY OUT OF

Science fiction
AND INTO MAINSTREAM
journalism.

IT STRUCK ME THAT
THE NOVEL IS MUCH
MORE DYSTOPIAN THAN
THE WAY PEOPLE
TALKED ABOUT THE
INTERNET.



I WAS STRUCK BY THE THEME OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION,
AND THE HORRENDOUS GENDER RELATIONS...



IN CONTRAST TO THE TALK OF
THE INTERNET AS DEMATERIALIZED
INFORMATION FLOWS.

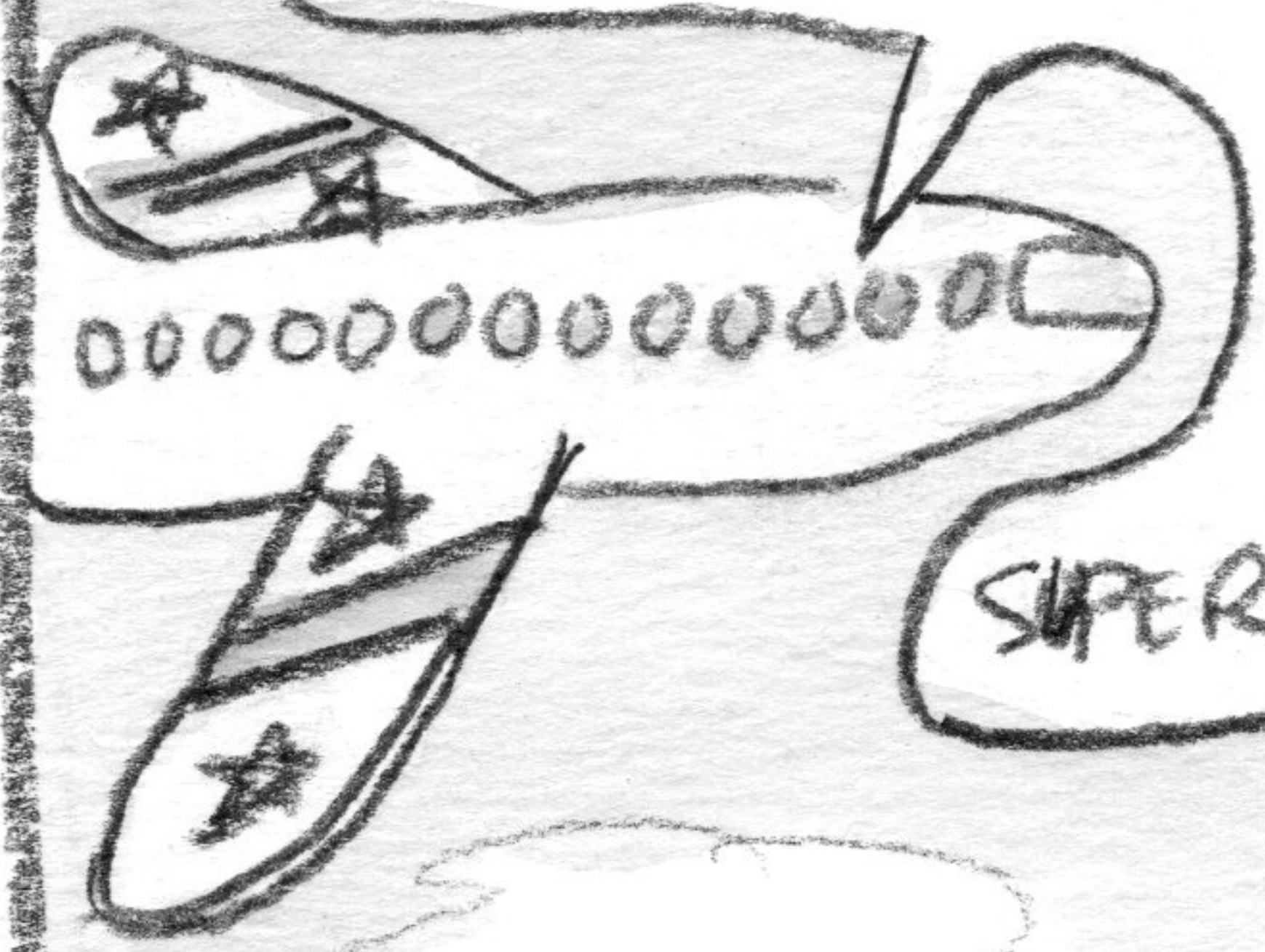
I MEAN, all of this
stuff is stuff!

I BECAME ESPECIALLY INTERESTED IN THE material consequences

of the internet, so I DID MY PHD ON —

AND THIS IS SUPER 1990S — THE MULTIMEDIA

SUPER CORRIDOR IN MALAYSIA.....





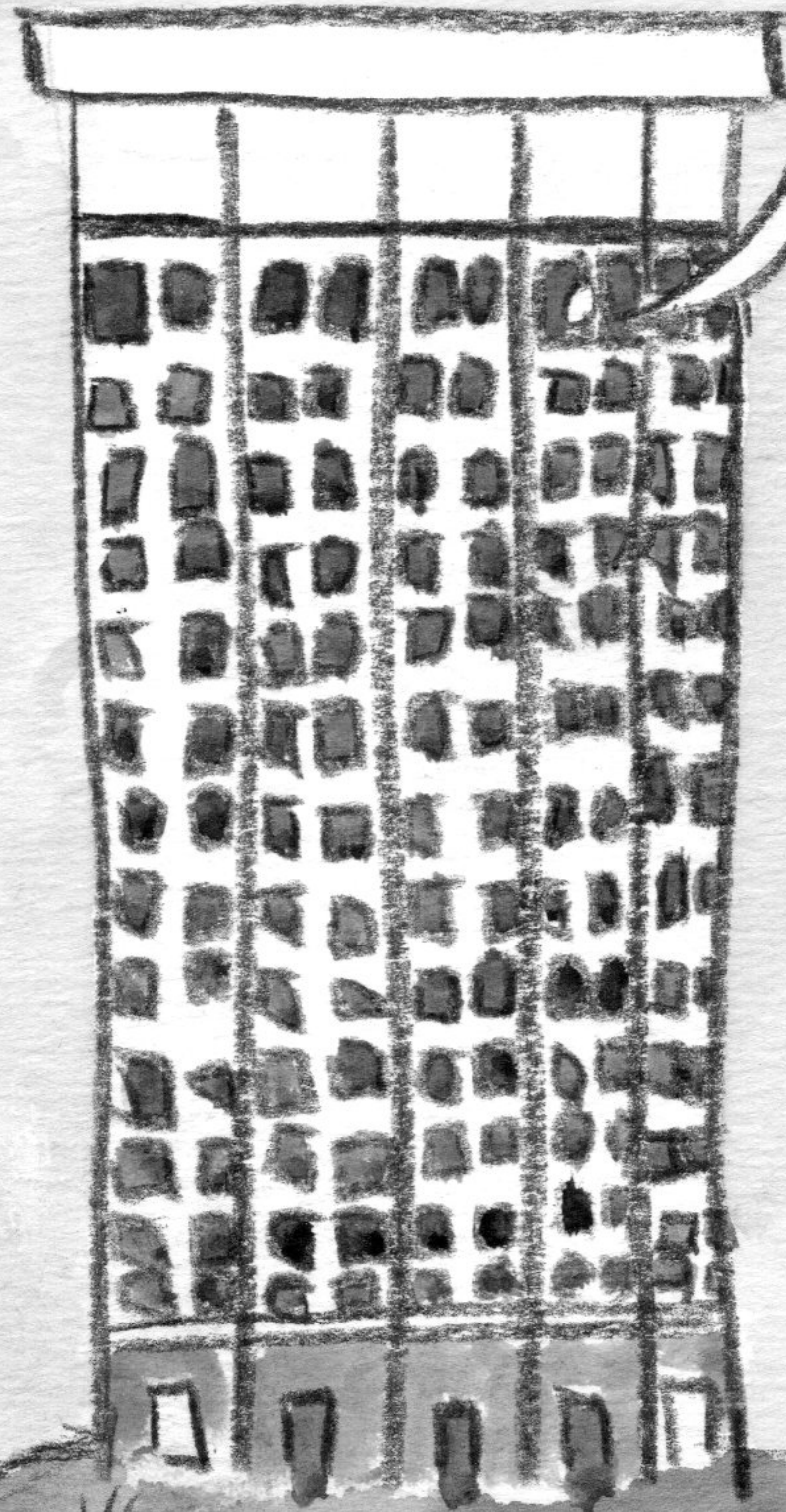
IT FELT LIKE THEY WERE building *Neuromancers*.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS WERE LITERALLY*
BEING PLUNKED DOWN OVER
RUBBER & PALM OIL PLANTATIONS.

THESE LEGACIES
OF COLONIALISM
WERE BEING
CLEARCUT FOR
THIS PROJECT.

YOU COULD SEE THE
TOP SOIL WASHING INTO
THE RIVERS.

*JOSHISM: PROFUSE USE OF THE WORD "LITERALLY, ALWAYS CORRECTLY."



I WAS WRITING UP MY PHD, WITH A BROAD INTEREST IN THE materiality of digital technologies. I CAME UPON THE BASEL ACTION NETWORK REPORT

EXPORTING HARM,
on electronic waste



WHICH CATALYZED MY NEXT PROJECT.



AS IN MALAYSIA, WASTE IS NEVER
A BLACK AND WHITE, GOOD OR
BAD. THERE'S NO EASY ANSWER
AND TO ME, THOSE ARE
THE BEST QUESTIONS.

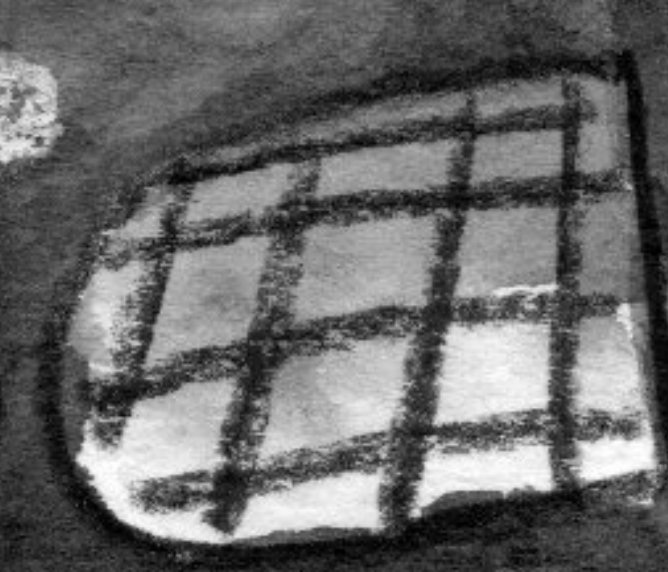
I'M INTERESTED IN DISPLACING THE anthropocentrism
THAT COMES WITH A LOT OF WASTE RESEARCH

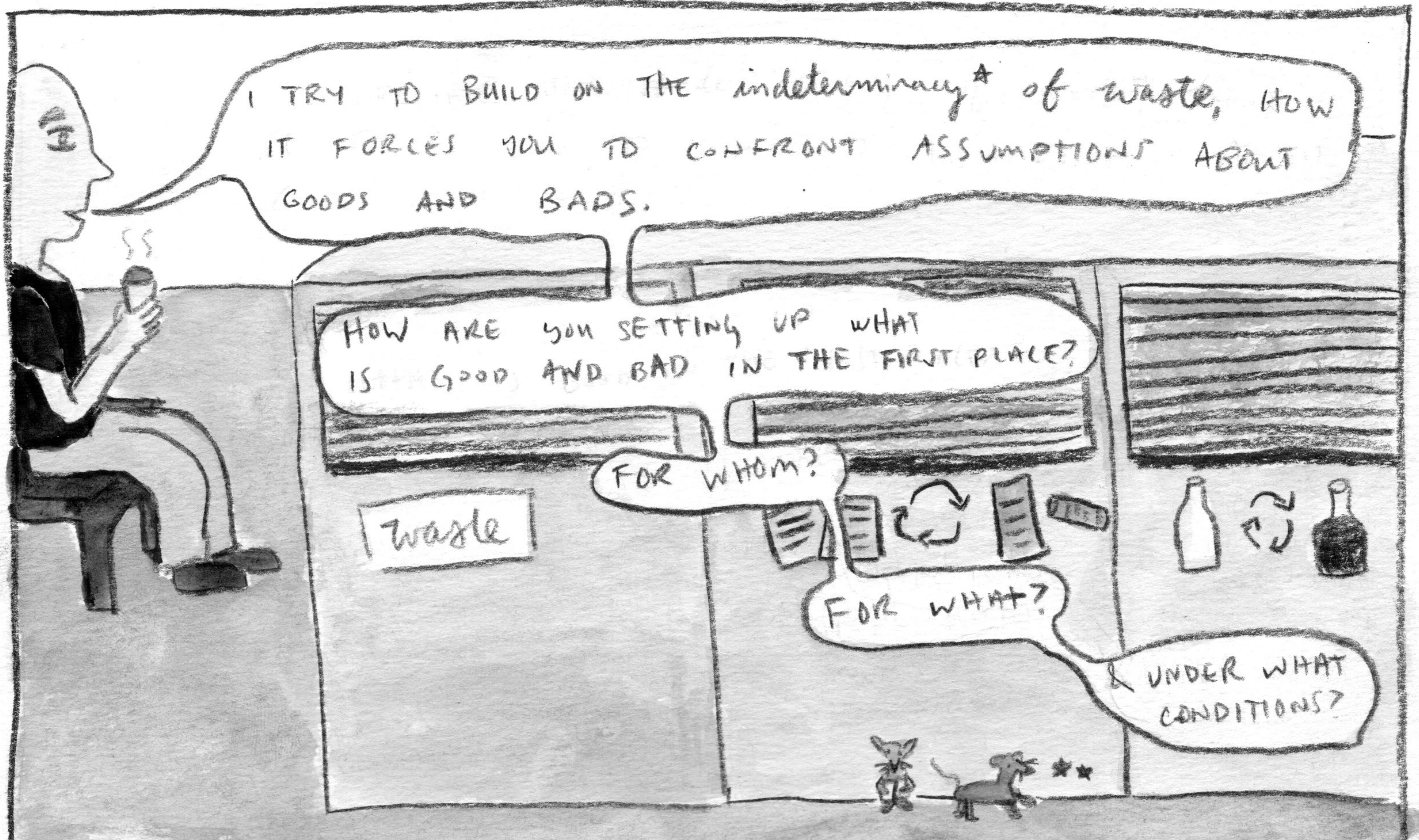
HUMANS ARE bottom dwellers AT THE BOTTOM
OF AN ocean of waste gases

oxygen is... A poison

[he also
studies
space
debris]

IN GEOLOGIC TIME IT WAS RELEASED AS A
WASTE GAS...





I TRY TO BUILD ON THE indeterminacy* of waste, HOW IT FORCES YOU TO CONFRONT ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GOODS AND BADS.

HOW ARE YOU SETTING UP WHAT IS GOOD AND BAD IN THE FIRST PLACE?

FOR WHOM?

waste

FOR WHAT?

& UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS?

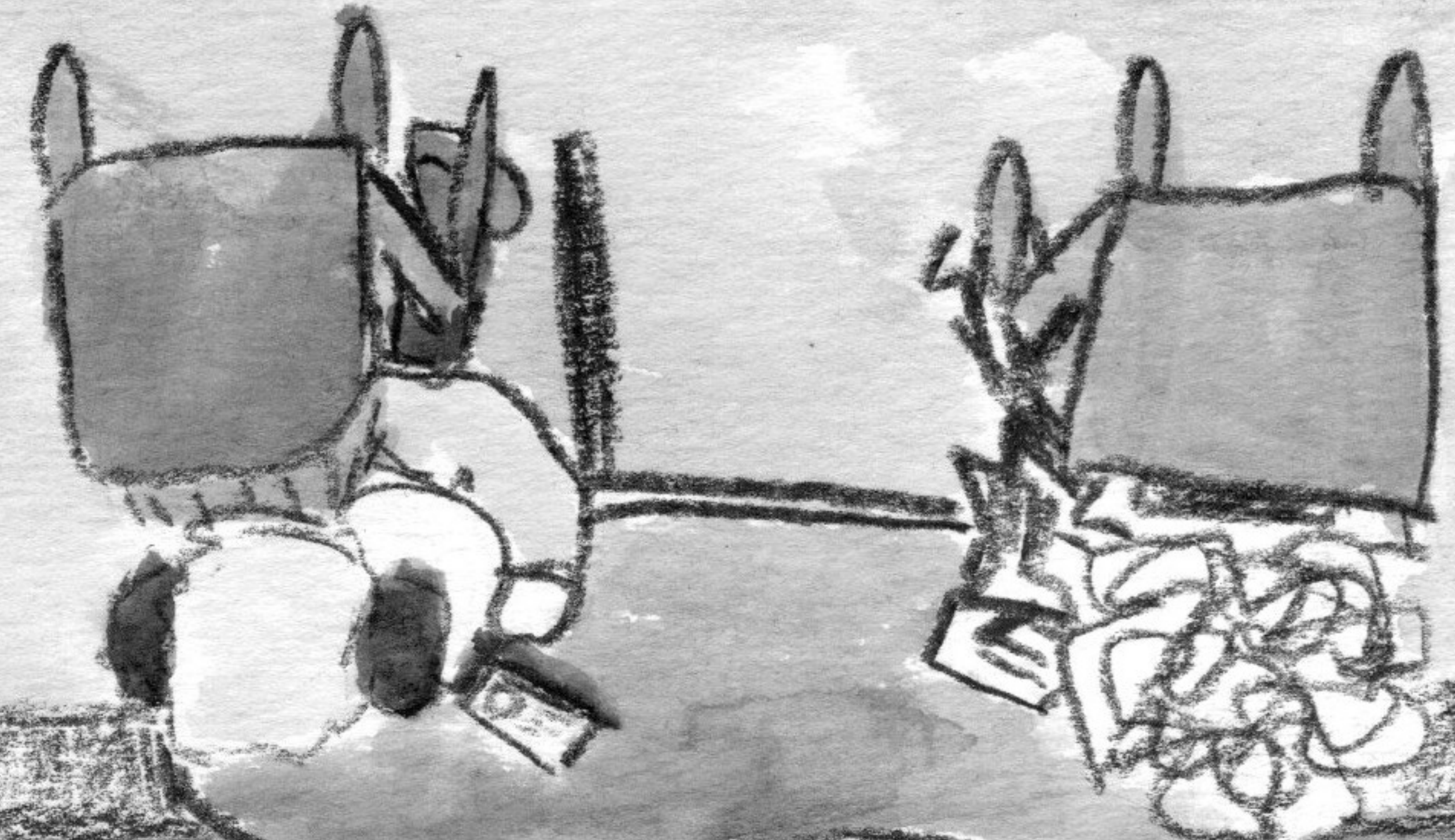


* SEE DISCUSSIONS BY MYRA HIRD & ZSUSZA GILLE // ** THERE AREN'T ACTUALLY MICE HERE

SO BUILDING ON THE INDETERMINACY OF WASTE, CAN YOU TALK ABOUT A TIME IN YOUR WORK WHEN YOU HAVE GONE INTO THE FIELD & HAD YOUR ASSUMPTIONS FLIPPED?



WHERE WHAT YOU SAW DIDN'T MATCH YOUR EXPECTATIONS?



YEAH - THE FLIP HAPPENED AS I STARTED DOING RESEARCH OUTSIDE OF CANADA

I WENT TO BANGLADESH, TO AGBOBLOSHIE IN GHANA...



YOU CAN FIND SITES THAT
YOU SEE IN THE BASEL ACTION
NETWORK'S REPORT.



BUT YOU CAN ONLY SEE
THEM IF YOU KEEP
THE FRAME LIKE THIS
LIKE THIS

(LIKE THIS)



IF YOU LOOK JUST FIFTEEN FEET
TO THE LEFT OR RIGHT, YOU
CAN SEE SO MUCH MORE GOING
ON — THE REPAIR SHOP, THE REUSE
FACILITY.



THE NARROW PICTURES DELIBERATELY FRAMED OUT OTHER STORIES... WHICH ARE MORE IMPORTANT IN THAT THEY INVOLVE MORE PEOPLE, MORE MATERIALS...



THESE IMAGES ARE
THE DOMINANT NARRATIVES.
THEY ELICIT GUILT,
DISGUST, DEPRESSION...

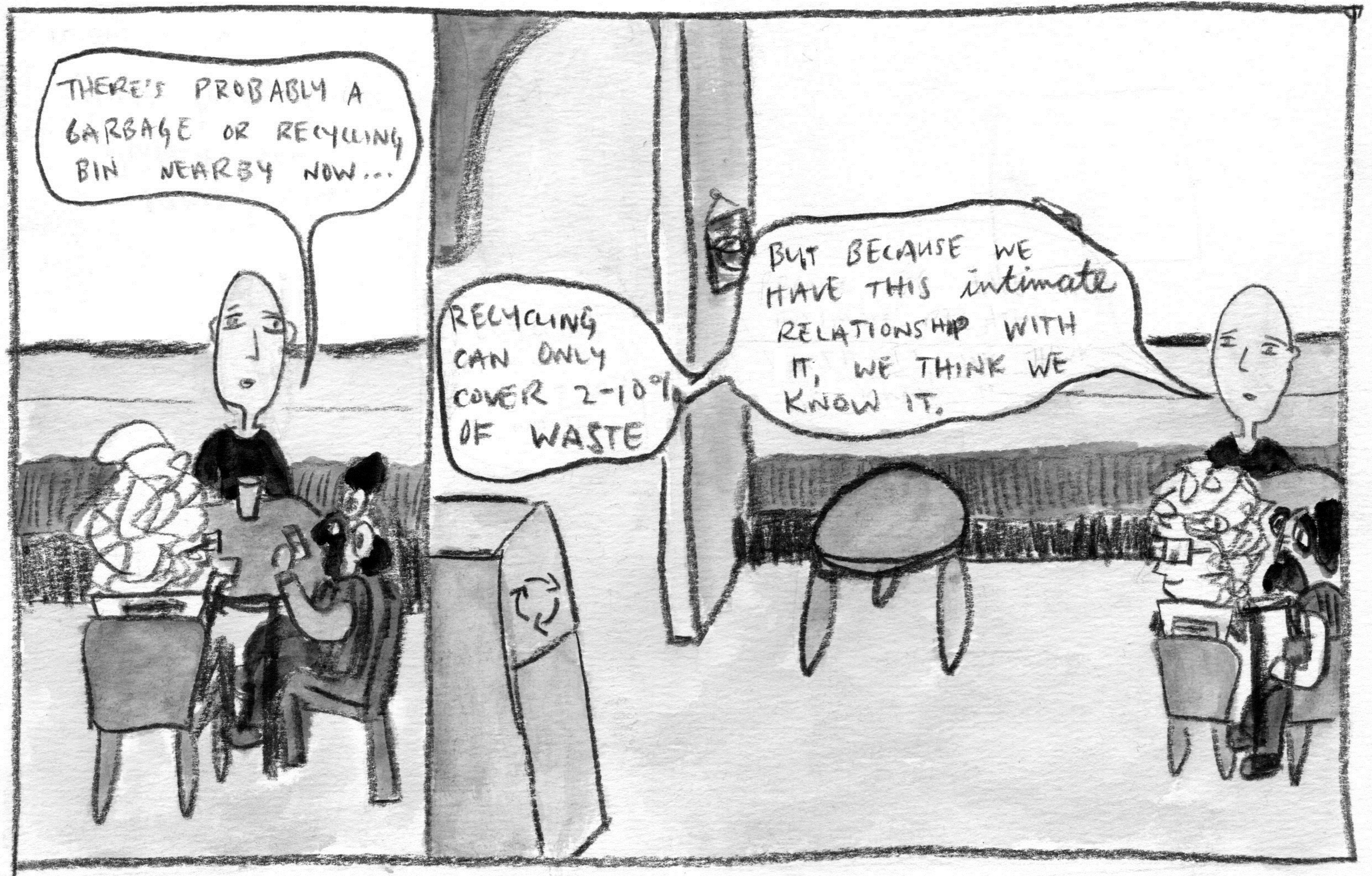



AND NOT TO downplay THE
SIGNIFICANCE OF TOXICS, THE DISCARDS ASPECTS
OF IT, BUT TO PRESENT IT AS THE WHOLE
PICTURE IS MISLEADING. IT LEADS TO MIS-SPECIFIED
SOLUTIONS TO E-WASTE - LEAVING OUT REUSE, RESOURCE EXTRACTION...

THERE'S PROBABLY A
GARBAGE OR RECYCLING
BIN NEARBY NOW...

RECYCLING
CAN ONLY
COVER 2-10%
OF WASTE

BUT BECAUSE WE
HAVE THIS intimate
RELATIONSHIP WITH
IT, WE THINK WE
KNOW IT.





THAT MAKES ME THINK ABOUT HOW RAFI
TALKS ABOUT waste and abjection -
THIS VISCERAL FEELING OF DISGUST,
ABOUT GARBAGE. E-WASTE -
THINGS LIKE BATTERIES, OLD
CELL PHONES - DOESN'T SEEM
TO PRODUCE THE SAME
REACTION IN ITSELF.

OR DOES IT?



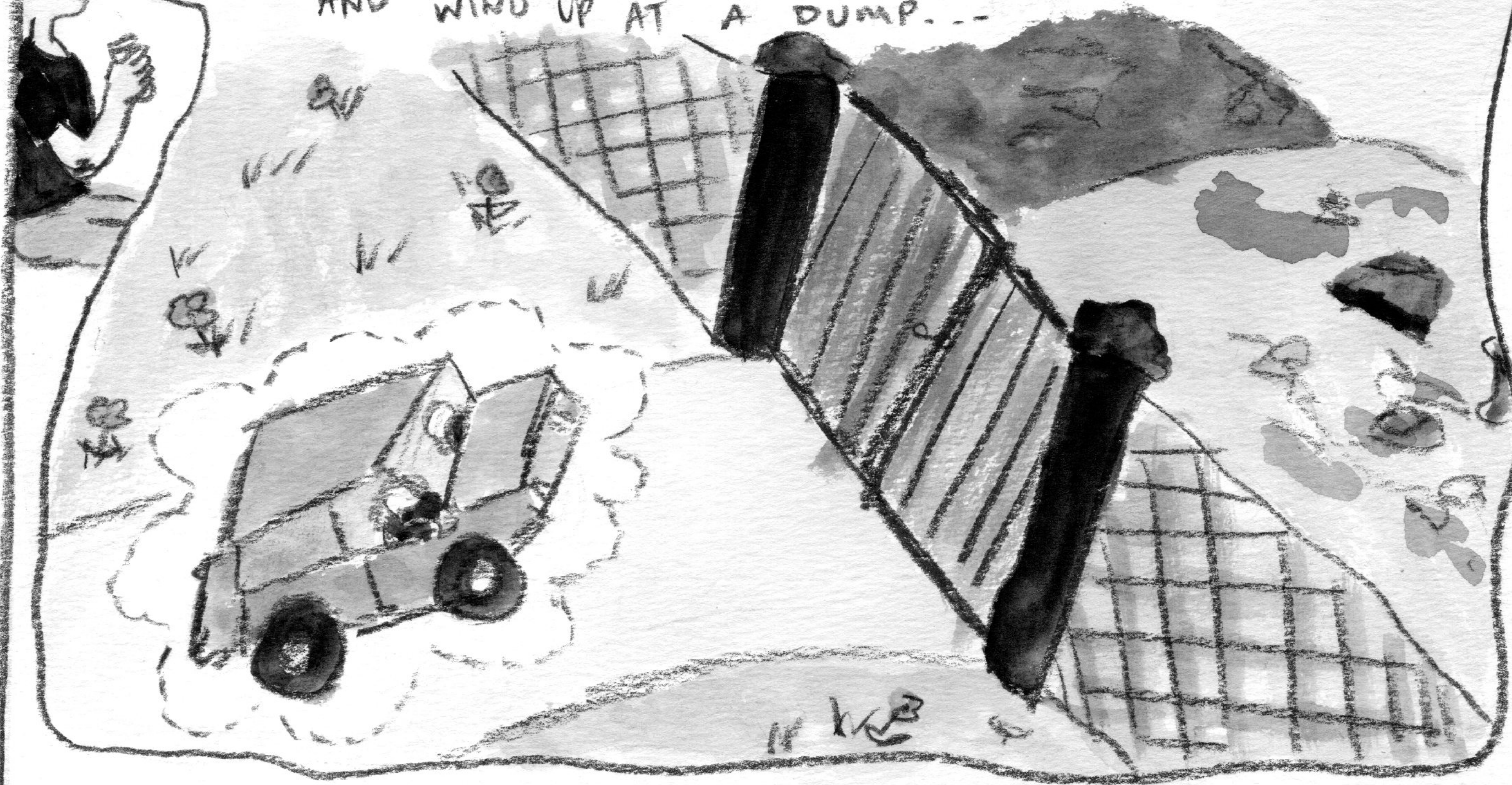
TO KIND OF GIVE AN
EXAMPLE OF HOW
THESE VISCERAL
REACTIONS BECOME
IMBUED WITH
MEANING, I'LL TELL
A STORY - & THEN
MAYBE YOU CAN?

WHEN I WAS WORKING
WITH THE ZABALEEN
IN CAIRO, SOME
GARBAGE IS RECYCLED
OR FED TO ANIMALS.
A LOT OF IT ALSO

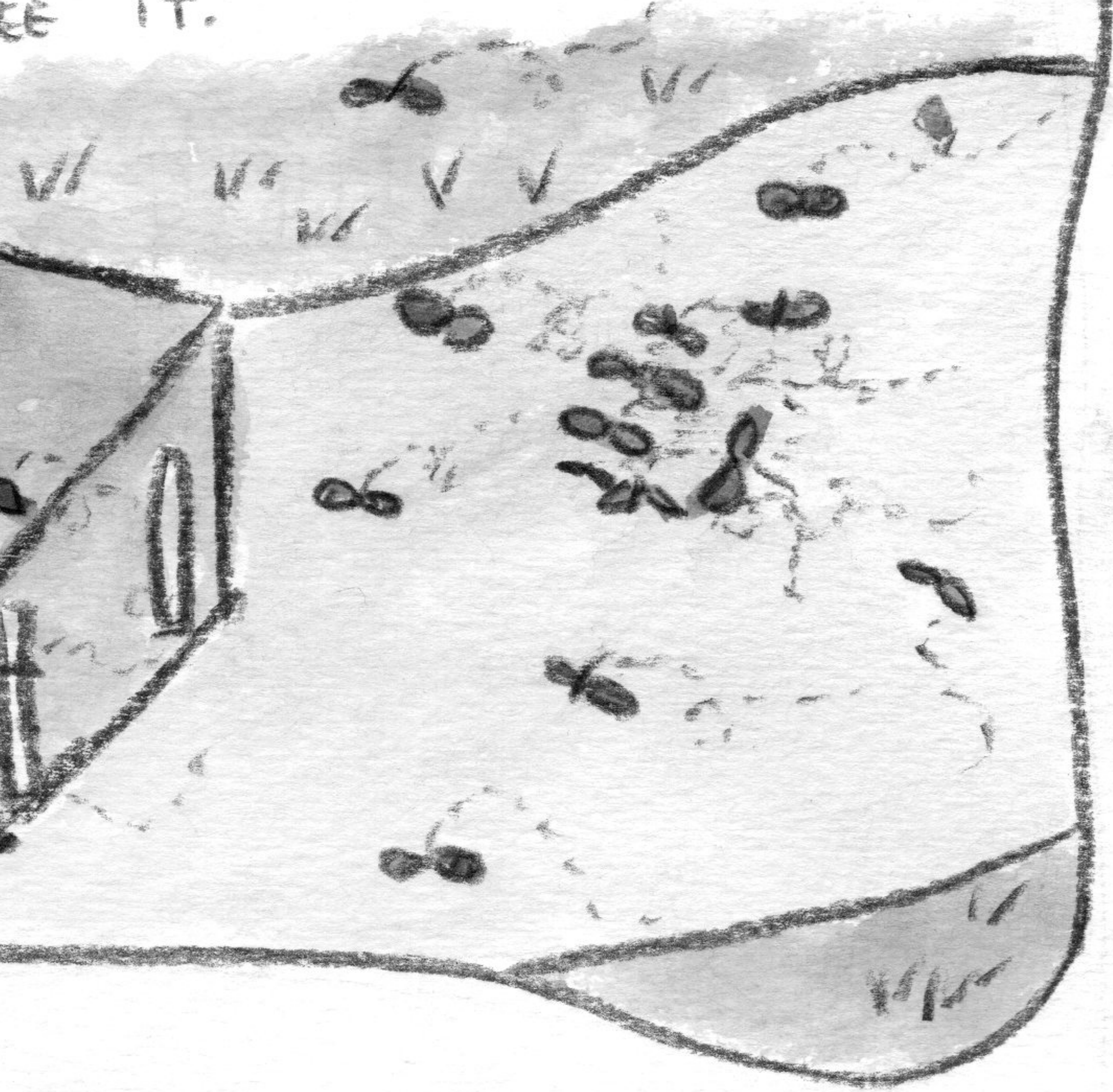
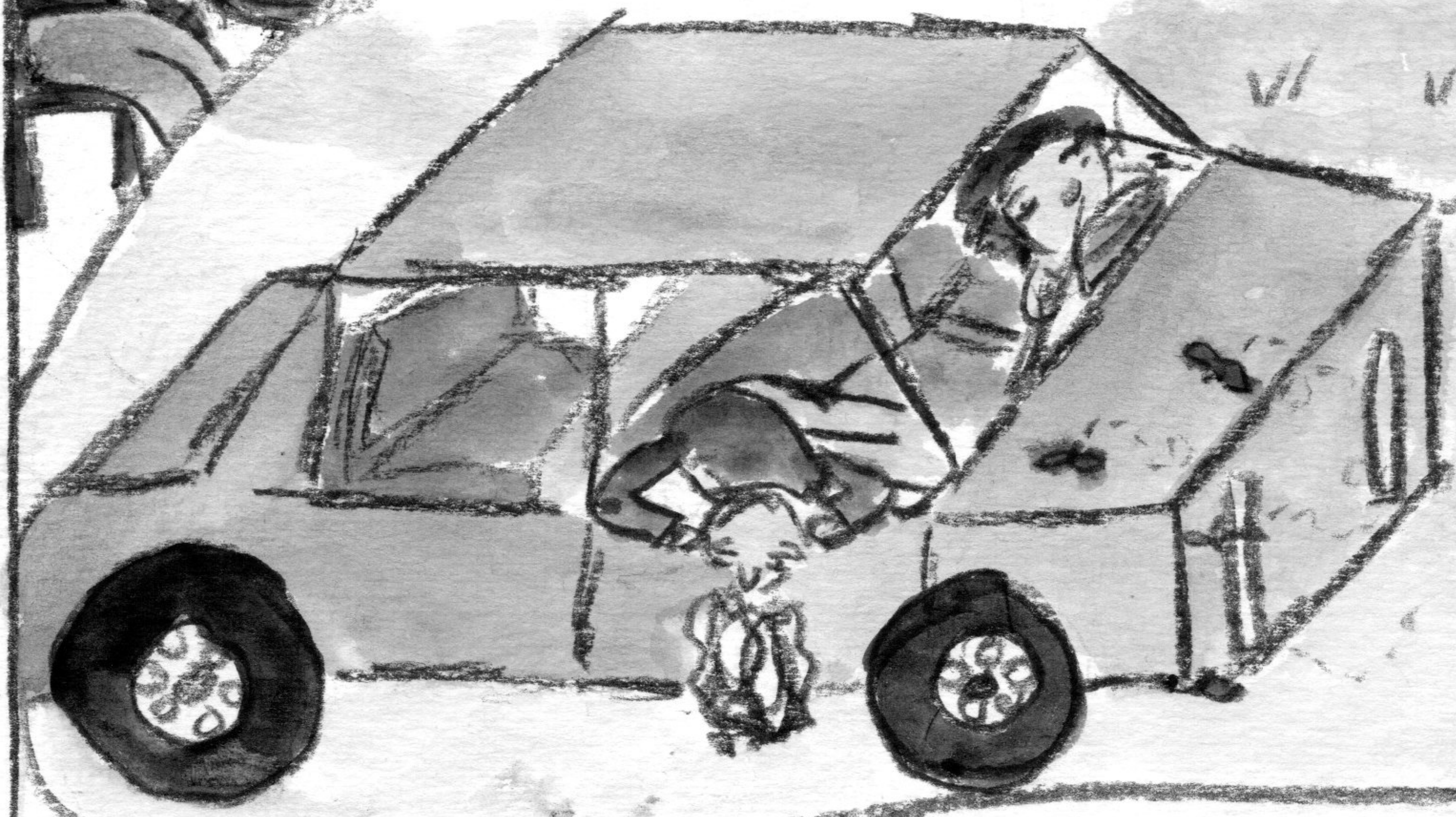
IS BURNED - INCINERATED. PLASTICS, I DON'T KNOW WHAT.
THE FIRST TIME I WAS AROUND IT, I KNEW IT WAS TOXIC,
BUT IT DIDN'T SMELL BAD. NOW I HAVE ALL THESE GOOD
MEMORIES ASSOCIATED WITH THAT SMELL...



WHEN I WAS IN BANGLADESH WE TRIED
REALLY HARD TO FOLLOW THE E-WASTE
AND WIND UP AT A DUMP. --



BUT THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN. ONCE WE
MADE A SPECIAL TRIP TO A DUMP TO
TRY TO FIND E-WASTE. AS WE GOT CLOSER
TO THE DUMP, YOU COULD SMELL IT, EVEN
BEFORE YOU COULD SEE IT.




SOON I WAS LIKE - I CAN'T DO THIS.
I HAVE TO ROLL UP THE WINDOWS. AND
SOON AFTER WE TURNED AROUND.

BUT THERE
WAS NO ELECTRONIC
WASTE THERE - AND
AGBOLUSHE DIDN'T
ELICIT THE SAME
VISCERAL REACTION

AMI SO
MUCH OF
THIS
SEEMS
TO HINGE
ON SMELL!

how do I make
this a scratch-
&-sniff?






THANKS - THESE THINGS
ARE REALLY IMPORTANT
AND CAN BE
HARD TO
EXPRESS.

THE
FINAL THEME
WE WANTED TO
ASK ABOUT
WAS COMMUNICATING
RESEARCH

AND DONE A
LOT OF
GEOVISUALIZATION.

WE KNOW
YOU'VE
WRITTEN
ABOUT
OPEN-
ACCESS
PUBLISHING

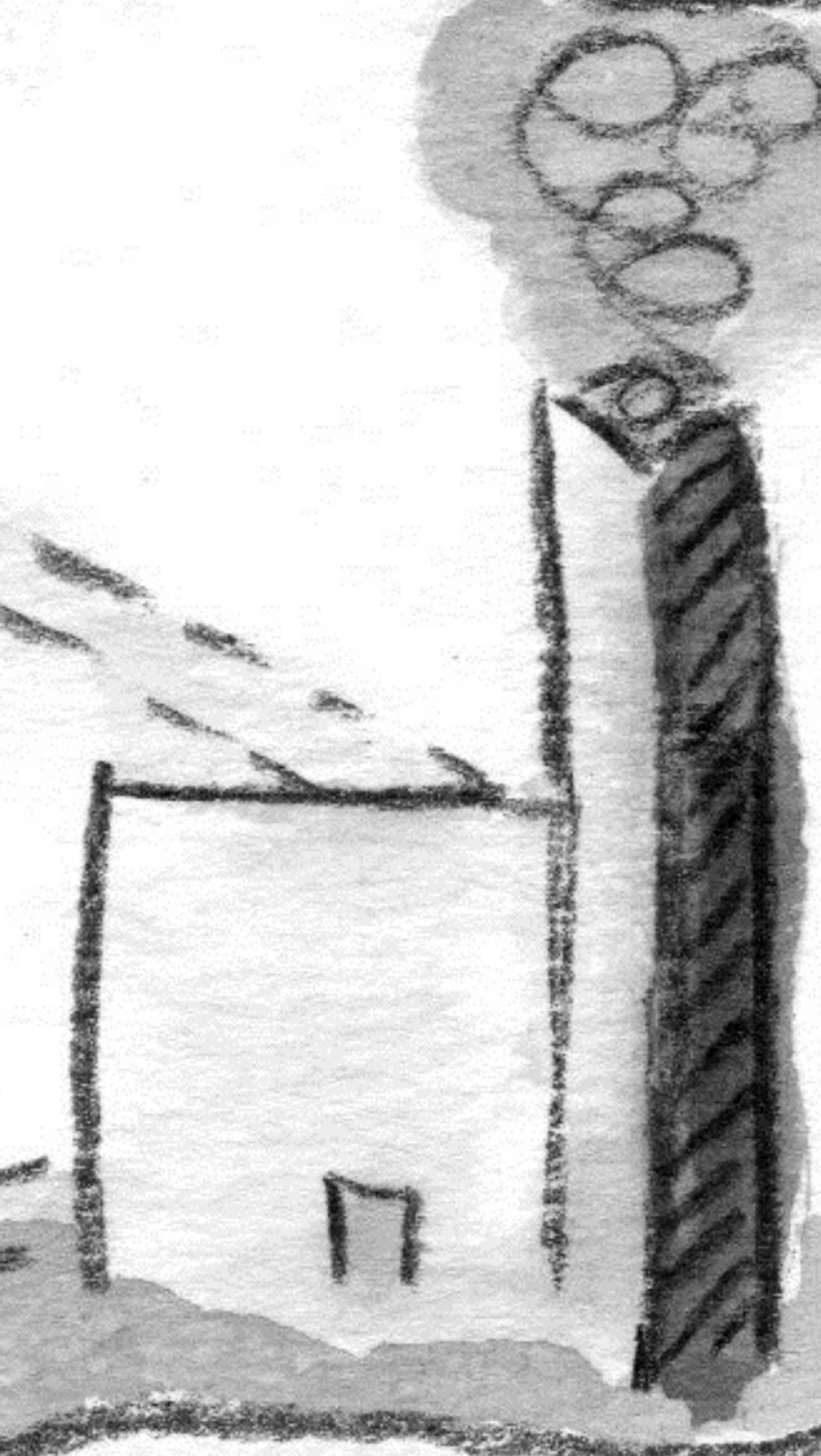
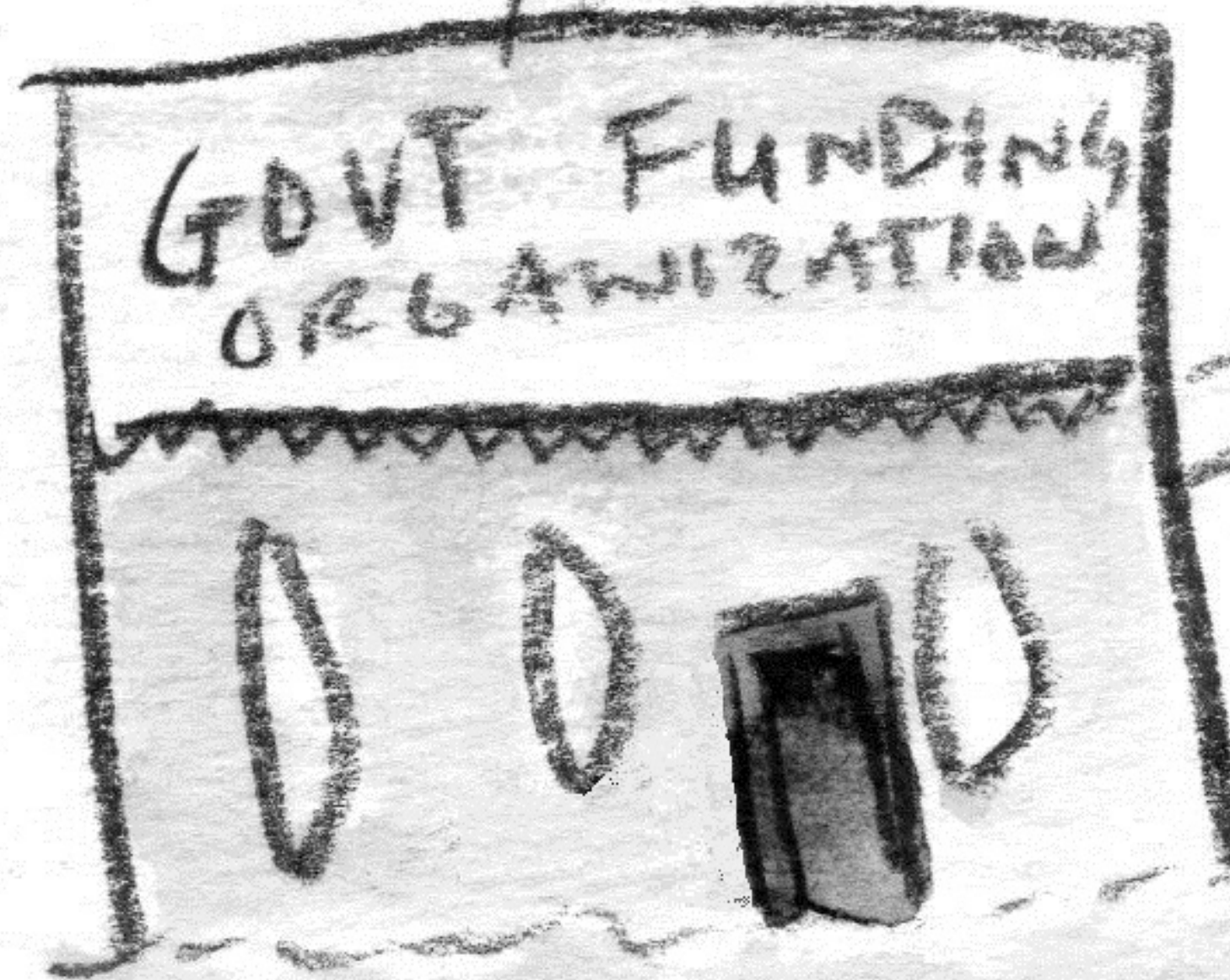
A hand-drawn illustration in black ink on a white background. In the upper left, a simple figure of a person with a large head and a small body is shown. A speech bubble extends from the figure, containing text. The background is filled with various abstract, organic shapes, some of which are shaded with grey. The overall style is sketchy and expressive.

ALL OF MY WORK IS PUBLICLY
FUNDED, SO IT FEELS LIKE THE
RIGHT THING IS TO MAKE IT
AS PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE AS POSSIBLE.

BUT OPEN ACCESS PUBLISHING IS
A TANGLY REACT, AND
IT'S GETTING TANGLIER



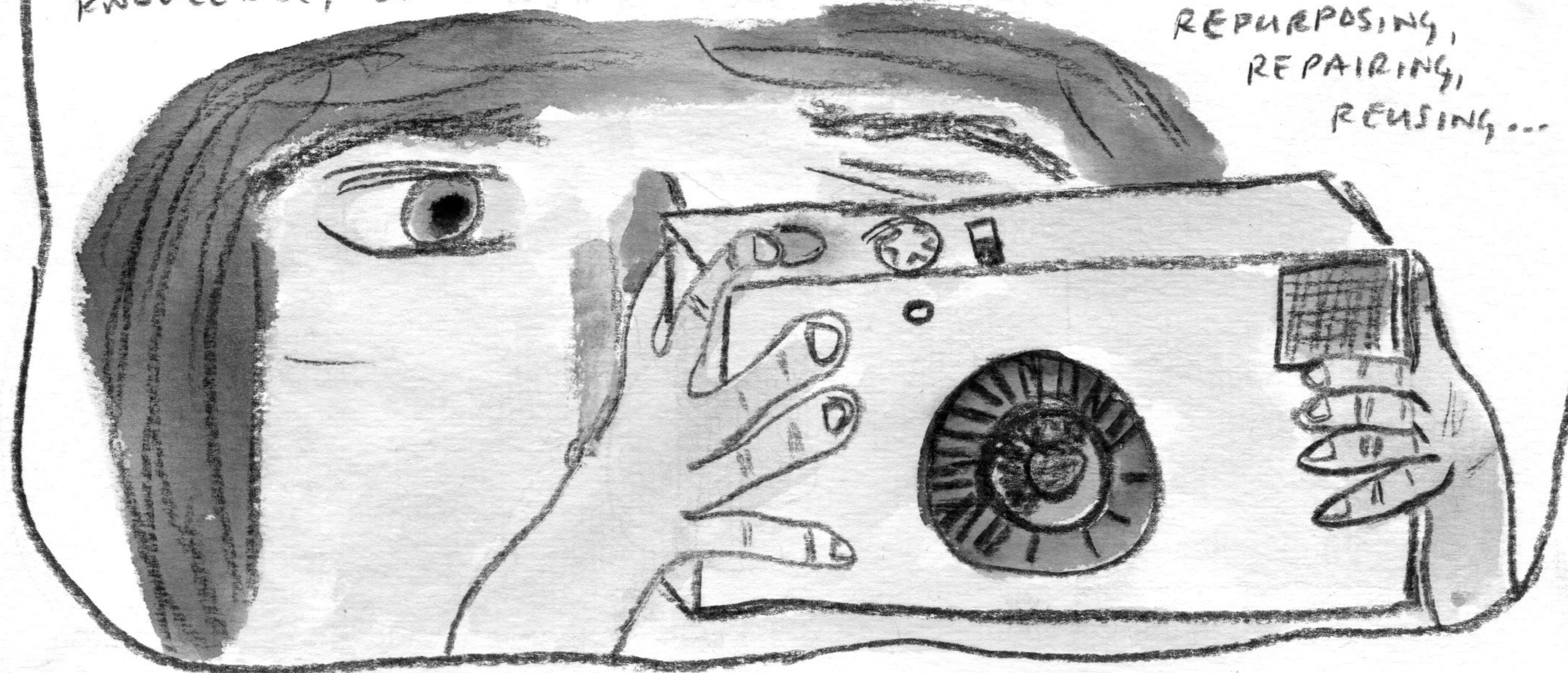
IT'S MADE ME A LOT MORE
AWARE OF WHAT GOES INTO AN
ACADEMIC ARTICLE, HOW SO MUCH
OF IT IS A gift economy



THIS HAS SURPRISED
OUR COLLABORATORS
IN INDUSTRY -

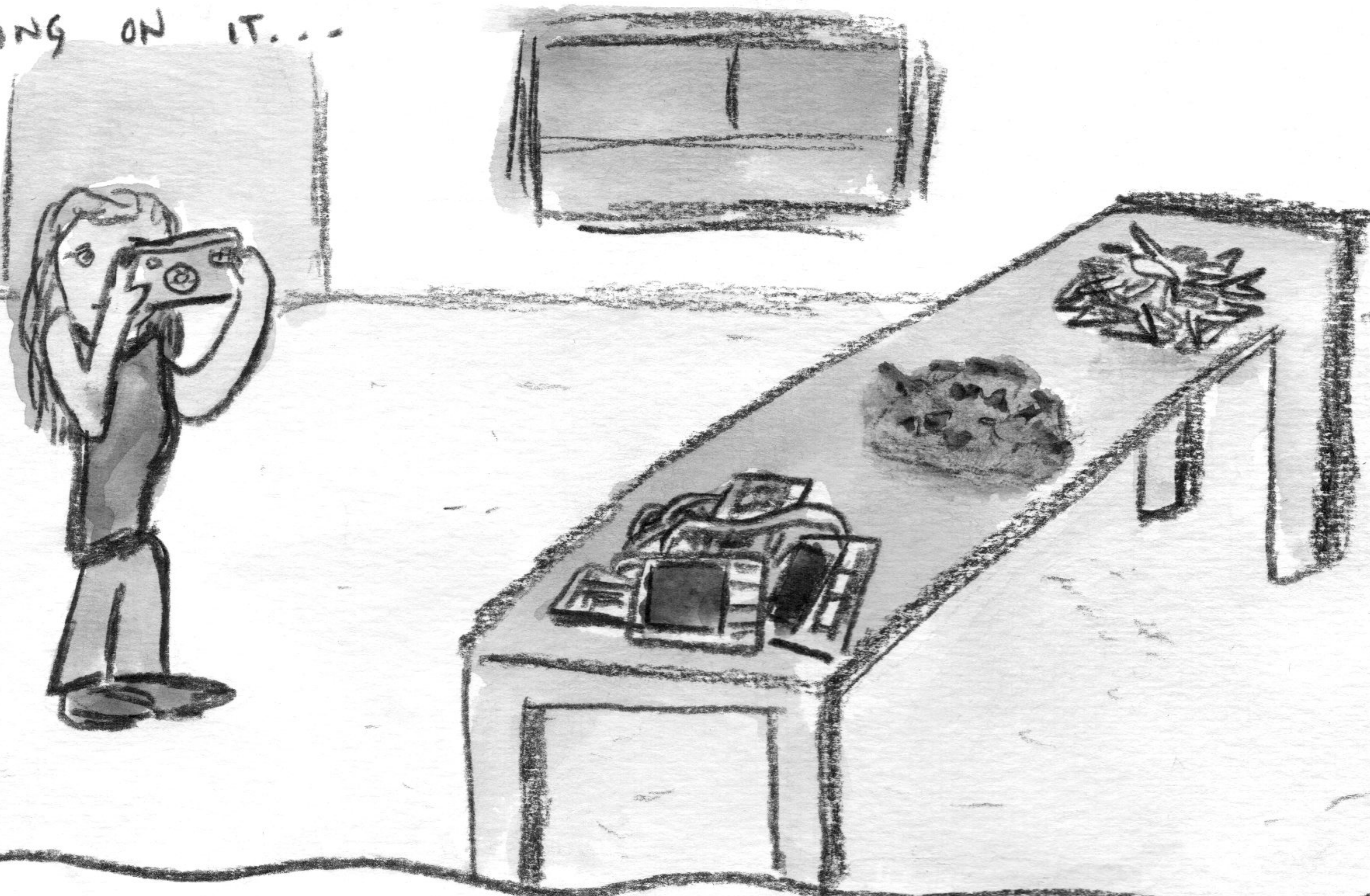
THERE'S THE COST OF OPEN
ACCESS ALONE, BUT ALSO THE
UNPAID PEER REVIEW, BACKGROUND
WORK, TRAVEL, GRAD STUDENT LABOR...

GOING BACK TO OUR EARLIER CONVERSATION ABOUT REPRESENTATION
IN DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY, I TRY TO USE PHOTOGRAPHY
AS A KIND OF COUNTER-MAPPING. THERE'S A TECHNIQUE
CALLED PHOTOVOICE* WHERE YOU GIVE PEOPLE CAMERAS TO DOCUMENT
THEIR WORK. WE TRY TO USE IT TO DOCUMENT THE SKILLS,
KNOWLEDGE, & CREATIVITY OF PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH E-WASTE-
REPURPOSING,
REPAIRING,
REUSING...

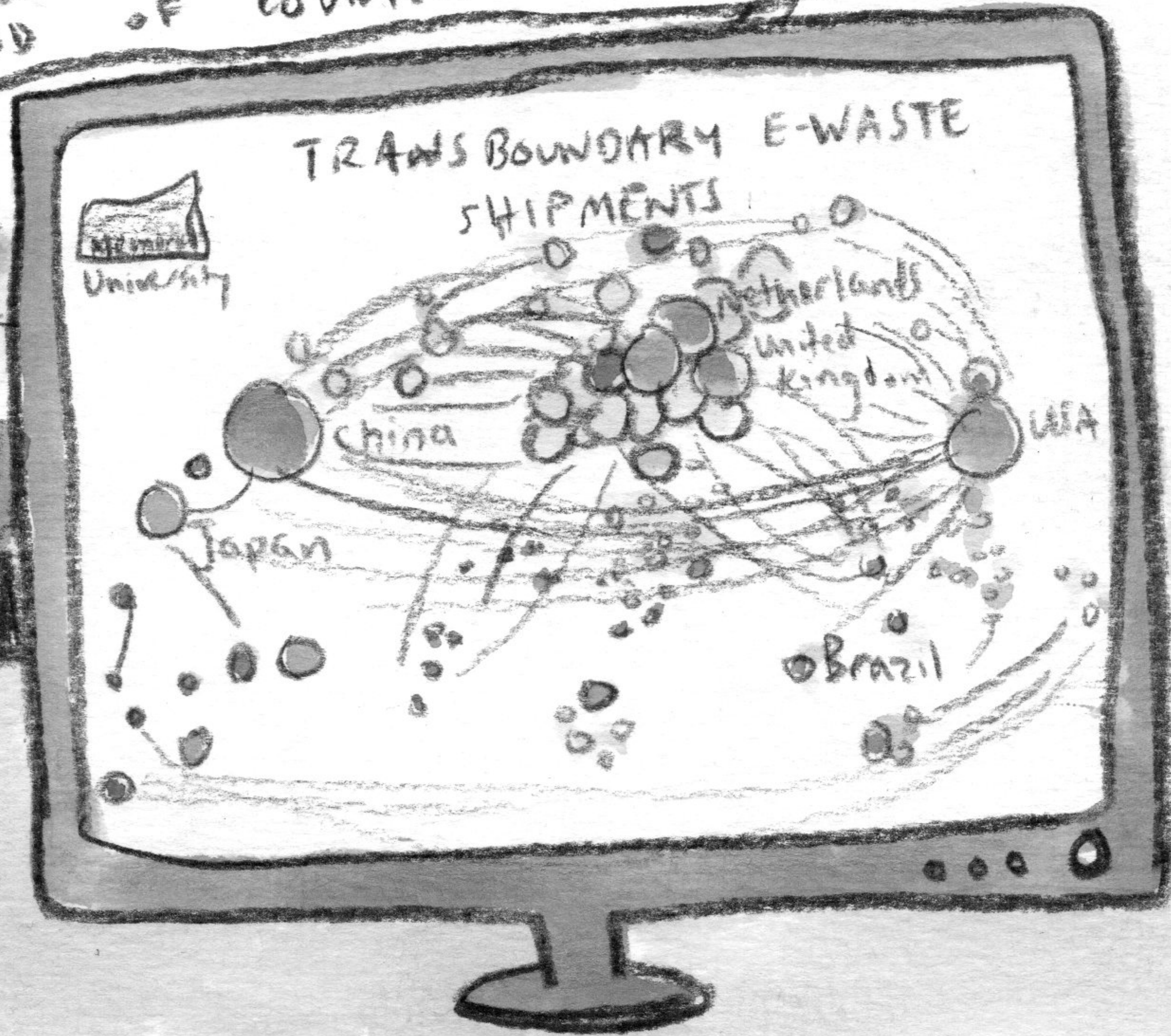


* DEVELOPED FOR CRITICAL PUBLIC HEALTH RESEARCH, ORIGINALLY.

IT TURNS OUT TO BE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO TAKE
PICTURES OF YOU DOING YOUR OWN WORK! BUT WE'RE
WORKING ON IT...



I'VE ALSO USED GEOVISUALIZATION
TO TRY TO CHALLENGE DOMINANT NARRATIVES
ABOUT E-WASTE, I THINK OF IT AS ANOTHER
KIND OF COUNTER-MAPPING.



JOSH'S WORK IS AVAILABLE AT:

Reassembling Rubbish: <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/reassembling-rubbish/index>

The **WASTE** Research Hub: <http://wastests.org>
(Waste and Science, Technology, and Environment)
&

The Discard Studies Blog: <http://discardstudies.com>