



The car boot is up and the bed sheet's down. Torches and five minutes are all the dumpster divers needed to excavate a few hundred dollars of groceries.

Situated in a cavernous shopping centre alcove gated by chain-link fencing, and stamped with a sign that reads: *Danger: electrical wires overhead*, this ooze-stained Remondis is known affectionately among various local dumpster divers as 'the ALDI bin'.

The problem right now, however, is the security guards. They form a trio of bright-yellow polo shirts, bomber jackets, numbered lanyards and walkie-talkies.

This one somewhat resembles a UFC contender. 'You've got to leave everything on the ground please,' he says in a commanding baritone. 'This is theft. See those locks?'

We're at Northland, the largest retail shopping centre in Melbourne's northern suburbs. I'm in tow to embark on a crash course in the 101 of dumpster diving. By helping my tour guides excavate discarded food from bins, it's my hope to fathom a closer appreciation of how the act of diving enhances divers' sense of connectedness to the dumpster diving scene and to enrich my perspective on how society (de)values food. It's 11pm on a Sunday in the middle of winter. Parking, understandably, is ample.

One of the divers, who arrived on a bike with a basket fixed to the front, had told us she was reluctant to be too confrontational in protesting these situations because she has been to bins in which peeved employees have urinated to dissuade divers. She's heard stories of employees planting razor blades too.

All divers have their cautionary stories, but she is nevertheless politely challenging the guard.

'Theft?' she says. 'But it's been thrown away. Into a bin. It's just going to waste. It's going to landfill.'

A different guard walks to the front of our car and uses his mobile phone to snap a picture of the numberplate.

A diver in a lumberjack shirt begins to load the haul back into the bin (there's everything from eggs to bread to nuts to muffins to breakfast drinks), articulating his peaceful objections as he goes.

'Right and wrong isn't necessarily defined by what's legal and illegal,' he says to the guards. 'It's a crime this is being wasted....'

'The buck needs to stop somewhere,' they say with a shrug.

Tonight's divers are part of Freegan Living, a Melbourne-centric social media group of more than 400 members largely focused on dumpster diving, which, as a tactile act, can be understood as reaching or climbing into bins to retrieve discarded contents for personal consumption or for provision to others.

Freegan Living operates as an expression of protest and activism against the problem of food waste, and endeavours to decrease consumer demand for food, reduce waste in landfill, end the planet's carbon footprint and spotlight food security and animal-welfare issues. It is one of a number of Australian-based online dumpster diving groups that provide a forum for active divers to share tip-offs, observations, information and photos of their hauls.

Melbourne also has the longest-standing Melbourne Freegan Co-Op, with around 700 members. Dumpster Diving Sydney Australia has almost 1900 members and Adelaide Skip Dipping has 68 members. But dumpster divers are also active in a variety of

activist groups and new social movements around Australia.

Dr David Giles, a lecturer in anthropology at Deakin University, has dumpster dived in various cities around the world as part of ethnographic research examining intersection of waste, cities and social movements. He proves to be a formidable doppelgänger for *Howl-era* Allen Ginsberg in a tweed blazer and horn-rimmed glasses when we meet at the Journal Cafe in Melbourne's CBD.

Giles has attracted significant media coverage for his diving expeditions, including an appearance on ABC Radio's *Conversations with Richard Fidler* (<https://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2014/08/20/4070877.htm>), but he explains that a lot of the mainstream media coverage around the issue is preoccupied with the legality and environmental health of the act itself, which is a disservice to the questions dumpster diving contributes to the way society values things.

'I think a lot of the exposés on dumpster diving just zoom in on the act rather than looking at the larger alternative economy it makes possible,' he says. 'The dumpster is just an entry point... It's the most popular part of what I write about because it's the shocking bit, but really what it's about is changing the way we value things and people.'

Natalie Visser, founder of Freegan Living, is a diver I first met when we hit up the aforementioned ALDI bin at Northland. The environmental studies student sees enough merit in dumpster diving as protest against food waste to do it a lot. For one period of six months, almost all the food she brought home came out of the dumpster.

'It's definitely a life choice that makes me feel better about what I'm doing to this world,' she says. 'Most companies in the whole line of production and distribution have a range of deplorable effects. By diving, you're taking yourself out of the whole equation and you're taking yourself out of the whole system.'

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Among the buffet of food waste statistics around today, September 2016 research from Rabobank estimates Australians waste \$10 billion of food per annum. FoodWise's most current figures show Australians waste about one in every five grocery bags of food (<http://www.foodwise.com.au/foodwaste/food-waste-fast-facts/>).

November 2015 interim data from *Watch My Waste*, a review of Australian restaurants and eateries conducted by RMIT researcher Dianne McGrath, shows at least 40 per cent of those food purchases recorded end up in the bin.

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According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation’s (FAO) 2013 *Food Wastage Footprint and Climate Change* report, global food loss and waste accounts for close to 10 per cent of total human-caused greenhouse gas emissions, due largely to the methane created when food is trapped to rot in landfill. There is also the major impact of water, energy and other resource wastage linked to the production and transportation of food.

In the climate talks in Paris in November 2015, scientific consensus acknowledging the impact of human behaviour on greenhouse gas emissions was echoed in the agreement of 195 nations to reduce human contributions to greenhouse gases to limit the rise in global average temperatures to below 2 degrees and preferably below 1.5 degrees (for fears that 2 degrees isn’t enough to stave some of the looming tipping points of disaster).

Scientific consensus about climate change isn’t exactly engendering a mainstream society of Al Gores, however – or dumpster divers. ‘The Dragons of Inaction: Psychological Barriers that Limit Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation’, a 2011 paper published in the *American Psychologist*, posits a taxonomy of barriers inhibiting individuals from taking action against climate change.

The manifestations are varied, but examples of why too few global citizens engage in enough behaviour to offset greenhouse gases and other environmental problems include ignorance, perceived distance of the problem, inflated optimism in ‘technosalvation’, aversion to the disruption of the inertia of their lives, contrary worldviews and perceived incapacity to affect change.

Divers like Natalie Visser don’t fit this bill. Visser, who grew up on a farm on the edge of a forest in Belgium that she says was formative in her affinity with the biosphere, consciously sharehouses in Footscray with a group of four environmentally active

people. They dumpster dive together, hold activist meetings at home and participate in working bees in their garden.

She's also part of a 'climate grief workshop', operated through global grassroots climate movement *organisation 350*, which brings together activists from different backgrounds to share stories, participate in art therapy and engage in dialogue focusing on how to find and share compassion.

'I'm living in a world that I don't agree with,' says Visser. 'The world's not going to change just like that and there's a clock ticking and it's ticking fast, and that can lead to effects like depression and whatever else people feel. So it is important to get support and I know a lot of people are after that.'

Dr Susie Burke, a senior researcher with the Australian Psychological Society, started a network of psychologist volunteers to provide telephone support for people feeling anxious or overwhelmed by climate change.

'There are quite a few people acknowledging that there are a lot of people feeling really distressed and upset about it,' she explains.

But global food activism is heartening in the face of climate change.

The SHARECITY100 Database, led by Trinity College's Professor Anna Davies, identifies more than 4000 enterprises in 100 global cities engaged in food-sharing endeavours intended to conserve resources, reduce food waste and build alternative food communities in the name of urban sustainability. In Australia, Melbourne is the most active city in the database, with 144 documented enterprises.

(<http://sharecity.ie/research/sharecity100-database/>)

'Food and Contemporary Protest Movements', a 2013 paper published in *Food Culture and Society*, describes food sharing as one of the most elementary ways that shared community and identity is cultivated. 'Positioning Food Cultures: "Alternative" Food as Distinctive Consumer Practice', a paper published in UK journal *Sociology* in 2015, adds that today's widely known ethical, alternative and sustainable consumption movements have emerged out of increasing awareness of 'the environmental effects of advanced capitalism'.

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Dr Ferne Edwards, a postdoctoral research fellow in the department of geography at Trinity College, Dublin, has extensively researched the practices of freegans and dumpster divers in cities around the world and makes up part of the research team behind SHARECITY100. She points out that Melbourne is a hub of ICT-powered food rescue organisations, 'ugly fruit' enterprises, food swaps and meal-sharing programs.

Dumpster diving, with its meal-sharing and food-swapping signatures, fits the bill. Its communal sensibilities around food are part of its appeal.

'The lack of a price tag and the endorsement of environmental values adds to the experience of the shared meal,' says Edwards. 'It's accessible, it's generally not socially stigmatised but instead celebrated, and through this combination allows for greater conviviality between groups of people who might not often meet.'

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Salty cigarette smoke and a heavy fish aroma perfume the spring air at the entrance of the Queen Victoria Market one Thursday afternoon. The fruiterers are winding it down and the forklift drivers are navigating dank aisles populated with wounded vegetables and fruit that looks like it was all mistaken for *piñatas*.

Five of the divers here have come direct from an open-house, student union-run dumpster diving workshop that just took place inside a sterile training room at the University of Melbourne's Union House. The divers are tentatively plying their new knowledge by lifting the lids on wheelie bins as life happens around them.

Kate Denver-Stevenson, incoming president of the university's student union environment department, presented the workshop, using the aid of an electronic whiteboard to inform participants about food waste facts, dumpster diving legalities, etiquette, hints and hotspots to visit in Melbourne.

While cruising the market, she tells me how her life has changed in recent times. She's moved to Brunswick, started buying clothes at op-shops, and grows her own vegetables. She's gradually starting to see what goes in the bin differently.

'The people I moved in with and the people who became my friends have this different idea of using stuff and what's cool. It's very low-waste and reusing and not having an impact on the world.'

The wheelie bins at QVM are a lucky dip of organic prizes and short straws. A forklift driver encroaches on the divers and politely calls out, 'Careful, please.'

At another moment, a fruiterer offers the group a bounty of apples.

'Got enough?' he says, pointing at them. 'Okay?'

The group gets boxes of apples and soon has more than it can carry.

I paw around a bin with a few mouldy oranges and I see Denver-Stevenson put the lid down on another bin.

'Where do you draw the line?' I ask her.

'I just picked up a pile of grapes with a tissue on them,' she says. 'That's my line.'

Environmentally aware students aren't the only divers to pop up in this story. You'll see families and elderly men and women and conservatively clothed civilians taking food out of the bins at QVM. Research highlights that some divers like free stuff and some like adventure, and some have an economic incentive to cut costs on food.

But having heard Giles's insights into dumpster diving, I start to fathom a vein of early-stage divers who move through the bin in a fashion of bourgeois tourism, deriving what Giles describes as a 'transgressive thrill' from the act of coming into contact with waste. It strikes me as analogous with the way a dark tourist might marvel in the everyday of a 'slum' at ground level while the inhabitants occupy themselves with the business of getting on with their lives. Clearly, from the vantage point of both parties, there are different things to see.

Giles also suggests that there are ‘certain degrees of privilege at work in who can and can’t dumpster dive’. The race, cultural capital and class background of a diver can affect their sense of agency and dignity in appropriating the inner-world of dumpsters.

‘For some people who are already coming out of poverty, it’s not necessarily such an act of “downward mobility” as a sideways step of necessary survival.’



Queen Victoria Market. Image: Matt Chan, [Flickr](#)

(<https://www.flickr.com/photos/eggplant/8580803973/>) (CC BY-ND 2.0)

Emerald MacGill is a rapper/music promoter/ events manager from Dunedin, New Zealand, now living in Brunswick. Snaking out of the lid of her tea-cosy beanie is a nest of long dreadlocks fit for an eternal Earthcore party.

MacGill says dumpster diving allows her to limit her weekly grocery expenses to about 10 dollars, which in turn buys her time to combine part-time work with writing, gigging and producing music.

Having previously squatted with about 15 others in a powered six-bedroom apartment in Carlton, she says dumpster diving is popular with the squatters she knows: 'There were no money transactions in my life for about a month.'

MacGill is currently busy foraging in a grubby blue dumpster in a loading dock behind a small Brunswick supermarket. It's the kind of after-hours real estate that appeals to the sensibilities of pigeons in the daylight hours. It's adjacent to the supermarket car park, which is largely deserted, save for the shadowy movements of the odd passersby.

I'm standing next to MacGill, wearing a pair of black HyFlex dumpster diving gloves I bought from Coles in the spirit of irony, and, it has to be said, I feel like a bloated and duck-footed white tourist with a bumbag.

'I just put my laundered gloves into a half-empty jar of seafood sauce,' I announce to MacGill, feeling as close as I ever have to Paris Hilton in *The Simple Life*.

MacGill responds with a polite, 'Oh no.'

She acquires several boxes of tea from the Clippers Teas range, which she intends to use for gift-giving when she visits Thailand in the next few days.

At another bin we visit, I find a pork loin steak with a complexion somewhere on the spectrum of Keith Richards.

'Do you eat meat?' I ask her.

'Not normally, but occasionally from the bin,' she says. 'I'm worried about food poisoning. But, like, sausages, because they're kind of mystery meat, I will sometimes take.'

Our dumpster is at the end of a dead-end driveway on the fringes of a large shopping centre car park. The distant traffic sounds like it's on tranquillisers.

MacGill tells me about another time she dived a bin. The girl she was with discovered meat in a bag.

'It had a pig's head staring out at her,' she says.

'Then what happened?' I ask.

'She screamed.'

The pig's head impresses me as a grim emblem of civilisation's relations with its own waste.

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At the core of the dumpster diving community is an awareness of nothing being inherently normal or moral or inevitable about the problem of food waste, in spite of the conditioning mechanisms on display in the sheen of the just-so tomato hills at Coles or Woolworths.

But the challenge is to raise that awareness more broadly, as Sean Scalmer, associate professor of history at the University of Melbourne and author of various books, including *Dissent Events: Protest, the Media and the Political Gimmick in Australia* (2002), highlights. He claims the very issue for social movements is that the circumstances in which the media launches them into the public sphere consolidates the association the public outside their movement has with them.

'Which in this case would be photographs of people or testimonies of people from inside dumpsters,' he says. 'It's a tactical dilemma. It can be helpful for movements to enter the mass media because obviously that helps them to publicise their cause and generate new supporters and so on. But often the costs of getting the media's attention are to be portrayed in sometimes simplistic and hostile terms.'

David Giles says a broader conversation about revaluing the food that winds up in dumpsters has been gathering traction in recent years, as public sentiment towards companies that profit on the continual obsolescence of things (be it razors, lightbulbs or iPhones) changes. Ferne Edwards concurs.

'The Australian dumpster diving community, along with the many others in cities around the world, has already done a lot to challenge social and cultural boundaries,' she says. 'Through its radical, newsworthy nature, it's revealed the extent of perfectly good food that would go to waste by retail outlets which in the early stages of the movement was very much hidden and unknown.'

I think back to the night at Northland. To rewind to that moment, the group has now returned all the rescued food to the dumpster. The guards have expressed their own disapproval of the shopping centre's food waste and advised the group on the best times to dive without getting busted. But they've also iterated that it's their job to keep the edible food in the bin right now.

The divers say amicable farewells to the guards and reconvene in Northland's undercover car park to debrief and discuss Plan B.

'That's the third time we've been confronted there,' says the diver with the bike basket as she starts to share around dived pistachio nuts. 'I feel really annoyed when people say, "It's just our job".'

'Not to dramatise the situation,' says the diver in the lumberjack shirt, 'but that line has been said in every tyrannical situation.'

Visser is visibly gutted.

'Just having to put that stuff back in the bin,' she says in a tone that sounds genuinely bereaved.

I'm somewhat surprised by the intensity of her grievances, but as I speak with her over the next few months my sense of surprise dwindles. It dawns on me that it's through the extremity of Visser's commitment to dumpster diving that she is vastly more in tune with the implications of food waste than I'll hazard your average Costco member is.

It speaks loudly for the merits of dumpster diving.

'Oh my God,' Visser tells me later, as she reflects on her attitude to waste. 'In the ALDI bins, you'll see, like, 20 chickens. Like whole chickens that have just spent their whole lives being pumped with whatever...packaged up and thrown out. That's just a completely wasted life, and that's what breaks my heart.'

End



Josh Jennings is freelance journalist who lives in Melbourne. He regularly contributes to Fairfax Media.

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