

## Scraps

by Pamela Kaye

Cairo, Egypt. July 2005. 98°F

I was in Egypt during the hottest and most humid time of the year. In Egypt, I had experiences unlike any I'd known before. I struggled to find a way to write about them.

*“Collage” is a term derived from art and refers to a picture made up of pieces of found objects: scraps of newspaper, bits of old cane backing, a gum wrapper, lengths of string, and tin cans. [Writers] perform a similar act.<sup>1</sup>*

My guide, Ramez, was a young man who graduated from American University. His English was good, and he had connections to people I wanted to interview for my research on the status of Egyptian women and girls. He told me he had wanted to be a guide since he was seven.

As we walked through a traditional market in Old Cairo, Ramez said, “Those three policemen have been following us. Let’s buy a slice of watermelon for each of them for protecting you.”

“Why are they protecting me?”

“Last week, a bus of American tourists was bombed.”

I dug my Canadian flag pin out of my backpack and pinned it on.

*Poverty Pimps: Photographers that exploit people in the worst conditions.<sup>2</sup>*

At the end of my appointments and interviews, Ramez asked, “Do you want to go to Garbage Village? I can’t take you there as a guide because the agency I work for only allows preapproved tours, but if we meet on the corner, I can take you there on my day off.”

“Sure,” I said. “What is Garbage Village?”

“Coptic Christians live there—they’ve been persecuted in Egypt.”

“Okay. But why is it called Garbage Village?”

“Cairo’s garbage ends up there. The people who live there sort and recycle the garbage.”

We made arrangements to meet the next day. It was so hot in Cairo, and I had hot flashes on top of the searing heat. I was embarrassed by how wet with sweat I always was. That night I went swimming under the stars that night at my hotel, hoping for the soothing cool of the water. A woman swam next to me in a hijab that covered all but her hands and feet.

*Dark tourism, black tourism, morbid tourism is tourism involving travel to places historically associated with death and tragedy. Sites that are so marked by trauma that they cannot be fully recuperated for normal, quotidian uses.<sup>3</sup>*

The following day I met Ramez, and he drove me to Garbage Village on the city’s outskirts. It was early morning, but steam was already rising from the hot ground. When we got out of the car, I was knocked back by the stench of Garbage Village—rotten meat, mangy dogs, chicken excrement, donkey dung—all manner of fecal matter. A young mother sat with her child in a pile of trash. I stayed close to Ramez. He casually said hello to people we passed and gave small treats to the children. I felt like I’d stumbled into a fifteenth-century painting by Bruegel; all of the colors were black or brown. It was a busy place with animals, children, men, and women going about their business—men repairing cast-off appliances, building ingenious items from scrap, women selling bread or other food, children playing. The heat was oppressive.

*Poverty Porn: A distinct mark of poverty porn advertisements and photographs made by non-African photographers is the lack of decency, dignity, or virtuous character. These types of photos are often used by charities to guilt people into giving.<sup>4</sup>*

As we walked further into the Village, we saw that people had their specialties. The sorters, including older children, opened the large bags of trash hauled there by oxcarts and separated food scraps to feed the wandering animals. Clothing and fabric went into a pile. Metal went to another space. Paper and things that could burn were used for heating. Appliances that could be repaired or repurposed were moved to another site within Garbage Village. Smiths melted down metals and made products to

sell; one site used scrap materials to make bicycles. Everyone found a way to reuse the garbage.

Ramez took us to a clean, bright room where little girls were taught their colors by sorting fabrics, and they learned to count by making piles. Older girls washed the fabrics and learned to read through their embroidery. The teenage girls learned how to make items they could sell and learned math through the process. I bought two small embroideries and a purse they had made.

Now I smelled fresh bread made by the women in Garbage Village. The streets and alleyways were not paved; they were covered with trash. And yet, after years of persecution, the inhabitants of Garbage Village, using a preexisting cave and the slope that leads into it, constructed a church that seats 20,000 people around a central pulpit, It is the largest Christian church in the Middle East.

*Collage at its best actually countermands much of the discontinuity and fragmentation by revealing, by the time a composition ends, a synthesis and wholeness that might not have been suspected at any station along the way.<sup>5</sup>*

As I was taking a photograph out on a street in Garbage Village, a woman walked into the frame and gave me the finger. I can't blame her. I wished to be a respectful and socially conscious tourist. Clearly, I could have done better.



**Pamela Kaye's** work has been published in *Mixed Mag*, *Penmen Review*, and *The Sun*. She earned a certificate in Creative Nonfiction Writing from Stanford University. Pamela is a botanical watercolor artist and enjoys collecting sea glass and biking. You can learn more about her at [pamelakaye.com](http://pamelakaye.com).

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<sup>1</sup> Definition Examples of Collage Essays - ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-collage-1689762>

<sup>2</sup> <https://sbynews.blogspot.com/2015/10/thomas-sowells-poverty-pimps-poem.html>

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<sup>3</sup> Dark tourism - Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark\\_tourism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_tourism)

<sup>4</sup> The dangers of poverty porn | CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/08/health/poverty-porn-danger-feat/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> Definition Examples of Collage Essays - ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-collage-1689762>