



SIGHTINGS

ELECTRONIC GRAVEYARD

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO YOUR OLD COMPUTER? How about that clunky TV you used to own? Labels tell us the origin of products but can say nothing about where your gadgets might end up. Besides, a “Destined for Agbogbloshie” decal lacks a certain zing. But this suburb outside of Ghana’s capital of Accra is precisely where millions of tons of e-waste—discarded electronic devices—build up each year. The four-acre digital dumping ground is a haven for criminals and poses a range of health hazards for the forty thousand residents of the town, nicknamed “Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Consumers discard about fifty million tons of e-waste annually, including thirty million U.S. computers and 100 million European cell phones. Recycling electronics is difficult, costly, and dangerous to workers, one reason why some 70 percent of e-waste ends up in third-world nations, which either lack or don’t enforce recycling regulations.

Despite an international agreement—unratified by only Afghanistan, Haiti, and the United States—prohibiting developed countries to unload e-waste in the developing world, governments and businesses often avoid compliance by labeling shipments as secondhand goods or charitable donations. Instead, products end up in digital cemeteries such as Agbogbloshie, where workers, mainly children, break apart or set fire to devices to salvage copper, brass, aluminum, and zinc, as well as hard drives and other components for resale. They earn \$6 to \$8 a day, at the cost of exposure to hazardous materials, including arsenic and mercury. Experts estimate that up to 80 percent of the children working in Agbogbloshie have dangerous levels of lead in their blood.

Many expect the situation to only worsen as businesses strive to sate the demands of the world’s swelling middle class—the United Nations predicts that by 2020, India alone may produce 500 percent more e-waste from computers and discard eighteen times the number of cell phones than in 2007. Government and industry must eventually step up, but for now each of us should be asking: Do I really need a new iPhone to replace my semi-new iPhone? —VADIM LIBERMAN