

Play Space in the Death Zone, or The Unused as Muse

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What is it like to live in an area of postindustrial decline surrounded by the broken leftovers of given-up-on urban utopias and narratives of working-class toil? Do we grieve the buildings we lose to ‘progress’? What does it do to the worldview of children to learn that the area they live in is ugly and not-to-be-aspired-to, that they must seek beauty elsewhere? While this essay will not answer the above questions, it will offer a poetic approach for navigating the postindustrial urban landscape while holding such questions in mind. It uses the association and drift – ‘a type of dreaming’ – that accompanies a moving body in physical space as part of an explorative methodology.¹ In doing so, it seeks to give value to mythmaking and personal interpretation within the cycles of neglect, demolition and redevelopment that recur in our urban spaces, suggesting play and creativity as forms of resilience, agency and understanding in areas of development and decline and their attendant messy scraplands.

Sites of postindustrial neglect provide evocative materiality, ripe for exploration and imaginative gameplay. Tim Edensor claims that when you walk through an unused industrial place, you have to use your imagination; there are clues or fossils to interpret but ultimately you are on your own. He points to the immersion place provides, how the tangibility of being *in situ* provokes an emotional response: ‘You can feel and sense the past but you can’t narrate it.’² Through such lack of narration or guidance, the landscape and its relics differ from a heritage site or a museum with their silhouettes, speech bubbles and wall projections of children pushing carts through projected mines: you must reconstruct a story, in fragments, as accorded by the rubble of the world-site.

For the purposes of this essay, I am going to focus on my poetic responses to Fiddlers Ferry in the North West of England, a decommissioned power station on the borders of Warrington and Widnes, originally consisting of eight cooling towers and one chimney stack. The power station, completed in 1971 and closed in 2020, had four of its eight towers demolished in December 2023, with the remainder of the site set to be removed by 2026.

One year prior to demolition, I lived some twenty miles away and the sight of the towers on the horizon became a calming point of reference.

I began a series of writings about the towers and started to construct interventions with them. In short, sensing their vulnerability, and perhaps my own, I entered into a relationship.

My Poetic Practice

As a poet, I intervene in the landscape by trying to capture the emotions present in an experience; emotions that appear as images – unruly, associative, chaotic – and that become controlled by their condensation into a poem. I strain to capture experiential fragments, transience or the sensuous embodied materiality of the world.³ As a poet, my craft follows a certain dream logic, and a blurring starts to exist between the work itself and the kinds of situations and environments required or provoked to produce it.

Christopher Bollas, in his book *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience*, states that the structure of the dream experience ‘has its equivalent in ordinary waking life’, claiming ‘we walk about, have intense moments, and then associate to them’.⁴ Such walking about is bound to be affected by the environments it takes place in, so my poetic practice seeks out environments that I know will yield something and are in accordance with my interests. My associations, as they occur naturally in space, are later recollected and channelled to become poetry. As such, the poems can be thought of as condensed waking dreams that are prompted by and in some sense moored to my lived environment.

My work is drawn to between-spaces, to the decaying but not the dead, to urban ruins, neglected buildings, abandoned shopping malls. In such places, time collapses, and – as with rock formations, strata, fossils – the past lives in the present to be touched.

When I enter a postindustrial landscape, whether through a gap in the fence or by climbing a few graffitied concrete steps that must go somewhere behind a promenade, it’s not an answer I’m looking for, not a product or an asset: I just want to see what I find and play with it. I want the landscape to surprise me, test me. I want to come away from a place knowing more than when I went in. Because, in the words of Bradley L. Garrett, ‘exploration is, on some level, always a process of becoming less ignorant’,⁵ and spatial exploration is a form of mental exploration, as Rebecca Solnit elucidates when she describes walking as ‘a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals’.⁶

On 3 December 2023 at 9:38 a.m., four of the eight Fiddlers Ferry towers lining the Sankey Canal in Widnes were brought down before a crowd of hundreds, all of whom had gathered for a four-hour window of potential demolition in near-zero temperatures in full mist. For the one and a half hours we were waiting, the towers were hardly visible: a curve here, an edge there. The Eight Towers pub was open for the occasion and served pints in plastic cups. Parents had brought children; there were former power station workers and people who didn’t seem sure what Fiddlers Ferry was or in which direction they should be looking; they’d simply come down to see what was happening. The crowd may have been in an open and receptive state of being, or ‘sensuous engagement with the environment’,⁷ a state that Edensor suggests is provoked by immersion in undefined space.

For a couple of months leading up to the event and since, I have been a member of a Facebook group called Fiddlers End where people post memories, jokes, photos and links to news articles about the towers and their environs. It's a busy group with posts such as 'who's missing the towers today?' or 'woke up this morning suddenly feeling sad about it' making regular appearances.

Following the explosion, I wrote a poem called 'Just a Natural Consequence of Their Design, Just Part of Their Natural Life Cycle' (2024),⁸ documenting the Fiddlers Ferry demolition. This is an extract:

I want to watch the enormous shrink

photos of the four resultant chicken-pox stains
on the ground
make me gag
just dust now
we're ghosts inhaling the insides of hoover bags

the material keeps coming
it will keep on coming

they are designed to collapse into their own pits
not to disturb anything
to pop in a footprint

this is a date, I said
and I kissed your cheek

the fog was brown and orange like when the Sahara
comes and coats us

the pub was rammed
another piece of history flattened
people were drinking Heineken on the street

Without explaining away all the poem's ambiguity, I shall unpack a few double meanings or associations in the above extract. The line *I want to watch the enormous shrink* follows a series of metaphors describing the sudden collapse of the four towers, and the use of the vague *the enormous* is brought in to convey a perhaps political, perhaps familial lack of agency and a rising anger that extends beyond the actual shrinking here being witnessed. The lines *the material keeps coming / it will keep on coming* are able to extend beyond the clouds of dust and into the never-ending development and chasing of progress within our urban environments. The line *they are designed to collapse into their own pits* and those that follow in that stanza, while referring to the towers explicitly, make a solid analogy to the working classes, and to societal docility and obedience more generally.

When writing a poem, I am largely writing about the urban environment and the details occurring in the situation I have set up

or in which I have placed myself. Associations and analogies occur preconsciously, in an ‘ambient condition’, a state that Bollas describes as akin to our earliest years; the mind is at rest in such a condition, peaceful, creative.⁹ Multiple meanings of these poetic leaps and jumps are noticed only *at the point of writing* and not beforehand. In this way space itself becomes a defining material within my practice.

Before the demolition of the four towers, there was a charity raffle, the prize of which was to press the button to start the explosion. In interviews, the woman who won mentioned how her own son was sad about the demolition; nonetheless, she felt it ‘meant something’ to be a part of history in this way. I tried to capture my and her complicated feelings in the same poem referenced above, with another extract here:¹⁰

it was 9:36 when Grace pressed
the button a cable unsnapped
from the plastic block she was holding
like a gleeful Hoover cord putting itself away

Grace has mixed emotions about winning the raffle
with the comforting landmark gone
how will she know when she’s home?
her son is sad the view from his bedroom window
is changing

Grace doesn’t mention her feelings post-initiation
she shares a video from her husband’s phone

as a child I had a recurring dream
about winning a raffle I wasn’t supposed to enter

At the end of this section, I have allowed for free association to occur, and this section finishes with the lines *my father’s voice booming / like the crack of four towers coming down*, thus looping it back to the towers and the present moment of demolition immediately after travelling back to childhood recall. The poem here performing how a consciousness moves through space, drifting in and out of reverie as environmental prompts act upon it.

One month before attending the demolition, I had walked the twenty miles from my house to the towers, to better understand the space between myself and these structures, the scale of the sprawling conurbation that separated us, and the ways I could talk to the towers and how they talked to me. Through this walking, I sought to meet the towers and contrive a stronger bond with them in order to create a steadier and more informed place to write from. I wanted to engage in dialogue; a certain confidence of phrasing being facilitated by my movements in the landscape.

This walk turned into a journey poem three pages long, in which the towers themselves scarcely feature, but whose driving force was a sense of pilgrimage towards them, a pilgrimage I had contrived for the purposes of the poem. The poem’s themes range from delusion, capitalism, parenting, futility, acceptance, humour, ownership, growth, memory, inheritance

and urbanism, all of which drifted naturally to my attention through the associations prompted while roaming the landscape.

The Poet as Witness, the Poem as Tool

I wrote poems both before and after the event, trying to capture my emotive response. This is not to say that the poet must understand or put a name to such emotions – they simply appear. As a poet, I drift through urban spaces and, when successful, have trained my attention to capture certain acute details in the form of words. A poem becomes a tool for capturing the complications of a shifting urban landscape, presenting the reader with habitual languages and landscapes turned askew. Local news articles can appear next to details captured from live events, textbooks and associations drawn from lived experience. The poet serves as witness, collecting details that would not otherwise be collected. This rich temporal detail anchors the poem more profoundly to the broader sociopolitical contexts in which it was formed. In performing juxtaposition, analogy, metaphor and metonymy, the poem, like the abandoned or neglected site, presents a playground of potential interpretation and site-specific ephemera, simultaneously offering morsels of history and complicated contemporaneity as prompts for exploration. In much the same way that we, as curious bodies, encounter spatial fragments.

Gaston Bachelard opens his seminal book *The Poetics of Space* by considering the poetic image, our being receptive to it as soon as it appears. He talks of shedding old habits, breaking ties with the received cultural past to better meet with the ‘sudden salience of the psyche’,¹¹ that is, the poetic imagination. Let’s say the city is a (found) poem and its juxtapositions are heavy with history, experimentation, innovation, symbolism. What am I, as a poet, looking at? I’m looking at the bits that are being erased and I’m considering the ambiguity of that erasure.

From my childhood I have very clear physical memories of underpasses, bus stations, department-store flooring, thick blue pens marking sheets of acetate. The environments we are raised in imprint themselves into us during our formative years and, I suspect, continue to influence our lifetime aesthetics. For example, I recently went down a mine shaft in South Wales and thought about the many months over many years that my grandfather would not have seen sunlight. The abstract thought became embodied, and such embodiment becomes the raw material of my poetic practice. I have largely learnt about the world by visiting it. I want the *stuff*, the pile-up of matter, which I then sift through, read around and redesign into poetry.

My poetic practice seeks physical memories in undefined spaces, it seeks the surrealism of unknown shapes and crevices. The strangeness that certain architectural spaces afford me is akin to the strangeness offered to the reader by poetry, and the heightening of consciousness (alertness to life) that ensues from tangible and undefined confrontations in the landscape. Without a cooling tower or a mine shaft to surprise me, where is my sudden salience?

An Explorative Practice

How do you remember, if all traces are removed? How do you tell a town it has nothing of note beyond old photographs of what it once was, not even a curious fragment? As past architecture sits there, not yet destroyed but no longer of importance, I wonder whether the object is lonely, why it makes me feel so strange. In this sense, poetry is a questioning; it is the doubt that underscores (that should underscore) everything. Georges Perec talks of space as a doubt that must be constantly marked and captured, and longs for stable, unmoving and deep-rooted spaces to serve as reference points for departure.¹²

My poetic practice understands and lives the urban environment by exploring how a consciousness moves through and experiences (urban) space, drifting in and out of reverie as environmental prompts act upon it. An uncertainty or impermanence of self is enacted through a similar uncertainty or impermanence in the environment. Through this resemblance, a kinship is formed, and my changing self finds itself within and feels seen by its changing environment. As Bradley L. Garrett writes in his study of urban explorers, in such between-spaces ‘one realizes that everything is already being lost’. This realization, he finds, often leads to a state of transcendence or acceptance, which in turn creates a kind of existential calm born by possessing or knowing a place on one’s own terms, without external regulations.¹³

Fran Lock describes her poetic practice as *feral*; she speaks of ‘the cobble and borrow’ as a working-class method for excess hunting, ‘a determination to use every available resource’.¹⁴ Such creative engagement with the landscape is suited to being adaptable, piecemeal and in progress. Sites of neglect or incompleteness offer a chance to see the workings of the urban environment, ‘revealing layer after layer of active life’.¹⁵ Lock calls poetry the ‘*perfect* mode of production for those poor in time and in resources . . . it travels light, communicates in fragments and flashes’, and like structural encounters in the landscape, ‘requires no specialist equipment or training’.¹⁶ Where Lock describes wrestling an ‘inchoate mess of thoughts-feelings-impressions’ into a poem,¹⁷ Bollas compares the city to the ‘seeming chaos of the unconscious mind . . . interlaced in some kind of moving form that gives rise to a type of organising vision’.¹⁸ Following a dream logic, my embodied poetic practice condenses and disseminates sensorial information,¹⁹ building narrative and moulding agency, crafting unbounded and raw environmental materials into poetry.

In his book *Middlefield*, Ian Waites presents a series of images of the housing estate where he grew up and juxtaposes these with memory vignettes, triggered by details in the estate. These vignettes bear titles such as ‘Cobbles’, ‘Cut-Throughs’, ‘Privet’, ‘Kerbs’, ‘Pebbledash’ and ‘The Phosco P107’,²⁰ highlighting how memory can be triggered by place, however banal the detail; how moving through space provokes flashes of dormant memory, or, sometimes, just as crucially, doesn’t. Both Lynsey Hanley’s *Estates*²¹ and John Grindrod’s *Concretopia*²² touch on some of the same emotions as Waites’s *Middlefield*, but while the former provide their emotive responses second-hand, as motive or catalyst for research, Waites’s emotive response *is* the research – he embodies the spaces and, through the

embodiment, he remembers. The poetic form offers a more direct method for nuanced exploration of experience, and its associative qualities are akin to how we navigate architectural spaces.

Poetry of Pasts: Memory of Post-Industrial Sites

Architecture, like poetry, is a holder of memory, and the urban environment holds multiple, often conflicting, memories from multiple timelines in close proximity and communion. Think about the unused or unfinished you might travel past on a regular basis: the boarded-up windows, cordoned-off new developments, the ubiquitous crane lights twinkling between high-rises at night. Think of young professionals, nuclear families, pop-up shops, shared houses, ghost signs, ghost estates. It's all there. As Benjamin suggested in 'On the Concept of History',²³ the urban environment is perpetually *in progress*, so a language for relating to the unused, unfinished or condemned spaces in our urban environments creatively and emotionally seems crucial.

Christopher Bollas, in *The Evocative Object World*, states that 'the built landscapes in which we live reflect the unconscious nature of collective life'²⁴ and compares walking through cities, à la Debord's *dérive*,²⁵ to wandering about in a 'world-daydream'. If all dreams take place in imagined environments based on received, cultural or real-world experiences, and 'vivid structures will enter our dreams',²⁶ the mapping of dream onto city and city onto dream creates a loop, making the environment we experience when we are awake also a kind of collective dreamscape, as well as ripe material for poetry.

Bollas claims that a psychoanalyst aims to 'catch the drift of the patient's unconscious with his [sic.] own unconscious'²⁷ – and here I find Bollas's use of the word *drift* very telling, the casual movement of it, the ambulant state. Architecture is a collaboration; new buildings are built, largely, in communities of other pre-existing buildings. The landscape drifts. Both the architect and the poet, who aim, respectively, to shape our external and our internal landscapes, seem to engage in a kind of therapeutic dialogue with the unconsciousnesses perusing an environment, and to be, knowingly or not, catching the drifts of all those passing through.

Edensor, in a chapter of *Industrial Ruins* entitled 'Waste, Excess and Sensuality', suggests that in the ruin, or the unused site between definitions, the formally hidden emerges; the 'internal organs' or 'guts of the building' spill out.²⁸ I understand the resonance of a building by being in its presence; and that *being* is a crucial *filling up*, an abundance I then pause with in order to write and filter. Poetry is a way of playing with the unconscious, a form of deep understanding. In the words of Bollas: 'We cohere as intensity, we disseminate as association.'²⁹ My poems cannot be written without the environment from which they emerge; they are born of the deep intensities and associations I encounter in the urban realm.

Bollas suggests that once structures appear they become evocative 'silent obelisks' and that it would take 'considerable historical work and decoding' to unpack the many ways people have been affected by and since their arrival.³⁰

As Edensor says, 'one of the characteristics of power is the ability to

make decisions about what is required'.³¹ My poetry provides me with a form of agency in a rapidly changing urban environment, an environment whose changes often involve the violence of demolition and whose priorities often seem misaligned with my own. My artistic attention is a form of love, an act of rebellion and a desire for community, connectivity, care and conversation. I want to write poems in the spaces, gather and churn the scrappy memories into a form of articulation before they are displaced.

This is a job that requires observation, direct study, the lifting of shrouds and the peeking behind signs telling us to Keep Out. If you tell me a building has fallen out of favour, then I want to go and make friends, find out why that is, stand up for it, learn who it used to be. I want the past of a site to be taken along with it into the future. I want the buildings I encounter to be replete with memory. And not just in name: I want layering in a site, 'a constellation of meaning' that feels participatory.³²

The work of poetry is to take all the material available and think. When a site stops being one thing, it turns into possibility. And when a site is not pinned down is when poetry is best placed to capture it.

Before the urban ruin or neglected building, I am confronted with conceptual death, the death of whatever world I was told in my formative years would be bequeathed us. And in much the same way as pencils and pens are left at the grave of Douglas Adams, or lipstick kisses pressed all over Simone de Beauvoir's headstone, so I, and perhaps many others, want to honour the dying building, offer something of myself to the place.

The neglected object silently succumbs to its fate. The demolished object is taken from us without our agency. The encountered object is a good listener and does not push us away. As soon as a building is under threat it becomes politically interesting; or, 'accidental sculptural forms emerge from the violence of collapse'.³³ In change, there is always a state of becoming. Likewise, when a building is taken away, the site does not return to a time before that building, we are instead left with a new kind of absence, a 'tomb' or 'death-zone' or 'reverberation of the object'.³⁴ Bachelard, himself drawing on the work of phenomenologist Eugène Minkowski, claims that this reverberation – the effect an object or place has on us – and crucially, our experience of that reverberation through the encounter, contains the 'being' or essence of the poetic image.³⁵ Through such encounters, 'we feel a poetic power rising naively within us'.³⁶ That naivety is important: it – like poetry – is a free and childlike form of exploration; an open, kind and unjaded way of responding to and taking up space.

What does it do to memory to leave a site in a state of neglect? Or to demolish a structure only to abandon development? Or to promise scheme after scheme to those living with architectural ghosts in the landscape? We need to find joy in the between-phases. Our towns are not 'ugly'. By demolishing or neglecting the structural heritage of the recent past, the recent past changes, and without structural interruptions in the landscape to remind us of its complexities, the interpretations of that recent past become flattened, vulnerable to marketing, and history becomes a mono-thing, whose story slips from our grasp.

Conclusion

When a history is not your history, you may not have much to say about it, nor find it particularly easy to be invested in. If a popular opinion is overheard at regular intervals, one may repeat this opinion without much consideration: think of phrases like *concrete monstrosity* or *blight on the landscape*. But the blight *becomes* the landscape. Before you are initiated into the polemic of how to think about a particular townscape, it simply *is*. How many eight-year-olds are missing the view of the recently demolished cooling towers at Fiddlers Ferry from their bedroom windows? How did those mountain-like structures impact their imaginations? And how does their removal change things? To a child there is no *urban* or *rural* or *developed* or *deprived*; there is just what *is*, and the inner worlds one builds from the things one sees.

My poetry suggests beauty is a form of attention: as you start to understand a language, like that of architecture, you can start also to speak. Who is telling us we don't like our concrete shopping precinct? Our looming mill? Our dark library with the narrow-slit windows? Our cheeky cubed police station in the centre of town reminding us of something very obvious and heavy-handed but somehow entirely less sinister than the future we have replaced it with?

What if more people spoke about the postindustrial in sensuous language? Such as Otto Saumarez Smith does when he writes: 'Whether or not you see an abstractly humanoid presence in cooling towers, and I do, there is something elementally graceful about the way that they make heavy concrete visually light through a tender hyperboloid curve.'³⁷

When they demolished half of Fiddlers Ferry, they left the other half standing for all to see. Rather than being able to move on and forget the structure, it's now half a thing, and that half that remains is a constant reminder of what is missed.

To learn from history, we have to remember it. For history to touch us, it must be encountered, connected with. An abandoned building accepts me, expects nothing. And maybe I can't save it but I want to, and my poems about such structures are a form of celebration, the way attention is a form of love. My poems are a human apology to materials that trusted us. I can feel the long-gone excitement of a building's birth, its strange and incomprehensible passage, its neglect, its naivety. I want to mother it.

There is humour in the details of how we fumble with our built environment, continuously correcting it. As a poet, I exist within a persistent urban undoing, making connections, gathering scraps from the clearance aisles, from the construction sites, and building something I can go home with. And through the experimental and site-specific methods of my poetic investigations, I have become more attached to my city and its suburbs, to the neighbouring towns and cities, and even to regions that are not mine but that I have briefly connected with, more aware of my city's changes and pace and the treasures lurking in its supposedly grim little corners, and more acutely aware of the political milieu of which I am a part. This embodied approach that fuses my practice with my environment leads to encounters, both planned and accidental; I overhear things; my own voice quiets, calms, finds direction, and the thrum of my surroundings steps into its place.

- 1 Christopher Bollas, *The Evocative Object World* (Abingdon-on-Thames, 2009), 63.
- 2 Tim Edensor, 'Invisible College public talk: Tim Edensor, 23.3.2012', *YouTube*, [youtube.com/watch?v=tEchL5WeGu8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEchL5WeGu8), accessed 13 May 2024.
- 3 Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics, and Materiality* (Oxford, 2005), 168.
- 4 Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience* (London, 1995), 57.
- 5 Bradley L. Garrett, *Explore Everything: Place-Hacking the City* (London, 2014), 34.
- 6 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (London, 2000), 18.
- 7 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, op. cit. (note 3), 84.
- 8 Lydia Unsworth, '2 poems', *Anthropocene*, anthropocenepoetry.org/post/2-poems-by-lydia-unsworth, accessed 10 May 2024.
- 9 Christopher Bollas, *The Infinite Question* (London, 2009), 20.
- 10 Unsworth, '2 poems', op. cit. (note 8).
- 11 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York, 2014), 1.
- 12 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London, 1999), 91.
- 13 Garrett, *Explore Everything*, op. cit. (note 5), 54.
- 14 Fran Lock, 'T.S. Eliot Prize Writers' Notes', *Poetry School*, poetryschool.com/theblog/fran-lock-t-s-eliot-prize-writers-notes-hyena/, accessed 10 May 2024.
- 15 Garrett, *Explore Everything*, op. cit. (note 5), 51.
- 16 Lock, 'T.S. Eliot Prize Writers' Notes', op. cit. (note 14).
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, op. cit. (note 1), 56.
- 19 Bollas, *Cracking Up*, op. cit. (note 4), 57.
- 20 Ian Waites, *Middlefield* (Axminster, 2017).
- 21 Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London, 2023).
- 22 John Grindrod, *Concretopia: A Journey Around the Rebuilding of Postwar Britain* (London, 2014).
- 23 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', *Simon Fraser University*, sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html, accessed 28 February 2025.
- 24 Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, op. cit. (note 1), 2.
- 25 Guy Debord, 'Theory of the *Dérive*', *Internationale Situationiste* 2 (1958), 62-66.
- 26 Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, op. cit. (note 1), 64.
- 27 Ibid., 10.
- 28 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, op. cit. (note 3), 109.
- 29 Bollas, *Cracking Up*, op. cit. (note 4), 57.
- 30 Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, op. cit. (note 1), 57.
- 31 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, op. cit. (note 3), 105.
- 32 Garrett, *Explore Everything*, op. cit. (note 5), 44.
- 33 Ibid., 115.
- 34 Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, op. cit. (note 1), 53.
- 35 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, op. cit. (note 11), 2.
- 36 Ibid., 8.
- 37 Otto Saumarez Smith, 'Cooling Towers Are a Powerful Presence in the Landscape', *Apollo*, apollo-magazine.com/power-station-cooling-towers-deserve-to-be-saved/, accessed 10 May 2024.