

This Shaping

by Laurane Marchive

London. An evening with friends in Old Street, next to the big roundabout. Cocktails, an espresso martini and two bitter pink strawberry drinks. It rains of that February rain which spits and slaps and you wrap your scarf closer around your neck, it's dark already but underneath the parasols the rain doesn't land and the light is yellow. The waiter has a vertical line tattoo, splitting his face in half between the sounds of cars and the laughter of booze. You roll a cigarette with liquorice paper, it matches your drink.

You check your phone on the table.

Whatsapp, 12 new messages from 3 conversations.
Messenger. A group chat where someone's friend posted a nihilist meme.
Data usage warning. Tap to view usage and settings.

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 18:56

Dear Mary
Your face is delightful.
Kindest regards,
Ben

Tara says I like this place, let's take a picture! Lucy sends her boyfriend a text, lets him know she'll be home later. You take a group picture. And then a solo one of you, looking fun and mischievous, drink in one hand and cigarette in the other. Let me see, no I look terrible, it's not working. Can you try another one? Ok, look to your left. No, try looking to your right. Maybe my front camera is better, it evens out the skin, the problem is the angle, try a different angle, hold on. Smile? No, don't smile. I think I should just take a selfie, yeah maybe. At the same time, I don't know. Isn't it a bit sad if it's just selfies?

Great cocktail break with @iamthegreatlucy and @blackorchids, so good to see you guys !!
#london #nightout #girls #cocktail #shoreditch
#cute #smile #great #happygirl #lifestyle

iamthegreatlucy _ LOVE YOU GUYS
1 m Reply
blackorchids _ hahaha love this
3m Reply

Going home, you climb into the bus. The windows are covered in steam, the driver lip syncs to imaginary music. A guy with a fedora hat watches you go past.

Up the stairs, an empty seat towards the back. The lines yellow and vertical, and heads in hats poking out of the seats. All wearing coats, staring at phones and going somewhere. Where do they all come from, you wonder how many are drunk, how many going out, how many coming back?

Instagram: @bionjp and 17 others liked your post.
Account update. Options for your Google account.
OkCupid: Someone new +537 others like you!

You take your gloves off, wipe the wet off your nose. On Tinder, you re-read the message. You open the man's profile, Ben. His photos: there's only three. A black and white selfie, a picture of him in a band and another one with friends, laughing. Mouth open, teeth showing. His bio says:

One of my eyes is green and the other is also green.

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:15

Dear Ben

Well thank you

Your eyes are so pretty

and I love your hat on your third
picture.

It is the best hat I have seen tonight

Warm regards,

Mary

The bus makes its way through Shoreditch. Kebab wraps on the floor, high heels stumbling on pavement, pints of beer and cider. The bars are already emptying

onto the street; people in pairs or in groups, having fun. A man in a black jacket smokes a cigarette alone, his back against a wall. You catch a glimpse of his face. You would like to see more but the traffic light turns green and the man disappears.

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:18

Dear Mary

It is indeed an excellent hat.

It gets me all the girls, to speak the truth.

Best,

Ben

ps: give me your coordinates, sea level, and wind speed, thanks.

23:19

Dear Ben

I am currently riding the 175 night bus towards Kings Cross, at an average speed of very slow per hour.

We almost ran over two drunk people a few minutes ago.

Also email rhetoric is getting tiring.

Mary

On Instagram you scroll past colourful pastel breakfast food. A group of friends around a board game, a party near Waterloo. An ad for a face mask, treating redness

and enlarged pores, someone standing by a beach with a blue sky above.

A selfie of Max with two other men at a party.

You keep scrolling. If it only lasts for a second then it doesn't really count. You see something Lucy posted earlier. You double tap it, she looks –

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:20

OK fair. So Mary, what did you get up to tonight?

A woman sits down next to you, she is carrying groceries, her face is covered with freckles, but you look back at your phone and an ad for the English National Opera, a poem written by someone in America. The bus swerves to avoid a cyclist, you see it from the corner of your eye. Stuck at a traffic light. A young woman in a short pink dress sits on the edge of the pavement, feet in the gutter, her shoes next to her, purse in one hand, hair dangling long over her ankles. Bent over. Maybe she is asleep. But maybe she is OK. A man standing a few meters away, hands in his pocket, looking after her. Or over her. Or looking at her.

You scroll back up your Instagram feed, stop on that picture of Max

Max

Max His smile, teeth showing, spontaneous, you only know one of the other men in the photo but it looks like friendship, it looks like happiness, a simple easy way to be, just smiling, just a Friday night, having fun, simple. His hair is a little bit shorter, he's wearing a

grey T-shirt, something you haven't seen before. But the smile always the same, generous, unthinking –

You unbutton your coat, casual. Loosen the scarf around your neck, woollen hat, comb your hair. From your bag, lipstick a shade darker, the bus is moving again; it's hard to do it properly. You give your lips the shape of a heart, something tender. Head turned towards the yellow light, hand under the cheek, showing no knuckles, knuckles, no knuckles, adjusting. So that it doesn't look contrived. So that it doesn't look staged. Posting.

Sleepy bus ride, finally heading home!

#smile #great #makeup #nighttime #busride #bus
#night #ldn #girls #cocktail #cocktails #shoreditch
#cute #cool #babe

Behind you a man is humming loudly. It's a song you can't place and it rings in your ears. You know it, you're sure of it, but whenever you feel like you've got it there's a change in rhythm and you are lost again, but maybe it sounds –

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:31

Oh no, I've ruined our rapport with my mundane questions

Are you still there?

23:32

Sorry got distracted

THIS SHAPING

23:32

You're still here!

Ok so let's get a few things out of the way

What are you looking for

Why haven't you found it

Do you think it's you or them

How close have you got to finding it

23:33

All very good questions

You go first

23:33

Ha!

Not how it works.

Too hard to reply, you can't be bothered to enter into the game. Instead, you carry on swiping. Chris, 29, a design engineer with a blue shirt and a serious picture. Jarrett, 32, an anaesthesiologist with brown hair and a bright smile. Ross, 32, wears all black and is an author. There's a picture of Ross on a boat on a blue sea, a picture of –

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:33

So?

23:34

...

Maybe I just don't know what I'm looking for.

You close the chat. Open your Instagram feed. Your own profile. A post from 12/01/18. A Saturday night, a selfie just before heading to a party. You're smiling, you look like you're having fun, like you're about to have fun, you remember it still. Anticipation.

That evening. The party was good. Afterwards, you left with Max. Outside, it was freezing. As you waited for the bus your feet were cold, your nose was cold and he rubbed your shoulders to keep them warm but you complained loud and drunk, and your hat kept falling into your eyes. He licked the tip of your nose to make you scream, you pushed him against the bus stand and wrapped your lips around his eyes, pushed your tongue between the lashes.

Back home, you poured yourself a glass of water in the kitchen and then in your room, you kissed. You took off your clothes, you laughed, you fell into bed. A feeling of warmth, a familiarity. You were tipsy, he was tipsy; you were falling asleep. His head nested in the crease of your neck but his hand started sliding along your shoulders, down to your hips and between your legs. He stroked you gently, he licked his fingers. You just wanted to sleep so you resisted but softly, not because you wanted the sex but because you didn't want to break out of character. This shaping, to keep it soft and playful. Eventually he'd take the cue, you weren't really moving. Is this good? Sometimes you're not sure what feels good, you just know what looks good. And maybe this did so maybe you could get in the mood, though all you wanted was for the fingers to stop, but –

Ting!

THIS SHAPING

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:38

So come on. What's your story?

23:38

What do you mean?

23:38

It's midnight on a Saturday night and you're online
chatting to strangers

23:38

Me? So are you

I don't know.

Maybe I'm just bored and lonely

23:39

Dream

Okay

Talk to me

Did someone break your heart?

but Max didn't stop, you didn't want it but you wanted to play nice, to not seem off-putting. The softness of the pillow giving in, but you kept thinking, If I don't move, he'll stop. He'll get tired. The lack of enthusiasm will give it away, eventually. But maybe there was something, in the sounds you made, that sounded like a willingness to participate? The fingers inside you started to hurt a little. Not much, just a little. But enough, probably. You wanted to say something but you didn't want it to be weird; you did like him a lot

and he liked you a lot. He turned you over. Spooning position. You felt yourself not reacting. Not quite a freezing, more a lack of movement, something that should be obvious. A tiredness. Limp. He had to lick his –

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:45

Anyway, you look fun, are you fun?

23:45

For sure

What do you want to know? Ask me something

23:45

Ok. What are you wearing?

23:45

Are you serious

23:46

Fair enough, scrap that.

What's your greatest fear?

23:47

To die alone.

Isn't that everyone's greatest fear?

moved your hips up and fucked you harder. You thought you weren't performing but actually. Maybe you were. Maybe you just couldn't remember if this felt

good or not. You're always so much fun, you should have been into it. He pulled your hair. Sometimes you like it but then you didn't. You wished he'd just stop, you clenched your jaws. He said 'You like that don't you' and you didn't reply but he wasn't listening. You found yourself wondering, would he be horrified if he knew? And so you said nothing. You remember watching, close up, the light from the bedside table. Silence and the fibres, on the sheet. In little criss-cross squares, repeating themselves. Threads interlocked. A tiny grid, over and over. So many, sand on a beach. The thread, white, running along the edge, sewing it shut at the hem. Folds in the fabric, darker. Lighter. And darker again. A nail, one, the one on index finger, planted into it. To hold on, a grid, the smallest dot.

Background coming in and out.

Like breathing.

Then, he fell asleep almost immediately, spooning you. A cuddle.

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:52

Ok, yeah sure.

Not very upbeat though

23:52

No

What's yours?

23:53

To never find TRUE LOVE

23:54

Fuck off...

Afterwards, what happened. Nothing. You didn't mention it. He didn't mention it. Eventually, he said you were acting weird. A resentment. Because, surely, he should have stopped but also, surely, you should have said something. And you still aren't sure: why didn't you say something? In the end he sent messages and you never replied and that was it. And somehow it's not that you couldn't forgive, just that you couldn't tell him; because it would have hurt him. So now you keep thinking that it was no one's fault, you keep thinking and yet, you still see yourself not moving and you'd think, right. You'd think he would have realised, and you'd think he'd have stopped.

Right?

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:54

What are you doing on this app then?

23:54

Don't know.

Tinder is basically a broken dreams
graveyard

And we all die in the end anyway
So might as well drink cocktails
with strangers in the
meantime

THIS SHAPING

Across the aisle a man unwraps a bag of fried chicken. The sound of paper unfolds and the smell floats to you. Scratching noises as the bus drives through low branches, sometimes you want to go back, undo the things or at least turn them into stories, snapshots you'd–

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:56

I can't fault your worldview.

And I find fault in most

Does it work for you?

23:56

Nope

23:58

Shame...

Keep trying though

Maybe it just needs more testing... ;P

23:59

Yeah, maybe

Behind you the man who was humming a song stands up and climbs down the stairs. You never found the song but in the end maybe there wasn't really a song, maybe he was just rambling in rhythm. You notice you're hungry and the scent of chicken, smell still floating and mouth corners salivating. Your phone vibrates:

Instagram. @Another.blue.flower liked your post.
Tinder, you've been Super Liked! Swipe to find out
by whom.
System Update. New system software now available.
Your phone is running out of internal storage.

Under your thumb, another Instagram post. A few weeks later: 08/02/18. Two drinks, at night, around a pub table. That was the day you thought it was time, you thought, maybe this would cheer you up, at least a change of scenery. So you arranged to go on a date. A guy, someone you met on OKCupid. That Friday night, standing in a crowd. A concert, because he had an extra ticket. The ceilings were high, the people, howling, everybody with their phones up, filming the opening. You were holding a cider. It was cold around your fingers. You posted the video with the caption 'Gig night!' As the gig went on, you were aware of your feet hurting in your shoes. You were aware of the couple next to you, his arms around her body, swaying to the music. You wanted to look like you were having fun even though your thoughts, trapped, swirling with nowhere to go. You thought of checking your phone but you didn't want to look bored.

You found yourself gasping for air.

From downstairs a commotion, the sound of voices arguing, the driver and a man, drunk, what's your problem man? Get off man. Come on man. Everybody upstairs listening and waiting, and paying attention and hoping for a fight.

THIS SHAPING

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Sat, 9 Feb 2018, 00:03

Hey this app is bugging me. Do you have WhatsApp?

00:03

Sure.

So long as you don't send me any
dick pics

...

I'm joking

00:05

Lol

00:05

(semi joking)

00:05

Wait so... you do want them?

00:05

No no

00:05

Lol. Also joking

00:05

I'm good

00:05

There will be no dick pics

00:05

Great

00:05

Whether you wanted or not

00:05

Thanks

00:05

Let's switch to WhatsApp

00:07

I think there's going to be a fight on the bus

After the concert, it was already late, you went to a pub. He drank whiskey and coke, you gin and tonic. He listened to you talk about your projects, your dreams, your quirkiness. Going through the motions, things you'd said before. To other men. On other dates. Things they'd enjoy. Things they'd find relatable. Or impressive. Cute, even. He talked enthusiastically, of the music he liked, of his hobbies and of his friends and you kept touching your hair, one shoulder leant forward. You smiled, you laughed, you were easy going, and fun, and easy to talk to. When he went to order two more drinks you looked down at your phone.

32 people saw your story.

@Chris_Navet, @another_blue_flower, @Dirty_face_dolly saw your story. @This_is_Pia saw your story.

And others. And others.

Max saw your story. You looked at the screen until it turned black.

He came back from the bar, you posted a shot of your drinks captioned "Thursday fun!" and went to the toilet. In the bathroom the light, too white. The fancy lightbulb was broken, the replacement glare almost grey, almost bright, and the skin on your face reflected in the square. You wiped the lipstick at the corners of your mouth. A glitch. You gave your lips a rest. From the talking. And the laughing. You slid your hands in the hyper modern hand dryer. You read an article about those, apparently all they do is send germs everywhere, it's the least hygienic of solutions.

You weaved your way back in, the place had wooden tables and fairy lights wrapped around the bar. Candlelit tones. Flattering hues. Something soft and your eyes slightly out of focus. They were closing, you shared a cigarette outside. You said, do you want to come back to mine? I have wine.

The bus drives round a roundabout. You see a fox, or cat, something crossing the road.

Snapchat, @PeteTheMonkay and @DavisJames are on Snapchat!

Gmail, From: Emma. 'To do: Monday morning ASAP'.

WhatsApp, Ben

00:10

Hello!

00:10

So what about you then?

Who are you, what's your story?

00:11

Oof. Incisive questions...

00:11

Do you have something better to do with your night?

On the tube that evening, everybody was drunk. A group of teenagers were singing off-key and swiping through pictures on their phones. You walked from the stop to your house, maybe he took your hand, maybe he didn't. Maybe he wasn't the type. Maybe he was. It was cold, you both commented on how cold it was. There were droplets of rain falling on your hair, covering your face, your coat, with beads of shine, like sweat on skin and you could feel, at the corners, the cracking of your lips.

You pushed the front door and dived into a pool of heat, coats off, scarves off. Put on some music from your phone, two glasses a bottle of wine. The formica table, both sitting on a different corner, diagonal. The blinding light of the kitchen, maybe at that point you were already getting sloppy, stumbling your words. He let you do most of the talking. Maybe he was drunk too. You finished the bottle. It was late. What time was it? 4am? 5am? It's late, I think I'm flagging. Yeah, me too. Well do you want to sleep here, I mean it's quite late. Yeah, it's probably –

THIS SHAPING

00:15

Not particularly

Actually I was seeing someone recently but

I got cold feet

I'm a shitmonkey

Truth is I'm not long out of a 2 year relationship with the girl I thought I was going to spend my life with...

Not cool to bring this up but hey

00:15

Ouch. That's ok. At least you're honest.

Near your bed, he asked again if you enjoyed the gig and you said yes. Then taking his jumper off, slowly, folding it and laying it to the side. Shoes, trousers. In a semi neat pile. Swaying. You removed everything apart from your underwear and crawled under the duvet. He followed. A yawn, you turned off the light. Lying side by side in the dark, colours from the outside and cars driving by. Watching the shadows as they came, not touching. You said, do you want to cuddle, I feel like we should cuddle. Yeah sure, let's cuddle. You pushed your body into his side, you said maybe you should take off your t-shirt. He took off his t-shirt, the skin of your skin reaching forward. Maybe we should kiss as well? A kiss, something soft, a thin veiled stro –

00:16

I guess so.

But maybe one day I can take you for a drink

00:16

Good idea. And then we can also have sex and wake up in each others arms feeling sad and lonely but pretending that we're having fun anyways

climbing on top of his body, a kiss still kissing, not quite wanting but not sure why. You removed his boxer shorts, slid them along the legs, the lips a perfect shape, the usual motion, repeating itself, again and again and he didn't really make a sound, maybe enjoying maybe something else. Pushing the hair out of the way, the only sound of skin rubbing against other skin, and saliva getting wetter, after a while you sat up and reached for the bedside table. A condom, you unrolled the latex. Making the sounds they always like, the squeak, the squeal, the moans that moan, a blur of dark and muted tones.

00:18

...

Too much?

00:19

Hahaha no not at all I very much enjoyed that I was going to point out that you are obviously a hopeless romantic
But then I got distracted by football

Too much? He kept going soft, sliding out, you kept putting it back in place you kept the hips, moving at

some point he said hey, hey maybe we should, but you said no just let me, no just let me just. Hey I don't think this is working, what do you mean? I think maybe I'm too tired. But you said come on, come on just let me just, just keep going, you tried kissing his temple, his face, the motion still permeating. Hey I think I'm just, wait-

In the end he took your arms from the elbows and pushed you to the side, not too hard just a little, it didn't hurt. I'm sorry, I don't know, I think I'm just quite drunk. It's not working. Sorry.

Oh, ok.

The bus will wait here, whilst the drivers change over.

00:20

God I think I'm going to be on this bus forever.

How is the football? Isn't it a bit late for football?

00:20

Never too late. How is the fight?

00:21

Not sure. It seems over now.

Currently waiting for new driver

But you still wanted it so in the end you placed his arm around your body, he held you and with his face so close to yours, he touched you till you came. Staring up, directly above. At some point you thought of that picture of you and Max standing outside a pub, look-

ing happy and drunk, but the feeling, moving, shapes rippling, circular, repetitive. Maybe you should have taken a selfie with that guy, before this. Something to show, to prove but you forgot.

Eventually you came. Then he fell asleep, or pretended to but all you could do is keep staring. Chromatic streams of the ceiling, swelling, flowing, diluting. To pat it dry before it shows, a water drop on a painting.

00:23

That's a shame. Love fights. Always hope someone gets injured.

00:23

Don't be mean

00:24

Why not. I can't imagine not being allowed to be mean

I would have zero fun

In fact I'd say 98% of all creative thoughts I have are directly associated with being mean

00:25

Maybe you're just a petty bitch?

00:25

No I prefer to see myself as sharp and devastatingly insightful critic of everybody who is not me

00:25

You sound like a dream

THIS SHAPING

New bus driver. Angel station, Jamie's Italian, the big Starbucks at the crossroad. People's windows flickering past, the orange squares where people live. You catch a glimpse of someone still watching TV and of a man brushing his teeth. A few people on a terrace, smoking cigarettes at a party. A couple kissing on a balcony. All framed in bright boxes, fading breathing flashing images.

00:26

Where do you live, Mr Mean?

00:26

Cally Road. You?

00:26

Really?

We're actually gonna drive through Kings Cross shortly.

Wanna meet for a drink?

00:26

That's pretty late notice...

00:26

Come on, live a little.

00:26

But I've got my slippers on and I'm ready for bed!

00:26

Come on

00:28

Hmmm maybe...

You reopen Instagram, your own feed, going backward. 12/01/18: the selfie that evening before the party, looking happy. 10/01/18: Max and you outside a pub, smiling, tipsy beer in hand. 04/01/18: A boomerang someone took in a bar, pulling a silly face just minutes before he arrived. 21/12/17: visiting the Welcome Collection, Max wearing a ridiculously bright woolly hat. 12/12/17: A cropped image where you're both looking at a video on someone's phone captioned "too cute not to post". 13/11/17: A selfie you first sent to him an evening when he was working late. 29/10/17: A video of dead leaves brushing the floor you took together. 15/10/17: A gallery opening when he was supposed to join and at the last minute couldn't, but you wanted him to see and so you posted it and you made sure your hair was big and your skirt was short enough and your legs looked good. 02/10/17: the bathroom selfie with your cat you showed him on your first date. 27/09/17: crispy spring rolls on a plate, eaten, swallowed just before heading to the bar where you were about to meet him for the first time.

Each photo he liked, and you knew that because you checked. Performance for two. And now? Each new image making a point. Looking happy. Pretty. Busy. Having fun. Going out. Meeting old friends and making new friends. Just so he sees. Just so he knows.

Data usage warning. Tap to view usage and settings.
Tinder, You have a new match!

THIS SHAPING

Ting!

Tinder, Tom sent you a message!

Sat, 9 Feb 2018, 00:32

Hello!

Have you ever been a bird?

Do you do voodoo?

Do you believe in previous lives?

-gif of a swan with human arms flying low over water-

00:35

Tinder guy just sent me this.

People are weird.

-send attachment of gif screen capture-

00:35

Hero

What do you think?

U gonna go for it?

00:35

I don't know, why not.

At least it'd be a change

00:35

From?

00:36

The usual.

When I go on dates it's so scripted I'm never sure whether it's going well or not. I just keep saying the

same things to different people.

00:37

I think that's maybe the saddest thing I've heard
on this endless vortex of failed love

00:37

Thanks

It's just hard to know if I'm doing
things because I want

to or

I don't know

00:37

Damn, you sound like a proper laugh

00:38

Thank you

00:38

You're welcome

00:38

So. If I get off at Kings Cross, will
you come?

Tinder, Somebody likes you! Open Tinder and swipe
right...

Instagram, @foodforparrots commented on your
photo

_This place is great, best cocktails in town! Heart
emoji.

1m Reply

At Kings Cross you get off. You like to come here because the place is always busy, you've never seen it empty, even in the dead of night, even when it's raining. It's a scene of transit, of movement. You sit on a bench, your favourite bench. From there you can see the clocktower. Once, there was a cloud of Sahara sand over London. At least that's what they said, and the light of the sun just wasn't quite shining through. It was like being on the moon, a different quality to the transparency. Or what you think the moon would feel like. You were sitting right here. It was a few days before the party.

The man next to you smokes a cigarette. He wants to keep sitting there without feeling awkward so he can't refuse you one, not really. You roll it, light it, fill your lungs with more smoke. Something quite reassuring about the way streetlights bounce off swirly architecture. Carving pockets of pale, and black, secret dark corners, swallowing and spitting out the hues on purpose and at will. It doesn't photograph too well either, you've tried it in the past. Maybe you just need a better nighttime camera. But in the meantime it just doesn't work. So it's like it doesn't even exist, or it exists just for you. You feel the cold, the air is damp. There is a thin layer of water in between you and everything you see.

#nighttime #dreamscape #moonlight #streetlight
#escape

00.53

Are you still there?