

The City: Isolation/Togetherness – Issue 3 Editorial

Issue 3 marks a year of *Flight Journal*, as well as the end of our tenure as editors and Flight Associates. Its [spearheading editors](#) shaped the identity of the magazine as a publication for bold short fiction.

With this second and final issue for 2016 we narrowed our gaze to the city, and with that the opposing feelings of togetherness and isolation it can trigger. Our call for submissions went out with an added proviso: stories had to be up to 500 words rather than 2500. This aimed to mirror the thematic: micro/flash fiction is reflective of the fast-paced city life, and can hone in on a moment, a feeling, a breather from the city. While we set a theme for this issue, the fundamental goal of publishing dynamic short fiction remained. We are delighted to present you with a range of commute-length stories, diverse in form, tone, voice, and subject-matter.

We start at dawn, with portraits of individuals removed from fast paced city life. A dreamlike city setting meets the prosaic banter of a troupe of bin men in Sarah Wallis' [There's Violets for You](#), a story which reveals the way the rhythm of city living can both isolate us and unexpectedly draw us together. In [The Sugar-Picture Man](#), a waitress' humdrum life is affected by a mysterious dreadlock-donning customer's unusual creations. Karen Jones questions the boundary between voyeurism and human connection.

Then we move through the morning with daily commutes on the bus: the systematic, bordering robotic, cycle of modern dating, relationships and city life, is taken literally in the quirky [Monday Morning in a Wheeled Box](#) by Kevlin Henney. Then we find ourselves on another mode of transport: a flash of anxieties and a plea for empathy, Eliot Keirl's [The Interval](#)'s stream-of-consciousness gives a voice to the people who run metropolises but are so often unseen.

Also exposed are the toils of misunderstanding in relationships, and in mind. Sara Jafari's [Be Positive](#) snapshots the anxiety-ridden mind of a girl unrecognised both by her partner and the city as a whole. Marianne Tatepo's [People Who Have Never Hurt Me \(Or So They Think\)](#) embraces listicle-storytelling and comedy to chronicle the sinuous forms love and kindness can take, exposing the pitfalls of (mis)communication.

In a break from city life, we are given a moment to ponder. Freya J. Morris' [The Tree of Life](#) shows us a city dweller longing for a connection with nature – and with something that causes us to pause, think and feel in the hubbub of city life.

Moving through to the confines of city dwellings: Elizabeth Lovatt's [SHARKS](#) depicts two lovers' playful musings on the housing market in big cities and the obsolete idea of utter isolation therein. Whereas, Nick Ryle Wright's sharp [Sight Unseen](#) captures a man mourning his departure from the city, his home, in sacrifice for the man he loves. Then we enter a community in which home means something different. In [Corners](#) by Shreeta Shah, we head to the fringes of London's suburbs and a world of 20-somethings whose cars are their own independent states, the closest thing they have to being at home in their lives.

The night brings out a different side of the city. In Andrea Eaker's [*The City's Plan for You*](#), we see a city's nightlife, how it draws people close, too close for comfort. Moving into the early hours of the morning, Paul Attmere's chilling, engrossing, vivid [*Earth Mother*](#) – much like the soil in which its protagonist finds herself writhing – explores the dark side of estrangement and anonymity.

We hope you enjoy reading Issue 3.

Sara Jafari, Marianne Tatepo and Shreeta Shah

The Sugar Picture Man - Karen Jones



Sara looked up when she heard the bell above the door. She knew it would be him. She could set her watch by him. He came into her café every day, bought a salad sandwich and a cup of tea, then sat at one of the blue tables – always blue. He would put his canvas bag on one chair, his rainbow-striped sweater on another, his plate, cup and tray spread over the table. Actions as warning: “No room. Sit somewhere else.”

He ate quickly, as though fearful someone would snatch his food away. Between mouthfuls he cleared a space in front of his tray. Then he took seven white sugar sachets and eased them open, careful not to spill anything. He sipped his no-sugar tea and tipped the contents of each sachet onto the table. Finally, using the edge of one of the packets as a tool – head bent, face hidden by swaying dreadlocks, oblivious to his surroundings – he started work.

Sara crept up behind him, ever keen to see his creations before he blew them away into his bag. A peacock today. So detailed, delicate. Although white against blue, she felt she could see all the colours, every feather.

He caught her looking. She smiled, ready to ask the questions she’d held back for months: Was he an artist? Did he have paintings? She could exhibit them. Just a café, but still, maybe he’d make some sales.

He pushed his chair back, knocking over his cup in his hurry to escape her attention, drowning the peacock in tea dregs.

She wanted to follow him out, to apologise, to promise never to disturb him again. Instead she wiped the table clean, consigning the peacock and the other unformed grains of art to the dustbin.

The following day she saw him through the window of the health-food café across the street, sitting at a white table, making pictures with brown sugar. He looked so at home it hurt.

About the author

Karen Jones is a prose writer from Glasgow with a preference for flash and short fiction. Her work has appeared in numerous magazines, e-zines and anthologies including *Msllexia*, *Writers' Forum*, *Flash 500*, *The New Writer*, *Bath Short Story Anthology 2014*, *10 Years of HISSAC Anthology* and *Words With Jam Anthology*. In 2014 she published a short story collection, *The Upside-Down Jesus and other Stories*. Follow Karen on [@karjon](#)

About the illustration

[Elyssa Rider](#) is the illustrator for *Flight Journal Issue 3*.

There's Violets for You - Sarah Wallis



It has been cold tonight. Elodie feels the extremes more keenly now. We cannot know if she is immortal, but she takes on the aspect of Tithonus, the mortal fatally blessed with a god's love who forgot to ask for eternal youth. What error of judgement. Elodie feels the song of age in her bones; it has been a long time since she whispered her name to a chestnut horse and rode into the dream of a new city. She starts her rounds of the city early and when Elodie finds Flora she sits with her, tears streaming.

The city begins the day oblivious, dustcarts beeping, bakers calling orders, the flower market scenting the dawn chorus and the cleaners on the first buses, faces grey with lack of sleep.

'Ah, bless her, she's gone to a better place now,' said Little Dave, removing his hat. 'It's Filthy Flora, mate, she's gone.' The men climb down from their dustcart.

'She had a mouth on her, didn't she?' said Big Dave, their driver.

'Knew more cuss words than me, I reckon,' said Little Dave.

'We've got a shift to finish,' said Big Dave.

'No way, we're not just leaving her!'

'She died in a bin for Christ's sake, it's our watch and we've to do right by her.'

'I'll call it in,' said Little Dave 'They can bloody wait for their bins today.'

'There'll be ructions,' said Big Dave.

'Just ... be a human being for once in your life, yeah?' said Little Dave. 'And turn those bloody beeps off, it's not respectful! You ever talk to her?'

‘Not beyond hello and to give her a couple of quid,’ said Hairy Dave. ‘I get choked enough over any animals.’ He shakes his head and wipes his eyes. ‘But I never found a person before.’

‘You didn’t ...’ said Little Dave. ‘I found her.’

‘So you did, Dave,’ said Hairy Dave.

‘We should have an honour guard of binmen. Sort her a decent send-off.’

‘Giant Dave can read one of his poems, perhaps?’

‘Yeah ... only ... not one of the really depressing ones. You’d need something uplifting ...’ said Little Dave. ‘And all the city invited, see what this society is ...’ Hairy Dave nudged him to look up the street before his friend could get properly up on his soapbox, and there they saw Giant Dave marching down the street carrying armfuls of violets.

‘Terrible news, chaps,’ he said.

‘What did you do? Clean out the flower market?’ said Little Dave.

‘They heard, and not a fella there would take a penny for them. Poor woman ... she was someone’s daughter once,’ said Giant Dave. They each took a handful of violets to scatter over Flora’s passing from the city, the police set up a cordon and people took care to step around the masses of bright blooms showing the path one of their own had taken to another place.

About the author

Sarah Wallis is a writer based in Leeds. She has been published in various journals and her poetry pamphlet, *Waterlore*, was highly commended in the recent Mslexia competition. Her short play *When God Was a Woman* was on at the Leeds Fringe June 2016, and a reading of *Laridae*, developed and supported by Furnace at West Yorkshire Playhouse, helped to kick-start the Leeds Theatre Pub scene autumn 2016. Sarah can be found on Twitter [@wordweave](#).

About the image

[Elyssa Rider](#) is the illustrator for *Flight Journal Issue 3*.

Monday Morning in a Wheeled Box - Kevlin Henney



Monday morning. As alone as she was on that first date when they realised mutual dislike of one another in the opening seconds.

Monday morning, on the bus. Alone and unrushed in the human press of rush hour. Driftwood in the sea of people going this way and that. Workwards. Schoolwards. Awkwards. Misfit pieces from different jigsaw sets locked together in a wheeled box.

That first date. She remembered. Her friend had said she needed to get out, start seeing other people, start dating, get back into the scene. Easy to say, harder to do. A scene she had never been into to get out of to get back into. Apps and sites in no short supply, but no more than a Facebook view of humanity, filled to overflowing with idealisation, bound with lust and hate, packed with connected strangers getting stranger and disconnected. To find a partner, a mate, in this ocean of profiles, everyone trying to fit or be fit. To find something she wasn't looking for.

And she'd found him. They went on that first date, a Friday. Discovered their differences before sitting down. Seated, they dwelt on each difference for no more than a moment as each raised its head for attention and conversation, before they moved on to play their parts. To meet expectations. They had that in common.

‘So, what was he like?’

‘Couldn't stand him.’

‘Oh!’

‘We've got a second date on Saturday.’

‘Oh ...?’

Then the third date ... then the fourth — each expectation ticked off in turn — ... fifth ... sixth ... steady ... steadier ... the L word — although neither meant anything more by it than expectation demanded — ... proposal ... acceptance ... marriage ... resignation ... anniversaries ... separation. Tick, tick, tick.

He'd left her. Sunday.

Monday morning, on the bus. Alone. But she was not alone again; she was alone as always.

About the author

Kevlin Henney writes shorts and flashes and drabbles. His fiction has appeared online and on tree (*Litro*, *New Scientist*, *Physics World*, *The Pygmy Giant* and others) and has been included in a number of anthologies (*North by Southwest*, *We Can Improve You*, *Haunted*, *The Salt Anthology of New Writing 2013*, *A Box of Stars Beneath the Bed*, *Eating My Words*, *Scraps*, *Jawbreakers* and others).

Kevlin's stories have been longlisted, shortlisted and placed. He won the CrimeFest 2014 Flashbang contest and was a finalist in the NYC Midnight Short Story Challenge 2016. He reads at spoken word events, winning the National Flash-Fiction Day Oxford flash slam in 2012, and has performed his work on local radio (BBC Radio Bristol and Ujima). Kevlin organises the BristolFlash events for National Flash-Fiction Day and the Bristol Festival of Literature.

He lives in Bristol and online. He can be read on his blog at asemantic.net and stalked on Twitter as [@KevlinHenney](https://twitter.com/KevlinHenney).

About the image

[Elyssa Rider](#) is the illustrator for *Flight Journal Issue 3*.

The Interval - Eliot Keirl



Please nobody jump please nobody jump please nobody jump ... I wish I could not look ... robots, why can't they get robots to drive all I do is press buttons then I'd be unemployed though OK one more down and on we go four bad ones left this evening after all can't wait schedule time targets it's ridiculous that they're pushing us so hard on fast service when it's Peak Jumper Season I don't know how some of the guys handle it so well last time it nearly destroyed me yeah one more and you can retire but that just makes a part of you want it to happen you could see the relief on George's face after he made three it's sick the whole business is sick I suppose it's actually one of the perks along with the money because you do need good perks for this job I mean look at it it's like those crap tunnels in The Matrix lined with all those cables except I'm stuck on tracks and I don't have a crew it's just me ... maybe they should do co-drivers co-pilots ... just me and the short-lit darkness in front with occasional moments of light and people and possible manslaughter then darkness again and ah yeah thanks for reminding me sometimes we have to stop and sweat in the black ... maybe someone's jumped or maybe just fainted and pulled the alarm well someone else pulled the alarm for them let's hope it's that one even though it's more annoying because it's just so stupid anyway four stations left I got into a good rhythm of not thinking about it recently and now it's all over me again like a rash what's changed is there something bothering me well I suppose Jane's in one of her "off" swings again I don't get her sometimes and I wish she'd understand my pressures a bit more but I know she's trying and it's not that easy I'm not easy I'll try to be easy I love her to bits I'll make more effort with her till she's picked herself up again if it's in my power to do it it's stupid not to maybe I'll get her some flowers after my shift or do people not do that anymore yeah why not she loves flowers she texted me before did I reply ... don't think it needed one I think it was just carpet done pasta tonight oh yeah pick up some garlic bread can get flowers at the same time perfect so pasta tonight had that before seen this tunnel before too at least we're about to be another station closer God it still makes my guts tingle how much longer can I keep doing this well probably till my third I suppose it has to happen eventually then at least this suspense will be over I don't ever want to reach three though here we go please nobody jump please nobody jump ...

About the author: Having just returned from three months in India and Nepal, Eliot Keirl is currently exploring new career paths, after a few years spent in digital marketing. He writes both fiction and poetry, and is especially interested in the topic of consciousness.

About the image:

"[Westminster Tube](#)" by [Tomosaurus](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#).

Be Positive - Sara Jafari



Picking at my nails, pulling at the hanging skin, watching my fingers bleed, I think of what might happen tomorrow, next month, in a year, when my mum will die, through old age or some unknown, when I will die. Life is the great unknown; a grey abyss in which my worst fears could come true. *What ifs* and wondering *when* eat me from the inside, gluttonously chomping my gut, causing pains in my chest.

“Stop worrying! Enjoy life,” he says with a wave of his hand. He then puts his hands over mine; I can no longer pick at the skin. I feel a gnawing deep in my soul. I *need* to do it. Sensing my discomfort he removes his hands and brushes his hair from his face. “I know it’s easier said than done,” he sighs. I say nothing. My fingers slowly move to the hanging skin, and I pick as discreetly as I can. “But you really need to start being more positive.”

“Everything is shit,” I reply, crumbling the perfect gingerbread house he created for us.

“Don’t say that,” he says in a whiney tone, as if this issue, this problem, is affecting him more than me. “Be positive.”

“Are you going to tell me that there are children dying in Africa next? That I should be happy that I’m not starving?” I snap. “No one asked for your advice.” He is the one who says anxiety is relative. He is understanding in theory, through social media retweets, but not in practice.

“Don’t be like that.”

I pull at the skin on my pinkie. I think the skin will pull off easily. It’s soft enough. However, it starts to bleed. Bright red blood gushes from my finger and my trousers are white so I have nowhere to press it against. I put my finger to my mouth, aware he will either:

1. Frown
2. Act concerned and then give me a lecture
3. Get angry at me for “self harming”

Surprisingly he doesn’t seem to notice. I think this annoys me more than if he did any of the three.

On the tube surrounded by people I feel worse than alone. People excited for their evenings encircle me, girls in high waisted jeans with flat stomachs, who smile effortlessly. They're not going home to stare at their blank walls in a friendless flat share. They don't ruin the rare times in which they get to see their boyfriends, because they're having a particularly low day.

I search for a bit of skin on my index finger. I tug at it with my other hand and it peels off seamlessly. It feels good. I work on the side of my thumbnail, using my teeth to create hanging skin.

No one looks at me. I am invisible. Insignificant.

Then, I pull.

About the author

Sara Jafari is a Flight 1000 Associate 2016, co-editor of Flight Journal and a writer. She writes short stories, has written one novel and is currently working on her second. Sara has recently been published in Syrup Magazine and gal-dem. She also works at Penguin Random House. You can follow what she's up to on her blog [here](#) and follow her on twitter: [@sarajafari](#).

About the image

Photographed by Sara Jafari, 2016.

People Who Have Never Hurt Me (Or So They Think) - Marianne Tatepo



I.

The courier is alright. Except when he rings.
I see a big bouquet: 'For me?'
The tag says "Becky Hasitall♥".

Cheery Chap chortles "I pushed all the buttons!"
More babble: 'They're so heavy! He must really lo- '. I tune out.

As I retreat with my neighbour's delivery, he double takes my ass.

Later, I check myself out in the mirror.
Oh. I am wearing my menses men's grey sweatpants.

II.

The till operator (Ms Curmudgeonly Masticator) scans my whiskey.
She inspects my 'Party-For-One' takeaway bag:

'Party?'
'No, just the new *Archer*.'
'A reboot of *Robin Hood*?'
'A mouthy cartoon spy.'
'Watch Daniel Craig!'
I say the Bond Girl is always hotter anyway.
(And if it's not human, I can't fall for it.)
Her eyes say *dirty dark dyke*;
Her mouth: 'No contactless.'
I punch my pin, say: 'Contact will happen if needed!'
A beep. 'Declined.'

She chews.

III.

My father? Of course I–. I do. *Unconditional*, as they say. Except ...

When he says what a shame his “favourite [only] daughter” isn't *seeing* anyone nice, instead of just “Happy birthday!”

‘Father, I’m in a city of 9 million! I see *nice* people. I do. Everywhere. But we live by “never speak to strangers.” And you can’t know if someone’s right for you by whether their finger has a gold-or-silver band on,’ I jest between mouthfuls.

‘I understand,’ he says, staring at the ‘2’ then the ‘9’ candle. I hope the sugar rush will keep him quiet.

Post-insulin Dad invokes Him, says he doesn’t understand how his “lovely bright spark” has only him.

His gift was a turntable. Inside the record shop, I sing-song: ‘My *lonely mess* is killing me!’ and pick a vinyl: *Last Night I Dreamt Somebody Loved Me*.

At home, I play the record.
It skips on "somebody."

IV.

I almost loved someone once ... I knew I wouldn’t.
But only after I told him 'I love Bukowski.'
‘Well! Me too!’ he beamed.
After we went to sleep I found him hovering.
Loving himself over my face.

Later, Mr West Country moaned: ‘Enunciate! You said “B-U-K-A –”’
‘No, “B-U-K-O-W-S-K-I”!’
‘Well, “to-may-toes; to-mah-toes ...”’
‘No, “Bananas and *fuckin*g plantains”! Have you *had* raw plantain?!’
‘No! *Actually*, Papa is allergic to most raw fruit so –’
‘Well, if “Pah-pah” had done *this* to “Ma’am” with *his* banana, you ... we, wouldn’t be here.’

We dried our eyes.
I asked not be held responsible for the things that come out of my mouth.
He softened: ‘Well, at least you are responsible for the things that go inside it.’
God, was he handsome. Afterwards, on my pillow, he said: ‘I think I l–’
My heart jumped: ‘I–, It’s beddy bye byes!’

The next day, I left and texted him a tentative “**L.O.L**”.
No reply. Follow up. On a loop.
My texts got shorter, fewer, scant, then zilch.
(I’d meant “**Lots Of Love**”.)

V.

I'd say 'myself,' but I lack the introspection.
I am my own only exception.
(Or so I think.)

About the author

Marianne Tatepo will try anything [writing-related] once*. So far she's written essays and articles a few hundred times, for outlets including *The Guardian*, *The Bookseller*, *Brooklyn magazine*, and *Open Pen magazine*, and has a not-insignificant amount of scribbles masquerading as poems somewhere in The Cloud. She loves to write fiction that explores the fragility of human dynamics, with a penchant for intimacy or the lack thereof. Marianne is currently working in publishing.

*Supporting evidence via prosaic short story/NaNoWriMo novel/plotless play/and unadaptable screenplay underway.

About the image

"[Salomé Gif](#)" via Giphy

The Tree of Life - Freya Morris



There is a tree that speaks to me. That's how I know it's alive. Its speech is like hunger in my stomach. I understand it. Like me, it's alone. It sits on the shoulder of Colston Place, breaking through dying concrete. It reaches out to the forest of buildings with leaves of glass, thirsting after rivers of cars flowing with clogged rage.

But the tree, it starves.

In the city, I am crushed, compacted into smaller versions of myself, but under this tree I feel my soul stretch and open out. You cannot hear it over the roar of people pumping legs, mouths, exhausts. It all screams. But I can hear this tree. We bloom together in spring under its confetti of cherry blossom, we wilt in the heat of summer, lose something in the autumn, and become bones in the winter.

It's more alive than the entire city, and it is still, quiet, rooting me with something I cannot touch. I shouldn't have been surprised when the city gave the tree its notice. It sticks out. An eyesore. A reminder of seasons, of life, of death. And I think of petitions, of protests, objections and lawyers, and I spend every working-day grabbing at its leaves. A kiss of palms, a stroke of the limbs. To be close. And I think that if they kill this tree, it would kill me too.

But it doesn't. When I see the stump for the first time, I wish it had. It cuts through me. It is a split, not of infinitives or atoms, not of dowry or hairs. It cracks through me like an axe. It says to me that we are only good for the fire, to burn, to be splinters of ourselves. The tree and I were the same, grafted from the same seed. But now the tree and I are separated by buried earth, cut off from one another by metal and stone.

The city will not have us. I walk away with the crush of it, the loss of my lifeline, and a sprout of pain digs into my stomach. Something is under my shirt. I lift it up to see a sapling unfurling from my belly button. The tree isn't dead at all. It's rooted in me.

About the author

Freya Morris is an award-winning flash fiction writer from Bristol. She has been published in variety of magazines including Bare Fiction, The Fiction Desk, Popshot, Halo magazine and

two National Flash Fiction Day Anthologies. You can find her censoring her own tweets [@Freya_J_Morris](#).

About the image

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SHARKS - Elizabeth Lovatt



‘It’s like with sharks,’ Maria said.

‘Sharks?’ Jo reached over to push a strand of Maria’s hair behind her ear.

‘That tickles.’ Maria frowned.

They were lying in bed together, in Jo’s flat; Maria on her side, one arm tucked under her head, one leg draped over Jo’s.

‘Why do you always describe things instead of doing them, like a normal person?’ Jo laughed. ‘You always say “that’s funny” or “that hurts.”’

‘No I don’t.’

(Their Sunday morning had been spent with both breakfast and laptops in bed, and the rhythmic droning of planes overhead.)

‘You do. You never just laugh or say “ow”. Most of the time you just say how you’re feeling.’

‘Well isn’t that better?’ Maria slid her leg off Jo’s. It had begun to ache.

‘So, sharks?’ Jo said.

‘Well, they have to keep moving or they die.’

‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘No, I’m sure I read it somewhere. It’s how they keep the oxygen flowing in their lungs ... Or gills, I guess?’

‘I don’t think that’s true. And anyway how is that like flat-sharing?’ Jo said.

‘It’s like you can’t ever stay still. You can retreat to your room but there’s always this movement in the flat or in the block or out on the estate. Always this noise of other people’s lives.’ She rolled onto her back and placed her hands beneath her head. ‘There’s no escape. I don’t think we’re meant to live in cities. All piled high on top of each other. It’s not natural.’

‘I don’t mind it,’ Jo replied.

But she had only shared a dorm at university and even then she’d had an en-suite. After that her parents had lent her the money for a deposit on her own place.

‘But don’t you wish sometimes you could be somewhere and not hear another person? Be completely alone.’ Maria said.

‘But then I’d miss you.’ Jo reached for the hem of Maria’s t-shirt where it had ridden up on her stomach.

‘You’re not listening!’

‘Not really,’ Jo said and smiled.

Maria sat up and opened her laptop. She stared at the screen, scrolling through tweets faster than she could possibly read. Jo watched in silence. Above them came the distinctive clunk of a someone shoving a plug into the wall. Two flats down, the hum of a hairdryer played over barely discernible music.

After a while Jo spoke. ‘So what you’re saying is that you’re fed up with sharing and you want to be all alone.’

‘Be serious. And not “sharing,” *flat-sharing*.’

‘Right, flat-sharing,’ Jo said, placing her hand over Maria’s on the laptop. ‘You can just ask, if that’s what you want ...’

‘I can’t. You’re the one that’s supposed to ask.’ Maria looked at the screen then at Jo’s hand on hers.

Jo smiled. ‘Maria?’

‘Yes?’

‘Would you like to move in with me?’

‘Yes. Yes please.’

Maria laughed.

About the author

Elizabeth Lovatt is a proud graduate of the Write Like a Grrrl programme run by For Books' Sake, the website that champions women writers. Her flash fiction and short stories have been featured in *Popshot Magazine*, *Halo Literary Magazine* and *Severine Literary Journal*, among others. Elizabeth currently lives in London and works for Tate making prints and postcards.

Follow her on twitter [@elizabethlovatt](https://twitter.com/elizabethlovatt) or visit her website at elizabethlovatt.wordpress.com

About the image

Image courtesy of [Josh Brown](#).

Sight Unseen - Nick Ryle Wright



The city, it seemed, did not want to let them go. Stuck in traffic, less than a mile from the home they were leaving forever, Paul fought the urge to suggest that fate, or perhaps a divine being neither he nor Gerard believed in, was trying to tell them that their move was doomed. This sense of impending disaster had first visited him earlier that afternoon as he watched the removal men load the last of their possessions into the waiting van. Standing alone in their empty bedroom, he lit his first cigarette in five-and-a-half years and wondered how they were going to fit everything into the new place Gerard had chosen for them; a remote, dilapidated cottage, situated perilously close to the edge of a fast-eroding cliff top. It was the sort of place, Paul thought, where two ancient spinsters might go to die, and not where two cultured, worldly men, only a smidgen past their prime, might go in search of a new beginning.

But Gerard had been determined to make the move a reality. A once successful portrait painter, he had come to blame the city and its many distractions for the long and painful decline of his talent. He yearned for a quieter life, hoping to reconnect with his muse, that elusive and often ephemeral thing, closely connected to his sense of self worth. After arranging the sale of their flat to their good friends Scott and Benoît (who planned to move in upon their return to the country later in the year), Gerard purchased the cottage, sight unseen, claiming that the place 'spoke' to him on a deeply spiritual level he could not explain.

For his part, Paul, a translator, still enjoyed the chaos of city life and he was not yet ready for the near-monastic existence his husband had in mind for them. But the move, or the idea of the move, had acted to revitalise Gerard after his latest and greatest depression, and for that reason Paul had gone along with it in the way one might acquiesce to a terrible idea, safe in the knowledge that it will never come to pass.

Only, this bad idea *had* come to pass, and now the traffic was moving again and they were following the long, almost funereal procession of cars past the bars, clubs and restaurants they would never again frequent. Before long they were on the motorway, heading south towards a fiery sunset that Gerard declared was a good omen; a sure sign, he said, of their future prosperity.

But Paul was not convinced. To his eyes, the angry red and orange glow seemed positively apocalyptic, suggestive only of catastrophe. And as Gerard told him again that all would be well, he closed his eyes and reached into his jacket pocket, wrapping his fingers around the front door key he'd failed to surrender, just in case the man he loved was wrong.

About the author

Nick Ryle Wright is a writer of short fiction, currently based in the New Forest, England. He has had stories published in The Nottingham Review, Paper and Ink Zine, Rockland, Open Pen (online) and Firewords. He can be found on Twitter [@nickrylew](https://twitter.com/nickrylew).

About the image

[“2016_09_19_sb-sunset_40”](#) by [Doc Searls](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

Corners - Shreeta Shah



Away from the glittering lights and glinting windows, the suburbs are wearing them: men in the City who are boys at home; girl-women, daughters of the household, wherever they are. Parked in black cars beside long fences (who know, and see everything), their faces unnaturally aglow in the light of their phones, windows open, smoke drifting out, uncurling its fingers open to the world. Sometimes they come in pairs: they sit and commiserate together; or devour each other; or are still, allowing themselves to be cradled by a stiff silence.

Awake, too awake, are their homes. Four generations under a roof. A one-and-a-half-year old licking the kitchen floor, his parents off for a meal somewhere local with Kenyan-Indian-influenced Italian food. A father watching the news, brash and blue, the blue of boarding-school-authority actualised. Too readily believing what he is told; sucking it all up, growing fat on it. Mum's voice raising to the night – DOES NO-ONE HEAR ME? A grandmother observing it all like a lugubrious turtle.

There you find yourself, parked on a discreet corner at 11.30 on a Monday night. Smoking until what is fixed and impenetrable is something else. Texting some guy who will not love you, words assembling and reassembling, composing a tune of indifference just for him. A fox darts across the road in the silver silence, holding secrets to itself. You wonder for a heart's beat whose house will become home when the time comes.

About the author

Shreeta is a fiction editor who works independently with writers and at Penguin Random House. In 2016 she worked as a Flight 1000 Associate with Spread the Word. *Corners* is her first published story. She tweets [@shreetashah](https://twitter.com/shreetashah).

About the image Photographed by Shreeta Shah, 2016.

The City's Plan for You - Andrea Eaker



Inside the club, the music makes you its tuning fork. It hammers into your chest and overrides your heartbeat. But behind the door marked 'Ladies', the music loses its intensity, its invasiveness. That makes the ladies' a sanctuary: rat-eaten carpeting, soggy drywall and all. Here, with the other women, you lean into the mirrors and repaint your blurred faces. You sniff lines off the backs of the cracked toilets. You come here because you can breathe here, where the men don't follow.

Coming to this city for the first time, all you chose to feel was energy. You chose not to see the trash, the rock-shattered streetlights and the boarded doors. The empty-handed and the empty-eyed: you looked through them. Broken things and broken people are everywhere, but there is only one you. That's what you think when you arrive.

A woman by the door says: "Got a good one tonight. Big wallet, ready to party."

Everyone is silent. We don't talk about men in here. She must be new, but she'll learn.

When you first arrived, you saw women from the club in the mornings, going home as you were going to work and you'd think: that will never be me. But then your job slipped away. And after a few months, you slipped away from yourself, too.

The woman next to you sees you struggling with cheap mascara and says, "Honey, you're clumping. Let me." She uses a rusty safety pin to separate your lashes. The pin is so close you can't even focus on it, you just see a thin shadow and the flecks where her nail polish has chipped away. Even with a pin next to your eye, you're beyond flinching. You don't even blink.

The knees of her stockings are torn and laddered from kneeling outside behind the club. But so are yours. All knees in here look the same.

Your favorite memories from early days in the city: the tumble of coffee shop conversations around you while you sip tea, making it last. The first time you stood next to a building more than a dozen storeys, and felt a wash of vertigo but a throb of energy. The Michelin-starred restaurant, with its champagne-covered sorbet, Calder-style chandelier, dark and foamy carpeting.

You were a fool for thinking a restaurant like that wouldn't come with conditions.

If you had said yes to him in that restaurant when you had the chance, what other path might this city have shown you? An easier one? One where your stockings didn't tear every night, one where you chose your own heartbeat? You fought going to this club as long as you could, but in the end you accepted your place here. No matter how you feel, you are just like these women.

We may still be in the city, but in here, the doors hold back the worst of the music, the worst of the men, and the worst of ourselves.

About the author

Andrea spends her days researching technology markets, and her evenings writing and reading. She's started eight novels and plans to finish one someday, maybe. She bakes award-winning bread and keeps her houseplants alive for many years (most of them). She lives in the Seattle area. She can be found on Twitter [@ophelia_reynold](https://twitter.com/ophelia_reynold).

About the image

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Earth Mother - Paul Attmere



Eyes open but dark. Apart from the bike helmet and the thin plastic bag that covers her body and clings to her skin, she is naked.

It is a bumpy ride over rough ground. All she can hear is bangs, squeaks, and the strangely comforting, steady ticking of a bicycle wheel. She thinks about potatoes; what her grandmother called apples of the earth. It feels like she is in a wheelbarrow – a prize-winning vegetable freshly pulled from the soil. Was she in an accident?

The last thing she remembers: riding her bicycle through Regent's Park, a balmy evening, trying to get her exhausted body back into shape after pregnancy. Now it hurts all over. Her left hand falls out of the bag, allowing her wedding ring to hit repetitively against metal. They reach a stop. She resists the urge to tense her arm as it is packed back with care, as with a present.

She waits. So little air. Makes a small incision in the plastic bag with a fingernail and puts her lips to the hole, gulping like a newborn. She thinks about her daughter, feels the wound just below her abdomen. Still itches. Then she fumbles to release the helmet strap. It separates into two equal pieces but the bag holds it loosely to her head. It occurs to her if she removes it completely her throbbing brain may spill from her skull like the soft flesh from an exotic fruit.

“God!” is repeated over and over again in a voice pitched high then low. She can't decide: one voice or two? Her right eye is aligned to the hole. She sees her blue bike propped against a tree next to a spade, partially lit by a torch. Her parents bought it for her 18th birthday and she kept it all these years, even after the move to London.

A hand strokes her face through the bag. Lips pressed just below her nose mutter something with their warm, alcohol-infused breath.

The wheelbarrow is lifted from behind and she slides into space before landing on her right wrist, snapping it instantly. Her other hand rips open the bag and catches a mouthful of soil as she tears it from her face. Above, the full moon is eclipsed by a figure staring down.

A torch flashes into her face. She partially closes her eyes. Only chance of life: hold breath; play dead. The light is withdrawn and momentarily turned upwards, illuminating a pained expression ...

Her mother's.

She hasn't seen her since her wedding day last year. She looks old, as if left out in her precious garden, forgotten all winter. More soil rains down as her mouth closes over the word "mum." She splutters desperate to get the word out. The face disappears. Somebody's crying.

There is a long silence shattered by a short explosion of a car backfiring, or is it a gunshot? A bird flies across the moon.

About the author

Paul lives in Krakes, a small town in Lithuania, where he moved to from London in 2012. When not doing the more rudimentary tasks associated with building a straw house such as digging holes, painting walls and making tea, he makes theatre, teaches, writes stories and plays with his six-year-old daughter. Thankfully there are no wolves in Lithuania.

Last year he wrote and performed his first solo theatre performance inspired by the Cornish artist Peter Lanyon and was recently long listed for the Sunderland Short Story Competition.

About the image

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