

Sidewalk Opera

by Bea Pantoja

"No, this is it, this is for real," he says to his two friends, a man and a woman.

The sun beats down on their shoulders and stretches their shadows into spindles. The shadows prod at her heels, nudge her into a pace faster than she planned. She can feel the shadows tickling her ankles, it's not just the sunlight, she swears.

"You know how I know it was for real? I don't think about my ex no more. It's over. This is love. Three months and I'm in love with her."

His friends murmur in reply, and she realizes how far behind the group is walking. She can't hear his friends, only the man. He rounds his vowels, makes his consonants crisp, and she can almost see how his lips stretch and pucker, like he is trying to be heard in a crowded room.

The man's voice cuts through the heat like a blast of wind, buoyed by an understanding of — and need for — an audience bound by something more than obligation. Others are oblivious. They are convinced of their purpose and it does not include this man. His words are meant for her only.

"But you know what the best part about her is? She cleans. Every night I come home and she's cleaned for me, she's got dinner ready too, it's all set up and it's for me...for *me*..."

Such wonder.

She drifts to the side and lets the group pass. Fraying backpacks. Necks glistening with sweat. They smell like a New York summer, like burnt skin and subway metal, and soon enough his voice fades away just like in the tunnels. She is left feeling like she has missed a stop, that she's at the last stop, that she's somewhere she wasn't meant to be.

She doesn't know if this girl is beautiful, if she is too young or too old, if she throws temper tantrums or works for NASA. If she went to a good school, or if she practices good hygiene, or if she's kind to

those in need. If she reads before bedtime, if she wanted more for herself, if she shows her teeth when she smiles.

Maybe this girl saved him from something terrible, or maybe she's the kind who collects minor annoyances until they themselves manifest into something terrible. It doesn't really matter. She cleans. She makes dinner. That is enough.

The maestro loves his audience, and they in turn worship. What a symphony they play, when they are content to fill the roles that are asked, and so perfectly too! To find that recognition in another of your worth, marked by a sweep of a palm across the spotless counter, hot food on the plate. In the voices, the haze of the street, the adoration that carries through and trails behind. The city hums with the sound of their lovely devotion.

