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# LITERATURE





# The Distance of Breath

*Ungelbah Belle Daniel-Davila*

Her toes caress the sole of her boot,  
keeping time to a sweet bottom note,  
like the lingering sound of guitars  
played at kitchen tables after work  
by hands callused  
from holding wrenches, hammers,  
pulling barbed wire between fence posts.  
Hands that snag the silk of a woman's skin,  
measure the space between bodies  
by the width of a thumb,  
the distance breath travels before it cools.  
She sips another man's beer,  
leans back and stretches her leg  
out across the bar, feels 60 miles into the night,  
a length of smoky quartz,  
a snake stretched taught,  
the color of sagebrush moon shadows,  
down La Bajada Hill  
to the bed where her lover sleeps  
and dreams of something brushing his chest.

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UNGELBAH BELLE DANIEL-DAVILA holds a BFA in creative writing from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her lineage can be traced back to the outlaws of the American West, the Spanish land grant people, and the Ashiichi Clan of the Diné. She is an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation. She is the creator and editor of the online publication *La Loca Magazine* and is currently employed at the *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, where she works as a reporter. She lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

# Country Music Gave Her the Courage to Break Your Heart

At the dance she was the peroxide blond in the Cody James hat,  
a confederate flag on her buckle, a diamondback cowgirl  
coiled in a man's breast pocket,  
a Camel menthol hanging out her mouth,  
she danced like she was stomping out a wildfire,  
proud, the way lilies are proud,  
white calla of the neon light,  
Valencia County's savior of wild salmon.  
She kept reaching her foot ahead, even though you were leading.  
That was before you fell in the parking lot  
and used her body like a crutch.  
She carried you to a field, a Ruger 270 over her shoulder,  
and shot beer cans in the headlights.  
*I used to skip the sad songs, she told you,  
but I don't mind them anymore.*  
In the morning the sun woke you up, hung over in the bed of your truck.  
Driving home past Isleta, you finally noticed  
the Buck Owens song scribbled in the dashboard dust.

# 1,000 Miles

*for Daddy and Dwight Yoakam*

You hummed me to sleep with  
every great cowboy ballad ever written,  
those crushing midnight trains,  
those dark horses, galloping through  
every cloud of dust I've ever made  
turning my pickup around, down  
every lonesome goddamn dirt road  
I've ever traveled at dusk.  
Through every shot of whiskey  
in every bar in every goddamn town  
where I ever got thrown out  
and had to walk home barefoot  
and sleep it off alone.  
Through every man and every hat  
in every motel lobby along I-40  
I ever went up the stairs with  
because he looked like you.  
Through every cool pearl button  
on every white shirt my eye make-up  
ever bled against during every sad song  
at every rodeo dance  
I've ever gone to since I was twelve.  
Through every moment that I could bend  
one more finger on my right hand  
for every time you've ever said *I love you*.  
Through every bad spill  
I ever got up and walked away from  
and through every cast of every bone  
I ever broke that wasn't too close to my heart.

# Birthday

Suddenly you were *the older man*, the one who no longer posts current pictures of yourself online, who now markets yourself with pictures from twenty years before when you were the age of this girl who is giving you the time of day, the one you hope will never see these pictures of you when your muscles were a little firmer, your hair evenly dark. This girl who took you home because it was your birthday and you were newly forty and maybe she felt sorry for you, or maybe she was curious and wanted to examine you like a member of an alien race, or maybe her father didn't love her enough and she had some kind of new age Lolita fetish, or maybe she was heartbroken and taking refuge from the man she is still in love with who is older but not as old as you, or maybe it was just that she was bored and drunk, getting drunker, now talking flirtatiously about how she has always wanted a bunny to call her very own but you don't realize that she tells that to all the boys so some days later you surprised her with a live baby rabbit she forever struggles to take care of until she finally pawns the poor thing off on an understanding neighbor. Later you will accuse her of thanking you for the bunny with "gratuitous bunny sex." You will read your notebook to her, wondering "who she's on her knees for tonight." On the night that she comes over to break up with you, or whatever you want to call it, after disappearing with the other, older-but-not-as-old-as-you man she is really in love with who you can see does not and never will give a shit about her, not like you, you who have helplessly fallen for her like a school boy, like a fool, not like a man of forty who has been around the block, who when she asked, boasted hundreds of notches on his bedpost. In the three days she has been gone you have filled entire miniature moleskin notebooks with melodramatic words about her, which you proceed to read to her when she comes by to call it off and you are so caught up in your teenage heartache that you don't even stop to marvel that she actually stays to listen to what has now become a full manuscript about a brokenhearted man in love with a younger woman. *Jesus man*, you should be saying to yourself, *get a grip*, but instead you read on and she hears you out to the end, rolling around on your bed, sometimes playing with her tiny, perfect little toes, sometimes listening to you solemnly, flat on her belly, with her chin on her fists, feet flicking in the air like a child listening to stories meant to frighten her into good behavior, trying not to let on she's old enough to know there are no monsters in the closet. She's rolling around on your bed and you're too busy moping in the corner, reading aloud, to get a hard-on. Maybe she listens because she feels

sorry for you, or maybe it's that she's intrigued that she has managed to turn a grown man into a whiney, pissy schoolboy. Or maybe she's taking it all in, plotting it out in her head, doing research for a poem she'll write later—and at some point you stop reading and think, *that bitch, exploiting you, exploiting your vulnerability, taking your money, moaning like a porn star, eating the dinners you paid for, and that rabbit, that poor neglected animal, probably locked in a sock drawer somewhere*, and you realize this is the sort of bitch that makes men kill bitches, and you think about strangling her, right there on the bed where you've stuck it to her so many times and always ignored the fact that she kept her eyes closed or did it doggy-style so she could face the other way, but you don't strangle her because your roommate's home and you're stoned and slow and about to start bawling and the best you can do is promise yourself you will never date another girl with tattoos as you watch her walk out the door, where she gets into her car and drives down the street a couple blocks to the other guy's house, the guy who is older, but not as old as you.