

## EYES LOOKING

*Naomi Ayala*

They flit about  
unconsciously, she says.  
Over the empty  
shadowlands.  
Breathe.

I lie over my blanket  
for our pelvic  
bowl pose,  
remember the blue  
shawl I wrapped  
myself in one winter  
when my eyes  
craved everything  
dark beneath.

I remember  
the *abuelitos*  
of my life,  
how I could lose  
myself inside  
their eyes,  
where I learned to look  
differently.

I remember the eyes  
of all the brown  
people I bury mine in  
on the bus to work,  
in the streets  
of my tiny *barrio*  
turned development

host—the picking  
hands lifting pails,  
the stockrooms  
and factories,  
the fortune-talking  
lottery lunch  
over our barter  
of survival.

I pray for these eyes  
that give my own  
their way of looking,  
that give my soul a window  
for the air to come in.

*Response by Amanda Burnham*

## BRUISE

*Stuart Dybek*

She came over wearing a man's white shirt, rolled up at the sleeves, and a faded denim jumper that made her eyes appear more blue.

"Look," she said, sitting down on the couch and slowly raising the jumper up her legs, revealing a bruise high on the outside of her thigh.

It was summer. Bearded painters in spattered coveralls were painting the outside of the house white. Through the open windows they could hear the painters scraping the old, flaking paint from the siding on one side of the house, and the slap of paint-soaked brushes from the other.

"These old boards really suck up the paint," one of the painters would remark from time to time.

"I've always bruised so easily," she said, lowering her voice as if the painters might hear.

The bruise looked indigo behind the tan mesh of nylon. It was off the hip and above it he could see the black, lacy band of her panties. The day was hot, climbing towards ninety, and as he studied the spot that she held her dress up for him to see, it occurred to him that even now, at this moment, there was a choice. Things between them might not be irrevocable. It still might be possible to say something that wasn't charged with secret meanings. The direction their lives were uncontrollably taking might be changed, not by reason or by revelation, but in the course of an ordinary conversation, by a wisecrack, some self-deprecating joke, or perhaps by a simple question. He might ask why she'd worn panty hose on a summer day. Was it that her legs weren't tanned yet? He might rise from the couch and inquire if she would like a lemonade, and when she said yes, he'd go to the kitchen and begin to make it, and she'd say, I only said yes because I thought you already had some made, don't bother, water's fine, I'm not even that thirsty, I thought lemonade came out of a can what are you doing with those lemons? The entire house would begin to smell of lemon as he carefully squeezed them and spooned the seeds from the pulp—a real, old-fashioned lemonade, the juice stirred with sugar and water, the granulated sugar whispering against the ice, and the ice cubes in the sweating glass pitcher clunking like a temple bell.

They could sit, sipping from glasses cool enough to record their fingerprints, chatting about something as uncomplicated as weather, gabbing in

the easy way of painters, not because they lacked for more interesting things to talk about, but because it was July and she seemed not to have dressed for the heat.

Instead, when she crossed her legs in a way that hiked her dress higher and moved her body towards him, he touched the bruise with his fingertip, and pressed it more softly than one presses an elevator button.

"Oh," her lips formed, though she didn't quite say it. She exhaled, closing her blue eyes, then opening them wider, almost in surprise, and stared at him. They were sitting very close together, their faces almost touching.

When he took his finger away she stretched the nylon over the bruise so he could more clearly see its different gradations of blue. A pale, green sheen surrounded it like an aura; purple capillaries ran off in all directions like tiny cracks, like a network of rivers on a map; there was violet at its center like a stain.

"It's ugly isn't it," she asked in a whisper.

He didn't answer, but pressed it again, slowly, deeply, and her head tilted back against a cushion. This time the *oh* of her lips was audible. She closed her eyes and moaned, uncrossing her legs and running her fingernails up the insides of her thighs. They were sitting so close together that the sound of her nails scraping along nylon seemed to him almost a clatter the painters would hear. Her legs spread and he fit his hand against her lap and felt through the nylon, heat, actual heat, like summer through a screen door, reflecting off his palm.

He pressed the bruise again and again. Each time she reshaped her lips into a vowel that sounded increasingly surprised.

Outside, the house turned progressively whiter. The summer sun dissolved into golden, vaporish rays in the trees. The bruise—he never asked how she got it—spread across the sky.

*Response by TM Sisters*

## THE UGLIEST GIRLS IN THE CITY

*Reese Okyong Kwon*

Annabel hadn't even wanted to go to a strip show in the first place. But Henry, her fiancé of a month, said it was burlesque and therefore different: historic, he said, not just any seedy old show. "I've never seen a burlesque act, either," he said. "You'll like it." Not because she necessarily believed him, but because it made her happy, seeing him happy, she agreed to go.

They went to the bar—"in the basement," the bartender said, with a jerk of a shoulder, when Henry asked about the show—then down the stairs, filthy linoleum clinging to the soles of her shoes. As if the floor were trying to grab her, she thought, and she wished they hadn't come. But they were able to find seats, at least: two stools at the bar. The club filled up and strangers' elbows poked their backs. Finally, torn red curtains opened.

The man at the microphone looked as if he'd stepped out of a different century, stiff in a top hat and solferino velvet suit. A triangle of black hair tufted from his chin. "Is that the pimp?" she whispered to Henry.

She was being funny, she thought, but he frowned. "Relax a little," he said.

A tantara blared. The hatted man opened his mouth. "You're so wicked, baby, and you're depraved," he crooned. "It's apparent that you've misbehaved." When he finished, he took off his hat with a flourish, and the audience applauded.

Then a woman ran on stage. She was tall and stately, unusually tall, with long black hair. Wearing a high-necked white blouse, a floor-length black skirt, and glasses, she carried a stack of books. The man kept singing. Her name was Betty Be Good, he explained. She was a librarian, stuck deep in the heartland. At the mention of her name, she looked startled and dropped her books. Her hand went over her mouth in feigned surprise. Leaning over to pick up one of the books, she wiggled her bottom at the audience. Annabel laughed, surprising herself.

Betty Be Good balanced the book on her head then peeled off her gloves, finger by finger, one after the other, then unbuttoned her blouse then flung it off, removing her glasses, stepping out of her skirt, unhooking her corset. She blew kisses at the audience as the man tutted and sang about the tedium of a librarian's life and the dirty, dirty thoughts in her head. Finally, she was down to panties and a pair of tassels that covered her nipples. Her hands went on her hips. One tassel then the other revved up, twirling happily like twin propellers, the book still

steady on her head. The crowd whooped as she walked off the stage, tittuping her hips.

Still laughing, Annabel turned to Henry. “Wait, they don’t get naked?” she asked.

“Here’s hoping,” he said.

Then came another woman, a large woman, dizened in a gold lamé gown and carrying a tray with two bottles, a martini shaker, and a martini glass. The tight gown accentuated her big curves and dimpled arms. The singing man said her name was Miss Sapphire and that she’d recently run away from a rich man’s harem. Miss Sapphire pulled a moué of self-pity and the crowd cheered for her. Shaking her hips, she set her tray on the ground then inched out of her dress to reveal another corset, gold again. Her breasts were enormous. Monolithic. She pressed the martini shaker into her cleavage, and poured gin and a few drops of vermouth into the silver canister. Then, holding the martini shaker in one hand, she undid her corset and revealed frilly gold underwear and yellow tassels. Her stomach bulged over her underwear. “Yeah, Miss Sapphire!” someone yelled.

The martini shaker slid back into her cleavage. Squeezing her breasts together, she simultaneously twirled her tassels and shook the martini. She leaned over, and, the shaker still between her breasts, poured the drink into the glass. After pulling three olives from her panties, she topped off the drink then offered it to a woman in the first row, who laughed and took a sip.

The show ran for another hour, featuring performers like Hula de Ville, who slung hula-hoops around her body as she stripped, and Miss Kitty Cat, who made her breasts pop out of her bodice as the man sang “Pop, pop, pop goes my heart.” The women were tall and short, thin and large, blond and redheaded and robustious and brunette. When the show ended, Annabel whooped and clapped until it hurt.

As they walked out of the bar, Annabel clung to Henry’s arm as she walked, giddy from her gin and tonics, sure, but mostly from the show. “Hey,” she said. “You were right. I had a fucking blast. Fucking loved it.”

She leaned up and kissed his lips—or, she meant to kiss his lips, but missed and hit the lobe of his ear, instead. Well, that was all right. She liked his ear, too.

“Did you?” he said.

Drunk as she was, she could tell there was something wrong. “What is it?” she said. “Did you have fun?”

He shrugged. “It was all right.”

“How could you not have had fun?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I was bored.”

“*Bored?*”

“It was the women,” he said. “You know? It was like someone walked around the streets of New York and handpicked the ugliest girls he could find for the show. Some of those women were *old*, too.”

She was twenty-six; he was thirty-three: both still young, as opposed to young, period. They went underground and the subway train snaked them past the parts of the city where they’d lived separately before they met, taking them to the one-bedroom uptown apartment they’d been sharing for six months, long enough that all their things were mixed up, and they would keep living together, and loving each other, for as long as they lived, thought Annabel, sobering up but fighting it—wouldn’t they?

*Response by Maggie Michael*

## FROM READINGS IN WORLD LITERATURE

*Srikanth Reddy*

1. In my research for this talk, I came across an inscription on an historical prism of Assurbanipal which may offer some preliminary illumination. Of an enemy whose remains he had abused in a manner that does not bear repeating here, this most violent and scholarly of Mesopotamian kings pronounces

I made him more dead than he was before.

(Prism A *Beiträge zum Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals* ed. Borger  
[Harrassowitz 1996] 241)

Prisms of this sort were often buried in the foundations of government buildings and therefore intended to be read by gods but not men. Somewhere in the maze of carrels and stacks I thought I could hear a low dial tone humming without end. In Assurbanipal's library at Nineveh there was a poem, written on clay, which corrects certain common errors regarding the world of the dead. Contrary to the accounts of Mu Lian, Odysseus, Kwasi Benefo, et al., for example, it is not customarily permitted to visit the underworld. The underworld visits you.



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2. Tunneling through sleep, the underworld visits a secondary character, sometimes described as the protagonist's double. Closing the door to the dream behind him, he notices that the inside bolt is thick with dust. He passes a heap of discarded crowns. The inmates, their mouths stained with clay, are suited in feathers. Soon the dreamer arrives at a registration desk:

[There was] the queen of the underworld,  
the goddess Ereškigal.

Before her crouched [Bēlet]-šēri, the clerk  
of the underworld,  
holding [a tablet], reading aloud in her  
presence.

[She raised] her head. She saw me.  
“[Who was] it fetched this man here?  
[Who was it] brought [*this fellow*] here?”

Cuneiform tablets describing the Mesopotamian House of Dust frequently refer to a clerk who must continuously enter the names of those scheduled to die each day. Little is known of this indefatigable figure. First, she has only one inexhaustible theme. Second, she writes for an ideal reader, the lady of the dead, who perpetually tears at her hair with fingers "like pickaxes." Third, she writes in a timeless form which allows for considerable prosodic variation en route to a fixed rhetorical conclusion.

Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (small arms fire, Fallujah).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (small arms fire, Fallujah).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (IED, Muqdadiyah).  
Sgt. \_\_\_\_\_ (vehicle rollover, Tuz Khurmato).  
Spc. \_\_\_\_\_ (small arms fire, Jalawla).  
Gunnery Sgt. \_\_\_\_\_ (IED, Khalis).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (under investigation, Kuwait City).  
Maj. \_\_\_\_\_ (IED, Balad).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (IED, Balad).  
Spc. \_\_\_\_\_ (IED, Balad).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (RPG, Iskandariyah).  
Staff Sgt. \_\_\_\_\_ (pulmonary embolism, Baghdad).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (small arms fire, Wasit).  
Cpl. \_\_\_\_\_ (grenade, Baquba).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (helicopter crash, Qayyarah).  
Staff Sgt. \_\_\_\_\_ (helicopter crash, Qayyarah).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (helicopter crash, Qayyarah).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (helicopter crash, Qayyarah).  
Spc. \_\_\_\_\_ (helicopter crash, Qayyarah).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (IED, Iskandaria).  
Tech Sgt. \_\_\_\_\_ (non-hostile - drowning, Al Asad).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (small arms fire, Tikrit).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (small arms fire, Tikrit).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (small arms fire, Tikrit).  
Cpl. \_\_\_\_\_ (brain aneurysm, Basra).  
Sgt. \_\_\_\_\_ (IED, Tuz Khurmato).  
Spc. \_\_\_\_\_ (IED, Tuz Khurmato).  
Staff Sgt. \_\_\_\_\_ (RPG, Khalis).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (non-hostile - small arms fire, Kirkuk).  
Pvt. \_\_\_\_\_ (grenade, Baquba).  
Amn. \_\_\_\_\_ (non-hostile - controlled detonation, Joint Base  
Balad).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (small arms fire, Al Farr).  
Pfc. \_\_\_\_\_ (IED, Tallil).  
Tech Sgt. \_\_\_\_\_ (small arms fire, Balad).

1.2 By now it is beginning to seem that this material wants to be about the ongoing occupation of Iraq by American armed forces. But I would have preferred to write something along the lines of, say, a poetic essay on comparative underworlds. For the past few years I have taught an introductory course titled "Readings in World Literature" which has generally proven to be a disappointment both to myself and to the undergraduate students, some in headscarves, some occasionally dressed in fatigues, who have registered for this seminar in order to satisfy their Humanities requirement. So I thought that by writing about teaching I might learn something about the subject. And because I know almost nothing about the world, I decided to work my way up from the underworld. But this would prove to be somewhat difficult.

2 Writing makes a writer more dead than before. In a letter to a fiancée he never married, Kafka once touched upon this state of affairs:

What I need for my writing is seclusion, not 'like a hermit,' that would not be enough, but like the dead. Writing, in this sense, is a sleep deeper than that of death, and just as one would not and cannot tear the dead from their graves, so I must not and cannot be torn away from my desk at night.

(*Letters to Felice* eds. Heller and Born [Schocken 1973] 279)

I frequently caution my students against quoting other writers in their poems. You don't want the most memorable lines in your work to belong to somebody else, I say. But really I think it has more to do with some limbic taboo about inviting the dead to cross one's threshold. Our standard editorial versions of several Mesopotamian poems, including *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, were originally redacted by an ancient class of priestly exorcists. From page 156 of the *Letters to Felice*:

One can never be alone enough when one writes.  
There can never be enough silence surrounding one who writes.  
Even night is not night enough.

*Response by Jon Bobby Benjamin*