



**Ghazal for the Nightmare of History, For Admiral Peary: Arctic Explorer, Meteor Shower, November 18, 2001, not in Afghanistan**

Benjamin Balthaser

Benjamin Balthaser's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in journals such *Massachusetts Review*, *Boston Review*, *Minnesota Review*, *Laurel Review*, the anthology *What Saves Us*, and elsewhere. His 2012 collection of poems from Partisan Press, *Dedication*, details the lives of blacklisted Jewish activists during the McCarthy era, and his 2016 book from University of Michigan Press, *Anti-Imperialist Modernism*, explores connections between cross-border, anti-imperialist movements and the making of modernist culture at mid-century. He is currently associate professor of multi-ethnic literature at Indiana University South Bend and lives in Chicago.

**Ghazal for the Nightmare of History**  
*for P.L.*

You come downstairs to share  
your burden: our bodies

wedged uncomfortably in chairs: these  
pages in Russian: ghosts embodied

without addresses or eyes. The  
hours are against you, your body

and its weight of flesh & voice: we  
read: women herded into vans, body

parts broken open, a rib-cage  
shattered by metal bars: bodies

upon bodies charred into fibula, spine,  
and voice-box: into a mash of bodies

no longer human: into shapes  
neither dark nor light: there are no anti-bodies

for the name that streaks like blue flame in these  
KGB files: your grandfather, on whose body

fitted the black and red Nazi uniform: can guilt  
descend through generations? The bodies

of Eucalyptus press at the cement  
and do not enter. They lift, bodiless,

without arms or ears, just blue seeds  
that drift on wind, without the body

of memory that haunts you: you want

to evoke our friendship: my body

to provide an alibi: the crimes are listed:  
they do not belong to you: just somebody

who bears your name, your pale, sandy hair, your  
blue eyes that reflect, so perfectly: my body.

## For Admiral Peary: Arctic Explorer

It's hard not to believe in you. The dry  
snow of confetti covers New York

as you parade Madison Avenue, Times  
Square, having reinvented the country

with a pair of faulty coordinates: our shores  
of melting snow can now be forgotten -

polite girls or maps made of paper.  
In return, we made you a kind of saint:

living alone on your island, facing  
the hard coast of Maine in an office

crested with battlements and cut stone,  
a compass in the tile tracking due north,

your thick Siberian mustache along with  
leather bound books never opened or read.

I'd like to say we love your imagination:

on an island bristled with summer blueberries,  
you dreamed of a shifting point in the snow.

That to make yourself someone you stopped  
building canals and went to the heart of

the wasteland. Your one friend Henderson  
died of bad crabmeat on the way back from Alaska

and when you returned, black ghosts and doubles  
followed you everywhere, collecting confetti in

their pockets, as you learned taxidermy on pigeons sick  
with the city's poison. But we spared ourselves

the last act. As the Dutchman stood at the world's  
center two years before you, you planted a flag

on the ice-cap and marched home, you will  
to walk on sheer pain, feet frozen to numb stumps

mattered more in the long run. In Manhattan today,  
each gutter glistens like a horizon, every

window seems a frontier that you could build  
a life striving towards. What you asked for was not much:

perfection, a pair of numbers on paper, a sheet of salt-ice  
a hand could harden into shape, a name etched

on a surface harder than a tombstone. I'd like to say  
you died found out, stripped of your admiralty

or at least forgotten, but America loves your fraud.  
Postage stamps fly to other countries with your lean

New Englander's face, and young men die,  
their bodies the color of uniforms.

## **Meteor Shower, November 18, 2001, not in Afghanistan**

Like a shadow falling into a second  
and deeper shadow, light falling into

darkness, we try and imagine space,  
wear fugitive blankets around our shoulders,

sit silent as refugees. There is frost in dry sand.  
A spasm of branches in late November wind,

a dark green wood that glistens like a wound.

The meteors make no sound; they glide  
like rockets, their trails bend like the backs

of dancers, unreal, untouchable, and we  
can't say why they don't reach the earth,  
why they glisten and die out so comfortably

above us, or why here, in along the banks  
of the Connecticut River, it's hard to believe  
this stark invasion of ash, ice, and wind.