



BEYOND LOVE

By James Winter



“Beyond Love” won first-place in the CRAFT Short Fiction Prize in 2018,
judged by Jim Shepard.

An Author’s Note by James Winter follows the story.

Introduction

If one of the primary goals of literature is to extend the reach of our empathetic imagination, then “Beyond Love”’s achievement is good news for us all: the story takes us inside a terrorist cell and helps us to understand someone who has seen the devastation his actions have wrought, who feels keenly for those he’s helped make suffer and who will continue to suffer, loved ones and strangers alike, and who *still* believes that on balance what he did was right. The story is assured in its rendering of its world, and hearteningly even-handed in its depiction of the Jordanian police, the protagonist’s baffled and distraught family, and above all, the alien intensities of his logic—“Now, they’d be remembered as having lived for something greater than punching a clock, than even marriage, children, settling into middle age. Their sacrifice was hope, a daring to believe”—as well as the way such fanaticism can be underpinned by the quiet inability to negotiate the quotidian: “Now, standing there in the TV light, he was befuddled by the remote. His mother snatched it away and held its fat, red button up to his eyes. ‘Too much in here,’ she said, and poked his forehead.” The story is also masterful on how much we might underestimate the power of our own covert resentment: “He didn’t want children. It felt like another decision taken from him, another concession. He could never tell Rowaida. When he saw the ultrasound, when their OB told them he was going to be a father, while Rowaida and his mother celebrated, he wore a grin and hid his dread.”

by Jim Shepard

A week ago, in downtown Amman, Jordan, suicide bombers entered the public park near the American embassy. The blasts shattered windows along the ground floors of the looming, gated government buildings on Umawyeen Street, which dead-ended at Qaherah to the north, two busy lanes of housing for diplomats and foreign officials, all concrete and glass, palm trees, balconies, swimming pools. To the south at the roundabout, more embassies. Australia. Malaysia. Hungary.

Saeed, Mohammed, and Abed had lunch together that day to the east at the Good Pub. The loud American oldies made it easier to concentrate on the food, easier not to think. They turned down the Thursday drink special, draft beer in chilled mugs, two dinars. Instead, they ordered vanilla milkshakes and another basket of fries, saying nothing, nothing needing said.

The next day, newspapers ran photos of those who'd been in the park, chatting on benches, eating their lunches in the shade, sweating in the heat. Twelve dead. Forty-four wounded. Half of them American. Husbands. Wives. Coworkers. Two security guards. A taxi driver on break. An aspiring actor who sold stuffed pitas and juice from a cart under the eucalyptus trees near the embassy motor pool, his day job to make ends meet. "You might've seen him in that Royal Airlines commercial," the detectives said to Saeed. "The young guy with the beard, sipping champagne."

The detectives had approached Saeed that evening, five days after the bombing, as he crossed the upper deck of the parking garage behind the call center where he worked. They opened their wallets to show him their identification, put him in the back of their unmarked cruiser and drove him ten minutes west to the downtown police station where they sat him in a chair and handcuffed him to a table in one of the stuffy interrogation rooms, concrete and tile, a two-way mirror staring back at him on the opposite wall.

During the ride to the station, Saeed had shouted at them through the prisoner partition, the steel grating that separated him from the detectives. He said they couldn't just arrest him. He demanded a lawyer. He wanted names, badge numbers. He was going to have their fucking jobs.

Now, however, his voice hoarse from shouting, he sat in silence, sweating, the ticking clock over the two-way mirror ringing in his ears. He looked like a guilty man but couldn't help it. It was the smells of his sweat and the footsteps and voices in the hallway. It was the clock, counting down to something, anything. It was the two detectives laying photos, one atop the other, of all those who'd been killed and maimed in the bombing.

Three children, teenagers skipping class. Smoking. Laughing. Hanging out.

The cops showed him the school headshots, adolescents bearing their parents' indignities with tight smiles, giving the camera fuck-you eyes, as Saeed had done when he was their age.

The detectives said his wife was pregnant.

"Think of that," they said.

Embassy security cameras caught it all on film, his friends entering the park, putting on the vests, crying as they touched the wires and blew themselves to paradise. And with the video Al-Qaeda posted online, Mohammed and Abed giving their names, railing about America and Zionist injustice and sharia law, now the police had started piecing together their lives, their histories.

They said Abed picked Saeed up for lunch that day. The car was ticketed the next morning outside the Good Pub and again the following afternoon, and the license plate put through the system. A security camera filmed the three of them outside. Financial transaction records showed who'd eaten at the pub. The police pulled up driver's license photos. A waiter had identified Saeed.

"Didn't even buy your friends their last meal," said one detective.

"Milkshakes," said the other, and slapped Saeed, a backhand that rocked him in his chair.

Licking blood from his lip, Saeed said, "I want my lawyer."

They allowed him the phone call. Even if a lawyer got him out of this, Saif, the leader of their cell, wouldn't let him live. All Saeed could do now was endure, outlast, protect his family.

Needing to hear their voices, he called home. He pictured them in the kitchen, his mother clutching the phone, leaning both elbows on her walker, his wife huddled against her, pressing her ear as much as she could to the receiver. "I love you so much," he told them, trying to sound tired, a little annoyed, but reassuring. Lies came easy. "They just have me confused with someone else."

That night, the police led him downstairs to the holding tank, two pairs of cells across from one another down a short hall, all empty save for a burly man in a shiny silver track suit and muddy sneakers, glaring at the world. Saeed guessed this man was quick on his feet, judging by the coiled way he leaned forward, gripping his cot, his massive legs tucked under it and jittering flecks of mud off his worn sneakers as his pants rustled like plastic bags at a grocery checkout.

As Saeed passed, a cop at either elbow, the man licked his lips. Saeed couldn't be sure if the gesture was directed at him or if the man had happened to wet his lips at that moment, but he was glad they gave him his own cell. He asked about the man, whispering to the young cop who leaned in to unlock his handcuffs. "A killer," the cop replied, "like you."

Saeed knew that. He accepted it.

After he and his friends had finished lunch on the day of the bombing, outside on the street, teary-eyed, feeling the warmth of their bodies, he didn't want to let them go. Before they left him on the sidewalk, Abed teased him. Sniffing, a tremor in his voice, he gave Saeed his handkerchief so that he could wipe his eyes. "Sensitive," he said, patting Saeed's cheek with a smile. "An artist."

As his friends rounded the far corner on foot, each carrying a large duffel on his shoulder, Saeed watched them go, leaning against Abed's Camry. It was the same beater they took uptown to the university years ago. After classes, they'd practice penalty kicks behind the recreation center through goals they rented for a few dinars. Mohammed, a high school star, had such intensity, such power. Abed was swift, seeming not to dart through the grass, but over it, like a cat. Saeed, the least athletic of them, did his best to keep up, his shirt soaked with sweat and calves burning.

When he was a boy, he'd fancied himself an artist, a rebel. He sketched and painted. He never took part in the pickup soccer games around the neighborhood. But after his father died when Saeed was a teen and things began to get serious with Rowaida, the girl he'd one day take for his wife, his mother said if he wanted to become a family man, he needed a steady income. In college, programming came to him naturally. It was like art, exploring questions, finding answers.

That the three of them had chosen computer programming sealed their friendship in those years. Unlike art or athletics, the dreams of boyhood, it was a reasonable living. Their parents approved. At the call center, Saeed helped people fix their modems, routers, connections.

"Useful," his mother said.

Now, they'd be remembered as having lived for something greater than punching a clock, than even marriage, children, settling into middle age. Their sacrifice was hope, a daring to believe.

On the street, he'd jumped at the roar and covered his ears as the earth trembled and the vibration rattled windows and street signs. He felt it up his back, in his skull, his brain, his insides. Smoke rose over the buildings to the west.

Clutching his friend's handkerchief, Saeed prayed for their souls.

Later, he watched the evening news with his wife and his mother, sighing and shaking his head as if he'd had nothing to do with the caution tape and roadblocks, with the crater downtown.

When they decided to turn in for the night, he couldn't remember how to switch off the television. He'd been staring at the tube dead-eyed, mourning Mohammed and Abed, and worrying over the coded messages that Saif was bound to send to him online about their cell's next move.

Standing there in the TV light, he was befuddled by the remote.

His mother snatched it away and held its fat, red button up to his eyes.

"Too much in here," she said, and poked his forehead.

In the basement of the police station, as the fluorescents buzzed overhead, Saeed removed his shoes and set them side-by-side on the floor. In his shirt and tie, he laid on the bench at the back of his cell, covered his head with his blazer, and turned toward the wall, a hand over his mouth, the other curled in a fist under his nose.

Since his wife stayed home to tend to his mother, who'd lived with them for going on two years after she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, his IT job was all they had. They'd been saving up for injections that might help her symptoms. Her "foot drop," at its worst in the summer heat, made her legs feel like cement. She either shambled around with a walker or was stuck in a wheelchair. Last year, she'd put atop her birthday list: *New legs*.

Now, his family, his unborn son, would have to fend for themselves.

He'd known that all along, just as he knew what it meant to give oneself completely to the cause, to hold convictions that went beyond family, beyond love, that were ennobled by them and in spite of them. To commit to choosing death in the name of life. It was something he and his friends poured over, had talked through carefully, reasonably, like men. Buoyed and emboldened by its long history of atrocities, The West was doing everything in its power to subjugate and eradicate Islam. The War on Terror. The invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Guantanamo Bay, Abu Gharib, and the cells at Bagram air base. The militant support of Israel in the Palestinian conflict. Yet, Saeed had never believed in jihad. The world's evils were tangible, pitifully human.

No infidels, just the rich and powerless, the boot and the neck.

Death in the name of life.

They'd studied it, debated, decided. But Saeed hadn't known how any of it would *feel*.

"Innocence and experience," his mother would've called it, with a laugh.

In his fist was Abed's handkerchief. It smelled musty, sour, of a man living alone.

What grief had Saeed brought upon his family? How could he fix this?

But the police weren't after *them*. They weren't the ones locked in this cell.

He wept harder, ashamed of his selfishness, ashamed of his shame, terribly, terribly afraid.

In the next cell, as the fearsome man's track pants swished, swished, Saeed prayed for the strength and will to persevere. To keep his secrets hidden deeply where no one could find them.

His cell door swung open. Somehow, he'd fallen asleep. Two military-looking men in blue fatigues and black ball caps handcuffed him and led him down the hall—the man in the track suit was gone—and out the back of the station to an unmarked car. One of the men wore glasses with thick black frames. The other, about Saeed's age, had a pointed goatee and a thin black moustache.

"Wait," Saeed said, as they pulled him along in his socks, asking who the men were and where they were taking him. Ignoring him, they shoved him in the backseat. The older man sat in front, started the engine. All was still dark. The clock on the dash, green numbers: four fifty-nine.

Saeed asked again where they were going. The younger man turned in the passenger seat and slapped him, caught him above the eye. The thud of flesh-on-flesh cracked in the car. Saeed gave a mousy cry as the blow knocked him sideways and laid him out flat across the seat.

They sped north on the highway. He asked once more, meekly, where they were going. Neither man responded. They drove on, expressionless, as if Saeed weren't there.

By dawn, they reached the prison, a quadrant of five-story buildings surrounded by a high fence topped with spools of razor teeth. The men pulled Saeed from the car and marched him across the lot. Everyone in Jordan knew of Muwaqqar, the prison for gangsters, killers, and terrorists, but it was as if Saeed hadn't believed it truly existed until he saw it with his own eyes, and in its shadow, feet smarting on the gravel, he felt helpless, awestruck, like a child.

The man with the glasses swiped a card over an electric eye and the tall, steel doors ahead hissed open. Inside, past a fat guard at a desk drinking tea while reading that morning's *Jordanian Times*, they escorted Saeed two floors below and turned down a maze of hallways at a fast clip.

They stopped in front of a cell, one of many in the corridor, unlocked his handcuffs, pushed him inside, and slammed the door shut. On a knee, he put his ear to the flap in the door meant for passing him meals. He listened to the guards' footsteps receding in the hall. He didn't know why.

All day, Saeed sweated and paced. Though the hall outside was cool, the sun shone directly into his cell, one meter wide and two meters deep, concrete block and painted white, the tile floor a flat, smoky grey. The prison was built into a hillside. Over time, the building had settled, leaving the cells on that side of the ground floor canted toward the window, which was covered by steel mesh. Out it, blue morning fog hung over mountains in the distance. Between them and the prison was scorched earth, trees recently logged out en masse, row after row after row of mangled stumps.

After sundown, on his cot, steel springs under a lifeless mattress, as prisoners called out windows, blithering in anguish, he thought of Rowaida and his mother, of what they must've been going through, beside themselves with worry since the morning, calling the police. Or perhaps the police had told them everything, and like him, they were up all night, restless with disbelief.

To wash and relieve himself, Saeed used the compact corner unit in his cell, the sink with a pair of timed, button faucets built-in atop the toilet tank, all of it polished chrome like the table in the bright room down the hall upon which the interrogator drummed his long, smooth fingers.

The guards had dragged him to the interrogator on that second day after they gave him his prison jumpsuit and slip-ons, their soles worn smooth. They'd watched him devour his breakfast, rubber eggs and a greasy beef patty, and suck down a bottle of water. He hadn't eaten since before his arrest. As they collected the tray, he couldn't help thanking them. They hauled him to his feet.

The interrogator was waiting, leaning back in his chair, flipping through a stack of manila folders as the guards plopped Saeed in the chair across from him and took their places on either side of the door. A fattish military man in green fatigues, the interrogator licked his lips, his tongue a bright, candy-shade of pink, and he opened one of his folders and set on the table a college photo of Saeed, Mohammed, and Abed.

In it, sprawled together on a sofa, they looked younger, happier. Abed, who had a slender, girlish face, wore a pair of round, wire-rimmed glasses. As always, Mohammed was wrinkled, yellowy. At twenty, he smoked a pack a day, yet never grew winded when they'd played soccer on the university grounds. Saeed was chubby even then, his jaw darkened here and there by his pathetic attempt to grow a Sunnah beard.

It shocked Saeed to see the photo, and he pulled it toward him, touched their faces, rubbed the smooth paper between his fingers, remembering how simple things had been in those days.

The interrogator snatched the photo away. "At the call center," he said, "your cubicle is tidy, on your desk photos, one of Rowaida and one of your mother, whose picture is larger because she wouldn't have it any other way. Your coworkers don't know you well. You're fine with that. At least, that's what you told Mohammed and Abed through email from 1998 to 2001, before they moved back into the city. You talked politics, too. Israel. Great Satan. King Abdullah, the traitor."

The interrogator tapped the photo.

"We went to university together," Saeed said. "That's all."

"We have emails, phone calls. We have almost everything."

"Okay. We email, yes. Catch-up. It's nothing."

The interrogator drummed his fingers on the table.

"How about when they lived with you?"

Saeed smiled politely. "They stayed for a weekend. They were in town, visiting family. I offered them our spare room. My wife did not approve. After that, nothing. Like acquaintances."

The interrogator's hand lashed, knocking Saeed sideways out of his chair, which clattered to the floor. Able to catch himself in the fall, he tucked his knees to his chest and covered his head.

The cell had trained him in this much at least.

When more blows failed to come, Saeed raised himself shakily on all fours and wiped his nose. It wasn't broken, but the back of his hand came away smeared with blood.

The guards plopped him into his chair again. The interrogator had gathered up his photos and put them back in his stack of folders. Trying to get his trembling under control, Saeed lowered his gaze. His reflection wavy on the tabletop, the interrogator leaned forward and whispered as if they were co-conspirators. "The Americans want you badly," he said, "and the only thing keeping you in Jordan is what's in your head. Hold out on me, and I'll have to turn you over eventually."

He said, "In Muwaqqar, you might get to see your wife, your mother. Your son."

He said, "Do you know where the Americans will take you?"

That night, they fed him a hunk of bread and a lemony sort-of soup. As Saeed ate, looking out his cell window over the gutted landscape, he thought of the computer programs that allowed for easier logging, code that enabled the machines to cut everything so efficiently. In Amman, in the Sahab industrial district where, until his father died, he'd grown up as a boy, everything smelled of gasoline. Through his bedroom window, at his easel or desk, he would've heard the furniture factory's fine-tuned, computerized machines sawing logs neatly into lengths, the rip and buzz one sound among many in the din that dominated the streets about the river from dawn through dusk.

"Good," his mother said of his first still-life, a charcoal drawing of their cat, a black and white ragamuffin who'd been sleeping at the end of Saeed's bed. "But is that Hashem's tail or a fifth leg?"

He could spend hours sketching, painting, working late into the night. He became addicted to the process of fleshing out the images in his head, to the toil of starting again, trapped somehow, feeling that only in recreating the image to perfection could he find release, become whole again.

This had been his love, this and the inevitable discovery that nothing was perfect, that each drawing, every painting, had lives all their own. They were their own beasts, like little children.

It saddened him how easy it was to give up art for a life of counting days until the weekend, when he could sleep in, enjoy a quiet afternoon tea with Rowaida, and watch TV, eating junk food. While he still doodled cartoons of celebrities and coworkers, and his depiction of his boss, all

raging eyes and flabby jowls cut in two by a dictator's moustache, was a hit in the office, it could never compare to the sharp smell of fresh paints or shhh of brush strokes on new canvas.

If he'd followed his dreams, he'd most likely be home, painting. Or maybe he'd be wearing a handsome suit in a gallery someplace, Rowaida glowing on his arm, his years of hard work hung on the walls, good art with hefty price tags. But if he was a painter, what would he stand for?

Art couldn't fight jackboots and genocide, not like chemicals, wires, circuitry. Bombs.

Sopping up the remains of his soup with his bread, as he finished his meal, still hungry, the portions not enough, he felt the first of all that might break him. Not only the demands of his body or his draining, tireless fear, but Rowaida and his mother aggrieved and betrayed at home, and the certainty of all that was free and living, a world that'd continue to turn, all wounds healed in time.

A son who might never know his father.

II

Summertime. Long days. Clear skies.

Then, three weeks after he was brought to Muwaqqar, storms.

The prison fence is gashed open by flying debris, some piece of scrap. The next morning, guards in fatigues and combat boots are sent to repair it. Staring out his cell window, his lips cracked and one eye swollen shut, Saeed can't make out their faces. He doesn't need to, anyway.

What unfolds along the wire is timeless: a fat leader shouting as others do the work.

This afternoon, the interrogator presses Saeed about visiting Greece with Mohammed and Abed the summer they graduated from university. "Drinking soda and watching girls," Saeed says.

The interrogator drums his fingers on the table.

Saeed smirks, leaning in, showing him his bruised, discolored face. "Was this a crime?"

The interrogator opens one of his folders and, on the table, sets headshots and surveillance photos, mostly in black-and-white, of scruffy men young and old, some bald, some with shaggy hair, some in turbans, keffiyehs, sunglasses. They gather around maps or stand together in the sun, pointing into the distance. They fire rifles, belts of bullets strapped in big Xs across their chests.

Saeed shrugs as if to say, "Strangers."

The interrogator says, "You must be proud."

He says, "You're a murderer, a traitor."

He says, "Men like you spend eternity in Jahannam, writhing in the blaze."

He says, "I will break you."

Their boots find his spine, his tailbone, his neck and face.

They drum their batons over his body, grunting through clenched teeth.

They pin his arms behind him and rock him with body shots.

They clock him on the jaw and the world flickers like a spool of film.

Hot blood fills his ears, whooshing in and out like breaking waves, and the next morning, he pisses blood, choking on tears. Fighting the desire to turn his hatred of them into one that wishes to destroy everything, including himself, he prays for the strength of someone like his mother.

Two summers ago, he'd visited her before work while she was still a cook at one of the steakhouses in downtown Amman. She'd begun screwing up orders, forgetting ingredients. Once, she fainted at the stove. If one of the other cooks hadn't caught her, she might've cracked her head. From thereafter, she kept a chair nearby so that she could rest, but still often fell behind schedule. She wouldn't quit though, and on the spur of the moment Saeed decided to stop by her apartment to see how she was feeling. When she failed to answer his knocking, he let himself in with the key, like any child would.

The shower and fan were running. So, he waited, thinking he'd been hasty, that he should sit on the sofa for the time being, but something told him to check on her, and soon he was peeking at her one-eyed through the crack of the bathroom door. There, in her robe, about to step in the tub, her hair tangled about her head, she was staring in the mirror. It was the look she'd given her boss when he suggested she retire. The one she gave to Saeed when he said she should be sensible.

"Go ahead," she said to her reflection, offering her chin. "You can't touch me."

The words were meant for whatever was ailing her, what would have her slurring her words and dragging herself home on cement feet. Saeed left her a note on the dining table and dashed off to the office, amazed that this sixty-year old, this widower, his mother, still refused to be beaten.

To keep his mind limber, to keep from being lost in the pain, from being erased blow by blow, he takes to counting the tiles in his cell, numbering one-hundred and twenty-one in all.

First, he counts them lengthways. Next, across and diagonally. He makes a series of squares or counts in Xs, Ts, Zs. He counts the outer tiles, the inner. He says the even numbers aloud and whispers the odd, and vice versa. He counts silently, nodding, playing with the rhythm, the beat.

Hours of this.

Days.

Weeks.

When he loses interest in the floor, he turns to the walls. Eight blocks to a row on his cell's front and back walls stacked eleven high. On the wall with the door, eighty-three. On the opposite wall with the window, one-hundred and four.

Crawling, ignoring the collections of hair, tangled, lying dead, in the corners of his cell, he counts dimples in one block, his fingers caressing the coolness in the pockets of paint: one-hundred thirty. The dimples in another: one-hundred nineteen. In a third: eighty-two. A fourth: ninety-six.

They are the same fingertips he brushes down Rowaida's hips in dreams.

One day, knelt before the blocks, he sees he's tallying what only a prisoner would notice.

He gets to his feet.

He stops counting.

He draws a line on the wall.

There's nothing there, of course, but he can see it.

To help his mother pay for his college tuition, he'd painted interiors with a city crew on weekends. They painted high-rises, office buildings, small businesses. He'd dip his brush in the bucket and with a few flicks of his wrist would sketch a pair of eyes, a nose, a mouth, messy hair.

It always brought a smile.

Though he painted over the faces with his roller, in a way, he supposes, he's still home, here and there all over Amman, behind two or three coats where no one can touch him.

He lifts his finger again. A bird. A soccer ball. A curvy, nude woman with flowing hair.

He works into the night. Until he has a whole gallery. Until he must crawl onto his cot, close his eyes, and dream of the world he must let wither and die. Dreams. These no one can steal.

The next day, a particularly hot one in early August, it begins again.

They hold his head in a five-gallon bucket of water, releasing him when he loses his breath, filling the bucket with bubbles. Then they spray him with a hose and keep his cell cold, hot, cold.

Curled on his cot, he shivers and sweats.

He can hear his own gasp echo in that little room.

He does not paint anything for a long time.

Later that month, clouds roll in along with men in overalls, gloves, hard hats. The collars of their jackets turned up, they rev their saws and make vertical cuts in the stumps, careful series of Xs, like Saeed's mother would do with her pies, grilled lamb and onions stuffed with pine nuts.

Backhoes dig up the stumps and dump them in trucks. Bobcats tug the stubborn out of the ground with a length of chain. Wood chippers growl, grind, feed, shooting sawdust shoots in tall arcs that is then raked into the soil as dump trucks haul in more dirt. After a week, there's nothing to see out the window but smooth dirt. Men walk about with small sacks, happily spreading seeds.

In September, detectives discover the server Saeed set-up in the call center's basement. From sifting through hundreds of files on his home computer, they find that he managed the cell's website. Approving and blocking users. Content curation. Discussion threads. Security and software updates, open source and encrypted using an SSL certificate and HTTPS, everything, including the domain name registrar, bought with stolen credit cards. Saeed routed their VPN to mask their site traffic and make it seem as if their ISP was based in Russia. One of Saeed's former coworkers, the department IT guy, noticed something was dragging, perhaps even syphoning, their bandwidth. Thinking it was a hardware issue, he'd trudged into the basement with a flashlight.

"What surprised me most," says the interrogator, "was the pornography."

He sets the photos on the table: sweaty men and women, mouths open, eyes squeezed shut.

"Tech guys flipped through picture after picture. They didn't give up though."

He opens another folder and begins arranging them on the table. Documents. Web histories. Banking figures. Personal messages between cell members. Proposals. Detailed plans of attack.

"You can't hide everything, Saeed."

Saeed looks up at him, says nothing.

The interrogator lays a single photo atop the others. Black-and-white. Recent. An old woman in a loose skirt and sweater struggling across a street with an armful of groceries, using a cane, watching her pigeon-toed feet. Helping her along is a young woman with dark eyes, a swollen belly. Sneakers visible below the hem of her skirt. A curly lock of hair hanging from her hijab.

Saeed can hear the crackling bags and his mother's dry, labored breaths. From her years in the kitchen, she smells of cumin and paprika. In her ear, his wife's tender voice: "You're doing fine, Mother. That's it. I've got you." Saeed reaches, but can't bring himself to touch the photo.

For the moment, he's had enough pain.

"They could visit you here," the interrogator says. "You could still see them."

"What've they done for money? Where does Rowaida work?"

"I can't protect your family until you help me."

"How does she afford care? Or when the dementia comes? When she no longer knows their faces? Is my wife working? Tell me!"

"Names," the interrogator says.

"I will give you nothing."

"You know," the interrogator says, "you ask about your mother and your wife, but never about your son. Is that how they trained you? To never ask about the thing most precious to you?"

Saeed wipes his eyes, looks away. "You know nothing."

The interrogator shrugs. "It's your choice. This could all be over if you wanted."

The prisoner lifts his head, puffs his chest. "I know."

The interrogator says, "They say they're coming. I need names. I need leverage."

"Your career, eh?"

"No. I want you to hang here, in your country."

"Let them take me to Cuba. I am not afraid."

One night in September, his cell door opens, and a guard sweeps into the room. Saeed scrambles against the wall and covers his head, expecting the baton, but the guard speaks to him gently. "Shhh, shhh. It's okay. I won't hurt you. They don't know I'm here."

This is not his usual guard, but a woman, and she squats before him, telling him that she's grown sick of how they treat him, that she's stolen a photo for him from the interrogator's files.

Trembling, Saeed reaches for the braid hanging out of the back of the black ski mask she wears under her hijab, the hair draped over her shoulder. She doesn't flinch or shy away; it's silky between his fingertips. He tells himself not to cry. It's no use. She holds him, both of them sitting side-by-side on the floor. Thinking of Rowaida, he buries his face in her shoulder and moans.

After she glances at the open door, she takes the photo from her pocket.

"Quickly," she says. "I have to return it to the files by morning."

He didn't want children. It felt like another decision taken from him, another concession. He could never tell Rowaida. When he saw the ultrasound, when their OB told them he was going to be a father, while Rowaida and his mother celebrated, he wore a grin and hid his dread. He was not good at caring for others. Rowaida's nausea. Her headaches. Her cravings. In May and June, her wrists and ankles were swollen, cracked. Knelt over her in bed, he massaged lotion into her hands and feet, pausing every so often so that she could sip from the two-liter water bottle on her nightstand. Sometimes she made him refill it in the middle of the night. Sometimes she sent him to the store for ice cream and when he returned with thirty dinars worth, she didn't want the gallons of vanilla and strawberry. She wanted chocolate. Hadn't he heard her? Wasn't he ever listening?

"I'm the one doing all the work," she said.

His mother would poke his forehead. "Not everything is about you."

"You're not around, Saeed," they said.

"The late-night meetings."

"The overtime."

They practically shouted at him: "Weekends, too?"

Rowaida liked to put his hand on her belly for him to feel his son kicking, swimming like a fish. He hated it. He thought of himself, of Saif and Mohammed and Abed, of all that was wrong with the world, all he wanted to do, all that could never be done. In his wife, potential. Heartache.

Now, here is his son in full color, swaddled in the nursery at Farrah General in the city.

Abdullah, the name on the infant's placard. His father's name.

His mother's choice, Saeed's political protests overridden.

Here, in this photo snapped hastily in a hallway, the glare on the glass obscures his son's face. He rubs it with a thumb, knowing better. Knowing the guard, the woman, is meant to soften him. Knowing this is no deception, that his son lives, cries, is kept alive by his mother's breast.

Knowing they are better off without him.

That his silence is his bond, his sacrifice.

His commitments. His convictions. His cause.

Death in the name of life, in the tragedy waiting beyond love.

He tears up the photo and throws the pieces in the air. They drift down like confetti, one landing on the guard's shoulder. Saeed brushes it away. He looks her in the eyes, trying to smile, trying to control the tremor in his voice as he tells the worst of all his lies: "That is not my son."

That October, he's roused from sleep, taken to the showers. One of the guards has fresh clothes folded over his arm: khaki pants and a white tee. Confused, Saeed opens his mouth to speak, but the guards tell him to shut up, step into the stall. As Saeed scrubs with soap, they spray him with water from a hose. It stings bitterly. They make sure to get him in the face, the genitals.

Gaunt, and hollowed-eyed, Saeed changes clothes in the bathroom mirror, his new clothes loose, comfortable. The white sneakers fit perfectly. As he's led down the prison hallways, it feels like he's walking on clouds, and outside in the gravel lot where they first brought him to Muwaqqar months ago, Saeed squints against the night, sucking the cool autumn breeze deep into his chest.

He closes his eyes, feeling taller, cupped in the palm of the world.

Then the guards throw a black, cloth sack over his head, handcuff him, and drag him to a car that takes him to a runway where he is marched onto a plane and shackled to a bench in the hold. If he moves, they kick him. So, he keeps still, and after a flight of several hours, they transfer him to another plane with guards that speak English, and allow him sips of water, threading a straw through the neck of the sack. In the hold, noisy, rocking, the other prisoners sniffle, cough, sigh.

Slumped on the bench, Saeed and the prisoner beside him wriggle closer to one another, getting comfortable for their long flight together, sharing their warmth in the space afforded them.

That night, Saeed dreams of Rowaida's heavy thighs, her dark lips. Her curly black hair. Her arms. Her breasts. The smell of the jasmine she dabs on her wrists before climbing into bed.

Who sleeps beside her now?

His son. He thought his worst lie was to rip up that photo, but it was actually to believe he did not love the child, that he could not love him, could forget about him even in a place like this.

After landing, the guards escort the two lines of prisoners from the cargo plane, their chains rattling and shoes scuffing the runway.

A cool wind tickles the hairs of his forearms. On it, he smells a hint of the sea, and thinks of his honeymoon, of swimming with Rowaida in the Mediterranean, their mornings and evenings for lovemaking, and daylight for splashing and diving in the warm, clear waters. They acted like kids, and after dinner, before heading upstairs to their suite, they sat in the sand, Rowaida in her hijab and long swim bottoms, and him with his sketch pad across his knees. He couldn't get the majesty of the sunset right, not with simple shading, and longed for his palette and paints. Sensing his frustration, she told him to relax, to lie beside her, put his head in her lap and enjoy the sunset.

For a moment, he wishes he could rewind his life, to saying nothing as she played with his hair and the sun slipped quietly into the earth. Maybe he'd rewind further if he could, to kicking a ball around, making up scores and triumphs, tie-breakers and defeats, whooping and clapping with

Abed and Mohammed, when they had their whole lives ahead of them, and before the whole world changed. Maybe he'd go even further. Here, right here, to that first sketch, his cat, Hashem, dozing at the end of his bed. To the pad, the paper. To the small boy, a pencil in his hand, as light as air.

Author's Note

Before they were allowed pen and paper, Guantanamo prisoners wrote poetry on cups using pebbles, scratching verse across Styrofoam. At the end of each day, the cups were disposed of along with the evening's *halal* military rations, crackers and cheese spread with some wet hunks of mystery beef. Sometimes, the detainees would only write a line or two before asking the *mutarjim*, the translators, to pass the cups from cage to cage so the next man could add to the succinct descriptions of imprisonment and torture, pleas for mercy and demands for justice. That the cups found their way into the garbage only added to their power. A detainee could memorize the poem, but still, he'd have to let it go and start again tomorrow.

One cup. One day. One draft.

Picture one of these poets in his orange jumpsuit, cross-legged on the floor of his cell. Imagine the squeak of the pebble on the foam and rasp of his fingertips as he turns the cup.

What if I told you he was a member of an Al-Qaeda sleeper cell? That he aided suicide bombers who were responsible for the deaths of almost fifty people, including three children?

If you knew that, would you give him that pebble?

Would you let him keep that cup?

It was this question I asked myself as I wrote "Beyond Love," which Jim Shepard so kindly selected as the winner of the *CRAFT* Short Fiction Prize. This was the final draft of an especially frustrating writing process. As one who often bases his work in large amounts of research, my first draft, simply titled, "Guantanamo," served merely to underscore the prison's existence, that these injustices happened. In retrospect, while I had a dynamic setting, I was valorizing an innocent man. Sure, it might've been right for another story, but not this one. I was too hung up on convincing the reader of a message: that, well, it sucks to get locked up in GTMO. Who doesn't know *that*?

Venting about this problem to another writer, he posed a question: how do I feel about torture? And the more I thought of it, and the more I researched, I began to realize the very idea of prison, of locking someone in a six-by-eight cell with little human interaction, is depraved.

So, I had a character, Saeed. I loved his perseverance and his frailties. He has a sick mother, a wife, and a baby on the way.

I knew how innocent men had been sent to Guantanamo but had yet to research the guilty. In reading about terrorism, I found many radicals are well-educated, some with master's degrees. They have family, children. They have people who depend on them.

However, they're so disillusioned with domesticity that for want of purpose they move beyond family, beyond love. They twist themselves into believing they hold these beliefs so dearly both for their families *and* in spite of them.

It was this contradiction that breathed new life into Saeed. It allowed me to explore the realities of his character instead of the horrors of GTMO. In fact, hardly any of the action takes place in Cuba. It doesn't need to, but boy, was it hard for me to let go after years of researching and making the effort to include almost every detail in my previous drafts.

But Saeed is not just a GTMO detainee. He's a man, a husband, father, son.

A killer.

Would I let him keep that pebble, that cup? I'll let the story speak for itself.

Once again, I'd like to thank Jim and the editors at *CRAFT* for their time and consideration and for allowing my work to find its way into the world. I've carried this one in me for a long time. I hope you enjoy it.

James Winter teaches at Kent State University. His fiction and nonfiction have been published or is forthcoming in *One Story*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Salamander*, *PANK*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and *Dappled Things*, among others. Currently, he has finished a collection of short stories, of which “Beyond Love” is included, and is wrestling with the final edit of a memoir.

