

**Joel Vega** \Drift

# STORY UNFOLDING BACKWARDS

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The ground where she last stood used to be the sea, or parts of the sea.  
It comes like long accusing fingers, the water spilling into the room  
called after the living.

What the assassins were looking for, no one knows. Money they never  
found, a box of contraband, addictive substance, a cache  
of shells, empty bird's nests.

Rain of bullets, metal hitting flesh. Danica's father never had the time  
to dodge, outrun a trajectory precise as  
a burning meteorite.

Masked men came at seven in the morning, teams of two on motorcycles  
armed to liquidate, to cancel  
and delete.

There were no knocks, because no doors,  
no pleas, because no words

Sudden judgment is a velvet blanket,  
a shroud for the condemned, trapping  
the face to exclusive horrors.

No time to think, the eye  
blinking out the blue.  
Overhead, a plume of jet fuel

tracing a double-barreled end,  
cold metal against  
the forehead.

Have I told you, the storyteller says,  
that this is a story of grief?  
An immensity by itself

the kind of grief  
that contains the self,  
not that other way around,

self cannot  
contain  
grief.

# THOSE WHO FELL BEFORE US

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Was it blue or gray  
a sky folded  
in the corners

was it a tent  
made of sparrow  
wings, was there  
a loud knock  
on the door  
just before  
the quick jolt  
of a knotted heart

Have you seen  
a cracked egg,  
a meadow  
emptied of  
summer thistles  
were the lamps dimmed  
the curtains drawn,  
who was counting  
the pills by the kitchen counter  
was there a gun  
was there a blank wall  
was there a voice of command  
a deafening shot in an unlit tunnel

did the footsteps  
retreat back to the front door  
was the knock the thud  
of the back of my hand  
was your hand  
in my hair at the  
hour of midnight,  
was the night black  
as a bruise or white  
as a drawn-out  
dream played  
on a field of snow,  
was it cold  
like the square  
of a bathroom tile

was I there?

# DRIFT

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Though I did not wait  
for these hours to come they waited  
for me on all fours like small mammals keeping watch,  
    their warmth  
in balls of fur & with all the necessary silence unknown  
to humans.

For I am here in this thin light of winter  
the pointed elbows of my heart poking at my sides,  
    asking myself how should my knees  
bend before this altar that is your bed? How long  
the wait, how deep & awful the slow march  
    of minutes & what if I rouse you  
from your sleep? Will it be one unbraided breath?  
& if my hopes remain tiny as teeth,  
    what of  
the thunder & the dank earth & hanging web?

    Though the planets navigate  
the vastness of the clouds & the green of the garden  
    remains constant—  
what will remind us that the worst  
is yet to come? & if I will rattle & shake, asking for  
    things to stay  
        as they are,  
they will not. & I believe that no one returns  
as they are

    & what we have are the lines in our palms,  
telling us the tick & drift  
    of continents, its ineffable divide—  
in fact we can do nothing else and we will leave nothing  
    behind. Perhaps not even the cold or bone  
of winter can change the fact that whatever we savor now  
the heft of our bodies  
    will unravel.