ONE BY ONE: Running Poem

JUAN FELIPE HERRERA

for jorge arqueta, mayra and alfonsito guillén, and all desert-warriors


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one by one
two by two they galloped
across the clouds and the flowers
across black corn fields
and exhausted sands
one husband
one woman
two
fourteen-year olds
one
with a blue straw gunny sack
another
with a bag of lemons and hard bread
barefoot with bed sheets knotted into eights
to dream of rivers driven into one
to raise the arms toward the sky
to sleep
open-air
on the wooden slate and
the numbers of the night

violet thorns
and tiger storms and
tigers without tongues
it was mayra it was alfonsito
it was grandmother doña soria from atizapán
two and one
three and two one and
no one even though they had
names like lalo and lupe
and pepe and araceli names
without letters or stars
better yet
they were no one
said the wind
no one
said the river
you are like me
said the yellowgreen water
you are transparent fleeting you rise and fall
appear and dissolve among the others
like you
like me
like no thing
like water
for a moment
there was silence

there was a breathing in the desert
of winds and souls aflame
they boarded a bus
one by one
busload of sheet metal and cardboard
hopes and resentments
from leaving themselves behind
their clouds and their forests
two by two
almost
dressed up made up
socks of sand shoes made of rubber
and inside the girdles and belts
folded pesos
tiny green and scarlet
and blue yellow bills turned
into miniature trumpets
a roll of yesterday and tomorrow another
twisted into knots without victory
without dreams without a throat
only the little voices
from that ranchito
sobbed in the distance
that pueblito
of shadow ashes and
candles color of copper and sun
why are you here from where
how many remain
how far you headed paisana
they spoke like this
on the rough sands
sure of their triumph and that paradise
norteamérica
that is how they scattered under
the black trees that is how they gave sweat
in the train cars color of brick
color of oil and fog
that is how they were left
under the silvery leaves
it is the moon that calls us
hey moony moon they said
give me a flask of your water white fresh
hey moonmoonymoon
sang the children give me
a pony made of rainbows and
white gold blankets
so we can find the river where
no one will see us hiding doubled up
one by one
this is how their dreams arrived
walking
dragging themselves hugging each other
through the tunnels the canyons this is how they lived
inside tarps and sad holes and fiesta cloth and
newspapers and movie posters of the famous
without sun without earth nor house without any thing
nor sky nor floor
they were twenty they were eight
fifteen one
then two
they were infinite
they could taste it
in the bread they felt it
in the murmur
of the branches and
the barrack’s riddled wall
señor coyote’s
almost time
almost the hour almost late this very minute I’ll take you
he told them at the hour when all cats are grey at night
and he smiled and they handed him two thousand from /
their bags
and they gave him a tip and they offered him
three thousand each one each two
stay here
I’ll be right back to pick you up
that’s what señor coyote told the eleven year old boy
from santa tecla from that forgotten volcano
that was his promise to the girl from san pedro guatemala
and they gave him all they carried in their jute bag
and they emptied their kerchiefs on the wet sand
and they were left naked
on the tin sheets trembling
one by one two by two
washing up their hands preparing
and wetting their braids
once again they waited
for the morning light of day break
with more dreams of the states
with more dreams of their mother
the mother
whips clothes against the water-well stone
in the pueblo of kindling wood slivers the kind
that flourishes in springtime
the kind that almost smells like honey
when you burn it
in the thick night
go now
it’s time here take this
everything I have one day we’ll meet again
one day you’ll see we will all be together
step into the bus son
step in my little girl do not cry now
do not think about this that is what the mother said
cracking her knuckles
blessing them on the corner
that rectangle of nothingness
that bone oven
this is how they dreamed the mother
on the corner
short and poor
with dead eyes and her voice
at three in the morning every second whirred
waiting for señor coyote
señor coyote in his station wagon mirrors and blowers
with his watch and his mustache and
his hair the shape of fire
we have known many señores
they whispered to each other
some where tigers
some lions others wild boar some howler monkeys
what more can we do
and they waited shivering in between wood slats
one by one
against the wall of the abyss
that cage of voices and eye on fire
salvadorean some whimpered guatemalan others
shouted chiapas man veracruz tabasco michoacán
this is how their voices twittered each one
as if they had nations
as if they had lands
as if they had countries
so many voices fell on those crazy windows
that smoke without carbon
he never arrived
señor coyote the coyote señor was
below the tin sheets and cylinders he was
celebrating beers and mariachi standards
at the table he was
with his guys his home-town boys
he hovered in the tiny circus of that pueblo
on the mountains towering over nothingness
tasting tacos fillets leg meat brains
tripe breadcraded steak gizzard and chicken
shoulder bone smoked sausage and pork rind
he was laughing with his mouth full of corn
and his oiled cowboy shirt the color of roses
one by one two by two
they escaped
one by one
two by two
you jorge
you margarita
you vicente and florencio
you alma and esperanza
a wife a young man alone
with swollen eyes
with sores on the lips
the throat shut tight the legs
clawed without a planet or a season
it was summer it was all the time to pick produce
it was summer eternal incandescent time
without time to return as giants
to go back south one day
this is how they drifted
one by one
two by two
they were fourteen they were six
without water
without bread
without a name
without licenses
without papers
without a wallet
without stars
a busload of shadows and nightriders
some dragged underneath
some behind
others further below
others in the trunk
others with shoulder blades against the engine
charring their skin
burning and screaming
melting down drop by drop
arm by arm
but no one heard them
no one
had a clue
only the wheels tearing
only the chrome filaments of the metals
grating the asphalt toward the north country
only the night jungle
made of wires giraffes jeweled rifles
one by one
two by two
you maría

and juana and norma and teresa
you francisco apolonio fernando roberto
they huddled into another bus
we are almost there brother
see we can do it little sister
this is how they spoke half asleep
half dead and buried
they stopped at a check point
and the soldiers spoke
where are you from boy
tell me what pueblo
the green-suits asked
I am a mexican
I am a mexican
I am a mexican
one by one they said
then two
by two
they were twenty
they were fourteen
I know where you are from
and where you are headed get down
or I will get you down
and that is how they fell
with their shredded skirts
with their huaraches and
string shoes
and they threw them in jail
some made calls
others
stayed fallen without breath
some were taken
by brothers or an aunt
the rest knelt on the dirt battered
with eyes lacking water
gray cold and their hands
swollen hard fifteen years old
twenty nineteen fifty-six like this
alone in those broken skeletons take off
the blouse pull down the underpants
let’s see what you have there
and no found out
and no one
said a word
drinking café latte
in the offices no one
searched for them
the others took off running
it was a lottery night without reimbursement
it was a desert that never ended
and they cried among themselves
I am free at last
at last I am headed to the states
I want to make some dollars
a few greenbacks for
my mother and my children and
a Chevrolet pick up but nor a new one and
they darted toward the lights
yellow and red and blue and white
like fire and alarms in that salt
ice and flame at the same time
then those lights switched off
there were more patrols more soldiers
and they jailed them
behind bars again
one by one
two by two
they were so numerous they seemed
like the desert itself
busted black the color of smoke
and the waves of voices and blood rushed
each night only this held them
the crevice of landscape a fan of weeping
that abyss where they were born
without a name without a memory
only a faraway heat
the nothingness echo they suffered
some slipped out could barely see
others stayed under the shadows
and there they drowned in the sea of iron cells
one by one
two by two

they were thirty
they were five
they were eternal a husband
one wanted to be a student
wanted books to study
wanted to sport a blue accountant suit
one wanted a household
another wanted to learn english
one by one
they opened the desert
it resembled mexico
without jaguar skin
guatemala without
lakes or volcanoes
it resembled puerto libertad
but without water or an oar
it resembled janitzio but without blue green
one by one they crossed
two by two
miguela eleven years old
maría dolores garcía lópez quintana carrillo
and more names like martínez alvarez garza avina
monreal sifuentes smith orona a husband
a young one a boy
lost searching for his mother another
turned upward and noticed white carnations
they are rain clouds they are the words of god
it is a ship of shadows this is how they spoke when
they crossed the red sands
by the tumbleweeds
until they landed
on the papago reservation
miles from agua prieta naco
and beyond tucson
until they dissolved
among the shacks
government sponsored shrunken
by the blue fire of of the heavens
some stayed behind digging
scratching the earth
tastes like rain
tastes like milk
and there they closed the eyes
the eyelashes popped stiff
forever
others
hid themselves
in the laminated indian houses they robbed
they broke the beds and the tin cases and nothing
they found in the small ribbon boxes
only ash and more shadow more sand
nothing and everything
one by one they followed
the road to no place toward
a dream without earth without horizon
their lips lost their hands cut
their hearts only their hearts
were left but they were not hearts anymore
they were empty of blood
and rhythms of breath
it was an ancient tree
that tore out of the chest
a soul
of orange colored branches and lavender nests
torn without honeyed water only leaves
thorns bones shadows fires
then the earth opened made of dry lights
and more patrols and more cells and more ovens
one by one
two by two
I am alive
or I am dreaming
I am dead they spoke like this
those figures
crossing
deserts across deserts
notice the flowers and the rivers
the thin rain and fountains and chickens and town feasts
the gardens the sky clean the casas ours the
dishes of pastries and jellies and salsas and
little gifts and the horse from the ranchito
and the water-well brimming and the laughter maría and /
and jose and marianito maruch
saying hello one by one
two by two they arrived caressing
their children and their weary dogs
destroying burning the horizon little roads and bitten
fields
when they lived in another time in another life
like this they arrived where they began
one by one
two by two
their mouths
stung by bees
their hands as if almost playing guitars
crossed over the breast
in a box without a name
in between dry wood slats
the color of wine color of never always
wrapped in foreign sheets
their lips half open as if about to drink water
their hair thin brilliant
    in the winds