

ONE BY ONE: Running Poem

JUAN FELIPE HERRERA

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



Lupe Ríos. Tepic, Nayarit. Mexico. 1970, Tomás Mendoza Harrell

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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
northern america
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 breaded 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 not 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 /
 pedro
 and José 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