

Jorge Carrera Andrade's BIOGRAPHY FOR THE USE OF THE BIRDS

I was born in the century of the death of the rose
when the motor had already driven out the
angels.

Quito watched the last stagecoach roll,
and at its passing the trees ran by in good order,
and the hedges and houses of the new parishes,
on the threshold of the country
where slow cows were ruminating the silence
and the wind spurred its swift horses.

My mother, clothed in the setting sun,
put away her youth in a deep guitar,
and only on certain evenings would she show it
to her children,

sheathed in music, light, and words.
I loved the hydrography of the rain,
the yellow fleas on the apple tree,
and the toads that would sound from time to time
their thick wooden bells.

The great sail of air maneuvered endlessly.
The cordillera was a shore of the sky.
The storm would come, and at the drum-roll
its drenched regiments would charge;
but then the sun with its golden patrols

would bring back translucent peace to the fields.

I would watch men clasp the barley,
horsemen sink into the sky,
and the laden wagons with lowing oxen
go down to the mango-fragrant coast.

The valley was there with its farms
where dawn touched off its trickle of roosters,
and westward was the land where the sugarcane
waved its peaceful banner, and the cacao
held close in a coffer its secret fortune,
and the pineapple girded on the fragrant cuirass,
the nude banana her silken tunic.

It has all passed in successive waves,
as the vain foam-figures pass.

The years go without haste entangling their
lichens,

and memory is scarcely a water-lily
that lifts between two waters
its drowned face.

The guitar is only a coffin for songs,
and the head-wounded cock laments.
All the angels of the earth have emigrated,
even the dark angel of the cacao tree.

*Translated from the Spanish by
Muna Lee*