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, 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

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Jorge Carrera Andrade’s
NAMELESS DISTRICT

In my district there are groups of houses and cattle,
sacks of cloud that pour forth silver kernels of sleet,
a sky that suddenly opens and closes its showcases,
pumpkins heavy with dream that drowse by the roadside,
a torrent emerging from a counterfeiter’s cave,
morning vegetables traveling to town on muleback,
all the insects escaped from the multiplication table,
and air that at every hour fondles the fruit.

In my district the flowers offer up in their tiny open hands
or in their little close-shut fists,
the essence of earth’s silence.
A cascade juggles its mirrors,
hurling its lambs of water
like a flock over a mountain-pass.

In my district the neighbors know about horses,
the forge imitates the tones of a bell,
the sentinel frogs give warning
when the rain hops by on its stilts;
under the color-organs of the sky
kneel the innumerable barley
and the far-off horizon is an ox
meditatively ruminating distances.

Translated from the Spanish by
Muna Lee

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