AGUA NEGRA
by
Leo Romero

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For Samuel and Adelaida,
my grandparents
Contents

Introduction iii

I.
In the Rincon 1
Benediction 2
Trees 3
Doña Sebastiana 5
A Faint Scent 6
Adam and Eve 7
The Goat's Cry 8
Estafiate 9
End of the Columbus Day Weekend 11

II.
Agua Negra 17
I Hear the Mare Neigh 18
No Stars, No Stars 19
You Listen to the Chickens 20
The Playing of a Flute 21
Para La Vida Eterna 22
Outside the Door 23
His Sister 24
The Silent Bell 27
One Light Glows 28

III.
The Wood-Carver 31
What the Gossips Saw 32
Augustina 34
Owl 35
Red Dress 38
A Lying Moon and a Lonely Bird 39
Not of the Soil 40
Note: A centered asterisk at the foot of a page of poetry indicates that the poem continues without stanza division onto the next page.
Introduction

With his first book, *During the Growing Season*, Leo Romero took his place among a small number of young New Mexican writers whose voices speak with authenticity and power about this land and its people. Here in *Agua Negra* he more than justifies that early promise and foreshadows a long and brilliant flow of poems and stories for our future. The poems here—I almost said the stories, the cuentos because of their strong narrative force—are as vivid to the mind as the landscapes of Mora County in New Mexico, where the high, blue air of the mountains and valleys seem to produce people who are hard, but unforgettable. They move and pass in a quick, vivid light that picks out detail in surrounding rock and earth and that sometimes leaves a slight chill behind when the light passes and the dark of mountains descends. In *Agua Negra*, we are among the peaks of Northern New Mexico where the people and their customs are, even today, as much 17th Century Spanish as they are anything resembling “American.” Behind them all, a shadow of Indian falls.

“Agua Negra” means “black water.” It is the name of a small village near the town of Mora and is the site of a miraculous apparition of Christ on an adobe wall. “Agua negra” also has the connotation of “obscure, dangerous waters,” strangely disturbed waters—an unease is implied by the words themselves. Leo Romero has chosen this place and its name as the setting and mood for these fine poems so that they—like the land and its peoples—will hold light and darkness, mysteries that seem beyond human comprehension as his people face the centuries and struggle to retain their old ways. Here speak the concerns and emotions of men and women, almost confused and lost, but still not accepting defeat from anything, physical or spiritual.

Many of these starkly beautiful etchings of New Mexican life are powerful, mystical—like the land itself. Leo Romero’s family have lived here for a long time, have buried their dead here (which claims the land more than any piece of paper or deed); he has taken the lives and deaths to be subjects for his poems, perhaps letting them become exorcisms for the memories that take shape as family, friends, the ways of the village turning and changing in the sharp light of time.

Always Leo is a careful craftsman, a good poet, and he shows the beauties, the joys along with the sorrows and fears. For me, the poems are especially valuable for the sense of mystery and terror that they contain. Somehow they reflect the apprehension born of living in dark mountains separated by difficult, arduous miles from any neighbor or help—an area of the state where priests, doctors, or sheriffs rarely came and where the people knew they had only themselves to depend upon, only their
courage to defeat the shadowy forces that moved through the nights. As the title poem says, "the people searched/ with tiny lights/ for the face of God." In too many instances they found things that were strange, threatening, but went on, crossing themselves before they reached for their rifles. Life in those mountains was and is hard. The growing season is short, winters often severe. Santos are fed, begged, and punished if they do not grant the family's wishes. Witches roll by in balls of fire. Doña Sebastiana, Lady Death, waits for all.

I think this book will be remembered. And cherished. The truths it speaks will make it so. I know that I am very glad to have had the experience of these poems.

Keith Wilson
Las Cruces, New Mexico
August, 1981
I.
In the Rincon

My grandmother would tell me
of the cold
sweet spring water
in the Rincon
She would go there
when she was newly married
And once she saw a bear
who had come down
from the mountains
for chokecherries
She fled and never returned
to the Rincon
a portion of land
far from any house
My grandmother is over eighty
She has forgotten much
But she has never forgotten
how cold and sweet
the water is in the Rincon
Benediction

My grandfather and I
rode on a large workhorse
to the Rincon
a section of farming land
below the mountains
He stopped along the way
and took a piss
That is the earliest memory
I have of him
A few years later
he lay in bed
dying from cancer
I would sit quietly
in his room
on a chair against the wall
His hair was as white as God’s
and people would come
to ask for his forgiveness
Trees

My grandfather is buried
by these three tall pines
in the Romero graveyard

He planted those plum trees
which gave bitter fruit
and no one liked to eat
until the trees died from neglect

He also planted these
stunted apple trees
which make a great show
of white blossoms
but the apples are small and few

The fruit trees
were my grandmother's idea
My grandfather complained
that it was too high and cold
for fruit trees
but my grandmother's thoughts
were with the orchards
of her childhood

The locusts and lilac bushes
were also my grandmother's idea
She kept her memories
and perplexed my grandfather

And those twenty foot willows
where the magpies build their nests
were also planted by my grandfather
for my grandmother's sake
But my grandmother
didn't have anything to do
with planting those three pines
She was a Sanchez
only the Romero's would think
of planting pines
Dona Sebastiana

The last visitor
my grandfather saw
was Dona Sebastiana
My grandmother
did not want to let her in
but the door flew open
My grandmother
did not look at her
but sat by the wood stove
and held tightly to her apron
like a little girl

Dona Sebastiana passed by me
so quickly
that I could not see her face
She looked neither at me
nor at my grandmother
but went directly to
my grandfather’s room
Her robes fluttering
about her like wings

For many nights afterwards
I would hear a horse
gallop wildly past the house
I never told anyone
about this
and especially not
after my grandfather died
A Faint Scent

My grandfather promised me
a tiny Christmas tree
He would go to the mountain soon
and cut it
That is what he told me
a few days before he became ill

I had already imagined
what the tree would be like
I had seen it in my dreams

And that is what I think back to
many years later
sleeping in the same blankets
which covered my grandfather
as he died a slow death
Blankets which with the years
still carry a faint scent of urine
Adam and Eve

The old woman swings her purse
between her legs, her body
is weighed over, grief stricken

Her granddaughter stands by her
holding a child which she rocks
automatically, regular as a clock

If he dies the spirit will rise
out of him like smoke, the old woman
thought of her husband dying
in the hospital room and thinking too
of the Bible, some verse, coming back
read way back when they were young
and they were like Adam and Eve
and she was always planting flowers
The Goat’s Cry

My grandmother took the young goat
and slit its throat
Delicate cords cut in the glass air
I fled from the sharp knife
from the gush of hot blood
which had stained my grandmother’s hands
which the earth drank greedily
In the air the goat’s cry
shattered clouds
opened and closed blue doors
I cowered inside the house
where I ran after seeing the sun’s face
in the blade of the knife
saw the sun drinking the blood
which was so warm, which burned

I listened to the incessant crying
The goat’s agony
filling the sky like smoke
I was helpless and trembling
listening to the severed throat
to the blood cry
elastic cords snapping
A cry jagged as broken glass
until the goat’s cry finally left the sky
and my grandmother was calling me
to wash my hands
to drink of the blood
the still hot blood
which she held in a pan
A pool of life
bright life
Estafiate

My grandmother walked
past the small spring
and almost to the river
She walked slowly
on her thin legs
Her body bent forward
by her humped back
which she had gained
with the years
and made her look
as if she were sinking
into the earth
or shrinking back
into a child

She walked fragiley
on slippered feet
and seldom left the house
except to pick estafiate
which she boiled
into a greenish tea
She would tell me the names
of herbs she had picked
when she was younger
But now all
that she could find
was estafiate

Each day she seemed
to grow weaker
It was summer
but she would sit
by the wood stove
dressed in kimono and slippers
She would keep the fire burning
claiming that she felt cold
And she was always
boiling some estafiate
which she claimed
was the “best medicine”
End of the Columbus Day Weekend

It began in the mountains
coming down a winding
canyon road, ten miles
at a snail’s pace, elk hunters
in front of me and behind me
Everyone wanting to pass
and dusk growing thicker
Two hundred and fifty miles
to reach home and work
the next morning, and two
hundred of those miles
across the darkening plains

Traveling nonstop
until Santa Rosa, getting nothing
on the radio but Christian stations
and static, and cussing people
who won’t dim their lights

Lights seen far ahead
rising and disappearing
Growing brighter like balls
of fire, a dance of witches
I drive carefully
wary of what the car lights
may suddenly reveal, that creature
half man half coyote
causing cars to swerve
off the road without warning

All the darkness of the plains
makes me think of death and love
And I think I sense a little
of the fear my grandmother
must have felt when she died

*
The letting go, and drifting
in the dark—and I think I hear her
calling out to me
saying, “No, no. not this way”
She is communicating her fear
which she must share with someone
And these two months since she died
and never really was dead
because I didn’t share it with her
didn’t die a little with her

When she was dying
they had to tie her to the hospital bed
because she kept wanting to leave it
And she kept saying in Spanish
“get these witches from me”

A bright light in the rear view mirror
tries to hypnotize me
and a police car without lights
glides by my side and disappears
unconcerned that I am doing eighty
The restaurant where
I stop to eat in Santa Rosa
reminds me of a fake front
on a Hollywood movie studio
And the waitress who takes my order
doesn’t return, and the gas station
where I stop at the end of town
is attended by a young girl
watching television
indifferent to me or my money

And all the way to Clovis
I count the dark spots on the highway
that once were rabbits
And I think of love, how frightening,
like the death of all these rabbits
I think of the dark side of love
and how its pain can seem
as endless as the darkness of the plains
And how terrible it is to be caught
by love, a love like the one
these rabbits knew, a love
that demands everything, a quick
burst of light and a speeding wheel
How terrible is the darkest side
of love, that will not let you go
Agua Negra

Outside, the night lay open
like an oyster
I sat alone
within my house
of light

Within the mountains
darkness poured like syrup
poured into that black
which filled the valley
like the deepest ocean

I would hear the throbbing
of the mountains
The slow breathing of trees
and sense the uneasiness
of the fields

I thought of the miracle
at Agua Negra
where people searched
with tiny lights
for the face of God
I Hear the Mare Neigh

Breaking earth all day
back bent
fingers stiff
Sun set an hour ago
but I can't stop
Occasionally I try
to stand straight
and gaze up and down
the valley
which is fading away
I hear the mare neigh
for the fiftieth time
Lizardo took the stallion
to the mountains
hours ago
I bend again
and hit the earth
with my dull hoe

My feet feel planted
my muscles are old roots
When the moon
rises over the trees
I stand straight
Something is coming down
from the mountains in waves
I have smelled it before
warm and bitter
I hear a nervous neigh
from somewhere by the river
No Stars, No Stars

Last night frightened wings
kept me awake
wings brushed against the walls and ceiling
tiny tremoring wings

Claws scratched the door
Claws scratched the windows
(Out of the dark woods
came a ball of fire)

No moon, no moon
in the eyes of the creature
that circled about the house
The odor of deep woods in its breath

No stars, no stars
The frightened wings
were singed by the glowing
ball of night
A layer of fire
surrounding a core of darkness
(A heart, poor heart)
You Listen to the Chickens

At a certain time
you can see the darkness
step from behind the trees
in the mountains

And very soon
it is at your doorstep
All you can do
is shut the door

And again you hear
that other breathing
Those measured footfalls
cautious as a prowling moon

You listen to the chickens
in their wire cages
This late at night
you listen to the chickens
The Playing of a Flute

Sinforsa had gone
to a dance by herself
When it was over
she walked home alone
There was moonlight
and she walked along the river
Soon she began to feel
as if something was behind her
She would look back
and see nothing
Constantly there was the sound
of slow moving water
But there was another sound
breaking the water’s rhythm
almost like irregular footsteps
Suddenly Sinforsa began to run
Loud noises were
coming from the trees
Twigs and branches snapping
She felt something
touching her shoulder
She turned around
and saw nothing
but the shadows of trees
following her
like a herd of cattle
Sinforsa ran all the way home
without looking back
Far away could be heard
the playing of a flute
Para La Vida Eterna

At night we climb the mountain
with our torches
Nuestro Rey
Nuestro Rey
Cantamos

Striking our flesh
we climb the mountain
Striking our flesh
with yucca whips
crying the tears of our Lord
the rose bud tears of our Lord

This mountain that we climb
is darkness
It is the shadow of our Lord’s life
His suffering in this world
Through our suffering
we will rise to him
as if we had wings
Tierra Sangrienta
Tierra Sangrienta
Cantamos

Our blood leaves a trail
through the mountain
for others to follow

The tears of the women
will burn in our wounds
In the blossoming wounds
of our flesh
Para La Vida Eterna
Para La Vida Eterna
Cantamos
Outside the Door

Manuel woke to the sound of something moving outside the house. Slowly he made the sign of the cross over his forehead and over his chest. And he said a small prayer to the Holy Virgin. Then he reached for the rifle, which was by the bed.

He had been hearing the same sound every night for years ever since he killed three deer down by the cornfields. He had hung the meat to dry but next day it was all gone.

Witches move in the night. He knew this very well. He partly suspected that witches had taken his meat. Witches disguised as wolves. He had found several of their prints.

Perhaps those three deer had been witches themselves. He had given this much thought. Each night he would do the same thing. He would go to the door with his rifle. There he would freeze and listen to the steady breathing outside the door.
His Sister

Manuel kept dozing off
as he read from the Bible
Occasionally he would get up
from the kitchen table
to put more wood in the stove

The fire made shadows dance
in the room like elves
Manuel would snooze on the table
and wake up at the slightest sound
The wood cracked as it burned

Slowly Manuel opened his eyes
His heart took a jump
A woman dressed in white
was standing before the stove
But as quick as he could blink
she was gone into another room

She disappeared into the room
where the portrait of his sister hung
Estefanita, Manuel whispered
He had been staying up many nights
waiting for her, ever since she died
They had always lived together
neither having married

Manuel had left her white dress
on her bed, she had made it
It was her favorite
with embroidered yellow flowers
Estefanita, Manuel said louder,
you have come back
He pushed back his chair
and stood up about to enter the room
Just then he heard his name
being called, and someone banged on the door
Shadows were dancing frantically
Manuel looked with longing
towards his sister's room
but the banging on the door
was breaking the spell

He recognized the voice
It was Filemon
Manuel opened the door
Filemon's face was aglow
It blazed with emotion

Filemon's tongue darted like flames
Estefanita is here, Manuel said,
I have to get her
Are you crazy, Filemon said
his eyes full of fire, she is dead
No, Manuel answered, and he pointed
to her room from where smoke
swirled out like a dancing skirt

You see, Manuel sounded pleased,
there she is in her white dress
The kitchen was filling with smoke
The roof was on fire
Filemon thought quickly
Yes, yes I see her
but hurry outside with me
I have a present for her
a black dress emblazed
with a burning sun
Tell me if she'll like it
Manuel went outside with him
It was past midnight
but everything was bright
Look, Filemon pointed at the roof
The dark night was glowing
Manuel grew panic stricken
Estefanita will burn

Before Manuel could run into the house
Filemon tackled him
and from the ground they watched
the flames leap higher
Manuel was crying
and trembling in the great heat

The shadows of the mountains
were dancing like elves
The smoke rose into the night
like a flying witch
The Silent Bell

In the church in Santa Gertrudes
there is a bell made out of silver and gold
but there is a flaw and it has never sounded
It is over a hundred years old
People come from far away to see this bell
The priest says that it is
like the great bell in heaven
which rings constantly and yet goes unheard
If we could hear such a lovely sound we'd die
Our souls, the priest says, are drawn
to this silent bell
because the heavenly bell is made of gold and silver
and the sound is so pure that not even dogs
can hear it
One Light Glows

At the head of the valley
one light glows
late into the night
A woman lives there alone

People say she is afraid
to sleep in the dark
She has never married

When all the young women
of her village
looked into the well
to see the features
of their future husbands
she saw nothing
The Wood-Carver

I made her with my hands
he said clutching her to his chest
gently bringing his fingers
across her cheek
There was a fragility to her smile
of one who had long known suffering
and only lately had been relieved of it

He found her in the mountains
A piece of dead wood
The shape suggesting what was within
Never before had he carved on wood
That night he could not sleep
thinking of the figure within the wood
and in the morning he set himself to work
What the Gossips Saw

Everyone pitied Escolastica, her leg had swollen like a watermelon in the summer. It had practically happened over night.

She was seventeen, beautiful and soon to be married to Guillermo who was working in the mines at Terreros, eighty miles away far up in the mountains, in the wilderness.

Poor Escolastica, the old women would say on seeing her hobble to the well with a bucket carrying her leg as if it were the weight of the devil, surely it was a curse from heaven for some misdeed, the young women who were jealous would murmur, yet they were grieved too having heard that the doctor might cut her leg, one of a pair of the most perfect legs in the valley, and it was a topic of great interest and conjecture among the villagers whether Guillermo would still marry her if she were crippled, a one-legged woman— as if life weren't hard enough for a woman with two legs—how could she manage.

Guillermo returned and married Escolastica even though she had but one leg, the sound of her wooden leg pounding down the wooden aisle stayed in everyone's memory for as long as they lived, women cried at the sight of her beauty, black hair so dark that the night could get lost in it, a face more alluring than a full moon.

Escolastica went to the dances with her husband and watched and laughed but never danced though once she had been the best dancer and could wear holes in a pair of shoes.

*
in a matter of a night, and her waist had been
as light to the touch as a hummingbird's ilight
And Escolastica bore five children, only half
what most women bore, yet they were healthy
In Escolastica's presence, no one would mention
the absence of her leg, though she walked heavily
And it was not long before the gossips
spread their poison, that she must be in cohorts
with the devil, had given him her leg
for the power to bewitch Guillermo's heart
and cloud his eyes so that he could not see
what was so clear to them all
Augustina

The day Porfirio's wife died
he did not cry
nor did he speak to anyone
He carried her to the wagon
and covered her with a star quilt
which she had made
when they were first married

A young boy herding goats
saw Porfirio driving the wagon
over the rocky ground
then disappear into the mountains
There seemed to be something in the wagon
but when Porfirio returned
hours later
the wagon was empty
The young boy herding goats
whistled, but Porfirio did not look at him
The goats fled from Porfirio
and the young boy followed

On his way home
Porfirio paused at Contrario's house
He did not get off the wagon
My wife is dead Porfirio said
and he told the horse to get moving
Word spread quickly
that Porfirio's wife was dead
Many people came to his house
No one asked about the dead woman's body
Her name was Augustina
She was the last Indian
to live in the valley
Owl

His name was Owl
He always gave people
an intent and serious stare
He was thirty-two
when he escaped from the state hospital
He had been in prison before that
for knifing to death
the groom at a wedding dance

Word spread in Ojito
that Owl was back
He had built a crude shelter
in Oso canyon
and was stealing chickens at night

No one had forgotten that Josefita
had been made a widow
only hours after she had been married
No one had forgotten, especially Josefita
She kept a knife under her pillow

Josefita lived over the mountain
from Ojito
When word reached her about Owl
she made the sign of the cross
over her heart and then spit
She left in the afternoon
with the knife hidden in her blouse

She reached Oso canyon
just as the sun was setting
She saw the smoke from a fire
and hurried in its direction
Owl was cooking
over an open fire
chicken feathers all around him
Josefita leaned against a pine
and watched him
Her breast heaved
against the blade of the knife
She was remembering her wedding night
The laughter, the bright lights
the loud Mexican Polka
which intoxicated her whole body
and the soft then violent
kisses—and the large bed
she was to sleep in alone
in which she shed pained tears
prickly pear tears

Already it had grown very dark
There was no moon
Josefita opened her blouse
and got the knife
She felt something wet
She touched her fingers to her lips
There was blood

Josefita screamed into the night
not from any bodily pain
but from remembering her wedding night
Owl dropped his chicken
and quickly stood up
His eyes bulged
as he stared in Josefita’s direction
In a matter of seconds
Owl had disappeared into the darkness

Josefita fell on the ground, crying
She woke up as the sun was rising
She was shivering uncontrollably
Slowly she walked back home
without the knife
After that Owl was no longer seen around Ojito
Rumor has it he is back
in the state hospital
constantly tied up
because he once rammed his head
against the wall
and tried to pull his skull apart
with his hands
as if he were splitting an apple
Red Dress

A little bird
flew over the mountain
to sing to me
A little bird
of pure song
singing about the graces
of your heart
bounteous as a garden

A little bird sat
upon my shoulder
and sang about you
He said he saw
your red dress
drying on the line
fluttering in the wind
like a God-bird

That same red dress
I saw you wear
at your cousin's wedding dance
when you danced
like a ball of fire
My hands burned
when we danced together
I swear—they burned

A little bird has come
to sing to me
about your heart
bright as any sun
which you show
so casually
that all mistake it
for a dress
A Lying Moon and a Lonely Bird

I search for a history of this valley
but no one wrote it down
so I look for anything
For a scrap of paper
with a few words
but I find nothing other
than some names and dates
written in family bibles
I am left to construct a history
where there are no written records

I wander through the mountains
hearing faint noises
but never seeing anything
I spend hours planting
and in my dreams I see
old fashioned writing
which turns into roots
I wake up nights and hear
someone leafing through a book
I turn on the light and there is nothing
I hear footsteps outside
I hear the moon spinning tales
I turn off the light and lie awake

Far away a bird is calling
when it should be asleep
and I want to call back
I want to speak so all of the night
and silence can understand me
like this bird, but the moon
continues his tales undisturbed
I listen, perhaps I will write it down
and say, this is how the people
lived in the valley, a lying moon
and a lonely bird say it all
Not of the Soil

When the women wash
their clothes at the river
they often sing

*If we were the fish in the river
the men would come after us
with hooks and line
with hunger in their eyes*

The women wash their clothes
among the rocks
and hang the clothes
on the bushes to dry

Returning home from the fields
the men always stop to look for fish
They are hungry for something
not of the soil
Weaving the Rain

I smell the first rain of this spring
and leave the door open
I am reminded of a feeling I had yesterday
while looking at a map of New Mexico
I was overcome by a sense of enormous space
and I caught a whiff of a wind
carrying rain, and I felt the grama grass
moving around me, spreading for hundreds
of miles

Outside the wind is weaving the branches
with their sprays of young leaves
and flowers
The wind deftly weaving the rain
into darkness
as the trees wave
Cabezon

A small adobe church
with wooden roof and tower
cross perched
A few adobe houses
Raining
Difficult to keep the car
on the clay road
A ghost town
below Cabezon
an immense volcanic plug
rising straight up
from a shelf
Cabezon the town
Cabezon the peak
For miles no one
just the clay road
the rain
the swerving car
the adobe houses
gathering about the church
Born in 1950 in Chacon, New Mexico, Leo Romero has a B.A. in English from the University of New Mexico and is resuming work on a Masters in English at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, after six years in social services positions in Clovis and Albuquerque. During this time he has participated, and still participates, in the Poetry-in-the-Schools program. He has published work, etchings and lithographs as well as poems and one short story, in many literary magazines and seven anthologies. He has exhibited in several art shows and at the Feria Artesana (Hispanic Arts Fair), also. In the fall of 1979, Mr. Romero resided in Taos on a Wurlitzer Foundation grant and is a panelist for the New Mexico Arts Division 1981-82 Literature Panel. The Special Collections Department of the University of New Mexico’s Zimmerman Library has established an archive for Mr. Romero’s work.
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