

AGUA NEGRA  
by  
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*For Samuel and Adelaida,  
my grandparents*



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# 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

# Doña Sebastiana

The last visitor  
my grandfather saw  
was Doña 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

Doña 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 fragilely  
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

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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,

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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





II.



# 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

Sinforosa 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 Sinforosa 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  
Sinforosa 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

Manuel your house is burning, get out  
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

III.





## 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

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in a matter of a night, and her waist had been  
as light to the touch as a hummingbird's flight  
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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