

Toyon Literary Magazine

Volume 66
Issue 1 *Toyon Volume 66: Exploring the Taboo*

Article 25

2020

Bruja

Diana Anaya
Florida International University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anaya, Diana (2020) "Bruja," *Toyon Literary Magazine*: Vol. 66 : Iss. 1 , Article 25.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon/vol66/iss1/25>

This Creative Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Toyon Literary Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.

Bruja

Diana Anaya

Outside it was just another door, the white paint cracking from the saltwater splash of the Bay, a rusted number thirteen nailed to the middle—lucky number thirteen to Cubans—and a simple woven mat at the foot of the door, its faded cursive script that read *Welcome Home*.

But inside—inside was a world of color and mystery: of wall-length paintings with a pink-tailed mermaid lounging over craggy rocks, stormy grey waves crashing around her, and tossing her blonde hair; jars filled to the brim with *caracoles*, painted egg cockles, coquinas, and broken sharks of rose petal tellin; one large conch resting outside the jars; plush red rugs stitched with intricate patterns of golden swirls and stars, covering every inch of the living room floor, and matching her equally scarlet loveseats and couches, with barely any room for *compañía* to sit, drink a cafecito, and share apartment-floor gossip.

It was no wonder my nine-year-old self always begged my mother to see our elderly neighbor Conchita, to sit on her floor and trace the lines of her rug with my finger, to fill my eyes with everything. Her apartment was one of the magical worlds I read about in books. I expected in one of those jars I'd find a faerie, or that beneath Conchita's blue sequined gown hid an iridescent tail. Never mind the smell of *palo santo* that was always burning inside, an incense stick in every room, the air so thick it made my eyes water—a small sacrifice for an afternoon of adventure.

Despite my obvious fascination with Conchita and her apartment, my mother did not like to bring my sister and me along on her visits. She always spoke of Conchita as "*la pobre viejita*," the poor old lady, when we were home, and when we visited, my mother always wore a frown, her eyes narrow

and darting around suspiciously. Where I saw colorful shells, sparkling beads, and beautiful paintings, my mother saw *santera*, *bruja*. Witch.

One day we visited Conchita after she specifically requested my mother bring us, stating she had a surprise. My mother could not refuse, thinking she would look bad if she did, and took us down from our third-floor apartment to hers on the second floor. Before we went inside, she warned us not to touch anything, but this time with a new excuse—Conchita was a *bruja*. That only made me more excited.

My mother knocked on the door and the three of us waited; my sister stood close behind my mother, and I to the side. Conchita opened the door wearing her signature blue gown, her tan wrinkled face breaking into a wide smile.

“Come in, come in,” she says in Spanish, ushering us inside. I smile hard at her, and she reaches down to pat my head.

My mother sits on the couch and offers her best guest smile. “How are you, Conchita? How are your daughters?” She gives my sister and me the crazy eye, as we affectionately called it, signaling us to sit down on the couch beside her. My sister plopped down quickly, but I walked over reluctantly, my fingers itching to touch every shell, bobble, jar, beaded curtain, and rug I saw.

“They’re good—either working or with their husbands. You know how this country is—everyone always busy,” Conchita replies. She walks into the kitchen for a moment, and I hear rustling.

When she returns to the living room she’s holding a small paper bag, and my sister and I are excited. I’m leaning off the couch, my feet poised to jump up and see what’s inside. My sister, normally obedient, is practically bouncing on her seat. Conchita sits on the couch facing ours. “I have this little gift for the girls. I hope they like it.”

My mother nods and smiles, quickly taking the bag. She clasps onto it tightly, hoping she won’t have to open it yet, but Conchita urges her, “Give it to them.” My sister and I, alert

to the contents of a bag, begin to nag and whine. Finally, my mother relents, reaching into the bag and producing two small, plush black cats.

She gives each of us our toy, and over a decade later the image remains fresh in my mind. Its soft black body, fitting perfectly in my palm; its black bead eyes shining in the yellow light of Conchita's apartment; its tiny triangle ears with a patch of pink peeking out; and its long black tail, limp with no plush, but thin enough for me to twirl.

"I love it!" I shout, leaping up from my seat to give Conchita a hug. "Thank you!" My sister stays seated, thanking her as she stares at the tiny black cat she has perched on her leg.

"Thank you, Conchita, but we have to go now. I have to take Diana to the doctor," my mother says, grabbing my sister and me by our arms, and dragging us toward the door.

"Okay," Conchita says, "come by anytime. If you ever need someone to watch the girls, I'm always here." She stands at the doorway, her dress glittering as the sunlight hits her. She squints as she waves goodbye.

My mother thanks her again, then yanks us down the stairs. I let her push and pull me as she pleases, too focused on the small kitten in my hands. I am holding it gingerly, cupped in my palms like a little bird, worried if I squeeze the cat, I will hurt it. I knew my toys couldn't talk, but something inside me felt sure they could see and think and feel, so I always treated my toys as if they were alive. I hadn't decided on a name yet, but I knew I wanted to call the cat something dark and mysterious, something that conjured my bedroom at night when the moon is full.

We were headed to the car, but my mother stopped us by gate, where the giant trash container stood. Then, before I could even react, she snatched the plush cats from my sister and me and tossed them into the bin. She shuddered once they were out of her hands.

"Black cats are bad luck," she said.

I don't remember how I reacted—if I cried, threw a tan-

trum, or silently sulked. But I remember the warm, plush shape resting on my hand, open-faced, and the way it sank into the bin.