SWEAR WORDS

Even now I laugh when I see the look on my mother’s face when I swear in Tagalog. I have no idea what these phrases really mean, but they’ve been spattered on me since I was still a fat, bawling baby—and scattered onto my head when I’ve toppled juice glasses on white carpet or come home past curfew. Sometimes even the length of my skirts or driving her through a red light produces ones with a bit of a gasp, a wet sigh of disapproval. Now I catch myself saying them out loud when I knock my knee against the coffee table, slice a bit of my knuckle with paper. When I asked her, she told me one phrase meant ‘God,’ so of course I feel guilty. Another is ‘crazy female lost piglet,’ which doesn’t even make sense when I think of the times I’ve heard her use that, and still others, she claims, are untranslatable. But the one I love best is Diablo—devil—pronounced: Jah-blew! She uses it as if to tell me, “I give up! You do what you want but don’t come running to me,” after I tell her I bounced a check or messed up a romance with a boy she finally approved of. Diablo! Diablo! Here comes a little red devil running past the terra-cotta flower pots in my mother’s sunroom, tiny pitchfork in hand. Diablo! Diablo! And still another from behind the kitchen curtains, a bit damp from the day’s splashes of the sink. Today when they meet, they dance a silly jig on the countertop, knock over the canister of flour, leave little footprints all over the place.

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