

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.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil
from *Miracle Fruit* (Tupelo 2003)