

## Deal-Breaker

The house creaked with Irish ancestry  
Gaelic tongues hissed limericks and blessings  
As if my ears with the stick-on butterflies could understand them.  
Vinegar-soaked banisters that went on and on  
Full of smiling red-cheeked leprechauns

*Top-o'-the-morning*

Did that one just wink?  
One time I touched one of them  
Just to see if it would respond  
Its moss-colored overcoat leaving stains on my sticky pink fingers  
The brocade pattern felt like the streets of a rural city  
Distant cars coursing through winding pathways  
Some of them unpaved and abandoned  
And they had hair of macaroni curls  
American pride prominent still  
Perfect curlicues of orangey gold sodium tripolyphosphate  
with a generous topping of milkfat  
Tastes like childhood

Not unlike the butter cheese white bread concoction—  
The only proven lure  
To drag me out of my nest of slumber,  
My sacred rest,

Nap time  
Darby slept there, too.  
When I couldn't sleep I'd imagine his dreams  
Eventually lulled by fire hydrants and fleeing rabbits.  
“Kaaaaaaate”

No one else called me Kate  
“Cheese sandwiches!”  
My feet hit the floor,  
Quick  
Skipping steps like stones in the lake  
Past the green grins and brass buckles  
And that morbid sign I never quite understood

*May you be in Heaven a full half hour before the Devil knows you're dead*  
And the platter of shining little squares

Crust-less  
Of course  
Awaited with a compromise:

No food  
Unless I forfeit  
*Are You Afraid of the Dark?*  
My mom said it gives me nightmares  
I am a balloon leaking air

Deflating with a whine that reverberates inside the ear canal  
A neon blur gasping as it hits wall to wall  
Fueled by the release of precious internal airs  
    But to no avail.  
Like a plate dropped in a crowded lunchroom  
With crust-less cheese sandwiches resting on top  
    “I hate you”  
Then silence.  
*The Devil knows I'm dead.*

### **On Getting Into Heaven**

It was midday  
A sunny Sunday.  
Bored with the library  
I decided to study  
On a bench by that museum with the  
Giant sculpture of who knows what  
A fiery red the color of  
Satan's tongue  
And angular deformities  
That mimic his pointy pitchfork.  
It was really nice outside.

Oversized clouds opened up overhead  
And the golden gates of the sun poured down libations  
To my paling skin.  
A heavenly warmth.

I failed to notice  
The Baptist church men  
Coursing through the campus  
Like overflowing wine.

One wandered over and wanted to  
Give me something and  
Curiously  
Courtesy came over me.  
“Sure.”

A white pamphlet folded crisp  
Followed by  
“May I ask you something?”  
Oh God.

“What do you think it takes  
To get into Heaven?”

Um.

Civility

Had latched onto my tongue

In a wriggling death grip.

“I guess

You just need to be

Good

?”

A lack of surprise filmed over his eyes

His wrinkles crinkled with a want to explain

And to change

Me.

He filled my pamphlet with scribbles

A frantic frenzy of diagrams

The timeline of my life

(A straight line. And I thought my life was more interesting.)

Heaven

(Some clouds. So that’s what everyone’s worked up about?)

Hell.

(Which is, apparently, a volcano.)

What I learned:

It doesn’t matter if you are a

Good person

Or not.

What really matters is if you accept

God’s gift.

He drew that, too.

(It’s a box with a little bow on it.)

He asked if I wanted to go to Heaven.

Well,

A volcano seems a bit more exciting than

Some clouds,

I thought

But sarcasm was taking this Sunday off.

“Well, yeah.”

He bowed his head

“I shall lead us in prayer.”

All I could do was stare

At the quizzical glares

From young agnostics with about a spine and a half  
More than I have.

“Wait,  
Can I, like, say it in my head?”  
He relented.  
I repented.

Sins ridden  
Since my first day of life  
And that day  
Was my second birthday  
Reborn in twenty seconds  
And now I can get into Heaven.

### **Christmas Cookies**

Frail fingers kneaded dough  
crafted with ingredients from a loose-leaf recipe  
in font so feeble  
her failing eyes didn't need to see—  
she knew it by memory.  
Her bony body told the story  
that her refrigerator was always empty  
minus some milk and maybe a vegetable of questionable edibility.  
Yet those cookies  
crafted out of love and ingenuity  
never seemed to care about ingredients and their availability.  
She could  
always  
make my favorite cookie.

Christmas morning  
then nightfall  
then mourning  
following the ominous phone call  
the sound of funeral bells in its ring  
surrounding my bones like December ice  
I read the lines in my mother's forehead  
a lyrical dirge  
and ran to the card on my dresser  
flipped past the jaunty snowman  
and reread

*Love,*  
*Grandma*

And afterward  
we strolled past rows of coffins  
as if shopping for a bedframe.  
We opted out of austerity—  
dark mahogany  
with maroon velvet  
the color of her tablecloth at Christmas dinner.

After the funeral  
we drove in broken conversation and  
covered tears. Naked  
tree branches blurred next to the road in a white  
reel like the memories being aired in my mind,  
with maroon velvet seats that recline  
my own home video of  
Christmas night  
over and  
over.

Our house with the  
little unlit lights  
that suffocate barren branches,  
the miniature Santa Claus with the broken bifocals,  
and a clay cookie jar with  
“Happy Christmas” in  
cursive curving around the lid.  
Inside, the last cookie made with  
ingredients from nowhere  
With a taste from  
Heaven  
a bit of butter and  
brown sugar and  
raisins and  
regret  
with every last bite.