Assurance

There is a heart at the heart of you.
Burrowed within,
below prayers of kin,
under thickets of despair.

And she is waiting there.
With a message from her mother,
about the nature of untruths
and the quick pivots of fortune,
the devastation of family.

And I am there.
Clearing gutters and
planting flowers,
holding your fury
much closer than my own.

This is the walk.
These are the steps
toward each other,
toward the end.

And I am there,
Until the devil's done fighting.
I have seen you. Raising heaven. Steaming with fever, furious with uncertainty. Shaking the twigs and dust of the wilderness out of your pressed trousers.

I have felt you. On balmy summer nights lightened only by the bitchy, teasing breeze. Dreamt petal soft and rose pink, settled in but always ascending. Under and over me, wedged between your hope and my passion, polished bright brown by twilight and laughter.

I have waited for you. In the lying arms of others, rocking apologetic babies to sleep. I squared up like a street soldier, ready to smash the shadows, but instead took them back to season the reasons I stayed.

I have killed for you. Murdered and exorcised a force destined to fail. Gutted a ghost blindfolded because you came; bearing my breath, shaming death for thinking you would lose.

I have died for you. Laid face down in disgrace before the fools who raised and debased me. Bones stripped of marrow, offering what done wasted. Shed my heart, my hair and my hell, just to be your baby.
Church Dinners

The combinations only we understand.
Cravings that were formed
before our grandmothers’ tongues
formed in their fathers’ mouths.

Fish teams up with spaghetti,
cabbage perched on the side.
There must be a roll.
They may run out of foil.

Salty, savory sours
soften the hours
of condemnation –
even the communion cups
are judging you.

We need food we can feel
in our elbows and hips,
the shit that licks our wounds
and burns our lips.

Lipstick on white plastic forks,
repressed and obsessed gets
finessed into sharp suits,
and under your dress.
The same lady that lost her wig
when the spirit was high
makes the cake you will
fight the big kids for.

And you will win.

Because everything else
feels like loss.
Better clean your plate.
You know we don’t waste

nothing.
Not even the opportunity
to work for the blessing
that was yours

from the very beginning.
Haiku

She was disgusted
at the sight of anyone
loving me better
“Float” (2018). Acrylic, magazine clippings, found items collage on canvas.
In the beginning, under the coffee table was always the safest place for me. My mother, an undiscovered ingenue in interior decorating, always found a way to obtain the most magnificent coffee tables. Massive, heavy, authoritarian even. The wood was dense and omnipotent. It knew what I needed and what threats surrounded me. Our coffee tables took on the role of protector, shelter, think tank, and imaginary friend. I was painfully shy and unwilling to engage with house guests. But I wanted to be “at the party” so to speak. So, I figured the best way to do that was to scurry on over to Club Coffee Table so I could feed off the energy of braver souls. I could hear grown folk business...sometimes. Black moms don’t play about kids being nosy. My mother had a continuum of deciding what was okay for me to hear, and what I needed to be banished for. I didn’t care. I just loved seeing brown, painted toes in Candie’s platforms or ebony feet in jellies or canvas Mary Jane’s you could get from the drugstore (back then it was Payless – not the Shoe Source … an actual drug store).

It was fodder for my imagination. It filled in the apologies I was already making for myself to myself. For not being cool. For not having what the other white girls in the neighborhood did. For being a ballerina with a big booty. For being afraid as fuck. Like all the time.
In the beginning, I could do the splits, and I ran around barefoot from July to August. I went outside voluntarily. I rode a bike. I was super pumped to inherit my sister’s bike which now that I look back was kind of tragic. BUT at the time I loved knowing that it was my turn to take on the neighborhood in what had once been Jewel’s ride. Picture this shit:

Yellow banana seat. Airbrushed rainbow body. Plastic, multicolored ribbons coming out of the handlebars. Oh yes, I was indeed taking my place in the winner’s circle. There was a declaration of freedom that happened when my little baby butt hit banana seat, bare feet pushed pedals, and the ride picked up its pace. Braids started bobbing, and once those ribbons started flying in the wind, it was on! I realize now one reason I loved those ribbons so much was because they could do shit that my thick, coarse hair couldn’t. They blew in the wind the way I wanted my hair to blow in the wind.

Another reason I loved being at the party but not a part of the party was that it gave me the distance and freedom to watch my mother be this luscious, effortless hostess. When people were over, the fevered annoyance that I came to recognize as her default countenance was gone. There were virtually no signs of it. I never saw her snap at her guests the way she gouged my sister and I with volume and word choice. I never saw her snatch their hearts clean out of their chests with a laser hot stare and pointed finger. Her hands were soft, nails meticulously painted, carefully curated rings adorned that scary
pointed finger. I never saw her present her guest with a homemade dessert crafted just for them, and then yell at them for requesting a specific piece of it – flashback to my second-grade birthday.

Nope. None of this happened. She simply glided around in a caftan or tube top (terry cloth of course) granting requests before they were even made. Cocktails, pigs in a blanket, explanation of her well laid collection of wicker baskets on the living room wall (or maybe it was the dining room?). My mom could present the abomination that was 1980’s snacks like nobody’s business. She could make wheat thins, cheez wiz and pimento look like art. She would even pick out the platter that complemented the color of the food. She was about beauty, aesthetic, and presentation. This is often what happens to women who haven’t been afforded the opportunity to tap into and develop their natural gifts. They get funneled; reallocated really. So, rather than my mom going to Parsons, she created beautiful ensembles, spaces, and experiences in the space where she reigned supreme: her home. Every room was planned out. And no clearance rack or thrift store was left unexamined in pursuit of the look she had envisioned. There is no fury more intense than my mother bringing her vision to life. It’s the way others build start-ups, or train for marathons, or how survivalists hunt for wholesale nonperishables. It only makes sense to the individual that has the vision, right? Scouring fabric scraps to make fly ass pot holders or trivets. Re-imagining a bathroom as a destination versus just a room to go pee. It was