Reclining Nude, c. 1977, Romare Bearden

You want to say she is peach-ripe, fragrant
Dark fruit sweetening around a hard, grooved seed,
The tan parchment beneath her Florida sand
As all things bring you back there—: to land
Your mother’s love threatened out of you—: you out of it.
You: a beached thing just made, and open for the sun;
You: a black man’s creation—: his simplest collage—: a woman.

There comes a blue that smells like ocean and wet earth, blue
That splits the face’s mask and seeps into the eyes.
An evening blue that ghosts you: outlines the hinted constellation
Of yourself: a blue that beads from your pores as you scour
A drenched page searching for form, a man
With sight enough to hang you in the sky.
Hung up, against a wall, in the right light you are

A museum piece: —this wanton: sure as one patch of sea-
Green, a triangle, filtering light between
The curve of your back and the crook of your elbow:
The other, just above your shoulder, the contrast
Of color: —this brown almost defines you: the skin—
You are saved by—layered—paper. Look, the left hand,
Its long, thin fingers, brazen, freeing itself from the body.
The Buffet Dream

In the buffet dream this is what I want—:
Everything I can swallow:
What is hot—: What is cooked—: What is sweet—:
What will fit on my plate—: What will drive me—from sleep
with longing—: This is hunger:—
before the first bite crosses my tongue, waking.

The colors of dream are there at seventeen, each day waking
to promise of silk and open sky—: the gift of truancy: who doesn’t want
flutter and slap of wind and parachute, foreign men, falling from Icarus’
heights? A girl’s hunger
for their sweat and the vowels they swallow:
Their neon canopies, their endless drifting, the pull of sleep:—
I could taste everything: the whole of this world: the idea—sweet
as leaving home, as being where I am not supposed to be, sweet
as desserts in the dream—: silver bowls of fresh berries and zabaglione:— as
waking,
just once, to bright lemon tarts with single sprigs of mint someplace where sleep
has wrought miracles. Seventeen—: coarse salt of want
on my tongue, I set out for the territories, hope to swallow
all, at least—: every drop zone I can find—: a black girl on the river Hunger:
—as free as that. I cannot leave this river—: Hunger
snakes along its slumbery route, slow as sweet
syrup, seeks low ground, overflows, swallows
a field, seeps into its green and makes it swampy, waking
the sticky, spongy air, summer’s silty edge, wanton,
dripping:—a humid decade’s night sweat, a constant of sleep,
until I am in Africa. In Cameroon, une volontaire, sleep-
deprived, listening to the dogs scratch hunger
out on Bafoussam’s abundant trash piles, I want
the nineteen-year-old boy I snatched like a muddy reed from some sweet yielding bank, four years back, dreaming satiety, waking, twenty-eight, purple-mouthed from boxed wine and desire. Swallow

the St. Johns, the Susquehanna, swallow the Maury, the Lom and Djerem, swallow
the Atlantic you crossed chasing bright-dyed dandelion seeds to find sleep
a glass display case of napoleons and air-pies, an éclair filled with waking.
Empty-handed on its ever-rocking water bed, hunger
waits you out, weights you. It’s possible you’ve tasted every sweet nothing your mind can offer, that delicious list you wanted

licked down to nothing, swallowed. Freedom—: the fancy-cakes hunger designed, decked out in fondant ribbons. Sleep: a night’s mouth filled with something sweet:—
what each morning, waking, you know you will still want.
Lost

The river, unrolled bolt of silk, gives
evening the smell of fish, wet leaves,
loosening matter. We glide through
its blue-plum tint toward night, the leftover
tang of red wine in our mouths. Upstream
an idea waits for us: if we were lost
how much more would we love each other.
We four move toward this losing with
the steady creak and drip of our rowing.
We cannot in lowering darkness tell direction,
whether the frog’s croak came from behind
or before us. Our bellies full, the swamp beckons us
behind its green drapery. Whatever hides
in the tangle—the surprise of cypress knees;
the fierce, sharp-edged palms welting our forearms as
we walk blind through mottled night’s
sulfur rot and sucking mud; what flies
into our mouths, impossible to see;
mosquitoes lighting in our ears, their constant
whine high-pitched and crazy-making;
the silent patience of gators and our
wary estimation of their hunger—
we will keep, we are certain, as we lose
ourselves for hours, when we find ourselves again
bank-side, and two must choose to swim because
we’re not where we began. The river moves
despite our stillness, our breath
breathing itself into the wet heat, whether
they disappear for good, the two who
splash away, their heavy kicking swallowed by
this evening. I am of the two who wait,
waist high in water, eyes stretched wide to see

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nothing but night, washing itself, black
over black in muggy layers inches from
my face, not my hands, skin of water, curve
of meniscus, my breasts where I displace it,
my undissolved legs immersed, merged
with water, losing above, in, out of, but for
these hands sliding over me, another’s
hands to keep me from becoming
current tongue, lisp of leaf tips touching
water, but for we, two, touching, agreeing
this is my body. Agreeing, I still belong in it.