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Song of the Water Hole Truce

by Ryan G. Van Cleave

A rank of impalas slake their thirst at the sun-cracked dirt
periphery of this mud hole, where water bleeds from the deep,

cool belly of the earth, dark and mineral-rich, still it wets
their cracked lips. The stuporous heat of midday works straight

to the bones, chews at the marrow, sucks the moisture
from every bit of exposed skin. A trio of lions stride straight past,

intent on their own thirst. Such are the truces of water, of water
holes here in Botswana, the simple earthen heart of Africa.

On the clay pans of the northern woodlands, trails lead like spokes
to hubs that hold water, but pans, unlike the lagoons and delta,

run dry, leaving only animals such as the springbok, which do not
need water daily. The delta knows catfish that escape dryness

of evaporating ponds by burrowing in the bottom mud, and it knows
antelope escape predators by submerging up to their nostrils.

Always close at hand, a wilderness so unfettered it can swallow
a herd without a trace. So it ends, here, this day, as a flock of ibis

wing back to their nesting grounds like ghosts at nightfall,
their fish-bone eyes, for an instant, reflect like strobe lights,

blips of white that, though vanished into dark, last and last.

