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Thirst

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THIRST

First Germany surrendered, then Japan,
Before our senior year at Hengestone High,
And thus the fearless four of us
Could look up at the constellations of the stars
And face what was to come just fortified
With vows that we would stay in touch,
That each of us could count on help, if needed,
From the other three. Al's mother owned a house
Above dunes dense with native roses and tough reeds,
With a vast ocean view
And a guest cabin hidden in the woods
Where we arranged to meet
Before we headed off to college in the fall.

Ten summers in a row, right after Labor Day,
No matter where we were,
We would reunion there, convinced
We never would forget those years;
Friendship like ours would never change, despite
Bill's claim, "I have a thirst for new experience,"
Which was an annual refrain for him,
A claim more grandiose than his routine
As an aspiring novelist could justify.
We couldn't figure what was troubling him,
Some ailment in his throat perhaps, and yet
One night when Bill had gone to sleep
Before the rest of us, we drove to town
And lassoed a ten-foot plastic Coke bottle
Standing outside a distribution plant,
Hauled it over, pried its bottom open,
And removed the sand that held it in its place.
We tied it to the ski-rack on our jeep,
Absconding with it in the moonlit haze,
And then unloaded it outside the cabin in the woods,
Marked with a sign: DRINK THIS, O THIRSTY ONE!
For Bill to see next morning when he rose.

That fall Al's cancer-ridden mother died,
Her house was sold, and Al,

Who never seemed close to her,
Went into mourning for which, so it seemed,
No normal consolation could be found.
After a year, he moved to South Korea, wrote
About a woman he adored who spoke no English,
But I never heard from him again.
And Jack, who of us all, had been the most relieved
To have escaped the draft back then,
Enlisted and became an officer
In the Marines. Soon afterwards,
As if this letter had not been his first,
He wrote to reprimand me I still owed
A debt of service to my country
Still unpaid. I could not bring myself
To answer him; instead, I wrote to Bill,
At work on still another book,
To tell him that reverberating night
We stole the legendary Coke bottle
Under the spectral blur of hazy stars,
To quench his cosmic thirst,
Contained the laughter that I treasured most,
The gold of our sworn friendship and our youth.

To my astonishment, Bill's curt reply
Was that he had no recollection of his waking up
To find a giant Coke bottle outside
Our cabin in the woods, and wondered
What my motive was for spinning such a tale.
Motive? What motive could I have except
My own ongoing thirst for stars
And laughter reaching out into the night,
Music of friendship we once thought
Eternal as the tides? I'm certain all of this was true,
The breathless theft, the bulletin next morning
On the radio, our restoration of the Coke bottle
Next night despite the first winds of a hurricane.

Could Bill have chosen to forget all this
Or did he want to claim the story as his own?
And what good could it be to question
What *his* motive was in questioning my motive now,
Since all that's left from the disputed past,
Beyond my late attempt to rescue memory
Is what was there before we four arrived:
The constellations of the hazy stars,
The ocean view to the horizon's edge,
And, like receding laughter in rough wind,
The tides' undifferentiated slough
Of fractured seashells on the shore?,