

City of Brotherly Love

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On the hottest of days
 in the sweltering summer of Philadelphia—
 when city streets sizzled like bacon with
 paved heat and the smothered air
 hovered like dragonflies and was too heavy to breathe
 and even I who rarely perspire
 was dripping rivers down my back, like a popsicle on a stick;
 even my inner thighs were wet—
 we passed a young woman
 and her infant daughter
 whose face was red, and swollen like the Delaware
 from the bites of thirsty mosquitoes swarming
 in the dampness, and from tears.

Do you know where I can buy
 milk for my baby? the woman pled.

Visitors ourselves, we had no idea,
 no answer to give. But you, feeling
 compassion, reached in your matted pocket
 to retrieve ten dollars, to which she replied:

No, please, I don't want your money
 Only milk for my child.

The mother had already begun to cry.
 Seeing this, you gave her another ten.
 And she hugged you there, like hunger,
 on that hot street, in the city where they
 say there is brotherly love. I was
 proud of you and your generosity.
 Sometimes I pass people begging,
 as I've finished shopping in the mall—
 and may stop, if I happen to have cash.
 But too often I notice the newish
 running shoes or the dog
 that looks well fed, and pass on by
 with the shake of my head.
 Then at night, I kneel and beg by my bed.