New City

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Recommended Citation

Hodgman, Douglas (1955) "New City," Calliope: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol3/iss1/11
New City . . .

by Douglas Hodgman

Philadelphia on Sunday is like no other place on earth; it is very big and very empty. The Sunday color seems to the memory all grey; the still, pale sky, the long deserted streets, the dark crooked alleys, the crumbling brick warehouses, the steel webs of the overpasses and bridge: they are all a drab, dull grey. Little noise disturbs the Blue Law peace; newspapers scuffle down the shadowy gutters in cold gusts of wind, water drips from the elevated's overhanging latticework, and perhaps there is the low moan of a faraway car, the drifting wail of a siren, or the sharp echoing staccato of a boy batting a ball against a windowless building.

When he first came to the city, it was not quite yet Sunday. It was snowing a steady wet drizzle when his ride let him off in Penn Square, and he headed straight for the railroad station, hoping only that his sacking luck would be good. As he walked in the door and down the stairs, he rubbed his fingers on the money in his pocket, a dollar bill wrapped tightly around a dime and two pennies. He had been forty hours on the road without sleep, and he thought longingly of an all night movie or a hotel. But he couldn't spend any of his funds if he was going to find a job on Monday.

He ambled once around the station floor, then picked a solitary bench back in a dimly lit corner. He waited carefully a few minutes before he stretched out and folded his arms under his head. Gradually, he felt the pain and the weight leaving his feet and ankles. His stomach turned dry, his head lightened, and his thoughts reeled dizzily until he felt he was once more out in the low wind, his thumb out, his neck cold, the cars passing; and he was walking, walking, walking . . .

"Come on, kid, you can't lie down here," the voice insisted. He sat up and tried to open his eyes. "You waiting for a train?" the voice rasped. He focused his eyes and saw that the cop was regarding his torn blue jacket and dirty tan pants.

"Yeah," he muttered, "Yeah, I'm waiting for a train."

"Well don't go back to sleep," said the cop. "We can't allow you to lie down in here." He watched the cop stride off under the lights to the next room. His head was throbbing heavy-light, heavy-light, and
his mouth felt full of cotton. I really ought to move, he thought, trying to keep from slumping over. I really . . . ought to . . . move.

"I thought I told you you couldn't lie down here," the voice was saying.

Quickly he sat up. "I'm just waiting for the train," he said. "Just waiting for the train."

"You been drinking, kid?" the cop asked. Oh Christ, he thought. He can smell that drink the last ride offered me.

"I only had one drink," he sighed, too tired to lie. "But look, sir, I was just waiting for a train."

"I think you'd better come with me," said the cop.

Godamn, he thought bitterly. Godamn it all, anyway.

"Where you from, kid?" the thick man behind the desk grunted as he wrote the boy's name in the book.

"The midwest," he answered. "Sir, can't I go back and catch my train?"

"What are you doing in Philadelphia?"

He tried to think, but the naked bulb over the desk glared in his eyes, and his head felt dizzy.

"What are you doing in Philadelphia?" the cop repeated. He stared at the cop blankly. An answer wouldn't come. "I'm booking you on a drunk charge," the cop said. "Take him away."

The one dull light stained the steel walls of the runway yellow, and the bars threw long widening shadows into his cell. "Give me your belt," said the cop in the runway. He shoved it through the bars, and then listened as the footsteps retreated down the hall and out of the room. Through the runway window he could hear the faint sound of a radio playing jazz, and now and then the blare of a car horn. The radiator hissed and knocked softly. He folded his jacket under his head and laid down on the narrow wooden slab. In his imagination, the deep shadows grew thicker and thicker until at last they smothered the light, and it was dark.

Sunday morning was grey when they opened his cell door. "Can I go now?" he asked in the hall, looking out the door and down the steps to the street.

"Hell no, kid. Got to go to court," said a cop. At the end of the hall five men from another section of the jail were waiting for the wagon.

"Don't you push me around," yelled the man with the bald, sharp skull.

"This one's a trouble maker?" asked a cop.
“Yeah, and he’s going to get his friggin’ head bust in, too,” growled the cop with the slicked hair.

“Just don’t push me around,” mumbled the sharp skull, his eyes blank and depthless as solid blue marbles.

“Just get in there and shut up,” snarled the cop, pushing the man out the door and toward the wagon.

“This is a free country, isn’t it? I can talk when I want to, can’t I? I know my rights.”

“Get in and shut up,” bellowed the cop, kicking the man awkwardly up to the wagon so he scraped his bald head against the top of the door. “All right, hurry it up,” the cop beckoned. As the boy followed the others into the truck he could hear the deep, hollow sound of a tower clock striking the hour in the still, morning air. It was seven.

The truck rolled noiselessly through the quiet streets. “Colored folks are all right,” sharp skull was saying. “Some real nice fellows I’ve known were colored.” The four negroes were growing uneasy.

“He’s going to get us all in trouble if he don’t be quiet,” one of them said.

“Anyone got a smoke?” the little man with the sweating cheeks asked as the boy took out a pack of cigarettes. There were just six left, and they were all looking at him now. He passed the pack around, then the matches, and the men smoked in silence as the smoke rose up like moist mist and clung to the roof.

The truck stopped in the back of the courthouse, and the prisoners were hustled into another cell. In the weak light that filtered through the high, meshed window, he could see men crowded in together on the benches of four inner cells and others standing or squatting in the enclosed runway. Four or five were sleeping on the grimy cement, a floor half flooded by the leaking faucet; and, in a corner, an old, bare-chested derelict was muttering softly to himself.

The boy slouched back against the wall and thought about food. It had been almost twenty hours since a ride had bought him a hamburger, and the hunger was now a shaking nausea that gnawed at his stomach and hurt in his head. The door lock clanked several times, and more prisoners were brought in. Later, there were still more.

Somebody said it was after one. A huge, shivering negro with a wedge shaped head was bawling his hunger. “Let us out so we can get some food,” he howled.

“And so I says to this cat: ‘Man, you got joint on your breath and roaches in your pants cuff. Clean up, man, clean up.’”
“Here I was just brewing the sternover—”

“Sterno, you idiot.”

“And who should come mincing up but these two broads, just like they could smell it, see . . .”

“So I said to the judge, I said, ‘Judge, you just send me up to the House of Correction, and I won’t bother you no more.’ Shid, you get a bed, three meals, and television. Shid, it gets cold outside these days.”

“All I was doing was sitting there on my girl’s door step, and along comes the red wagon and picks me up. It’s getting so you can’t sit on your doorstep without being picked up,” moaned the young man with a press in his pants.

The door clanked open, and the little officer with glasses over his pinprick eyes scowled at the prisoners. “Who wants to wash my car?” he snapped. Someone volunteered, and then others volunteered to mop the floors. The door closed and opened again. “Hey, kid . . . Yea, you. Come over here. I got a job for you,” the little cop said, leading the boy out into the court room.

The boy worked down the brass rail, buffing off the wax. Just as he finished, the judge completed some paper work. “All right, bring in the drunks,” said the judge. The cop with pinprick eyes went back down the hall, and then they came; forty-five men, they came shuffling, limping, staggering, coughing.

“All right,” said the judge, as soon as the group was assembled before him. “Who’s got a dollar bill they want to donate to the Heart Fund?” The young man with a press in his pants walked up to the desk and dropped a bill in the little tin can. “Okay, go home,” said the judge. “Now who’s got fifty cents they want to donate? Nobody’s got fifty cents? We’ve got lots of room for you up at the House of Correction . . . All right, who’s got a quarter for charity? Okay, go on home. Go on home. Okay. Okay. Okay. Any of the rest of you got any money at all? Okay. Go ahead. Go ahead. Save some money for carfare. Go ahead.” The judge looked out over the group still waiting. “You, you in the overcoat. You look like a nice man. Go on home. You can go too. You too. And you, and you, and you.”

The boy stood by the rail and watched while the judge finished dismissing the prisoners. Damn it, he still hasn’t pointed my way, he thought. “Why doesn’t he point to me?” When the last man drifted out the door, the little cop focused his pin-prick eyes on the
brass rail and smiled. "You didn't do a very good job," he said pleasantly. "Polish it over again."

"You want some money for the Heart Fund?" the boy choked stepping up to the desk with the dime and two pennies.

"Yeah, let him go," said the judge. "Save enough for carfare, kid."

He walked out the door, jumped off the steps, and started up the long, deserted street. The sun behind the blanket of grey cloud looked like a dim flashlight wrapped in dirty gauze, and a cold gust of wind scuffled newspapers down the shadowy gutters. Water dripped from the overhanging elevated, the low moan of an auto horn sounded faraway, and across the street in a vacant lot a small boy was bouncing a ball against a windowless building. Now I will get something to eat, he thought confidently, and tomorrow I will get a job. But in the back of his mind was a thought he wanted to fight off, to forget: This new city, this Philadelphia on Sunday is like no other place on earth; it is so big, so very empty.

Rescue...

To the night belongs a fragile stillness;
It could be Death in miniature.
Life creeps forth in the delicate light
Of a trivial firefly.
Its insignificant gleam, when seen,
Becomes an exquisite lamp,
Soothing a lonely, frightened man
Charmed by its skipping, subtle grace,
Enraptured by its winking light.

... Bryce Forester