Those
a novel in progress

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Preface

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Those: a novel in progress has manifested itself through a series of difficult, unwelcomed learning experiences related to poverty and hatred, and a series of welcomed learning experiences which I created for myself with the help of various people and programs at North Central College. While I never lived in poverty, I have certainly been directly and sometimes harshly effected by its gritty presence.

A 3-D life with rich depth and sometimes sharp edges...

Life on a small, declining family farm taught me about need and the importance of community in fostering this need. This is where I gained feelings toward the theme of the novel.

My intellectual development in the novel was facilitated first by the IDS sequence. As I studied the changes of ideas through history, I became increasingly interested in the rise and fall of social movements. Dr. Fran Navakas's "feminist perspective" class had the most profound impact on the initial development of the novel when I began to question who was really in need of social movement and where the movement should go. I noticed a historical disengagement of the lower economic class in the latter part of social movements.

This seems to be problematic, I think.

With the fresh and exciting idea for Those, I began to research social movements, conflict in changing societies, and otherness. An independent study in the "understanding social movements" with Dr. Lou Turner began this new sequence of learning. The sequence also included various research trips to the city and a trip to Northern Ireland in which I studied conflict in a society engaged in social change. The capstone of my research has been in the IDS 490 seminar on "tolerance, respect, recognition, and loyalty."

Writing the novel has been rich, wonderful, and exhausting. It has been both educational and humbling. Gene has traveled with me everywhere I have gone since his creation, and we have seen a world as painful and beautiful as the setting I have tried to create in the novel. We hope you enjoy the reading as much as we have enjoyed the writing.
Those

_a novel in progress_

_by Jackie Mitchell_
THOSE

I am -- Chapter I

I am dirty. I am losing. I am weak and flawed. I am poor, without, and empty. I am drinking, getting high, and addicted. I am alone and scared. I am needy, needing, and unneeded.

I am overreacting and dramatic. I am jumping to conclusions as usual. I am denouncing, ignoring, and apathetic. I am sick. I am tired and I am sick and tired. I am tired of me, you, and especially us. I am dying. I am malignant and giving up.

I am hiding and fighting. I am lighting a joint. I am raping. I am murdering, and I am masochistic. I am assuming way too much and I am arrogant. I am lost, searching, agnostic, and unsatisfied. I am selfish, greedy, and manipulative. I am disgusted and disgusting. I am tolerated.

I am numb.

I am wishing and hoping and, I can guarantee you I am expecting too much. I am missing the point and I am wordy.

Because I am. I. am.

For Free -- Chapter II

Someone must have died. I've got these two quilts that've got to be heirlooms with all their browns and blues, sketchy calicos and tiny diamonds. Magma offers me all sorts of stuff that's never claimed by his patrons. I make out best when people pass on. I even get my unders
from Magma. Would you believe that some folks'll get even their unders dry-cleaned? My second layer of long unders is still warm and starched from the ironing press like a toasty fabric waffle, hugging tight to my skin.

HOT OFF THE PRESS: STARCHED UNDERS. That's what I say to Magma.

He doesn't hand me the stuff. He just leaves it on the back door stoop here for me. That's what's just alright about Magma; he doesn't got to look me in the eyeballs to feel like he's doin the right thing. Probably don't even constitute it "the right thing." With Magma, it's just the thing.

With Magma, it's just the thing to do.

I suppose it could be his school that gave him his way. Of course, his degree isn't official here. Not a "lettered" kinda study, they say. Better to study Comp than say Marketing or something. He says that they got a "greater" in Supermarketing but it's in the Planet Sustainability division, sorta Biology. Comp is in the Community division, like a Sociology of sorts. He did his "lesser" in Empathy, but his "greater," his real discipline, is the study of Compassion. This is how he goes by "Magma." "Magma" is sort of a "Dr." epithet for him back at home. He says that I couldn't do the maneuvers with my mouth that's required to say his real name, so I'm to just call him "Magma Comp." Magma for short. He looks like most folks, so people just think that his
name is of some foreign origin or something. Like the vet-who-didn’t-
wanna-come-home’s kid. They don’t bother him much or ask questions
about where he’s from. They just go there and get their unders pressed.

We see each other, though. He sometimes gets extra gumbo soup
at lunch so as we can share. He comes and sits on the stoop with his fat
saffron gloves on and slurps from his spoon, and I slurp from mine. I tell
him to go on in to the warm usually, but he persists that the soup’s just
better out in the cold. Says you can smell it more because it’ll float on
up into your nostrils while you slurp it in.

Keeps the snot from freezing, too, I tell him, on the frigid days.

We don’t talk much. Just share soup mostly. Sometimes, stew.
Sometimes, when it’s all broth and no gumbo, we stew about the soup.

Met him just because he’s got the best stoop for a houseless man.
The dry-cleaners got vents that blow out warm air. It’s almost like
having a woodstove with one of them blasting side blowers. Difference
between a dry-cleaner and a restaurant, though, is that you’re not
having to smell kitchen cooking. You just smell ripe, sweet laundries.
Like the smell of cold, only warm. Reminds me of Jane hanging sheets.

Jane’s my wife. She’s dead now. She’s still my wife, though. She’s
walks with me everyday when I do my chores. She’s right down in the
pocket of my Roo’s tennis shoes. You see, I carry her band with me
down there where no one will think to steal it. I have since her fingers
got too spare to wear it. We didn’t wanna misplace the ring of silver.
We'd lost enough. We had the secret of the universe though. Still do. Don’t need nothing if you has got the secret of the universe.

I guess there’s no sense in being tight-lipped about it. We got love. Need each other because of it and not the other way around.

We’re going on down to the 616th block to shovel some walkways here a bit later. First I’m gonna lay these two quilts out for a bed cushion, though, so I’m not on the cold asphalt. Magma puts the garbage here so nobody pesters my sleeping nook. Then I take it out in the mornings for him while he’s busy pressing them professional suits for the professionals before they hurry off to their chores. I take my backpack, though, in the case that I might need my lip wax. I take the backpack and the shovel-rake.

I carried the shovel for protection mostly when Jane and I had to leave. We didn’t have no weapons of sorts, so I took the shovel and a set of bellows.

I remember looking around, thinking what’d we need to come through wherever we was going, and I just kept on seeing things on shelves, all shiny, and Jane, all lackluster, and a big ole pitcher of heavy-headed blossoms, and a crystal bowl of perfumed dead leaves and cobs and lantern seeds, and the big shovel and bellows by the woodstove. I don't know how I was anticipating to use the bellows, but I just thought about air and fire and heat and how they was important and I grabbed the shovel and the bellows and Jane and left.
Then a spell later, Gerry from the variety store threw out this red rake head on a broken wood shaft, same size as my shovel shaft. So I just unscrewed it, hewed a corkscrew on this other end of the shovel, and twisted her right on. Now I rake in the fall and shovel in the winter. Pays the community bill so to speak -- keeps Jane and me in good company on the 616th block. I've got no house, but sorta have a big home this way.

Jane was the keeper of the bellows. They got stolen that first night she was gone. Dead. No air left in her. Just pulled in sort of hollow like an empty gas can. We didn't use them anyhow. I don't miss them. The bellows.

Jane is magnificent like a suncatcher. Hair like raisins dripping with molasses, she just sends colors about her. She's the type that would get people talking in a friendly way on the electric line, just by sitting near a window. Cheeks all brown but yellow, like butter on toast, she's just a shiny penny on the walkway, all shooting light back at you, telling you, "Pick me up, put me in your pocket, and let me be your good luck." Little rainbow in my pocket, I love her. Like a swirly marble on a concrete flat, boy, I love her. Nobody gonna draw a chalk circle around Jane, though. She'd just roll on away outta there shooting her colors about to blind her captors. She'd catch that sun and just ride with the rays, fast as light, my Jane. She's probably riding them rays, all color-shooting like she does. Now.
You'd think she was snow white, onyx, and chrome if you saw her.

I see her face in this ring head. I take it out the pocket of my Roo's and just look at it sometimes, usually at twilight. I sorta turn it against the sky and she shoots out her colors and sparks on the streetlights. You can hear every little flash "ping" as it strikes the filaments on. Boy, and when those streetlights come on she's a flash fire rainbow.

We'll walk down and shovel some before dark, I suppose. We got this plump measure of snow dumped on us this last week and it needs clearing. Why, with the parade this week coming, all sorts of folks will need the yard chair space. I don't know why they bother; they'll all stand anyhow like they always do in this cold. A bunch of brittle old thermometers, they'll just fix themselves upright showing everyone just how cold it is – shaking and quaking like they don't have some place warm to go back to after the merriment. Just the same, I guess they need to room to stand in front of their yard chairs, so we'll go shovel for them.

I like to see people out mixing like that in the cold anyways. They get themselves just a little closer than usually. Even strangers. They don't feign like they just touched a leper if they brush against some person they never encountered before. Strangerness isn't a sickness when it's real cold and you got to be out in it.

They got to be out in it. The 616th block, they take the parade earnestly down here. And if you aren't noted out here, someone's gonna
come and see just why not. It's a mandatory parade. It's people's way of declaring, "We'll be damned if we can't make accommodation to be a community one day out of the year."

And the people accommodate.

Even Graham and Maggie shut off the Internet machines and facsimile devices and come out for a spell. They probably know they'd spend more time explaining why they wasn't at the parade than time going to the parade. And they sure do have the notion that time is money and money is time and that there is some way out of that. They get on their skiing clothes, get a out-of-district babysitter, and go on out for their thirty minutes. They snuggle up to one another and even some others a little too.

Graham and Maggie is the only people on the 616th block that won't let me shovel their walkway. I tell them I just wanna be neighborly, but they think since I don't got a house that I'm not a neighbor.

"Gene, thanks for what you're trying to do here, but, uh, we don't need your services."

Don't need my services.

The snow must not fall on their walkway.

I just did it once cause it wasn't cleared, and they kept trying to give me some dollars. I told them that I don't charge for being neighborly and I sniggered, but they just said that I shouldn't do that again. I guess
I won't snigger in their company. Now, they pay their summer
lawnmower man from the 598th block to blast the snow right off the
walkway. They just feel like someone working that way should be paid.

Maybe they just can't rest well knowing I shoveled for free.

I can't rest well knowing they don't want me to shovel.

The **CAGED** -- Chapter III

Ugly folks came hollering down the main way like someone just cut
off their tails.

You've got your marching band just bellowing some old ragtime
number, and the Miss Missy of the town propped up in a sports vehicle,
sort of smiling like she was crying real hard. May well have been. The
parade's just wiggling and jiving its way down the main way like normally
and then, why, all you can hear is...

"BEAUTIFUL BITCH! WHAT'S INSIDE? FUCKING NOTHING! YOU
DECIDE!"

I was considering, "Mercy on us all, what could be the bother to get
them all hot and lunatic to yell such a number to the Miss Missy? She's
just trying to fix her mouth in a pleasant way?" I can't imagine just how
they thought up to spend a numb-cold day yelling at a pretty girl. They
all had on black sweaters and shirts, black pants, black shoes, black
belt, suspenders, earmuffs, hats, gloves, buttons, probably unders. Why,
anything they might have needed to wear.
Black dispositions.

They was wrapped like they was allergic to rainbow.

And ugly. Their mouths all gaping and spitty from the hollering, they looked like they was just throwing up hate from the gut. They hammered the pavement with their feet. Like their stomping made people think what they was saying was the importantest thing they ever heard. Most of the yelling folks had white skin, but no pink rose in their cheeks like most people's.

No color rose.

They seemed to hoot all the oxygen right on out of their veins till they was the bluish-white of skim milk or goat cheese. They was sweating and cold and wore the dull finish of fluorescent lights.

Boy, they sure was hooting. They was hooting like the angry folks at a city forum who are real fiery, but don’t know just what they’re trying to say – just know they got a driving need to say it before they pop like a kernel. Colic tykes, all haggard and going on their umpteenith hours of suffering.

I just about sniggered and asked what the Sam’ Hill’ was so disturbing, but I just thought to my own self that I should just blend with the townspeople. No sense in getting’ between fighting dogs, I always say. This is a good war to wear camouflage. A good war to wear camouflage, like most.
More frightful than dogs, even. Why, if dogs is rabid, they don’t got the smarts and will to get others biting, too. Mad dogs don’t get in packs like mad people do.

So there they was, just hammering with their feet ... BEAUTIFUL BITCH! WHAT’S INSIDE? FUCKING NOTHING! YOU DECIDE! And here I was, trying not to laugh at how nutty it was. But then I would regard the Miss Missy having to hear them; then it wasn’t funny in the slightest. It was downright tragic and peculiar. It was strange that they was so riled up about not looking a kind of way.

They exhibited a white banner with big black block letters saying, “The Coalition for the Advancement of the Genetically challengED.” They had the letters CAGED real dark and fat so as everyone on the 616th block could see. Everyone could see just how bad their strife was for being ugly.

They was CAGED.

Come to think of it, it wasn’t it a bad designation, them foaming like they was and sort of nutty. People watched them just like they was a real flimsy circus act, like the terriers that will jump over a cane, but the trick ain’t worth their getting whipped. People sort of laughed, then didn’t. They sort of looked at each other’s eyes so as to see if anyone knew just why they was still clapping. Lots of people just stopped cause it didn’t look like the kind of thing you’d be in favor of. Why, then the old
ringmaster would step in and try to justify just how hard it was to jump a cane.

Before people had to decide what was going on, the CAGED was hammering around the corner, spitting their poison at the Miss Missy. And once they was out of the front-way view of the spectators, people just uncovered the tikes’ ears, hunched and adjusted a little, and looked hard the other way right past the Lions Club on down to the fire buggies.

People whispered to their neighbors, some I don't think they was well aquatinted with, "Outrageous." Or "Why didn’t someone stop that early on?"

I caught a little, "That was odd."

Young folks uttered, “Okay?”

One big fella said, “They ought to be arrested, coming out bitching like that. Ungrateful sonsabitches.”

I don't know if they was sonsabitches, but they wasn't all that ugly that they have mission to stomp and yell in the 616th block parade with their challenged genes. I guess I don’t mind that they was hollering the ugly words, but I’m not sure they had defense to fire at the Miss Missy like they did. Only reason she probably looked prettier was cause she was trying to be pleasant.

They was just squeezing their ugly to the surface, that’s all.

Grease oozing out a roasting chicken.

Hot and sweating, while the core’s got to still be froze and hollow.
The story of the parade's got more to it than that though, and I ought to not let the story go untold.

Shouldn't ever permit the pretty of the story go untold for sake of the ugly.

The parade wasn't all about people feeling caged. More people was just downright chilled like stiff old frostbitten, freezer fish. Cold as a carcass on parade day. People stood in front of their yard chairs, just like I had suspect they would. Kids tunneled under the rows of empty yard chairs, though, so the walkway space wasn't used up in vain. Down on their pillow palms and knob-knees they just shuffled across that concrete like it wasn't frigid as a iceberg.

The marching band walked all sketchy trying to keep their icy pants from touching their bare legs. The lips of the brass division puckered like frosty purple prunes frozen right to the bowls of their mouthpieces. The Miss Missy held her legs squeezed together, with a afghan wrapping them like they was bandaged. Not to say she wasn't injured. But anyway, her smooth black skin was frosty, but her cheeks was a pink like she was burning hot instead of freezing cold. I was hoping to see her sash so as I know what they call her, but it must have hung under a black coat that was fit and trim at her waist. I don't know just what they really call her now. There was some confrontation about the correctness of her designation some years back. I just deem her the
Miss Missy so as folks know who I am referring to. No offense in that, I’d wager.

Lions Club couldn’t run the little spitting cars in the cold, so they just walked. Didn’t stir people much, just walking. Folks found it to be a right time to thank me for the shoveling of the walkways.

I found it a right time to thank them for the letting me.

They talked on and on about just how cold noses, ears, and toes was, and I remembered just how glad I was to be without toes this time of year. They get too cold just once and you don’t got to mind them anymore. Just the fingers and ears.

Just hurts once to get rid of them.

Folks in community helped pay the amputation bill before the cut off date.

Gerry told me, “Gene, we’re just refunding for all that shoveling you wouldn’t let us pay you for past winters.” Nurses thought they was doing me quite the service by bringing me a tray of food. They was feeding the houseless guy. They must think that houseless is the same as foodless. The corn tasted like they soaked it in a dirty ocean for a time. Like they hollowed the corn out of the kernel and swelled it with salt water. They took care of me right well, but didn’t do me any service with food.

Magma sneaked me in some Gumbo. Took care of that.
They was all concerned with the state of my balance, cause “Gene, you’re toes are just all-important in your balancing,” but they didn’t get it just right. I had some trial learning to walk right, but I’d had hardship learning to do a whole of slew of things, so this was not catastrophic.

I’d tell them, “If you start thinking losing your toes is unfavorable, try losing yourself a sweet Jane. That’s when you’ll lose your bearings. And your marbles.” Stasis goes to coo-coo, when someone plucks your love. I’ll tell you, too, because it is important, I fell more and harder when I lost my Jane than I did when they nipped my toes.

The biggest adjusting I underwent was lightening the load in my backpack when I lost the toes. The way I figured, I could only have as much weight in the backpack as I had in the “frontpack,” my paunch. So I pared down my goods and ate more. Before anyone could criticize my rigid and wobbly walking, I had found a sort of scale-measured balance.

I carted just the right amount in my belly.

I reserved just what I really required in by backpack.

I ascertained how to shift my weight against the shovel-rake.

And, God blessed, I kept balance.

Excuse me -- Chapter IV

Shuddering down the electric line, you can discern the ways of the world like you was reading the paper every day. I nestle myself in the
back boxcar facing straight on out the back window when there’s prospect to. A tan plastic double seat cradles my bottom and I aim right out the back Plexiglas window so as I can watch the present location jiggie right into the past.

I just gape out that muddy window and listen.

You can ramble all day and hear mostly nothing.

People turn their newsprint pages and then it goes like this; just one person will say something and it usually starts with “Excuse me.”

Today he said it because he had a puppy almost grown on a leash, and the little whelp just started licking this lady’s thick black leg, right through her nylon stockings. Her eyes about burst from her head like they was white cannon balls popping from a black chute. She swung her head around for aim, and, I’ll tell you, she wasn’t looking at her chunk of calf. No, she was hunting for the source of wet, and she must have had suspect to believe that the source of wet was at least as tall as a person, judging by the aim of her stare.

He spun his head toward her like he’d been licked, too, by cause of her barking startle. Their swollen eyes met and they just knew, because they was both so scared, that they was alright. That’s how it is on the electric line. If you’s both scared, you’s both alright.

Then they both sunk their eyes on down to the little beagle who was suckling the nylon, then shaking its head and mouthing its tongue
like it'd just eaten a scoop of parched old peanut butter. Lapping and sucking on its own chops.

In part from her relief, I suppose, she hissed and heaved a hearty laugh that surfaced itself audible in time. And as soon as he knew she was laughing and not choking on herself, he found himself at ease enough to snigger, too. And, that little pup corkscrewed its head at the windy hiss that steamed out of the woman's horselaugh. Nearly turned its small noggin right upside down trying to figure the source of that gasping whistle. Its beefy ears hung, one over its face, and the other like a slab of bacon while it twisted its head all kiddywampus. Little wind-up was still slapping his chops, too.

"Excuse me."


"Excuse me. I'm sorry, she, she just licks like that. Everything. She licks my shoes, my hamper, my... my breakfast. She just... well, she licks a lot. I'm really sorry. Can I... I'm really sorry."


"Come here. You come on over here. Come here, girl. I think it's time I held on to you. Oh God, I am so embarrassed. I'm so sorry. I..."

"You... Hiss. Hiss. Hiss. Hhyyeeeee. You, you... Hhyyeeeee."

"I'm sorry. Are you okay? Gosh, really, you... are you okay?" he laughed.
She took in a breath that popped people’s ears in the boxcar. 
Exhale. “yes, yes. I am fine, but . . . hhhhwooo . . . you have NO need to apologize.”

The “NO” resonated through that steel car into the popped ears of the passengers like they’d just come up from underwater. I tell you, it was a jovial “NO” like the “ho ho ho” of Saint Nicholas, and people picked their heads up from their daily newspapers and looked in the direction of their seat neighbors out of the top of their eyes..

They smiled at people they don’t know. 
They shot each other the kind of smile that is jeering and jealous at the same time, like folks smile when a youthful couple gets carried away in a friendly way at a public site.

They smiled like they wanted to be doing what she was doing without being who she was being.

“Well, okay, you’re right. Maybe I don’t need to apologize, but . . . but, I am, because, well, I am.”

He was embarrassed as carrots in a potato bin. Blood pumped on into his head like it was mercury rising on into a bulb.

Funny thing is, he wasn’t the person to prompt people’s talking on the electric line. He just carried his self on over away from people his little dog might lick.
The lady just sat there trying to contain all of her bubbling, but she'd belch up a Hhyeeeeee. Eyes screwed shut. Upper body shaking up and down. Train shaking from side to side.

It was really something else to watch her because she bounced right in front of me and I could see a whole herd of people just rattling from side to side behind her, all looking at her like she was a little crazy for being happy by herself. She was like an old cow crooning to the moon in the back of a stockyard truck trailer with stiff old cows tottering behind. Just bouncing up and down with her trying to control her sniggering.

Bodies moving side to side with straight old faces.

Her moving up and down with the corners of her grinning, stiffened mouth.

She couldn't see them, and it's just as well, if you ask me. It probably wouldn't have been any nevermind to her, but I liked that, from my view, she sort of looked like she was leading them all.

But I guess I'm seeing things from the back of the train.

Anyhow, this is how the talking starts on a electric line. Someone says, "Excuse me." I ride the line all day, when I get privilege to get on, so I know real well how the conversations go. I ride all day because I feel it's right to grab onto the opportunity when I have it. Today I chanced upon a ticket, checked its value, and it had some and that's how I got on.
Truthfully, I found the ticket last night, but didn’t want to waste the day on the night, so I waited to board till today.

Then, I waited in the near back till the rumble seat opened up.

I settled myself there.

I slept.

I hummed “Buttons and Bows” till people started shifting in their seats a little, like I was a loony person.

I stopped.

I decided that it wasn’t any of their nevermind if I hummed.

I started again.

They shifted.

They talked like crazy is the same as deaf.

I stopped so they knew it wasn’t.

They stopped talking all together.

I started up again.

I stopped for my own self.

Eventually a whole turnover of people was on and we did it all again. This went on till the noon mealtime I suppose. I let be when the woman got her leg licked around noon because people got to talking about something other than my humming “Buttons and Bows.”

Happy really coordinates with cracked on the electric line.

Like I said before, it wasn’t the conversation between the lady and the dog owner that got people to sharing words. It happened a spell later
when the people on the line was watching her like she was from the bin. Another lady went on over and sat right in the seat beside her, even though there was four other empty seats in the boxcar. It was a action of much confidence here. In a electric line boxcar, people will mostly shift cars to not have to make company with a neighbor. Got to fill up every other seat, like they was in a picture theater.

But she just roosted right by her, and because she did everyone new that it was deliberate. They had to look at their own unfriendliness right in the faces of the two women who weren't alone despite everyone else's sitting by themselves.

"Excuse me. Where should I get off this line if I need to connect with the yellow line?"

"Well, you need to get off at the Reynolds stop." She hushed for a bit, then stood up and continued. "But if you look here at this map, I'll show you how it works. You see this is the blue line we're on."

"Yes, I've got that much." They both laughed and folks on the line looked at one another like they was thinking "here we go again."

I thought, "Oh Lord Jesus! Let the world come to a bitter halt if people get to laughing together on the electric line!" Then I started laughing to myself.

People got to thinking they was even more normal.

"Well, if you look here, it crosses the yellow and it's labeled 'Reynolds'. Now, this is important. So long as it has a dot like this, you
can get off one and on the other without paying more. That make sense?"

"Yes, thank you so much."

They sat back down by one another with a little trouble. They swaggered. The newcomer didn’t quite have her “L” legs yet. They sat with they’re selves all pulled in safe, but comfortable. I like when new people get on the electric line and haven’t learned the unwritten riding rules yet. They just talk and sit by people even though they are just bringing all attention to themselves.

"Do you take the L everyday?" The lady asked the crazy person.

"Yes, to the Burton stop everyday and then some three or four others." Then she exhaled another, "Every day."

"How’s that you ride so often?"

"I work as a health inspector for restaurants in the whole metro area. So I go here and there." They sat facing straight ahead, then she continued, "I’m what you’d call a rainbow rider, cause I ride all of the colors. See my card."

"I guess I asked the right person about where to go, huh?" They both smiled again.

I’ll be damned if this isn’t just one of my favorite things ever.

"Yep, I’m the rainbow rider. That’s what I call myself."

She looked downright like a "rainbow rider." It was a proper title.

She brought me hope.
They didn't say much else, but other people started talking some. This is how it starts.

Then there wasn't much else neither lady needed to say to the other after that. Wet leg, crazy lady said "bye" to the virgin rider, that's all.

But what's just the greatest thing is that people kept to their talking when both of those ladies was gone. People came in and out of the boxcar shuffling, adjusting, switching seats and leaving, but since people was talking, people kept talking. And because people was moving, people kept moving.

People was. People kept.

Then, why, at some point it all stopped and we was back to still, shuddering quiet.

People wasn't.

I guess I don't mind the quiet much. It's a right place to think. Not too quiet like a church. Tired beams'll cackle at your thoughts in the spirit's house and send you looking in all directions but the one your looking for. Not too occupied, though, like a penitentiary with pans and mirrors and echoes. Can't think with echoes. You just repeat yourself to get back to where you were, then you're echoing along with the pans and "damns."
Yes, I like the electric line, and when I get a ticket, I use it sufficiently. Got to make use of good thinking sites. Got to have your head good and clear for when it really needs stretching room.

Head yawns.

On this electric line, in this back seat I can face out into a black tunnel. I get to send all my clouded thoughts right out the back like stumbling exhaust and I get to see them white and clear for a breath against a sucking black hole. The coal black siphons out my brain while we rattle forward. It'll suck in my stare, too, till I'm hypnotize by hooped iron beams and panting orange lights that drain into themselves as I transit away. I'll wake to my eyes being parched and sucked dry. The little acorns in my sockets make me blink like I got to pop off the two nappy caps.

The shake's just fluid enough for concentration. Stop screeches move me from one tenet to the next. My ideas move with the people. Some get off board when they get where they're needing to go. Some linger for a few stops. Some notions snore in the back from 6:30am till the shadow-eyes drift on beneath fat hoods.

Some jump to the tracks to fry. Unwanted in such deliberation.

Today I got to thinking about those people.

Those people's been getting on and off the boxcar since this morning. Those business people wear rigid suits that don't render them
flexibility, and even though the professional suit don’t cover the neck, their necks fix upright and tense, straight on ahead. They go in lines and all have dollar signs and diamonds in their eyes. Cold without their jackets. A man in a matted old insulated coat with elbow pads told his seat companion about those business people. Says he just can’t understand them.

Those business people don’t understand him none either, though. I heard a professional lady in a lady’s work suit say it, that those people ought to just get a job. It’s not like there’s not jobs out there. Pull themselves up with their bootstraps. Funny thing is, the guy with elbow pads ain’t even got laces in his steel toes.

Steel toes is real cold when you got to be out in the chill. Like ice melting around your feet and toes, then freezing back up again in all the groves till it cracks from the throbbing.

She made clear just how she had to work her way up, though, and I won’t question that. I won’t question if her feet’s throbbed.

Thinking about my Jane makes me know quite sure that cold throbbing in the toes, or where they used to be, is better than cold throbbing in the heart. Where it used to be. My heart’s still here in my barrel, under my bent old ribs, I guess, but it feels borrowed. I still know I’m the rightful owner, but I just can’t have it always right when I need it. It feels like there’s a sparkling case here for its return, like someone blew a bubble and let it freeze, so my heart’d have the grandest iridescent
casing. A frozen bubble feels downright vacant and cold, though, no matter how grand and pearly.

I lose my breath and try to take in bitter air sometimes but can't. I feel that empty chill, know that I just need air, but can't get it. I gasp different, though, when I need a breath of Jane. I try to pull in all the color and the sunshine. I just try to fill myself with the look of a dragonfly wing and the heat of its veins. The world will just look this way on some days, like the air is especially cold on this particular day of the winter season.

Somehow I will get the breath I need when it's cold.

It sets off my balance, though, when I feel vacant. I regularly have to take a soup can out of my backpack to get my balance. Just carrying the can in my hands will set me right till I can walk on flat feet again with the can in my sack.

Makes me believe downright that there's a mass to love -- sort of a varying mass that's really heavy and tiring some days. Other days it's so much lighter than air it'll make you swell and rise and snap all the ropes that hold you down.

Those business types. Those people who won't just get jobs. Those kids. These days. Those sick sons-a-bitches. The boxcar was full of those people. Those men. Those rabid women.

Those lazy bums on the street.

I wonder how those people would have designated Jane.
They’d have said, “that.” That Jane.

I wonder what they designate themselves.

Those CAGED hammered into each boxcar and obliged the whole cars’ focus. In the front of each boxcar, a person in all black stood with a hand full of gray leaflets and boy did ours go on. I could see her fellows behind her through the windows and they repeated themselves through each window. Her, replicated in facing powder room mirrors. An infinite reflection of CAGED persons.

She swung the leaflets around like she was trying to conduct a symphony with a flaccid old wand that couldn’t keep count no matter how good the conductor. Her duplicates echoed the motion behind her.

But we didn’t hear any music.

Just the same old song.

“Could I humbly have your attention please?”

Just the same old rattling.

“Will we, with clear conscious, let the injustice continue?”

I should hope not.

“Can you sit there and allow blatant discrimination to determine the future of an entire subset of people who are flawed (she threw up fingered quote signs) only in their genetic make-up.”

Those ugly people.

“Who will stand up for you when your soft skin hardens?”
Soft?
“Who?”
Soft?
“Who I ask?”
What?
“Who will lift you to your feet when they are retaining water?”
Well...
“And when your thighs exceed the satisfactory size? When you have bags under your eyes?”
You guys? I laugh out loud. She doesn’t like laughing. Or me. Or me laughing.
“Look here. Look at this man. He is worn. He is tired. He is laughing only because he knows the ill effects of the tragedy that I describe.”
Me? Is she speaking about me like I’m not here? “She knows it,” I say and laugh again, amused by my own wit.
“All I ask is that you join with us in the fight against this disgusting disease, discrimination. Fight for the rights of the sore-to-your-sight. Fight for yourself. Don’t let your equality be stolen by a beautiful (finger quotations) minority whose power is stored in their cheekbones and silicon implants. Escape the cage of this hateful rage of the endowed walking on the internally beautiful.”
Her hand was on my shoulder. Her duplicate’s hands were on folk’s shoulders.

“Take this. Share this leaflet with your genetically challenged friends and unite with us in envisioning a world without discrimination. A world where you can work where you want to work despite your weight. Despite your breast size. Despite how your face happened to take shape. Unite in teaching the world that (she closed her eyes) ugly can be beautiful.”

Rattle.

“Finally, I request one more humble action of support for the **CAGED**. Join us in wearing black to mourn the death of the soul. Show that you are grieved by the fact that your clothes, your shape, and your shell have defined your being. Grieve with us in black till we can resurrect the beautiful souls that have been starved in an unfair world.”

I'm hungry.

“This seemingly insignificant action could lead to the necessary awareness we need. I have no petition for you to sign . . .”

Yet.

“. . . But I do encourage you to show your support by wearing black to show the world that your clothes don’t make your man or woman.” She concluded with her head bowed at the instant the electric line train screeched to a halt, and she exited while handing a humble stack of leaflets to the passengers with her mourning infinite counterparts.
The train rattled on without them.

Amen.

"East is east. West is west, and the wrong one I have chose. Let's go where I'll keep on wearing those frills and flowers and buttons and bows, rings and things and BUTTONS AND BOWS!"

"Excuse me, you want to shut-up, please."

"Sorry, didn't mean to cause you trouble, sir."

"Stick it up your ass, crazy fuck."

I smile and nod to the gentleman. His soul's likely dying and he's in mourning. This "excuse me" won't prompt electric line friendly conversations, though. It'll prompt the contrary, likely, because no one wants to be Crazy Fuck. Stops the smiles altogether, too, because, like I say, happy coordinates with cracked on the electric line.

The back window sucks all the crazy out though and Jane and I rest and think some. I get to sliding my feet backward and forward on the lined rubber matt to make some noise, because it's too hushed here since the guy said "Crazy Fuck." I slide my feet to the melody I shouldn't get to humming. This is a war to wear camouflage.

When I get to staring out the Plexiglas I start to forget there's people because my ideas seem big enough to fill up the boxcar. But, then, I see a number of them amazing workers in their reflector jackets down in the tunnel. They sort of light up like orange fireflies that streak
out into black again. I can't fancy working in a black tunnel, not knowing what's coming. You get the feeling they never think about the trains that've already passed. They probably only think about the one's coming or blasting by at that moment. They learn to fix things in a hurry, I bet, with the notion that more trains are coming.

I wonder if the CAGED think their train is blasting by or coming. I can't help but have half a notion it's already passed and it didn't see them because they was wearing black in a black tunnel.

No telling.

This conductor person sits in a little metal booth right next to me, much resembling a cage, come to think of it. He rides half the day waiting till the back of the train is the front of the train. Every hour or so he goes from pushing to pulling. I forget he's there cause he doesn't say much of anything while he's the front and I sleep while we is going forward. I'm less interested in what's coming than what's been here on the electric line. I wake up when I hear the shift.

This shift I may stay awake even though we is going forward because the CAGED girl is on and not speaking. She's sleeping, but I like to watch her this way. She's beaming what you want to feel in a dream, even if the dream don't make any sense.

They remind me some of this group here a while back that walked through the city with big, round, yellow, cardboard smiling faces on Popsicle sticks. These fully-grown adults walked on the streets and
certainly presented their selves, but they didn’t, wouldn’t even, say a single word. No, they just walked propping up these smiling masks and no one knew quite why with the exception of them. Those smileys.

Rumor spread that they was doing some sort of sociology project. I could tell them right well what comes with big old smiling faces. Folks think you’re cracked. I bet my bonkers, too, that through them little pinhole eyes, they could see how everyone thought they was cracked.

Difference was, though ... the variable they forgot to take account of, I’m sure ... the others weren’t propping masks.

This girl, she seems quite exposed there sleeping. Real real. Her face, sort of sagging like it’s been on all day, looks downright authentic and effected. That’s one thing; you can’t mind her and not tell that she’s effected. When she came on and shared her two cents about her mistreatment, I believed her. I believe that she believes what she says she believes.

This makes it puzzling. It makes in hard for the reader.

I watched her devotees behind her and, boy, I think they meant it, too, mostly. Makes me speculate if I’ve been mistreated. Makes me ask if I’ve fallen victim to the discrimination disease.

I don’t feel ill.

Maybe I’ve always just been ill and just don’t know well.

My name is Gene.
I was just thinking that I'm not sure I introduced myself right.
Getting my head sucked dry by the black tunnel hole did something right
for you. Now you know who I am.

I've forgotten my sir name. Jane took my name when we got
married and, strange thing is, she took it when she died. I may not have
forgotten it, but I'm not just cocksure, so I'd just assume she kept it with
her. Some people say they get phantom pain after a war. I'd argue that I
got a phantom name. Even though I don't have it anymore, I still know
what it feels like:

I know that I feel like I still have a last name. I guess, factually, I
do have one; I just can't be full sure I know what it is.

I've got some ideas.

But you can remember me by my "Gene."

I opted to change my name when Jane and I wed to avoid some
hubbub, because I used to go my Jean, but a Jane and a Jean would
have cause some mailers to think we was one and the same. They'd been
right, but not for their purposes, so we made the resolution to change my
spelling.

When people got to asking questions about the change, we had a
story we'd tell them for fun. We'd tell them it was right that if one of us
had to change names that the other change, too, for fairness purposes.
We said it like it was the most serious decision we ever made. Then it
was serious just because it was our secret and we got store it in the great big context that just her and me shared.

That context was the most serious thing we had. And it's the only scrap of love that I can explain at all. Love wasn't with me or Jane. It was everything in between.

Others got real serious about it, silly as it seems, because we was serious about it, and two couples we know had conversations about their names and how they was going to change them in a way that was right. Maybe that's not so bad if they got their own piece of context out of it all.

Jane and me felt like little revolutionaries in our own time and place.

She has the name now, though, and I'm sure someday I'll know it again when it makes sense for us both to have it. There's certainly no way I can understand just why she needs it more than me now.

Maybe names is more important when you don't have a body and less important when you don't have a home. But somehow, in a cosmic sense, it all works out this way and I just don't ask why. I spend some time explaining it to the few people that get far enough to ask, but, other than that, I just think about it when the train shifts and I wake up and look out the back. It works out right well this way.

No demand for a last name, if people isn't even interested in your first.
You can see how, as it gets later, the whole make-up of the boxcar population changes. It's the cheap rate crowd, even though the fare's the same. They sit low in their seats with looming hoods shadowing themselves like awnings on "Checks Cashed Here" locations. Women pinch their purse handles till their knuckles turn white and blue as stars. I've never seen a purse being snatched here, but I get the same feeling, and all I can say about it is that it doesn't make full sense.

Most feelings is like that.

I think about how to exit in a hurry with no toes to propel me to the snappy doors. I'd just lean forward like I do against the shovel-rake and let the momentum get me out, hoping not to fall hard when I got through the doors.

Maybe I get the feelings because most of the nightriders don't need to find ways to occupy themselves. They're just confident enough to not do a thing on the electric line.

Just sit there.

Those do-nothings.

Eyes sort of meander up to check the stop, but they don't even turn their heads none.

When they get off, it's just like they don't know or care what stop we're at. They just decide that the electric train stopped right.

They seem to get off on a feeling.
A hunch.

Don't make full sense.

I sometimes get to wondering if “excuse me” would work here at night. I wonder if I said, “Hey, excuse me, are we all as nervous as me? Are we shaking in our boots for nothing?”

Then, I imagine that we'd all start to laughing like we’d uncovered the grandest mystery of them all. We'd all talk about how crazy the whole thing's been and wonder if this had ever happened before. We'd feel like camp kids discovering friendship.

I'd argue that if someone was intending to do some harm that night they wouldn't either. They'd be sort of affected and threatened by the whole mess of events, like it was too marvelous to ignore. They'd go to their sleeping place maybe wondering if it was a sign. I can't imagine someone doing harm to anyone after a ordeal like that.

Just by someone standing up and giving everyone the chance, I bet everyone could only really have the belief in themselves. Some kind of crazy driving lunatic inard thing would have to make you hurt someone after an episode like that.

You'd want to believe you was true enough to make you true.

Pulling out any weapon of sorts would be like running out and shooting someone right when you when the Colonel declares "The war is over."

It's done.
You all can stop fighting.

Bang.

Now if you tried this everyday, it wouldn't work so remarkably. Someone would catch on and let the statement be a cue for disaster, but if you only did it once, on that one night in that one electric line train, you could have yourself one real good time and maybe get someone to thinking about trusting themselves and one another.

I could just stand up once and trust them all once.

Just trust them all.

If you is both afraid, you is both alright. Right?

"HEY! Excuse me! Are we all as goosey as me? Can we just relax, or what!"

Wilting -- Chapter IV

Black's in.

I should've figured such when the CAGED got to talking about the death of my soul on the electric line some time back. Magma's hanged up some thousand or so black professional suits lately at the drycleaners. It's politically proper this way. If you wear black now, well, you don't run the risk of turning away the ugly consumers. Corporations started the changing of clothes when they did not require, but strongly counseled, all the employees to wear black just to be in the right with anyone who designated themselves officially CAGED or even officially
unpleasant looking. Corporations resolved that the bottom line can’t bottom out on account of the ugly getting on the corporations’ backs about their business wears.

Blacks the slimming shade anyhow, and people look lean and long walking down the street, blending with the streetlight poles. They look like they’ve all been squeezed out a greasy tube. Why, even if they is overweight, their pooches and pouches sort of melt into the black line.

Not everyone’s wearing the shade, though. You’ve got the corporation folks with their double breasts, walking all high on the top. Your grass roots folks show their more faded black threads. Most people in between don’t distress themselves with the color controversy, though. They just wear what they’ve been wearing like it just never meant anything and won’t now.

I guess as an issue it’s passed by most folks. Issues don’t creep by corporations, though. Sometimes, corporations make issue out of an issue before it’s even a real issue. Then, like bread with too much yeast, it swells itself right out of the bowl before it’s cooked. Black professional suits haven’t caused the big stir, though, since the color’s been deemed prudent for some time anyway. The elevated tower buildings have housed black-wearers for some time and this is just a wrinkle in a crinkle.

The goodwill shops is stocked with a rainbow assortment of the finest suits to come out of foreign countries and big cities. Racks of
clothes look like their holding all the flags of the clothes’ origins. Every color, but black, shifts to and fro while the people who is patronizing rifle through them. All the black pre-owned professional suits sold out right quickly when the big clothes changing took place here a month or so ago.

I found it a right interesting time to watch folks when the shift occurred. People who was hearing about it for the first time was my favorite. I watched at the Dearborn Café one noontime. Just sat myself on a rock bench with inscription and watched over the iron fence of the upscale dining location. People was sitting outside because it was just starting to get warm like March does. This was when a gentleman and tender lady got to talking about the rise in unit cost for garments in black and how it was just the end all in their frustrations. But, then, they was saying how they just was not at all surprised, well, with the color controversy and the rules of supply and demand and all. And, boy, that whelp of man who ate with them just squirmed in his blue suit like he was wearing red leather at a job fair.

I think that we all knew right well that they was trying to tell him something by bringing it up so non-chalantly. They was trying to tell him that blue just wouldn’t do when the money’s big and the steaks is expensive.

He wiped his hands on his linen napkin till it was creased with his sweat, and he tried to pull something out of his head to say. The other two stopped talking just long enough to make clear that the young fellow
couldn't get his tongue. Then, with a strange satisfied look on their puckered old tight little faces, they got to talking about just how the Underwood account was going.

Poor guy probably went home and changed his clothes like he'd wet his pants at school.

Magma says it's been good for business; with everyone buying resale they come and get the clothes cleaned for fear of getting lice or jiggers or something. Black shows the tiniest blemishes, too, he notions.

Then, too, I got to watching the professionals in the charity stores for entertainment for the week when there was still black suits in the shops. They slide the garments along the rack with just two fingers pinching the hanger's corner, just like they was pinching their own noses. Then, if they find something in black that pleases their taste, they act like it's some sort of mistake that it ended up in a place of goodwill.

Like goodwill is only kind of good.

Goodwill's not always generic, so they sort of look it over, then look around the room, like they was holding stolen goods. Most professional folks'll check the armpits of a jacket. They must think a lot about their own sweat, I'd say. Why else would they be thinking that other professionals before them would be ranking up the inside of their clothes?
One lady, when she went to pay for her new used jacket, said, “Oh, there’s tax? Oh, okay. I didn’t know if there be tax. I’m sorry.” She dug through her small purse for a quarter. “I didn’t know. I haven’t really ever been to a place like this.”

The old crab at the counter growled, “A place like what?”

“Well, what I meant is, I don’t usually buy clothes that have been . . . or, are used.”

“Oh.” The old crabbed laughed with her head stretched so far back that the hairs on her neck stuck straight out. Her skin was thin, gridded, and pimpily like a chicken’s. She laughed till a little bit of spit formed at the corner of her mouth and started to drip down her smile wrinkle. “A place like that.” She wiped the spit from her mouth and offered her customer some pennies with her spitty, hard hand.

That consumer lady just tapped the “give a penny, take a penny” cup, twisted her head and then her mouth till her body seemed to follow, and walked out speechless. But the finest part of this story was that she forgot the jacket on the glass counter and the old crab ran out to the street and yelled, “Hey lady! Hey, you, lady! Come in get this coat you bought. Hey, you lady. You come and get this!”

I like that part best. It was like the lady had to wear herself on her new used sleeve.
So, I spend a share of time thinking about what will happen if all of the people in the middle have to decide what to wear. I think about how people'll wrap themselves if their clothes really do make the statement.

I can't imagine that a whole slew of people would just give up colors. It'd be like people just waking up and deciding against the sunshine. People won't just be obliged to wear black if they ain't got some really driving motivation to.

Some people's going to look in the mirror and see ugly, I suppose. Maybe they'll think about all the times they haven't been treated just right and that'll be enough to start them to mourning the death of their soul. They'll find it a right time to resurrect some upset from the past maybe and scrape that jar clean of its goods. Maybe black will boost up their spines and their self-esteem.

If for no other reason, it's the slimming shade.

Some people may learn of the movement and wake up, see themselves in the mirror, and picture themselves ugly in any color but black, because they don't want to wear the colors of ugly injustice. And if discrimination against ugly is injustice, they won't take their chances. They'll slide their beautiful selves into the plainest of ordinary black clothes. They'll see themselves looking right and good just for feeling right and good.

Like seeing a lover in pajamas.
I imagine that some ugly folks just won’t want to believe in ugly. They’ll pretend like ugly never was, so they don’t have to see themselves that way. They’ll wrap up in rainbows to tell everyone that they isn’t ugly and never was. They’ll make themselves up in colors and shimmers, lipsticks and shadows, just to make sure the whole world knows that they never was ugly.

Like lovers in lingerie.

Then, the beautiful. They will just adorn themselves in all that says they’re beautiful and says they should be treated as such. They’ll gloss up their skin till they sparkle. They’ll wear leopard and fur and red and orange. If you’ve got the bootstraps, you might as well stud them with rhinestones and rubies. Shine them up right with polish, and show them off. They’ll walk like cats, stroking the air with their rolling shoulders and shifty hips.

Thin lovers in oiled skin.

I can’t think of what it’d be like if the average people got to wake up and decide. Any person who chooses to dress his self in the morning is going to have to choose a position, because he ain’t going to be able to sit the fence unless he sits it bare-behind-naked. If you dress yourself, you got to be for or against. You got to be colored or you got to be black.

I’d guess it would send people to fits, having to decide if their own self was ugly or beautiful.
Then they'd have to decide if they want others to think they is ugly or beautiful.

Then, they'd have to decide if it was uglier to support an injustice or uglier to wear black.

And would they be handsomer to be humble or handsomer to be handsome.

It'd be enough to send people to fits. More likely, though, it'd send people to the nudie villages where they wouldn't have to make up their minds.

Some folks would surely bare their outards, before they'd bare their inards.

The 616th block's still supporting the dolls. They probably don't have any notion of their statement, though, so I don't know that it counts. Only people I see really that is wearing black is Graham and Maggie. They wear their black most all the time now, but they donned it a lot before the color controversy. I see them when they're out fast-paced-walking only. They don't spend much time out of their wood house.

Not porch people.

They wear most things tight, but they usually cover themselves well with great big pull-over-your-head parkas, and they walk with their hoods up like they don't want to see anyone in their peripheral vision.
Like they would get a start from it. The hoods sort of work like old horse-blinders. They can see where they is going directly in front of them, but they don’t catch all the things on the side cause they obstructed their own views.

They just keep their steady trot to satisfy whatever’s driving them.

They used to wear yellow and orange, and they’d switch colors with the other, but now they just wear black. They look like the grim reapers with their straight faces and their purposed marches. When I’m walking toward them, I feel like I’m walking right into my very own death. Like they’ll split, each take an arm, and hike me backward to an underworld.

But they don’t.

They just pass me without a word between the two of them. They never split on the sidewalk when they are on their daily fast-paced-walks. Only change is that they sometimes clench their pumping fists a little tighter, like they is real nervous when they pass folks. Or me, anyway.

I guess I’m not most folks.

I forget that till I get to thinking about it.

Came to the 616th block in the first place today to check on the Malarys to see if they need any service. Tempra Malary has two kids, and Casper, the elder, is really sick from a deficiency of sorts. Gets sick;
then gets healthy. Then gets sick, again. She keeps her two hands full with the two children, though, and sometimes she just needs service.

Casper is probably six, if I had to guess, and Calamino is about four or five. She’s informed me that’s nine half-years.

I can’t do much in the way of medical treatment, but I offer my two good legs for walking town errands. Sometimes, the groceries could just be picked up. Or a financial reckoning letter could be dropped in the box downtown to get there in time. Sometimes service is just what it takes to make the difference between a fine day and real beater with Tempra.

She’s nice in the way that when she opens the door and sees me, she closes her eyes, takes a big huff of air into her nose, and smiles like I was roses. Like I was the sweetest thing she’s smelled this side of the city. I say, “Morning, Miss Tempra. I was out and thought you could use my service today. Could you make use of my service today?”

Most days she exhales, then says something like, “Sure can.” Or “Oh, Gene, I could.” Or, always something pleasant, though she should be out of pleasant by then oftentimes.

Miss Tempra’s got the look of a carnival. Her colors is fading, but the swirly edges are smooth and worn. She’s got red on her cheekbones, blue on her eyeballs, and yellow on her head. Her wiry hair’s usually back like a pony’s tail, but unshackled locks wind and curl like the corners of a fun house. They gesture like a finger saying “come on in” when the wind gets in them and gets them to moving.
Miss Tempra's also got the smiling disposition. Even when she's not grinning, she wears a cherry-painted smile. No lipstick, just seems that way. Looks a bit cracked and worn against her skin like it's been on more time than it should. Like it's getting just old and crusty enough to flake off and speckle her white teeth. Like blood on sheets.

You can decode from the letters and pictures in Miss Tempra's eyes that she likes what she's doing; she's just been doing it too long. Harlequin can only stumble so many times for a smile before bruises leave her swollen.

She's long like the trapeze flyer. Strong hands from hanging on. Stretched.

Wears a flower in her hat. Casper.

Pulls a red wagon for the extras. Calamino.

Difference with Tempra and the Malarys is that they met me first. I didn't begin the introduction. When I was getting used to pushing the shovel without the use of my toes, I'd slip to my chest and face sometimes and have to prop myself back up on my small feet. This day when I first encountered them, I was leaning against the shovel-rake, scurrying forward with a fast pace from all of my unbalanced momentum and the shovel edge caught a rock, frozen hard onto the walkway, and the old shovel-rake just stopped like it'd hit a meat truck.

I didn't stop.
When my feet went to sliding out behind me, I didn’t have any toes to bend under my weight and brake me from tipping right onto the walkway. The tips of my feet are rounded like old sled runners and I just shot down like a toboggan, feet shooting out behind me. I hit with a crack.

Cracked.

It was Casper that ran over to help me to my feet again. He didn’t say anything. He just tugged on my arm like it was his occupation to help people up and he’d gotten bored from doing it too long.

Casper’s a dandelion, the way he bends. One day too old. His yellow head and his yellow clumps of hair seem too much weight for his hollow stem of a body. But he shoots out a look like his hollow’s full of sunshine and sour milk.

Well, he bent like that on this day to pick me up, and I laughed and said, “What the Sam Hill?” because his arch suggested he’d buckle if he tried.

He said, “I’m not Sam Hill. My name’s Casper Malary.” He told me like he was introducing himself to me as my practitioner. Like he belonged in a professional suit.

“Well, hello Casper Malary.” I huffed the words out as I stood up and blew his hair with my windy words. I was glad he hadn’t gone to seed just yet. I’d have blown his head plumb off his shoulders.
And then, when I got my bearings back again, I saw him so close to me that his heavy head was tipped back on its skinny hinge, and he had a white little paw extended in the direction of my face. His hands were big and long, too, compared to the his stem of a body. His fingers may have well functioned as arms for the boy. The hand was right in my face and looked some like a fly swatter, reaching at me.

I picked my arm up to the height of the boy's hand that was clear up by my barrel, and shook it right proud. He'd done a noble deed just then and deserved due respect. My elbow was clear up by my shoulder, trying to shake his waving hand.

He tucked his hand, web to web.

Bit down with a firm hold.

And shook like a full grown person.

No killing this weed.

By now his mom, Miss Tempra, was standing with her hand on his sweat-frozen, petal head, getting fixed to introduce herself, too, as the Misses.

"Mom, this man fell down. I saw him and I came over to help his back up on his feet." He told her.

"I know, Casper. That was very good." She looked at me.

"Thank you." I said. I know that that was what was supposed to happen next.
“Casper helps people. It’s just been his way. Are you okay?” She had a voice of honey in her throat, like she’d been explaining his behaviors one hundred time that day. Like she felt the necessity to explain good-doings. She didn’t smile.

It didn’t matter, though, because she was still of the smiling disposition.

Casper still had my hand. I said, “I’m Gene. Good to have encountered you, Casper Malary.” I felt he had the preference of both first and last name. He nodded with strict approval. I looked to his mother. “Yes, I’m just fine. You get used to falling when you’re missing toes. You start to enjoy the ride down after a while, since you knows you’re gonna hit and hit hard.”

Oh. I just said the toe thing. Scares people like dirty grout in a shower.

“Well, I can understand that.” She looked at her green-eyed weed. His head was still hanging back, watching the grown up world he may have thought he belonged to. Maybe he did.

I’ve met my share of grown ups who look down for the same reason.

Some sort of thought seemed to drip from her eyes right down into his till he understood whatever she was trying to tell him and blinked. This is the way I’ve seen them talk ever since. He gets right under her, asks his questions with his head tilted back, she says something small
as beads, then drips some truth right into his eyes. He blinks like he’s been medicated, then walks away with something saturating his brain. His daily watering, I suppose.

Little Calamino had her face squashed in the crater behind her mother’s knee. Only reason I noticed her was because I saw two little sausage arms wound around her leg. When Miss Tempra shifted her weight to the other knee, Calamino’s head got sucked into the bend in her leg till she almost fell down on the icy walkway.

She looked at me and laughed. “I almost fell down on my face.” She told me with a little voice like running kitchen water.

“You lose your balance, little Miss?” I asked her. Her head was propped back like Casper Malary’s, who was still looking up toward the sunshine. Getting his chloro-fill.

“Yeah. I almost fell down on my face.” She jumped back behind her mother and dug her face into her stiff cold jeans again. Miss Tempra had been shifting her head from one to the other, just listening with the grace and gentleness of a bitch with her whelps. She seemed almost to want to lick their foreheads with her eyes closed, instead of saying, “I love you.”

She put her hands on their heads, smile-dispositioned at me, and walked away with her little tikes.

Casper said, “Good-bye, Gene. It was nice meeting you and helping you to your unusually small feet.”
“Good-bye there, Mr. Malary.”

Calamino unclasped one hand from the front of her mom’s thigh, her face still buried in jean, and spread her fingers wide like they was sticky from Popsicle. She stretched them out long till her thin finger bones bubbled beneath her skin like tree roots, just under the ground. She held her hand out like this like she was waiting to catch a ball as they walked away. This was her way of saying “farewell.”

They walked away, Casper, on his stems, Tempra with her hand on a frozen-sweaty petal head, Calamino, blindly behind her mom, with her two legs staggering her mother’s one and her two arms wrapped tight above the knee. Pulling a wagon with a flower in her cap. Wilting.

I got to my shoveling again.

Back on my feet.
Summary of the Rest of the Book

Gene will continue to watch a rapidly changing society become more engrossed in a strange and, to some degree, illegitimate social movement of the genetically challenged. As the movement affects the consumer market and work/public policies change to accommodate what is politically correct, the economy will be affected as well. The rich will gain more wealth as the poor continue a brutal struggle for survival. We will see this struggle personified in both Gene and the Malarys. While Gene will present his world as satisfactory in juxtaposition to the loss of his love Jane, his physical state and struggle for survival will pose many new challenges. The Malarys will be crucial in the climax of the novel, because as Casper's health withers, Tempra will have to work more and fight for the survival of her family. This will subsequently lead to the climax of the novel, which will take place on a TV talk show with a violent discussion between the CAGED and an obnoxious opposition group. Within this scene we will find Casper with loose white hair that falls out with even the lightest brushes at times as he nears his death (much like a short-lived dandelion). His mother will have taken both he and Calamino to work, because the school will be hosting an inservice on how to address new dress codes in the schools. Her janitorial job at the TV studio (in very bad times, I might add) will lead to a circumstance in
which young Calamino finds herself on stage between the two groups.

While the groups scream a vehement debate over the definition of beauty, it is the accidental Calamino who will pose an answer – an answer that reveals her hunger. This climax will hopefully clarify the significance of the inclusion of people struggling to survive in social movements that portend to defeat oppression. The point of the novel, that people struggling to survive are excluded from social movements by default, will emerge through the words of a hungry child standing in the middle of an language debate about the word "beauty." It is at this point that the omniscient narrator from chapter one will again address you, the reader:

Chapter (immediately after TV talk show climax) — I have

I have a headache. I have a cold, tapeworm, and a condition. I have a weak immune system, hypochondria, and yes, I have tried that and it doesn't work. I have stress, three jobs, prescriptions, and an afternoon shift. I have sour milk and an anorexic child. I have a burden, weight, a backache, and a membership to Bailey's Health Club and Spa.

I have a history. I have secrets, dependency, bruises to prove it, and a raw alibi. I have fatigue, anger, and a sucking wound — a void. I have addictions, weekly therapy, and several hiding places. Needless to say, I have aptitude — I mean attitude. I have tried, I have failed, and I have given up. I have forgotten. I have issues. I have lies.

I have lice. I have dirty blond hair, hairy legs, and socks with holes in the toes. I have responsibilities, dishes to do, laundry, fraud, revenge, and a clean record. I have dreams. I have nightmares. I have a rodent problem, the chills, bills, and eviction notices. I have killed rats, landlords, and myself.

I have controversy. I have affairs, middlemen, and a damned good lawyer. I have connections. I have sin, penance, a penis, envy, and atheism. I have a lot on my mind and little in it. I have a plastic surgeon and traces of
silicon. I have saline now. I have a slight case of acne and a clear conscience. I have guilt. I have suppressed. I have hope, a vision, and naiveté. I have a problem being concise. Because I have. I. Have.

Meanwhile, several changes will occur outside of the narrow view of the Malary’s. Official drab black garbs will be sold for a lofty price for “official” or “real” or “committed” supporters of the CAGED movement. The underpaid and unemployed will certainly not be able to afford this “generous contribution” and will subsequently be disregarded as leaders within the movement. Moreover, the clothes being offered to goodwill will primarily be colorful clothes that no one wants anymore. Other avid supporters of the movement will shave their heads to disregard yet another accessory of external beauty. The lines between colors and genders will become hazy to the inattentive observers.

Difficult choices regarding the meaning of beauty, injustice, and oppression will drive people to extremes in their personalities, particularly people who have always been able to disengage before. Nudity may be the only sanctuary from such choices, so nudist communes will gain popularity and status amongst the most apathetic. But within such communes you will also meet the PULP (People United in Liberating People), an organization that recognizes the ridiculousness of not only the movement, but also the voluntary separation of minority groups with similar interests. The PULP will find the communes to be
the most efficient places to work, as they are not infested with the politics of the increasingly more bizarre and crumbling outside world.

At Gene's lowest point in the novel, he will be offered the opportunity to live in the commune with some of his peers from the 616th block, but will find he cannot make the jump. Subsequently, when the colonies become one of the only sanctuaries from a hateful, greedy, and chaotic world, Gene will become the sole objective observer of the most extreme manifestation of identity politics in a world torn apart by misguided social movement. He will record and share the ill effects of a movement that stems from self-interest (my fellow ugly people and me) rather than the goal itself (equal opportunity for all). He will nearly die on the streets, only to be saved by the mere recognition of Magma (the only non-human character in the book). Magma's (literally) seeing him near death on the sidewalk in an angry world that is unwilling to even recognize him, will alone miraculously save him. Quite mysteriously. This scene will seem almost dreamlike and unreal, and will certainly pose some of the greatest challenges for the reader (similar to the prelude and epilogue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*).

While the end will portray a harsh and tragic world, the thesis will be less pessimistic. I hope that, with proper crafting, the book will be a prompt for various minority groups to unite, as their interests are relatively similar, and to actively accommodate the inclusion of the people most effected by discrimination, those who are unable to even
partake in social change because they are preoccupied with the most basic functions of survival. I hope, too, that it will challenge the reader to define their "those" people and begin to actively know what, ironically, "they just can't understand."

With this, the omniscient narrator will again speak to conclude the novel:

Chapter (final) — those

but those poor genetically challenged those poor beautiful ugly those poor republicans democrats conservatives liberals those poor people with hazel eyes those poor janitors gas attendants corporate executives bankers carpenters drug dealers doctors prostitutes those poor poor children that can have a new life for only $0.65 a day those poor people with a degree good paying job Metlife and nothing else those poor philosophy music sociology majors who are not afraid those poor business accounting science majors who are those poor bulimic anorexic malnutritioned starved those poor searching agnostic fundamental Christian Heaven's Gate cultist who need to believe and those poor existentialists nihilist who don't those poor living Living dead Dead those poor athletes over weight plus sized deformed those poor child actors actresses those poor insecure people who have to act those poor mother fucking people who hate those poor naїve people who love those poor people who don't have hope and can't believe and those poor people who do and can those poor writers who cannot be concise those poor those

The End