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Winesburg, Indiana

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Abstract

Gregg Pitman: The third "g," the double on the end, is not a misspelling. That is how you spell my name. I am a bastard. My father was visiting stenography instructor, my night school mother's teacher at Winesburg's Business Athenaeum. I was conceived in the simulated office suite on the second floor whose desks had all been graffitied with the swooping swooshes and schwa strokes of its students studying Shorthand.

Keywords

Michael Martone, Indiana, Whinesburg

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Gregg Pitman: The third "g," the double on the end, is not a misspelling. That is how you spell my name. I am a bastard. My father was a visiting stenography instructor, my night school mother's teacher at Winesburg's Business Athenaeum. I was conceived in the simulated office suite on the second floor whose desks had all been graffitied with the swooping swooshes and schwa strokes of its students studying Shorthand. In short, Shorthand became my first language. With the sharpened red-painted nail of her index finger, my mother, never speaking, transcribed what she was thinking on my belly or on my back as I learned to

toddle or on my butt as she changed me. In Shorthand, she annotated me with her abbreviated and compressed baby talk in the style of gestural dingbats, curlicues, and ellipses of this our secret shared language. My growth was stunted by this stunted dialect, abbreviated, and, at the same time, accelerated as Shorthand was built for speed. I never, really, learned to speak—my grammar truncated, my vocabulary condensed, the syntax reduced like a roux—but I did learn to listen. Listen: I turned out to have the gift of anticipation. I am a kind of hobbled psychic who only foresees a few seconds into the future, enough to change the story before it is told or, at least, to get the gist of the gist down on paper. It was only natural that I ended up doing what I am doing now. I'm the municipality's court reporter, a freelance clerk at all the depositions, a civil servant, an auxiliary in the interrogation rooms of the constabulary, recording the endless confessions of the long-winded citizenry whose secrets of incest, abuse, murder, rape, and torture pile-up in the coded squiggles and squirms of my spiral bound oblong pads. At night in my shotgun shack on the West End, I reread the traumatic digestions of trauma, note how all these horrific acts have been transformed, strike that, I meant to say tamed, by their abstraction into the innocent scratches of a child

pretending to write. I cannot sleep. Or when I do, I dream of a writhing orgiastic montage of writing run amuck. I wake to moonlight. There, crescent moon is a silent letter in the Shorthand of the universe. It stands for "and" or "but" or "or." Sleepless, I compose grosses of bad news letters for the front office of the Winesburg Knitting Mill, using the supplied templates of boilerplate text, leaving blank the spaces for the recipient and the sender to be supplied by the cursive endless longhand of the anonymous signatory.

Dale Rumsey: It's the wife's family business. We have the concession, pumping the latrines, outhouses, comfort stations, port-a-potties, and septic tanks over at the big Henry David Thoreau County Park. The park's in the floodplain and sprawls along the river's swampy, scrubby, piney bottomland—many acres where the sun don't shine. It is a known fact that most of the alien abductions take place here. Or so it seems. It makes sense this is the place where the aliens come to abduct folks. The park is remote and rural with many secluded nooks and crannies and hidden glens surrounded by stands of virgin forest. There is a high percentage of Whinesbergians who have reported

their live vivisections, endoscopies, anal probes, and invasive explorations. Folks disappear from these woods every day, the fires in the grills still smoldering, only to appear, days later, naked as God made them, staggering through the stands of quaking aspen, swaying birch, and seeding cottonwood. They're a mess. And in my role as custodian, I have started a collection of alien scat left behind on these occasions, I suspect, when the spaceships jump into hyper-drive or through the wormholes or whatever. The crews do a little light housekeeping, I gather, before they shove off. One day I will have enough such samples to open a museum. I assume the visitors from outer space use the facilities themselves before commencing with their deliberate cathartic probings on us humans. They wash their hands or flippers or tentacles after relieving themselves. The water hereabouts is potable, artesian. The pumping facilities are over near the ruins of the old windmill and water tank that looks, now that I think about it, like some space saucer itself. Back to the scat. The first thing that strikes you (after the wide range of consistencies) is the variety of colors that shade into the blues and violets or are marbled with veins of orange or fluorescent flecks of green, chunked with copper, gold, or silver. Some leavings, years later, still radiate heat

that is generated from something more than your normal mechanisms of decomposition. One elongated turd came equipped with what I can only imagine is its own treatment system—alien protozoa that then ingest the crap and excrete their own manure, leaving trails of slime in a kind of woodland forest camouflage pattern impossible to detect unless you are looking for it. Other piles are left behind wrapped in a kind of otherworldly wrapping paper, a frozen ribbon of blood red urine tying up the package in a neat bow that, over time, subliminally evaporates into rusty ropey smoke. Or the waste is encapsulated in a stone-like outer shell of coprolite, a kind of geode or chocolate bonbon with a gooey soft center. I suspect that like many travelers our visiting anthropologists experience irregularity sparked by their own unfamiliarity with the microbial life they have to ingest while on the road. The liquefied residue, in certain spots, can be prodigious, and often, I've found that the semisolid piles seem to steam, out-gassing helium instead of methane or, even more remarkable, neon which, when it sees the light of day, becomes excited and illuminates itself into drifting clouds of flickering pastel colors. Many aliens seem to ruminate, and the expectorant is as colorful and interesting as the other excretions, and a number of the extra-terrestrials

also seem to be coprophagic, like rabbits, expelling, after partial digestion, edible pellets that are then consumed. I have found such pellets with what I only can guess are alien teeth marks left behind in haste, the toilet stumbled upon by an innocent lost terrestrial hiker. Needless to say, I have found this strange poop mixed in with the everyday earthen spoil as the abductions often include bowel scoping and the local subject must also endure a pre-op purgative enema of the GI tract before the procedure is to begin. I also pump the holding tanks at the outpatient clinics in town where more pedestrian colonoscopies are performed. Heck, I have had that procedure myself, studied with interest the photography of my insides out. Not gutsy so much as I have a professional curiosity. What creeps me out about all this is not the fecal matter but the drugs that seems universally applied by aliens and gastroenterologists alike to wipe clean the memory of the event. When one is under, one is not so much under, but instead says anything and everything, a kind of logorrhea, to the occupied operating staff. Who knows, perhaps the spacemen are much more interested in what comes out of our mouths than our anuses. In my expert opinion no one's shit don't stink, even the alien kind. But I have gotten used to it. Still, I have never gotten used to this other odor.

The stench of our own stories is so attractive to us—bug-eyed and antenna-twitching carrion eating creatures that we are.

Amanda Patch: It all started innocently enough when I petitioned the Most Reverend Leo, Bishop of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend to initiate the beatification of Father Herman Heilmann founder of the monastery, Our Lady of the Circumcision, here in Winesburg. Father Herman made a home for his brother fathers, who come from all over the country to this quiet cloistered retreat—a collection of cabins initially converted from the rundown Rail Splitter Motor Court off the old Lincoln Highway—there to study and pray and meditate on that old Old Testament story of Abraham having to sacrifice his son Jacob to establish the covenant with the Lord. I just thought the Father's work needed to be recognized so in addition to my letter-writing campaign, I convinced my reading group to concentrate on one book, for a year, deeply meditating on the martyrs, spending each meeting discussing a life of a saint we read in Butler's Lives of the Saints. It was difficult, to say the least. The litanies of the deaths and the dying, the various methods of torture and the infliction of pain

seemed organized in such a way as to demonstrate the excruciating genius of Satan, working through his minions on earth, to exact utter and endless agony. My reading group, made up of several of the neighborhood's ladies and ladies from the church, also met on Wednesdays each spring to follow the March Madness of the basketball tournament, suspending our usual stock club meetings to substitute the brackets for the fine print of the big board. We were, perhaps, predisposed to such communal excitement, some might even say hysteria. As we read and reported on the lives of the saints, our presentations became more elaborate, the distinction between the mere abstract recounting of the material and actually living the lives of the lives of the saints became confused for us, and very soon we became enamored by the very particular narratives of the sainted virgins. We were impressed with the passion of their passion to remain un-deflowered, intact, innocent, and dedicated to Jesus to the point of taking Our Savior as a wedded yet chaste husband. There were (I remember, how could I forget) multiple incinerations at the stake, crucifixions, beheadings, stonings, rapes and sodomies with a variety of implements and animals in an effort to pry from these devoted young women the most special jewel in their possession. It was all quite thrilling. We were

moved. The antique prose of the text added a musty patina of gothic authenticity to the recitations of anguish, courage, and ecstatic exultation. All of us, by this time, were far from our own corporeal purity, having given birth to nearly four-dozen children among us. Many of us now were grandmothers as well. We had long suffered both the pangs of birthing and the fandangos of sexual intercourse, procreative and not, at the hands of our husbands and, dare I say, lovers. I am not sure whose idea it was initially, as many of us have used the skilled services of Dr. Minnick for other plastic operative rearrangements, but we somehow reached a consensus that all of us would participate in a kind of tauntine in reverse. We would not so much wait to unstop the cork of a pilfered "liberated" brandy but to stop it all back up again in the first place. You have heard of women's clubs, such as ours, creating calendars of their members photographed tastefully nude, a fundraiser for charity. Our idea was only, we thought, a slight variation on such projects. Perhaps it was Dr. Minnick himself who suggested it, inviting us to consider reconstructive surgeries "down there" commenting that labia reduction is now his most performed and profitable operation, the norming and neatening up, if you will, of the pudenda to the standard folds and tuffs, bolsters and

grooves of the ideal cosmetic model. Again, we were thrilled, that such miracles can be performed relatively painlessly in an outpatient setting. But, I do know for a fact, that this would not suit us. We proposed to Dr. Minnick that he attempt to go beyond the mere landscaping of what can be seen but also seek the unseen, to take us back in time. To state it simply—to reattach our long gone maidenhoods, cinching closed once more the orifice of our experience, virginal once more. And this he did, was anxious to do. Inventing a kind of embroidered helmet for the task, he wove the cap together from multicolored and multi-gauged sutures, a kind of monofilament cartilage tissue. The truth is when we are together now, reading further into the lives of the saints and the endless mortifications of the flesh, we continue to admire, in great detail, during our break for cookies and tea, his handiwork performed on each and every one of us, and how such emendations have delivered us all, strangely beautiful and pristine, one step closer to God.

Carol Clay: I look out for strays, and when I find them I take them in. Our town of Winesburg has rows of telephone poles, rows of electricity poles. The wires go every which way. All wood, these poles, and I find my darlings clinging there, their little claws dug deep in the pine, girdled around at the same height like a scallops of bark on a tree. There is nothing sadder than the messages. Have you seen the ones that say: Have you seen our Socks? Our Tom? Our Kitty?? That ask: Have you seen Mr. Mittens?? Or the ones that simply spell out LOST! or Reward!? Then they go on to say (I need my glasses for this) what color and how old and what special markings and last seen and call us any time and we are sad and we miss miss miss miss. I can't have enough of the missing. I pry them free. I have a little flathead screwdriver to work under the staple. I don't tear the paper. I'm allergic to the real thing, to the real cat. But I fill my little house with these cats with their ghost gray coats coating the pictures of the flyers. I have x-acto-ed them from the sad news of their departure. Look at that one yawning. That one's eyes are flashed with light. That one covered with yarn. Asleep in the sun. Batting a potted plant. Waling on a keyboard. All wet from a bath. I have albums

of the missing. In stacks and stacks though my bungalow, the books themselves like cats warming themselves near the registers, curled up on the coach, scratching at the door. I have papered the walls with the paper—a choir, shingles singing, mewling, purring. I open the door and the wall ruffles, rustles, twitches, arches its back in the draft. Its fur stands up. The fur flies. In some places, the paper is several layers deep, and I can flip thorough and make the kitties move, the still pictures fitting together into a movie in my brain. They lick themselves and stretch. They chase a bug. They roll and scratch. I go to the library to make more copies of my copies. I look sad. I've lost my cat. I am an old woman who has lost her cat. See, I show them. Have you seen Puddin'? They help me make copies of my copies. I put the pile in my red wagon. It is like walking a big red cat on a leash. Along the way, I look at all the poles, looking for new posters that ask me to look for missing cats. A tabby. A calico. Black cat. White cat. Long hair. Short. A Siamese. A Maine Coon cat. I have my little screwdriver to pry out the staple, to jimmy out the thumbtacks. I can't get enough. I paper over the windows of my bungalow with pictures of cats looking out the window. What are they looking at? Those cats are the inside cats. And I have

taped more cats, outside cats, on the windows outside looking in at the inside cats. Cats are so curious. There are scare cats in my garden to scare the real cats away. Some pictures I have have more than one cat in them. Only one cat is missing but there are other cats pictured who aren't missing. I have found them all. The mommy cat who's nursing a brood of baby cats that now are all my cats. There are cats playing together. There are cats looking at goldfish in the goldfish bowl. Cats pawing at the refrigerator, at a bird flying by, at a child staring in. Many cats are sleeping. The big furry heads drooping. Ears are twitching in dreams. Tails flicking at the tip. Look, there the claws are extended. The cat is kneading. The outside light shines through the paper on the windows and pictures of cats curled up in a beam of sunlight curl up in the beam of sunlight cast through the window shadowed with pictures of cats chasing shadows. I have found all of these lost cats. The ones weathering on the light poles, on the telephone poles. I take pictures of the pictures and put the pictures in my albums, tape the pictures on the wall. When I am at the library, I copy the copy of a copy's copy. Each time the image of the cat licking its paw fades. It fades and fades. The light in the machine licks back and forth. The copy's copy grays, breaks up

into finer and finer pieces, shades and shades and shades and shades of gray. At night, I sleep in a bed made up with a bedding of lost cats, paper I have pieced together, page by page, into a quilted comforter of sleeping napping cats, a thrumming blanket. In the dark, I feel them nestle in next to me, hear them crinkle and crimp as I move as they move to nuzzle my ear, bat my hair. They fill in the hollows all around me. They flatten and slide beneath me. They surround me like a skin. They are my fur. They ride on my chest, lighter than light. They rise and fall as I breathe, finding in all the layers and layers of loss a way to be found.