Winesburg, Indiana: Burt Coble, Catman

Greg Schwipps
Winesburg, Indiana: Burt Coble, Catman

Abstract
Yeah, I seen your little town at night. It's usually me and the moon coming up through there about three, four in the morning, boat on the squeaking trailer behind me, still dripping green river water from its bunks, and I notice your Dollar General lit up for safety, pole lights shining down on the empty yellow lines, feral cats slinking around the Dairymart, and one of two cars of high schoolers still hustling split-tail in the parking lot of the school. Used to be every buck wanted his Cutlass jacked up on air shocks. That or a lifted four-by-four. Now about every kid I see gots a foreign job, all lowered so the bumpers scrape pulling into the post office. Course, what's kids today got to mail anyway? But one more thing on them feral cats: more than once, I seen two or three toms circling an old mama cat in heat. They say a cat screams like it does when it's getting mated because a tomcat has a barbed penis. They also tell you a possum has a forked penis, but I don't even know how something like that would work. But yeah, I seen your houses all dark, everybody inside sleeping away, drooling on pillows. I know which places got them little baby blues, cause I see the light on low in some corner, mama rocking her baby don't want to sleep. I seen all that and more.

Keywords
watching, cats, people, houses

Cover Page Footnote
Note: “This story is exclusively available in the anthology, Winesburg, Indiana, published by Breakaway Books, an imprint of Indiana University Press, in the spring of 2015. Available wherever fine books are sold, borrowed, or used as dowry.”
April 22, 2011

Winesburg, Indiana: Burt Coble, Catman

by Greg Schwipps

Yeah, I seen your little town at night. It’s usually me and the moon coming up through there about three, four in the morning, boat on the squeaking trailer behind me, still dripping green river water from its bunks, and I notice your Dollar General lit up for safety, pole lights shining down on the empty yellow lines, feral cats slinking around the Dairymart, and one or two cars of high schoolers still hustling split-tail in the parking lot of the school. Used to be every buck wanted his Cutlass jacked up on air shocks. That or a lifted four-by-four. Now about every kid I see gots a foreign job, all lowered so the bumpers scrape pulling into the post office. Course, what’s kids today got to mail anyway? But one more thing on them feral cats: more than once, I seen two or three toms circling an old mama cat in heat. They say a cat screams like it does when it’s getting mated because a tomcat has a barbed penis. They also tell you a possum has a forked penis, but I don’t even know how something like that would work. But yeah, I seen your houses all dark, everybody inside sleeping away, drooling on pillows. I know which places got them little baby blues, cause I see the light on low in some corner, mama rocking her baby don’t want to sleep. I seen all that and more.
Once I slowed down to watch two farm boys whaling on each other outside the Hot Spot. Some young thing in skirt watching them, bouncing on her feet, hands up by her throat. Another time I seen a woman stumbling right down the middle of the street, drunk enough to grease-bump with an old boy like me, even after I been fishing all night, but I wasn’t much in the mood for it. I just slowed down and drove round her. I done got enough for someone old enough to remember this town before Dairy Queen, if you get me. Lots of times I pass a woman driving home all alone after giving her man some mud for his turtle. Sometimes it’s the man’s head silhouetted in a cab, especially if his new lady got a man or if he got another woman back at his place. I know a little something about how that works. It calls for a schedule and it pays to know when folks get off work.

What this town does when the decent folks go to sleep after switching off the news would tighten the guide-wires of some Winesburgers and tighten the pants of some others. I seen what this town does to itself in the blue-black night. Them new mamas could see it, too, but they don’t focus on nothing but their crying babies. For that I don’t blame them. I had three kids and I never was the one getting up with them but I know for a fact it takes a toll on a person. And most everybody else who could see these happenings is either doing it or is too drunk or both. The cop? You know you’re pissing on my back and calling it rain with that one. I know where he parks after midnight, out behind the propane tanks at 101 and Main, and I don’t know why they ever give them boys computers, cause when I go by there, trailer rattle-ta-tattle banging and squeaking, he don’t even look up, his face lit with the glow from his computer. I don’t doubt but that he plays games on it or looks at pictures of naked women.

Speaking of naked women, back before my hair was gray I knew a woman married to a guy used to work graveyard up there at Allison Transmission. He’d head to the line about midnight and I’d jump in the truck and slide over there to visit his lady, a woman named Lila with hair black as a crow’s back. Back then no one had cell phones and no one checked in with no one at any time, didn’t seem like. Lila’s man’d drive off and never wonder but that his old lady was home sawing logs in that big log house by herself. Not true.

During that same period of my life there was a woman I called Squeaky
married to a man got real sick with cancer and was laid up in the big hospital up there in Danville. From what I was told, one leg damn near rotted off his trunk. I know what you’re thinking: it’s a terrible sinful man who’d pay nighttime visits to a woman with a husband getting ate up from the cancer. In my defense let me say this: I never once called her. Night after night, it was her calling me. In fairness to her reputation after about one week of us carrying on, didn’t neither one of us need to call. I’d just show up with a case of beer and a pigsticker I had just rinsed off with rubbing alcohol for safety. Talk about cold.

If you see me out in the broad sunlight, you ought to take a picture, because I ain’t never been one for high noon. They say if you see a raccoon out in the daylight, you better shoot it, because it’s sick in the head. Same goes for me, bar the shooting part. Been lots of nights I half-expected to get shot coming out of someone’s house but I guess I was borned lucky.

Now days I don’t hardly carry on with no women. I know I never got less ornery, I know that. Anymore I just fish the White River down by Centerton Road and I get my bluegills as the sun sets and fish the big flatties till they stop biting for sure at two or three. That’s another one of them different world things, you could say, cause it’s just me out there on the water, sitting still in my old green flatbottom, the moon rising up over the trees and hitting the water like sparks from a welder, but softer, like they falling through rain, even when it’s not, the water all around you moving slow and stinking like a dinosaur swamp. I hook them bluegills through the back behind the spiny fin and when I cast them out they tremble and fight against the line till a big cat swoops in and eats em. Very little sound at all except for the night birds and then the boomslap when a beaver sees my boat and smacks his tail down on the water.

Some nights I sit out there till the sun comes up and I can see the world around me again. Other nights I knock off in the blue hours and trailer the boat, then drive slowly through the pot-chucked streets of this little town. I drive real slow and look in them houses and watch for windows showing some sign of life. Just to feel the old urge. Maybe a light, maybe a shadow of someone moving behind a thin curtain of gauze. I know some of them windows. Some of them I looked out of a time or two. I know for a straight cold fact there’s some lonely women in this town.
Eugene & Marilyn Glick Indiana Authors Award in the emerging writer category, and co-author of Fishing For Dummies, 2nd Edition. He grew up in Milan, Indiana, and received his MFA from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. He currently serves as the Richard W. Peck Chair in Creative Writing at DePauw University and lives in Wilbur, Indiana.