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Becoming UnDone in Christian Winn's *Naked Me*

Naked Me, by Christian Winn. Seattle: Dock Street Press, 2014.

Naked: Stripped down, raw, honest and unapologetic. *Me*: Curious, unassuming, resilient, and unwavering in the quest for meaning in the heart of the mundane, the absurd, the tragic. What unfolds in Christian Winn's *Naked Me* is a collection of stories that take the reader on an uncanny journey into the fragmented, unknown depths of the human experience, uncomfortably nestled on the fringes of desire, infatuation, unrequited love and longing, death and despair. Each story's character shares a common motivation: find a meaningful human connection from within the space of adversity, of perpetual uncertainty.

Naked Me's stories are positioned from the vantage point of the exiled—the unmoored, disparate wanderer who is looking to find her or his way back home—however tumultuous or bleak that home may be. Home, for many of these characters, is the longing for a relationship with an estranged or deceased parent, a rekindling of a broken relationship with an ex-lover, the hopeful admiration of an unrequited crush, a relentless search for hope, for glimmer, in unforeseen, harrowing tragedy. The self in each of these stories precariously hovers between the strange and familiar while remaining uncomfortably positioned in a paradoxical state of marginalized, reflexive, exilic self-reverence.

In Winn's first short story, "One Thing to Take," we are introduced to a character marred by the loss of a parental figure, a theme exemplified throughout *Naked Me*. All of Winn's characters struggle with the sudden absence of the familiar—and he pulls no punches in this understated, powerful first short piece. As Winn writes, "after Dad, Mom had pretty well lost herself, and maybe so had I" (5). Characteristic of Winn's characters, this young girl discovers beauty in subtle, conflicted, unusual ways. Wrapped neatly in a short expostulation about two teenage sisters who work a seemingly typical summer

job in a sleepy beach town, with "everything smelling like Copper-tone and grease" (5), the girls find unsettled solace in the image of their estranged father's brother, anonymously named "Uncle C," who would "sit beside [their mother] and she'd lift her feet onto his lap where he'd rub her arches. This always made her smile, which was one thing to take from all that time" (6). The story ends on an offbeat note, suggesting the unusual comfort one can find in familial communion from within the thicket of despair, the "one thing to take" (6).

Following his powerful opening piece is "The Dirtiest Hamburger in the World," Winn's version of a raw, uncharacteristic, and rather unsettling coming-of-age story. The piece begins: "It was the first week of July when Drew came over at 9 AM, told me his mother was hunched in her bedroom closet pretending she was a rabbit. He said he saw her eating a Pop-Tart with tiny buck-toothed bites. He wanted it to be funny, but I knew he was scared. We were fourteen" (7). This opening scene provides an artful snapshot into Winn's dysfunctional tale of two teenage boys who develop a friendship that is knit through their shared tales of maternal estrangement. Winn's second story in *Naked Me* reveals the backbone at the heart of his collection: the myth of the American dream and the disintegrating, fraying threads that have precariously comprised its fabric. But, as we see time and again in this collection, it's the unsuspecting, unsightly wrinkles in the fabric that Winn is most fascinated with exploring. Indeed, for Winn, it's from within these unsightly spaces where the most unusual yet most honest human connections are anchored. In this story, while their family lives are slowly disintegrating, the boys discover a "ten-foot plastic hamburger that sat in a wide parking lot under two eucalyptus trees between Ling's Chinese Restaurant and the Tip Top Tavern" (12-13). As Winn emphasizes, "the sight of the hamburger was always shocking and odd and funny. It was fantastically satisfying, approaching that big colorful plastic mound from the parking lot. Sitting there, beneath those trees, at the edge of that parking lot, it looked to me beautifully ludicrous and exaggerated" (18). It's here where the boys are able to escape their disenchanting home lives, to escape the veiled, convoluted stories told by their parents, and to find solace from within the "beautifully ludicrous and exaggerated" outskirts of their imaginations. The story ends on a somber note, with Drew's mother finally reaching the brink of her sanity and being carted away to what the reader suspects is a psychiatric ward. This is the final fray in the precariously stitched fabric that signals a haunting shift for Drew, for the boys. As Winn intuits, "we acted as though nothing had shifted, but knew, as friends, that they had. We'd both seen how some things

could begin to break down" (23). Yet again, Winn carries us through an unsettled tale only to further reveal the instability at the heart of the narratives we tell ourselves.

As *Naked Me* unfolds, Winn continually guides us through a tattered, bemused landscape of characters coping with their fragmented lives, each seeking to recuperate some semblance of selfhood in a reality of unforeseen, sudden loss. "Where He's Living Now" is perhaps Winn's most unabashedly honest depiction of a strained father-son relationship forged anew in the space of loss. Here's yet another story where a parent is absent or has passed away—and the family carries on in the presence of that absence. As Winn writes: "My own mother died five years ago this month, June 19. She drowned in the Payette River. In Idaho, rafting with a tour group. What a thing. Mothers aren't supposed to just die when their son is twenty-five, when their daughter is twenty-three" (62). Despite this tragic loss, the relationship between the father and son remains strained. Within this emotional landscape, Winn paints a story mired with complex emotional peaks and valleys, with the protagonist's body serving as a visceral site upon which these struggles are inscribed. Etched with tattoos, the son's skin serves as a visual map and reminder of his struggles: "my first tattoo was my mother's maiden name—Virginia Reese Benedict—running along the white-skin underside of my left forearm" (68). This tattoo, however, becomes the site through which the father-son relationship begins to heal. In a moving scene towards the end of the story, the Father finally asks to look at the tattoo and a tacit moment of healing begins—signaling the hope of transformation in the wake of loss, a characteristic theme in Winn's collection.

From beginning to end, in its myriad forms, styles, and stories, *Naked Me* beautifully explores the provocative, often underrepresented and overlooked, underside of the human condition. In all of its curves and folds, the emotional fabric of Winn's collection is a felt thing. It's the kind of collection we need right now, in this fractured, uncertain, fragmented world: a collection that honestly and unabashedly peers under the veil of pain and seeks out the unusual, unsuspecting forms of healing that can be found in the shadows of our own psyche.