

Human Tissue

Hilary Menos

smith|doorstop

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A Note on *Human Tissue*

A prose version of this book might be called “What they don’t tell you about transplants”. The public likes to imagine that organ transplant is a universal blessing and salvation. The truth is these are early days of the science and many patients suffer in the name of progress.

Hilary Menos’s son Linus, who suffered from kidney failure, had a “successful” transplant, aged 17, of one of his mother’s kidneys – “successful” in that it took quickly and functioned well to start with. What nobody told him about, or her, were the headaches, the itching and the permanent shaking. Aged 19, Linus had a massive rejection episode. They had to remove his mother’s kidney and he is now on dialysis.

Such is the horrific background to a life and death thriller of a poetry book, if I can put it crudely. A gifted poet, whose earlier collection, *Berg*, won a Forward prize, Menos writes the kind of English that operates like a surgeon’s knife on its material, with the difference that it has a sure grasp of the metaphorical implications and potential of its subject matter. Her determination to understand every last detail of the failure and replacement of the body’s second most complex organ may be a revelation to doctors and public alike. Her readers will surely be impressed by the eloquence and beauty of her insight.

– Hugo Williams

Contents

7	The Mud Man
8	White Pebble
9	Oblatory
10	Camino
11	The Way of the Cross
12	De Correctione Rusticorum
13	Petition
14	Danish Palaces Egg
15	Admission
16	Mountain of Heaven
17	Miracle
18	Hats Off!
19	The Mud Man is a Heretic
20	Lost
21	Fistula
22	Tumba Dios
23	A Lexicon of Yellow
24	Scaffolding
25	Tomorrow's World
26	Sloe Gin

for Linus

The Mud Man

The Mud Man squats in the copse,
his one long leg slung out like a telegraph pole.
From the back he looks like a minotaur having a massage.
From the side he looks like a bull with a bone in its mouth.
From the front he looks like a gymnast doing the splits,
a one-legged gymnast with no arms.

Close up he looks like old cake
his shoulders shedding crumbled chocolate,
his face a slipped scree of icing,
the side broken open to reveal the darker sponge,
a slurred mess weeping, the crust and flake
caught up in his firework hair.

We must feed him every weekend, says my son,
and we do, even the dog, who sniffs his face
then pees on his branched foot.
The Mud Man looks at me through struck flint eyes
and mutters a requiem for you, for me, for us all,
through broken slate teeth.

White Pebble

Tonight, after the bath and the bedtime story,
somewhere in the space between hanging
and folding damp towels, I kneel down. From here
it is barely a breath, a slow tipping forward,
until my forehead rests on the tiled floor.

In our story the children throw down a pebble trail,
escape from the woods and find their way back home.
I fold the corner of the page to mark our place
and smooth the hair from a sleeping face.
Nobody knows how a story ends.

Here's a pocketful of pebbles, and a mountain of crusts.
Here are small white pills to be taken every day.
There's rosemary, that's for remembrance.
I follow your trail to the copse and kneel down,
rest my forehead on a damp carpet of moss.

The Mud Man whispers to me in a dead language.
Noli timere, he hisses. But I am afraid.
I do not know how I got here and I will not pray.

Oblatory

For Beltane we roll up the bluebell carpet
and feed the Mud Man with its ringing tribute.

For Lammas we strip the hedgerows of berries
and stain his lips with a purple sacrifice.

We ram-raid the squirrels' stores at Samhain,
shove cobnuts into his maw like a slot machine.

The first snowdrops of spring are phlegmatic.
Nodding virgin brides slaughtered for Imbolc.

All year I am appellant, devotee, suitor,
appeasing and wooing him with the copse's fruit

and he is my journey's end, my talisman,
my worry beads, rabbit's foot, saint's bone.

I walk from tree to tree, station to station –
oak, beech, holly, sycamore, hawthorn, hazel, blackthorn –

always arriving at this scarred mound of mud
where I kneel and rest my forehead on the ground

and remember another time, another place.
Your first smile. Your lit face.