
Peter Lloyd, *Tales from the Labyrinth / The Stone Ladder* Wakefield Press, 2008, ISBN 9781862547957.

There's a particularly difficult task faced by the poet in apprehending the experiences of the disempowered within the often grotesque and brutal world of contemporary culture. In order to bear witness to the horrors of dispossession, the poet must portray something of the violent grotesquery of this world, while at the same time offering enough hope so that the experience is never too overwhelming. It is in his managing this difficult balance in *Tales from the Labyrinth / The Stone Ladder* (2008) that Peter Lloyd demonstrates his adept craftsmanship and substantial poetic talents.

Tales from the Labyrinth / The Stone Ladder are two collections of Lloyd's poetry—published in the one volume, each with their own cover and contents—so that they intersect, upside down to each other, somewhere near the middle. *Tales from the Labyrinth* offers an immersion into desolate worlds, while the more varied *The Stone Ladder* juxtaposes the savage and brutal with the sharp relief of beatific, though often very fleeting, reflection.

In both, Lloyd presents the bleak and suffering milieu of the underprivileged urban experience, mainly comprised of collected snippets of detritus:

Mrs Bleedinglegs, ulcer-veins and crutch, / has picked/-FantaCoopers7upCokeOrangeLemon/Sprite SpritzSnotopPepsiCoolers! / Bins and dumpsters rifled ('The Trap' *Tales from the Labyrinth*).

Lloyd excels in poems such as 'The Trap' with an ability to convey these frequently violent landscapes with urgency, a directness, which never shields the reader from confrontation with the brutality of their subject matter.

The titular poem of one of the collections, 'The Stone Ladder' offers momentary transcendence of this unflinchingly observed wasteland:

...Our stained mattresses, our myriads of pictures,
Munch Screams, Woolworth prints, worn bras, pans,

dresses, human used-by-dates, deaths, all in packed
skips, racks, aisle upon aisle—
tainted by the warmly sickening ineradicable smell of
bums 'n tits, under-arms, menses and middle class
shit that smells of violets...

Epoch of wire hangers, rags and whiffs of violence:
and back of the store,
a rickety stone ladder propped up through the skylight
against a sacred picture of the moon,
rising above streets, clouds and night haze—
in which you can just make out the hole through which

time is vanishing...

(from 'The Stone Ladder' *The Stone Ladder* 2008)
(As an aside while mentioning this poem, the choice of cover art for this collection unfortunately literalises this poem, and this image somehow cheapens rather than enhances Lloyd's work.)

The rendering of the worlds inhabited by the disempowered and marginalised, the inherited legacies of commercial wastelands and matrices of power, gather strength from the very visceral nature of their embodiment:

...They jut from their membranes, giants' feet,
stained mattresses, fatty womb-waters, rivers of bones,
while famished estrogens and vagina musk blow
round the plant.

They say of those crap pipes in the city that tilt our
effluent out beyond the stars—
put your ear to one of these
and you'll hear the scream and suck of all the
pregnancies in the world come to term...
(from 'A Mauge' *The Stone Ladder* 2008).

In another poem, 'Li Shizheng Moves House', Lloyd questions political, social and personal indifference to oppression against the backdrop of the brutality of exile:

Meanwhile, over duck and champagne in the city / the
swanky nouveau-riche discuss the mysteries/ of fatty
acids, proteins, cholesterol, total trans-saturated... //
and what can be done about it? ('Li Shizheng Moves
House' *Tales from the Labyrinth*).

Though most of Lloyd's resistance to the horror-world of generic commercial soullessness comes not through overt references to direct action, but the sudden, sharp moments of possibility provided by perspective:

[a]ll it needs now / is a single brilliant instance of
the Birth Passage / one rose of Spring / to tilt the
neighbourhood ('Briars', *Tales of the Labyrinth*).

It is in poems such as these, in the sharp insights of fleeting moments, that Lloyd balances the presentation of suffering and the possibilities for release so skilfully.

Through the detritus of urban waste—concrete and vegetable, recycled and regurgitated, borrowed and inherited, human and machine—Lloyd weaves together the cadences of urban experience and urban cliché and sets these as the seemingly ever-present background hum of the contemporary. This allows his poems to step forth, surprise and often clash with expectation and possibility.

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