

Wild Lemons by David Malouf

From: *Poems 1959-1989*

Through all those years keeping the present
open to the light of just this moment:
that was the path we found, you might call it
a promise, that starting out among blazed trunks
the track would not lead nowhere, that being set
down here among wild lemons, our bodies were
expected at an occasion up ahead
that would not take place without us. One
proof was the tough-skinned fruit among
their thorns; someone had been there before us
and planted these, their sunlight to be sliced
for drinks (they had adapted
in their own way and to other ends); another
was the warmth of our island, sitting still
in its bay, at midnight humming
and rising to its own concerns, but back,
heat-struck, lapped by clean ocean waters
at dawn. The present is always
with us, always open. Though to what, out there
in the dark we are making for as seven o'clock
strikes, the gin goes down and starlings
gather, who can tell? Compacts made
of silence, as a flute tempts out a few
reluctant stars to walk over the water. I lie down
in different weather now though the same body,
which is where that rough track led. Our sleep
is continuous with the dark, or that portion of it
that is this day's night; the body
tags along as promised to see what goes.
What goes is time, and clouds melting into

tomorrow of our breath, a scent of lemons
run wild in another country, but smelling always of themselves.

Summary

Wild Lemons" describes a path on an island, which seemed to show signs of habitation and other vague but promising indications that it was worth taking. The poet does not specify what was at the end of the path, but it has led him to where he is now. In a final image, his dreams include the scent of the wild lemons on the island. The defining energy of David Malouf's poetry comes from his need to understand and re-envision Australia as a space and as a collective identity.

Wild Lemons: Interpretation.

Starting with a basic paraphrase the opening lines introduce the idea of time, and time as "continuous present": the lines "Through...moment" suggest past as inside the present and vice versa. The tense in these lines is cryptic or ambiguous...the present always open through those years as the path that was found signalled or held a promise of a moment into the future at a place "that would not take place without us". The time flow is fused with a geographic imaginary, the track (the promise) starting across "blazed trunks"(to burn with flames, very bright) to be "set down among wild lemons". Yet was the trajectory already mapped out. The lemons were there because others were there before who planted them. The pronouns used "us", "we". "our"("bodies") tied to a geography or geographic imagination in a logic of complementarily, for example in the lines..."our bodies were expected at an occasion up ahead that would not take place without us". Important to emphasise the use of a bodily consciousness: the land or geography is experienced bodily, as the embodied experience of a place shapes the place or how a place or landscape is set up or imagined and felt. The body takes in/absorbs the landscape(" clouds melting into the tomorrow of our breath, a scent of lemons" or the "warmth of our island sitting still...lapped by ocean waters). Set down among wild lemons, bodies were expected "ahead" and "at an occasion" (the future) which would not happen without them because there were those who came before and had planted those lemons. Perhaps it means that those who were set down among the lemons (planted by the natives)—the settler community now has to participate in the shaping of the country/future. The lemons too were now adapting

to their own ends and in an island set to its own rhythm(“sitting still...humming and rising...but back”).The present too is always transforming, unlocking unknown futures. No destined end (“ Though to what out there...”) and as evening comes and starlings gather the silence is broken by a flute that makes stars move over water. In spite of the transformations, the poet speaker lies on the same track, the same body in a similar repeated pattern of day and night(sleep). The “body tags along”...with what we may ask”The self/other selves/bodies? And “as promised”...resonates with the promise in line 4. What changes or is constant is time, the Maloufian notion of time as ‘continuous present’: their breaths of tomorrow carrying the “scent of lemons” but who are now thriving(“run wild”) in another country, and yet not lost their identity/character, “smelling always of themselves”. The reference here is to movement/migration which is the defining energy of Australia. Earlier in the poem the lemons were suggested to have adapted to other ends, and perhaps they are replanted now(in the concluding line) holding on still to their character/integrity and perhaps reconciled with the settlers who have absorbed their scent in what may appear like a utopian imagination of different cultural universes intersecting in Australia: “ the present is always with us, always open”.

A central aspect of Malouf is his avoidance of obvious reference to identity politics though they are not absent but require careful study to uncover it. While Malouf objects to his work being seen as in anyway representative of gay identity(as a reflection of Malouf’s own sexual orientation), several of his poems including Revolving Days and Wild Lemons can be read in relation to sexual politics and a discourse of body that is present in these poems. In Wild Lemons, the body is metaphorized as the wild smelling lemons across “blazed trunks” and nurtured by the warmth of an island. The “path” which was set down as a “promise”(perhaps by the poet speaker to his partner) into the present. But what that might be(the present is always open) and to what end is unknown or not fixed. Only a mystical vision of “reluctant stars” moving over water is offered. Perhaps this is a reference to the uncertainty or apprehension that is present in the context of homosexual desire. The poet speaker is on the same track in a different season with the same body. The body “tags along”(with mind/self/other) as night gives way to day to see what transpires. What goes on is time and tomorrow’s breath carrying the scent of lemons that “run wild” in another country but still “smelling of themselves”. The

integrity of the body remains. The promise may continue into the present or the present may always be open to transformations or possibilities but what is certain is the connection we have with our body: the body which will always smell of itself.