

To: SA PEN Members
E-Newsletter No. 3/2012 – 25/02/2012

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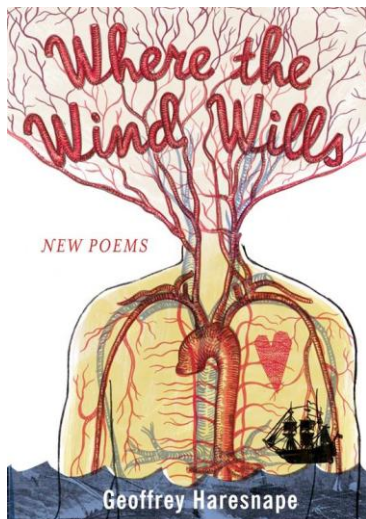
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Where the Wind Wills – New Poems by Geoffrey Haresnape. Reviewed by Peter Merrington

Echoing Green Press, Fish Hoek, 2011; ISBN 978-0-9870099-0-6



Where the Wind Wills gathers new poems written since *The Living and the Dead* (2005) which was a blend of mostly retrospective work from Geoff Haresnape's career and showed his remarkable depth and extent of engagement with a constellation of South African poets. These ranged from Guy Butler to Sidney Clouts, Walter Serote and Breyten Breytenbach, and older figures such as Van der Post and Roy Campbell. As long-standing editor of *Contrast* and *New Contrast*, critic, scholar, traveller, rapporteur and friend of writers,

Haresnape has a personal stock and standing that comprise an archive of SA literary heritage. He speaks lightly, behaving like the contrarywise John Skelton (priest, laureate, scholar, courtier, jester, caught in the shift between high Middle Ages and the Renaissance) and enjoys the Skeltonic line and Skeltonic humour. But he speaks with and through a domain of idiom that in itself is a full literary course on the history and current life of South African poets and poetics. His light touch is to be taken seriously. A new collection by Geoff Haresnape is an event in SA literature.

Haresnape's writing is careful and alert, without rhetorical excess, without purple. He pays special attention to every aspect, from rhythm to diction and idiom. There is a neatness, a professionalism, in this – but it is not the same as the often-encountered insistence on a poetic ethic of sparseness or minimalism. Haresnape shows that it is possible to go beyond cryptic minimalist imagism and to engage us with a proper sense of sentence, and discourse. Politeness is a term that comes to mind in its fullest meaning – poems that converse, that offer and discuss, while also observing protocols of good form in a poetic as well as social sense. I value this quality, which is a kind of neo-Augustan respect for the medium, the topic, and the reader.

But the content is not restricted to the rationality of a latter-day Augustanism. Haresnape has a deeper instinct than that – and many of the poems in *Where the Wind Wills* run to moments of non-rational primal experience as well as sensory encounters. Mind and gut are strung up into a keenly held suspension. The first poem, an encounter with a rotting whale carcass, sets the tone in this regard – a sense of

chance encounter, realisation of the circumstance, and sensory sharing *in extremis* – and a lingering resonance over the shape of a vertebra, the smell, the elemental zone, the intersection of two worlds on the meeting-point of the seashore.

This blend recurs throughout *Where the Wind Wills*, and the title itself suggests a liberating Shelleyan spirit of reckless openness that blows always as it wishes through the fine fretwork of ironic distancing, and formal care. A *mashrabiya* balcony – behind it an observer – before it the carnival of life – and through the fretted screen a reciprocating breeze, or gust, or blast or whisper.

The collection has five sections. The first offers occasional poems that speak of sites and situations in Haresnape's Cape Peninsula. The second drops us into contrary, unexpected, remarkable and deep waters that show a very different side to Haresnape as a poet. The third is South African contemporary satire, rude, rackets, topical and fun, with two irreverent personae to tackle the address – Erasmus Eyeball and Dr Severance Package. The fourth section engages with travel, and impressive discursive poems that speak about Israel and Palestine, the eastern seaboard of Canada, a bear on an ice floe in the North Atlantic, the tragic figure of Arthur Nortje in Oxford, and a short epitaph to Patrick Bronte, brother of the more famous sisters. These poems are in many ways critically generous tribute to people and situations met by Geoff and his wife Lesley on their travels, to colleagues and other figures within their range of encounter. The final section returns to the Cape Peninsula and SA, but at a different kind of set from the first – these eight poems are about the metaphysics of

death within the familiarity of the present.

I hugely enjoyed *Where the Wind Wills* because of Haresnape's customary expertise, idiom, and wit. But I found something more in this, his fifth book of poems – something that stops the smirk, freezes the eyebrows, silences the mind, and asks the unanswerable, runs to the imponderable. There is a very obvious engagement with literary discourse, with tradition, even to the extent of a tribute, a modern ode (*Cut Short*) to young Fanny Brawn and her departed lover, Keats. The fine poem on the fate of the Titanic, too, nods to Thomas Hardy. I don't expect less from a real poet, whose realm is other poets, long rich legacies, hard-won experiment with form and idiom, and a confidence in sharing this rare competence with readers; but Geoff Haresnape in this collection goes beyond that confidence – he takes us to a public zone of political questions as in the poems set in Jerusalem; and, more intriguing, he takes us to a private zone of unanswerable quandary about being, as in the most extraordinary and liminally shamanic *my mentor is dressing me*:

*There is a twang of release
and ululation
Can I put a girdle round the
earth in search of my target?
Shall I bring down my desired by
noonday or by night?*

Resonances with Shakespeare and with scripture, but a poem that drops the

speaker out of the customary field of poetic legacies and into a different realm entirely. Other poems in the collection adumbrate this letting go – they speak directly to faith and spirit, and the numinous and divine: the centurion at the cross, Lazarus, St Therese of Lisieux, for instance. Even here, in the realm of the numinous, are old honoured traditions, conventions of address, personae from a known though not mundane world, and yet my final impression of *Where the Wind Wills* is that Geoff Haresnape's poetic sense is leading him to a new kind of encounter, beyond custom, and into the vertiginous place of transformative and performative metaphor where depth of imagination in the form of metamorphosis takes place.

Congratulations to Jim Phelps, proprietor of Echoing Green Press, for scooping this fifth volume of poems by Geoff Haresnape, and to an evidently excellent editor, Nigel Bell. It is a meticulously well-set-up text. The cover design is a different kettle of fish, and I wish it had been otherwise. The image of arteries, veins, aorta and so forth, like a violent sketch by William Harvey, is startling and not in accord with Haresnape's vision. But, dear reader, please cleave to the old adage and buy a copy for its contents, not its cover.

Peter Merrington. Author of *Zebra Crossings, tales from the shaman's record*, and *The Zombie and the Moon: more tales from the shaman's record* (Jacana Media).

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Have a chuckle :

- ✓ A thief who stole a calendar got twelve months.
- ✓ When the smog lifts in Los Angeles, U.C.L.A.

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