

THE **ENGLISH
ACADEMY
REVIEW**



Southern African Journal of English Studies

Volume 29 (2) October 2012

|

ISSN 1013-1752

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Where the Wind Wills, by **Geoffrey Haresnape**
Fish Hoek, South Africa: Echoing Green Press, 2011. 96 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-9870099-0-6

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'A Scattering of Leaves'

The title of Geoffrey Haresnape's fifth and latest book of poems, *Where the Wind Will*s, might suggest some kind of sybilic surrender. But instead of folding his arms at the mouth of a gusty Cumaean/Capetonian cave, the poet has arranged his scattering of memories and observations into five sections, each with a more or less discernable coherence.

Section I belongs to the naked 'I'. The gaze is unmistakably Romantic and, at times, gushingly romantic. With the exception of 'At Seventy', not one of the poems fails to find its objective correlative in the fauna and flora of the Western Cape. From here Haresnape extrapolates to wider concerns: how the demystified may regain its mystery ('Beached Whale'), future loss pre-empted ('Amphibian'), past loss remembered ('Farewell'). The formula, successful for the largest part, involves setting the scene in troubadour-like fashion but then manipulating seemingly incidental detail into correspondence with muted moments of revelation. The sore thumb is the tributary 'At Seventy', which is subtitled 'for Lesley'. Despite the poet's formal efforts (rather bland blank verse), the prosaic nature of the praises laid out is not offset in any way.

The following section, the most provocative and teasingly ambivalent of the five, evinces a strong metaphysical and religious bent. There are moments of glibness, piety, and doubt, and the result (desirably) is a more fractured, more distorted poetic voice. Haresnape achieves distance between subject and object by adopting stances of alterity. Varieties of dialogue are employed in 'When and Where', 'HIV and AIDS', 'Flibbertigibbet', and 'An Imagined Dialouge with St Thérèse of Lisieux'. And in three of the other poems personae are used to establish an even wider pallet of sense and sympathy. Of these, 'Lazarus' is the most interesting and could even be reckoned as the stand-out poem in the collection. Having been resurrected only to suffer a second death, Lazarus is not as happy as Larry: 'How do I face this thing? / the one who should – they say – quite understand /the act of dying?' The triumph of the poem is its restraint. Despite having no set metrical pattern, the tercets have a necessarily cold, distracted rhythm. Lazarus, for the largest part, haltingly voices fear about the

repeated unravelling of his being and expresses quiet resentment for his 'rash and lovely friend'.

Section III has no such gem, indeed almost no sparkle. The two personae that alternately preside over the poems are Erasmus Eyeball and Dr Severance Package. The former, as Haresnape declares in his preface, 'is proud of sharing a name with Desiderius Erasmus since he admires the stance which the Renaissance humanist took for openness and common sense in religious and other matters'. Dr Package, in his turn, is described as 'acerbic,' 'pedantic' and 'reactive'. There is no doubt that the Eyeball poems are to be preferred over the Package poems, since they demonstrate aptness for the epigrammatic clincher and because they are saddled in tightly controlled couplets, which undoubtedly enhance the humour. To light verse, if the analogy will hold, one may apply the same criterion for amusement and hilarity Bergson applies to animals: we only find animals funny when they mimic humans or resemble us in some way. Light verse, if the levity is to be taken seriously, should show a certain technical mastery. The importance of rhyme, for instance, in effecting perfect comic timing, can't be overstated. Sadly the facile humour of Package, whatever excuses we are asked to make on behalf of the persona, is aggravated by the poems' formlessness.

In Sections IV and V, however, there is a return to the soberness found in the early sections. Though one can't discern an overarching concern or style here, Haresnape presents a few poems of disarming pathos and simplicity. The most noteworthy of these are 'Good Hope' and 'Garden of Remembrance', which have the poet's memory of his father in common. 'Good Hope' oscillates between the despair of loss and despair about the insignificance of that loss in the greater scheme of things. But, in the final lines, the import of the title becomes apparent, and the poet glories in man's audacious ambition to ask 'for all – / new Life, new Heaven, new Earth.' What makes 'Garden of Remembrance' one of the most technically deft poems in the collection is its use of slant or near rhyme. In a poem dealing with fading memory, nothing so well captures the haziness of history as paired words that seem to have kinship but really don't. The closing couplet is the crown, since the almost-rhyming words share a closer aural proximity than any of the other pairs: 'My father's image comes as a surprise / to tell me of my own declining days.' The memory, limpid for a moment, recedes agonizingly beyond the fickle reach of consciousness.

Despite the fact that a capricious wind has blown some less-than-deserving poems into Geoffrey Haresnape's latest collection, the good still outweighs the bad. More often than not it is those poems in which a poet does not seem to be *trying* that he achieves the greatest success, whether the aim is humour, or nostalgia, or celebration. But, of course, the truth is that a good deal of trying goes into looking like you aren't. What appears to be a scattering of leaves often turns out to be a deliberate trail of breadcrumbs.