

REVIEW OF MAURICE WHELAN'S

"How To Write Poetry In How Many Chapters"

by Shahid Najeeb



"Words will come out of the skies, and shine like stars, if you clear the way for them."

Maurice Whelan

The title of the book is a bit deceptive, for it seems to suggest a recipe book on how to write poetry. But the real purpose of the book is to explore the extremely complex and obscure process that one needs to enter into, to produce a piece of writing called "poetry". As Hazlitt says

"Poetry ... is not a branch of authorship: it is the stuff of which our life is made ..."

To explore this process the author seeks out what other authors and poets have written, but mainly he explores what goes through his mind in the creation of his own poems, which he uses in an exploratory way to illustrate the process. It is this internal exploration that is of interest to the psychoanalyst, because the processes he uses, are familiar.

The scope of this short book (just over a hundred pages) is enormous, but I would like to pick out one dimension that in a sense summarises the process of the book and one that I think would be of interest to any psychoanalyst. The image that comes to mind, is of an arial view of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, on a foggy morning. The hump of the bridge can be seen, but not where it arises from, nor where it goes. The fact that the bridge can be clearly seen suggests that there is a connection, even if it is obscure what is connected with what. The visible bridge itself can be seen as a very intricate and complicated structure. One can see the overall curvature, the steel beams that constitute it, and if one looks very carefully, one might even be able to make out the rivets and bolts that connect one beam with another. It is possible to regard a poem and the psychoanalytic dialogue, like the Harbour Bridge on a foggy morning. The words, images and various nuances of meaning that exist in both, can be reasonably well seen, described and perhaps even carefully analysed, but not where they arise from, nor where they go, for that is obscured by fog. The fact that a poem and a psychoanalytic dialogue exist, suggest that something is being connected, which would otherwise not be connected, were it not for this structure. Equally, the details of the connection might be studied and discussed in minute detail, but the most interesting parts that are being connected, remain obscure.

The first part of Maurice Whelan's book explores the mysterious territory in which a poem arises, from the first murmuring intuitions that gradually gather pace and structure and start appearing as images and words. Slowly over time, they get welded into coherent or suggestive structures, and a poem is eventually born. But the poem also necessarily connects with something in the reader, otherwise it would have no meaning. However, exactly what it connects with, remains obscure. Maurice, very wisely, does not attempt to delineate the landscape that is being connected with. He hints and suggests it with some of his own poems, which serve as signposts. It is left to the reader to interpret them as they choose. A considerable degree of trust is implicit in this process.

In exactly the same kind of way, the psychoanalytic dialogue, after the initial formalities, starts from obscure origins, initially in the analysand, which, if they find resonance in the analyst, produce the same initial murmuring intuitions that will in time develop into a dialogue that wends its way through experiences, past and present, of both participants. Exactly what the dialogue leads to, and with what significance may not be clear, till gradually the fog lifts and the connections can be seen more clearly. Till then a considerable degree of trust is implicit. Sometimes the whole work of the analysis takes place in the building of that trust, the bridge then being from the indistinct lands of mistrust, to the equally unknown lands of trust.

As suggested above, there is an inherent similarity in the process of writing a poem and engaging in a psychoanalytic dialogue. What makes it particularly interesting is that the author of this book is both a published poet and prominent senior psychoanalyst. So whatever distinctions exist between poem and psychoanalytic dialogue, they are felicitously dissolved in his person, so he could equally be talking about poetry or psychoanalysis when he says, for instance:

"A significant degree of chaos must be tolerated, even welcomed ... A stance of passive, feminine receptivity is best: active, masculine grasping worst ... The responsibility on the other hand requires he lend his 'I' to other 'I's, that, having entered through sympathetic identification with others, speaks on their behalf ... only when he is fit to journey into the origins of his own self; and if he knows that the journey, he has embarked upon is not merely one of exploring another's life, but it is also one that is a creation of his own soul."

Perhaps at this point I might mention that I am not a disinterested reader of this book. If I were, I don't believe it would be possible to generate sufficient energy to write this review. I am a psychoanalyst that enjoys reading poetry and I have an interest in photography, which for me serves the poetic function of using images to communicate inner states of mind. As Maurice says, "Poem making is 'image making', that I often use to help people 'see'."

For the remainder of the review, I will speak largely through a few sample photographs taken by me, conjoined with Maurice's poems, to again act as bridges in the fog, connecting with something in him and me to something in you, the reader. It is hoped this brief review will, in that way, whet your appetite to explore the book and in the process, possibly encourage you to write a poem or engage in a psychoanalytic dialogue!

Finally, I want to say something about the photograph on the front page of this review, which also forms the cover of the published book. The photograph (not one of mine) is of an Irish landmark, called "The Giant's Causeway". Maurice says in his correspondence with me that the stones that form this causeway, "look man-made, but are of nature. Poems are actually man-made but strive to be of nature." The same could be said of psychoanalysis. The setting and dialogue are man-made, but the whole of psychoanalysis is essentially about that many splendored thing called Life.

The stones (foundational mythopoetic imagery common to both poetry and psychoanalysis) that form the causeway, are an immense path of this enterprise that leads up into the mountains to their distant and elusive peaks, and from thence to the boundless sky of Ultimate Reality. Reflecting on the name of this landmark, it occurred to me that it should not have a possessive "s" as in "Giant's" but that the "s" should be plural as in "Giants". My reason being that from the little I know about Irish history, it is a land steeped in much pain, and yet in spite of that (or maybe because the pain has not only been experienced, but as Bion says, 'suffered'), it has produced many literary giants that have all probably walked on that enormous and mysterious causeway

*"And paced upon the mountains overhead,
And (hid their faces) ... amid a crowd of stars." (W.B. Yeats)*

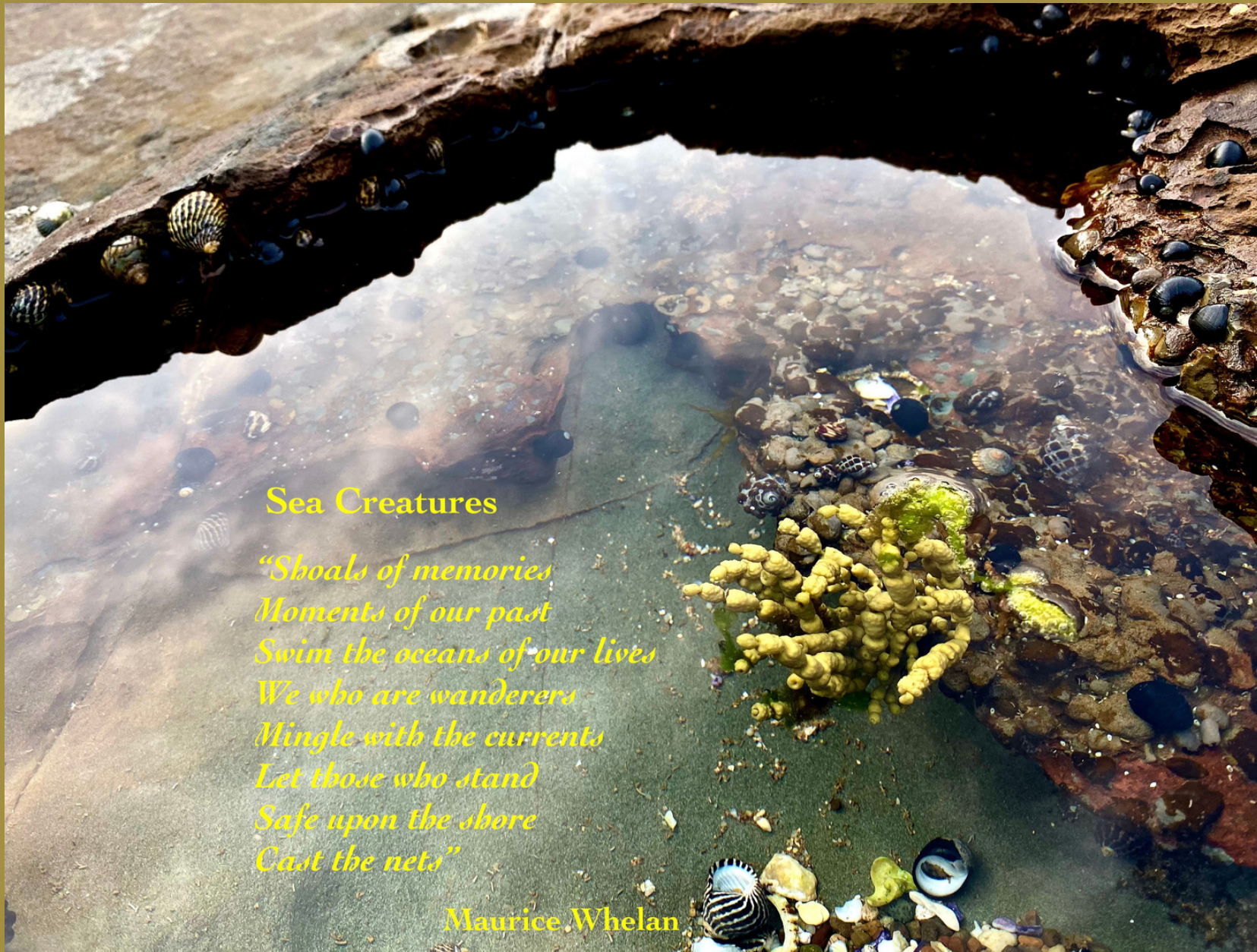


This is very complex poem for it contrasts the perfect eloquence of silence with all the ways in which we try to express ourselves, whether it be in a poem or psychoanalysis, piercing the glass lake of vast stillness that abounds within and around us, and which we are generally not aware of till we can pause, like a painted ship on a painted ocean. This complexity is expressed in the different movements of the poem and the contrasting imagery and colours in the photograph.



Maurice writes about this poem, "Creativity takes many forms. It does not always mean finding something new. It can be the re-finding of what has been lost; the re-discovery of what has always been at our side, but we have not slowed to stillness to make room for its presence. As our life progresses the storehouse of memory is enriched. There are greater opportunities for re-visitation, re-alignment and forgiveness ..."

The photograph attempts to convey this fresh perspective graphically, through light slanting on the path entering the stillness of a familiar Harbour scene. This is of particular importance in psychoanalysis when every session has a familiar external and internal structure and the challenge is to always find what's new "for re-visitation, re-alignment and forgiveness ..." for that is where what is essential and alive, exists.



Sea Creatures

*"Shoals of memories
Moments of our past
Swim the oceans of our lives
We who are wanderers
Mingle with the currents
Let those who stand
Safe upon the shore
Cast the nets"*

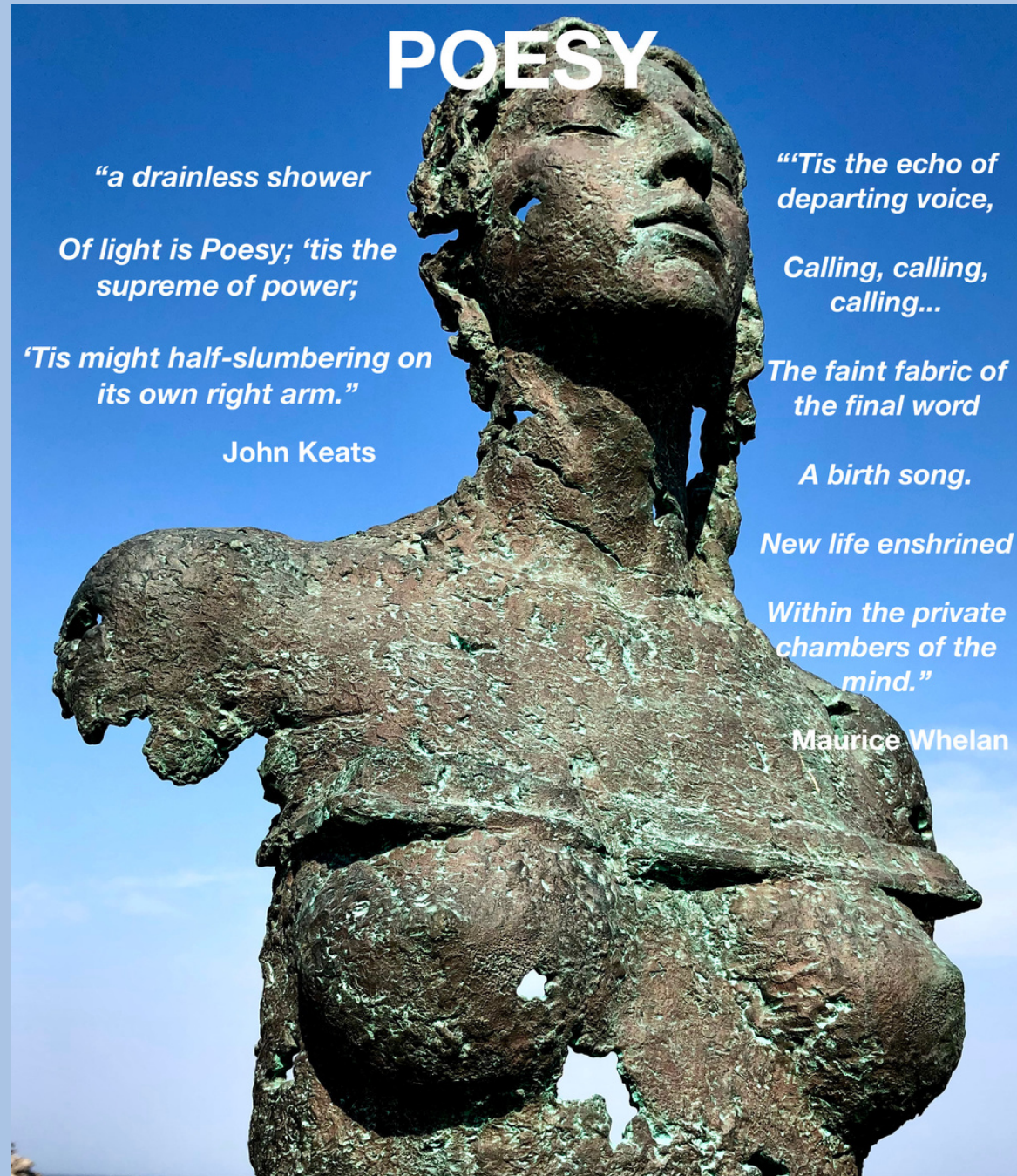
Maurice Whelan

In this seemingly simple poem, Maurice makes an important distinction, both in poetry and psychoanalysis, that the intricate and complex experience of writing a poem or engaging in a psychoanalytic dialogue, is not the same as that in which it is communicated. Internal experiences and the external communications about them, occur in different realms of existence. Expression is generally safer, casting its nets, as it does, from the firmer grounds of language, which can convey, but never substitute for, the live currents of poetry or psychoanalysis.

About this poem, Maurice writes -

"Basho, the inventor of the haiku said if you want to write about a tree become the tree. I've become beech and birch, eucalypts and angophoras. To write, I'll Never Look into Your Eyes, I 'became' a terrorist. As a poet you do all sorts of things to yourself. But in each and every poem, regardless of its subject, that liminal presence must have life. Otherwise, it will fail to reach, to touch, refine, rarefy and expand the life of the reader. My attempt is inspired by Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale'."

I have appended both poems to an Egor Zigura's "Sculpture by the Sea" photograph, which perhaps depicts a half-slumbering half fragmenting-into-wakefulness dreamlike state, calling, calling, from poet to poet, from analysand to analyst, from century to century, out of the immeasurable depths of ocean, out of the limitless blue sky, to new life, new possibilities, enshrined in, but waiting to be born from, the "private chambers of the mind."



POESY

"a drainless shower

*Of light is Poesy; 'tis the
supreme of power;*

*'Tis might half-slumbering on
its own right arm."*

John Keats

*"'Tis the echo of
departing voice,*

*Calling, calling,
calling..."*

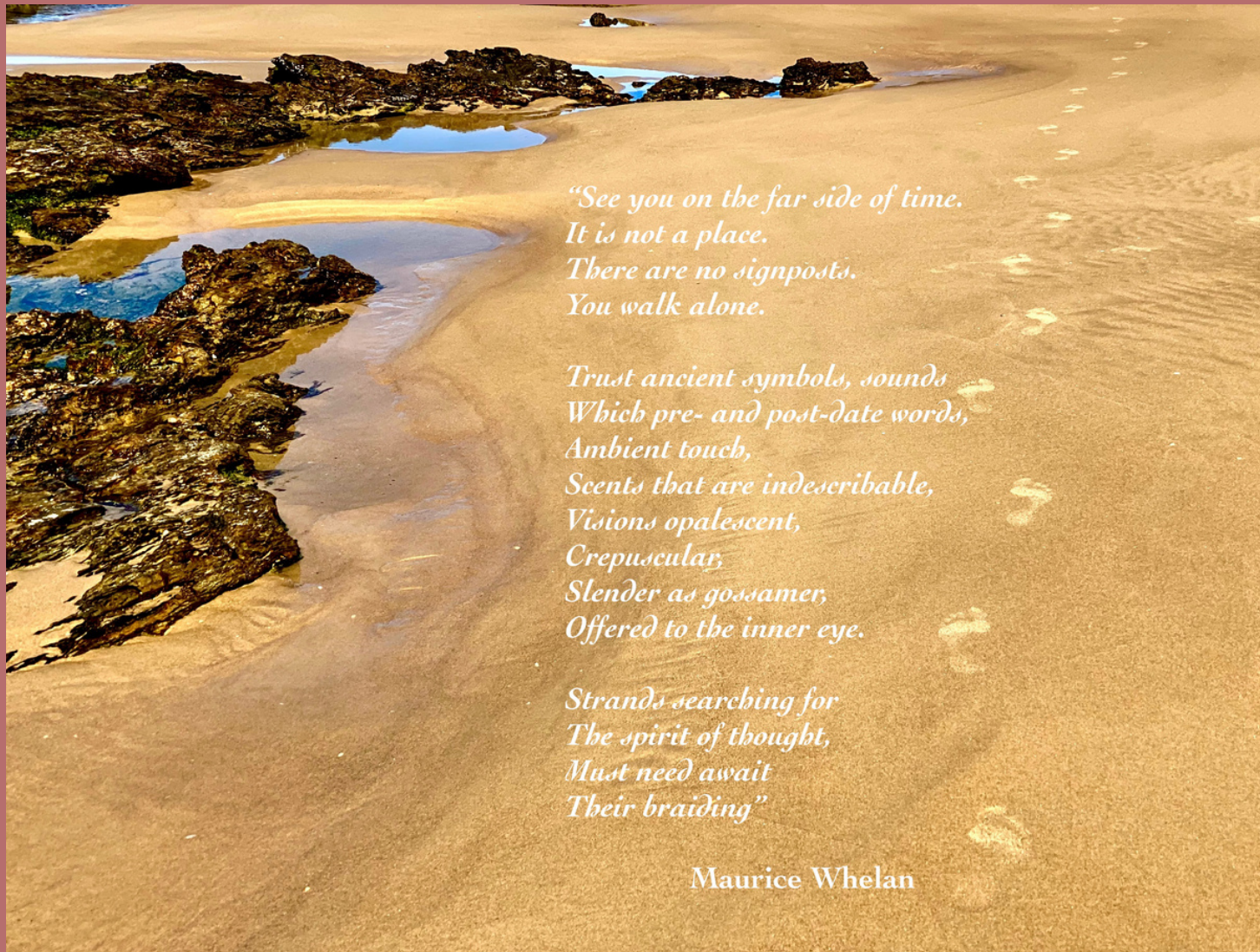
*The faint fabric of
the final word*

A birth song.

New life enshrined

*Within the private
chambers of the
mind."*

Maurice Whelan



"Far Side Time"

Maurice writes "There has been no end towards which I have been writing; summation is neither possible or desirable. Nevertheless, I don't wish to stop leaving a trail of diffusion and vagueness behind. I will therefore turn my attention to that which is essential to keep alive, to value highly and enable to flourish.

In 'In The Beginning' I wrote of the mystery of Life which includes the mystery of self-consciousness. What a marvellous thing existence is. Existence is everywhere but we humans are blessed with/have been given/ the gift of self-consciousness. Some other forms of life have transient and/or limited awareness of 'self'. We have it in abundance." What a wonderful way to conclude!