75 Lines for Liberation

In 1942, with life on the Island in a desolate way
three best mates headed to the edge of a bay
with a dream of getting away
they held a hope to together escape
and help those who were tethered to stay,
It was the 2nd of May.

Their names were Denis, Peter and Maurice
Three teens with fortified hearts of promise
bonds of friendship that could crack concrete.

The sea at Green Island is history
meaning that it churns with turbulence
and rocky constellations, patterned with victories
and defeats.

Although night was dark, no ideology can occupy the stars
so light firing far, distant and free illuminated the path
down to the white sand of the beach.

How cold was the water as they waded to the knee?
How loyally silent was the wood of the small boat?
Or did it floorboard creak? Did the breeze turn blind eyes or speak?

Were the boys awake to dangers of the deep?

They must have begun to dream, a mile off the shore
rowing toward liberation with the maps that they had drawn
they beachcombed details to help the Allies win the war

They must have begun to dream that they would make it
hearts becoming cormorant wingbeats soaring on warm currents
souls lifting like anchors, chains unmooring from prison piers

was the night cold enough to sting with tears?
Was the wind crisp and fierce? Did they shiver and cling as they steered
a journey through the minefield rocks, each one deadly and ready to blow

Did they know?
II

Denis is in the water, I’m trying to get his hand
but his fingers slip through mine like poured sand

it happened quick and the boat is a splinter now
the ocean is winter now and there’s cold in my lungs

we’re going under now and the waves interrogate
Denis can’t answer, he lashes his tongue

I can’t hear the scream and I can’t see Maurice
Denis looks silver underwater, ghostly shimmer of a comet

it happened quick and all hope is drowning now
the ocean surrounding now and there’s death in the air

Denis is sinking now, the seabed a prison camp
his eyes are barbed wire and they catch mine in despair

I tread water. Maurice is there. I tread water.
Maurice is alive. I tread water. Denis has died. I tread water.

We swim. With nowhere to swim. We swim back now.
The walls are tipped with soldiers, how did they know?

The water coughs us up and we are spluttered to a van
time accelerates and we are driftwood on tidal flow

The Gestapo ‘question’ us in France
then we are sent into a camp, concentrated with the damned

It’s 1943, Wittlich Prison in Germany now
concentrated in the damp, Maurice has trouble breathing

Maurice dies of tuberculosis and we are split from our pair

so now it’s just me, Peter, grieving. Time exhales and the war loosens its chokehold

I breathe out. Its 1995. Where is Maurice? I travel to a German war grave and rescue him

he is still nineteen but at long last, I am a lifeguard, taking his hand to save him from the deep.
The world’s new millennium was in its infancy. I was growing up in Jersey, anchored in the shadow of France. There, me and two friends used to cycle rusty bikes to Green Island; teenagers momentarily liberated from the demands of our parents. In the breezy six-week summers that punctuated our school sentences, we would swim out to the Island. Getting there, and clambering ashore, we would breathe out with our back flattening the wet grass. The sun dried us quickly. The crystallising salt made maps and ridges of our skin. We were free.

Peter Hassall, Denis Audrain & Maurice Gould, aged 15, 16 & 17. Attempted to escape the Occupation carrying Plans of Island Fortifications to Aid the Allies. The boat was swamped. Denis drowned and is buried in St Saviour’s Cemetery. Maurice and Peter were captured and deported to SS camps in Germany. Maurice died in 1943 and his remains were re-interred in the Howard Davis Park in 1997. Peter died in 1998. His ashes are scattered nearby. United again.

It is 2019. I read this plaque at Green Island. An elderly couple read it after me. How sad, they say in deep, grave voices. They were just trying to escape the war. Some minutes later, sitting with my baby daughter, watching the sea – I see the couple seat themselves nearby to begin turning the pages of The Sun newspaper. I hear them say that’s all we need, more migrants in France, soon they’ll try boat it to Jersey. Are they trying to re-fortify the Island, against who they see as invaders? The walls they build are imaginary but cement. I want to tell them that teenagers in small boats are just trying to escape the war. Not even teenagers. Aylan Kurdi was three when his boat was swamped. So, what is liberation really? What is freedom if it only belongs to a few? Liberation must outlive one day or let the memory of the day be sullied. Liberation will sink if we remain insular. Liberation will sink if we do not look to the depths of history and learn. Imagine that it is your friend drowning. Take their hand.

Christian Foley