Bruce Hunter
For *Canadian Poetries* a review of

36 Cornelian Avenue
by Chris Wiseman

They weren’t uncommon, washed up on the beach at Cornelian Bay, the big sea mines, German or English, dirty iron, five feet high, huge chestnuts with spikes, good for climbing. Each

one of us was warned, and really warned, that we
must never go near the mines, that they could kill....

Thus opens the first poem, “Mines,” in Christopher Wiseman’s superb 10th collection, *36 Cornelian Avenue*, which follows *In John Updike’s Room*, his highly-praised new and selected poems of which Carmine Starmino says, “Wiseman makes good on a promise only the finest poets are able to satisfy....”

In *36 Cornelian Avenue*, Wiseman risks great vulnerability and nostalgia: his family’s wartime resettlement to seaside Scarborough in Yorkshire, his father’s long, painful absences for the war effort,
and later his premature death, and Wiseman’s return home to England searching for his father, 37 years gone. Yet, there’s nothing mawkish here. The book plays and sounds like a fresh contemporary film, at turns, racy, funny and terrifying. And the ending is a weeper. Wiseman’s succinct craft and emotional courage means we trust him completely as we trek the English countryside during the war and years after.

From the first poem, “Mines,” about childhood, to the last poem about his father, Wiseman deftly shifts point of view in a line or two. He moves from the reckless boys double-daring death to
them as adults laughing and boasting of their dumb luck as one tells of a ship hitting a mine just after the war:

“Geoff saw, two miles out to sea, a bright flash, heard an astounding roar, and watched a freighter break in two.... His eyes get wide, his voice quickening, as he tells about it all these safe years later.”

Wiseman uses lyric, narrative, dramatic and documentary forms to portray a people besieged by war and life afterward. Blackouts, rationing, and love
are depicted vividly. And of course omnipresent menace too, as a German pilot’s Junker 88 cannons strafe Cornelian Avenue where Wiseman and his mother live.

Poems such as “The Fathers Fishing” about the fathers’ precious time home on furlough, and “Pike Fisherman, 1944”, evoke a classical richness of place and time, as does Yeats’ in “The Fisherman”, as I remember him: “…his sun-freckled face/And his gray Connemara cloth”. Whoever Wiseman’s influences are, I hear echoes of Yeats, Larkin, Durcan, Plath and more. There is a compelling colloquial and elegant voice here.
In the final poem, Wiseman stands at the blue door of his father’s wartime digs and addresses him directly:

“This door. Your wife so old and small. You quite gone:...
You. Through this door/55 years ago....
Why did you have to die young? My children have needed you. It’s me, Dad.

And Wiseman concludes the poem and the book here: “This door. This goddamn blue unlit door. Goodbye.” Anger expressed without rancour and grief without self-pity.
As the credits rolled, I stood in ovation. There’s nothing bleak about Wiseman’s spirit. This is a book generous with all of the emotions, especially love.

36 Cornelian Avenue is tender, cool, droll, whimsical, scathing, funny, sharp and profoundly moving. Or as Yeats has it, in the last stanza of “The Fisherman”:

“Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.”

Christopher Wiseman, one of our finest poets, has given us many poems as cold and passionate as the dawn.
November 15, 2013