

## Poem by Paul Maddern

### The Tipping Line

—for Rowan Vickers

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On the day of your free-for-all eighteenth  
I'm as close as Donegal allows,  
staying on a writer's generosity,  
in her caravan, yards from Tramore Strand.  
It's a *Boys Own* landscape where you'll find  
villagers lighting beacons all along  
the tidal flats to aid the glider bringing  
home the Cold War spy, or where you might  
imagine gasping U-boats surfacing –  
and in the aftermath where a silence  
off the mountains begins undoing war.  
Flights of fancy? Well, in three-week's time  
I'll be reading in the *Belfast Telegraph*  
of an allied bomber unearthed on up the coast.  
The pilot parachuted, and recently turned  
eighty-seven. So, if I tell you here

the beach is the breadth of Bermuda  
and there are ancient marram dunes  
and megalithic chamber tombs  
and orchids grow wild  
and cotton bursts in bogs  
and larks and pipits are the music  
and flies have spotted wings  
and flocks of resting gulls erupt  
unaccustomed to intrusions  
and against Slievetooley a gannet's  
singularity is magnified  
to the point that I'm fixated half the day,  
then believe me and we'll be all the richer.

Right, the gales that blew all week have died.  
The sun is out and warming. Cottages  
and sheep are dotted. I've nestled my back against



Time to head for the caravan. The route I'll take  
will be the tipping line: the point where  
what floats in finds rest. Today, the usual  
made strange: spume, jellyfish, feathers, plastics –  
water, energy-drink and mouthwash bottles,  
bait buckets, lobster pot tags, a baby's  
blue spoon, a *Green Valley* wrapper,  
*Kerrymaid* and *Butterlicious* tubs.  
And one glass item: a Bacardi bottle  
without its label, only the fruit bat  
logo on the twist top. And within,  
no coded message from headquarters, just  
drops of condensation that glow of an evening  
on an Irish beach.

I've almost omitted  
the gull's carcass: a Great Black-backed,  
the largest of them all. Although it's hard to swear  
given the state: all flesh gone, splayed  
wings half-buried, and sockets that would look  
for all the world. But the jolt-yellow beak  
survives intact, designed to rip the flesh  
from living prey like a raptor on the wing –  
but equally adept with carrion. I take  
many photographs: Gull and gulls.

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Perhaps it's the Black-backed that after supper  
haunts the selection of *Gods and Monsters*, a chronicle  
of the final days of James Whale, the discarded  
Hollywood director who created  
Frankenstein's Creature, as played by Boris Karloff.  
The narrative unwinds towards Whale's suicide  
and along with Brendan Frazer, who plays Whale's  
gardener and cautious physique model, we discover  
Whale was a veteran of the trenches and there  
he lost a lover, and that this war and lover haunt him.

Unlike Shelley's, Whale's resurrected grotesque  
is given no soliloquies, rather the Creature's  
struck dumb, if not altogether silent:  
he can grunt his ecstasy on hearing magic

from a blind man's violin, laugh with a child  
who throws flowers upon the water  
before the little flower herself is crushed,  
and he can scream at villagers, fire and lightning.  
And as sound is limited, so too is movement.  
Creature rarely bends his limbs. Straight-armed,  
he claws at sky, and leaden feet are lifted  
from the hip. And there's the mask Whale  
gives to Karloff. The first sketch of it –  
the stitched cranium, the heavy brow, eyes  
dead in their sockets, and the bolted neck – Whale  
leaves to Frazer for services never rendered.

I've watched this movie many times for many  
reasons, but always for its ending. Dissolve  
from Whale floating in the pool to years later:  
Frazer's on the sofa with his son  
watching *Frankenstein* on the box.  
As the credits roll he shows his son  
Whale's sketch, but the kid won't believe  
his father knew the man who drew it. Frazer  
smiles and doesn't force it. He takes out  
the trash as reminded by his wife. It is  
a happy family unit: all creatures are repressed. //

Out in the alley behind the modest home,  
the night sky is the cobalt blue only  
Hollywood night skies can be. Frazer  
bins the trash and it begins to rain  
the milky backlit rain that only Hollywood  
rain can be.

And there is thunder.

And Frazer closes his eyes  
and he lifts his head to the rain  
and he enacts iconic gestures:  
Creature and creatures,  
he raises an arm  
to claw at lightning  
and growls his fear.  
The scale is operatic.  
And believe me when I tell you that  
behind him those are not suburban lights  
in suburban hills. They are torches.

The villagers are on their way.  
The Creature has left the trenches.  
And turning, legs unbending,  
he lumbers down the rain-slicked alley,  
clawing, stomping. Trash cans tumble  
and he is welcomed into the night.  
And we are all the richer.

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I'm alone on my night walk along Tramore.  
There's no director, tenor, Creature, gulls,  
and they're everywhere. It's sublime.  
There's a moon, and I see the Bacardi bottle  
has shifted: another tide and tipping line.

If you'll forgive my stagecraft, out at sea  
a ship is signalling and across the bay  
a lamp responds. A submarine will surface  
and villagers will light their beacons. There.  
A plane's exploding and the parachutist  
drifts, continuing into his afterlife.  
Yes, I'm tempted. I want rain and thunder;  
to become my own conductor. I close my eyes,  
music swells, and I'm raising an arm to the sky.