Poem by Paul Maddern

The Tipping Line

-for Rowan Vickers

1

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 Slievetooey 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 a lichened rock to watch the Atlantic, blue as atoll waters, funnel down the inlet.
Light illuminates and shadows the mountains' stone-walled fields and hollows
Simple bread and butter stuff. Manna for holidaying writers.

Instead, for you this landscape must become an amphitheatre. Grab a rock. Have these cliffs and flats serve as your boards and backdrop. Imagine here, where it suits the mind to focus and serve its purpose, it's getting on and the setting sun provides an amber light that makes every blade and stone, the sea, each cloud, the gannet, golden. The beacons on the tidal flat are lit. Villagers, sailors and our spy assemble. And because the scale of this is operatic, from the farthest field a heldentenor, the rarest breed, makes his entrance. He's long-incarcerated Florestan leading his fellow prisoners from the dungeon in a whispered chorus praising light, and from his flagship's prow Otello listens to his Esultate! ricochet between the mountains, and Aeneas, whose ancestral ghosts have steered him to his ship, screams Italia from that cliff top, and Tristan's drowning in harmonic waves, and Grimes puts out to sea this time without a boy, and Siegfried's searching for the wizened tree where magic swords and myths abound, and Samson stumbles as he tries to find both vengeance and redemption, and honest Parsifal stands alone and wiser, the quest completed, the chalice in his hand, a sea of shredded programmes fluttering from the gods, torn by an audience struck dumb by singing. Believe me when I tell you of all this is happening and once happened.

Or is it startled gulls again? Just bluff? As I said, it's late. The sea's now in and another world's arrived on the tide. 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.

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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.