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 lichenized 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.
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.