



**University of
Nottingham**
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

‘The Watchful Eye’

Grace Morrison

English Dissertation: Creative Writing

Supervisor: Thomas Legendre

'The Watchful Eye'

Grace Morrison

There were disagreements from the very start to the very end, but I stand by my account that I spotted John Macleod the day after his obituary was published.

Angus and I stood at the loch's edge, clad in PVC waders. Sweat gathered on my chest beneath the fabric as the water reached up to our thighs, gradually numbing our feet as the Atlantic drifted in from the Minch. In the stagnant air, a hoard of midges soon emerged above our heads. The grey shapes darted back and forth in frenzied delight at the stench of our skin baking in the sunlight.

'We better not stay out for long,' I said, squinting at the sky. The flat, glassy water drifted out between two hills to connect with the sea on the far horizon, where clouds of grey swarmed. 'There's a storm headed our way.'

'Och, that's nothing,' said Angus. 'Summer rain will never harm you.'

Our silence resumed. Angus was staring impassively out at the lake. The catch today was not as good as it should have been. Yet, the old man faced the incoming clouds, hunched over his fishing rod, his expression one of quiet determination. A sheen of sweat coated the back of his neck, eyes just obscured by a black cap that read '*Stornoway Port Authority '59*'. Even in the bright light, I could see the frown that seemed to rest permanently upon his face, his pursed lips, his sallow cheeks and the way he appeared as if perpetually drawing from a cigarette. All the while, a great, white beard hung from his chin, just touching his collarbones.

There was the rustle of rubber brushing rubber as he took a step to the left and drew back an arm. I watched as he twirled the line around his head with ease, launching it out onto the water. It flew in the direction of the pebbled shoreline on the far side of the loch, casting ripples around us. Our lines floated together on the surface, undisturbed. It was catch and return, but even so, no trout yet fell for the black pennell flies.

'Bastards,' Angus muttered, slapping the back of his neck. The noise erupted into the air. Several hooded crows were startled out of a collection of rocks on the far beach. Their calls carried across the loch, at a frequency just enough to make me wince. They flew overhead, grey and black shapes flitting against the Egyptian blue sky.

There was another slap, quieter this time. His exposed neck was red and dotted with welts. He drew away a hand flecked with oil to examine the flattened midge.

'Anything?' I nodded at his line. He shook his head. I ran a hand through my hair, hands sticky with sweat, and let out a sigh. 'The only time we've been able to get out here in months and this is the result.'

'Irony, isn't it?' Angus let out a brief, hurried laugh. It emerged from his mouth as more of a second cough.

'Aye,' I said. 'We could cut today short. Before that storm.'

Angus removed his cap and inspected the brim, brushing off a stray, white feather that had somehow found its way inside. He revealed a rounded, bald head dotted with age spots.

'I'm not sure when I can next come out.'

'Surely you'll have a weekend off soon?'

'You live a privileged life, Alexander.' The Uist man said, beginning one of his favourite tirades. He pulled the cap back onto his head as I felt the eye roll happen before I even realised I was doing it. 'Long holidays, finishing at 3 o'clock. All you have to do is shout at some brats for a couple of hours a day and you're done. I do that every day for free.'

'Your poor grandkids. We have this conversation every time. Yet, what do you even do? Fiddle around in cranes every day? Wave off the odd ship?'

'Your generation,' he shook his head. 'No respect. Explains a lot about your wife and how she talks to you.'

I muttered further words under my breath, but if he heard, he chose to ignore them. Instead, we turned back to the loch and the conversation went no further. I had found, over the years, that it was often better not to rise to him.

Now, the clouds were no longer on the horizon. They were drifting in, blown by a wind that was gradually picking up. I stared down at my line. It sat on the surface of the water that churned around me as I tapped my foot impatiently on the rocks below.

It was another hour or so before we felt the first droplets touch our cheeks. They were light, fleeting, only just caressing our skin. You could hardly feel them. There was still a strong light shining down from above even as the water began to stir up little waves.

'Ah!' Angus let out a shout of delight and pulled back on his line. A slick, brown trout emerged from the water. The older man took no notice of his net and lunged to grip the fish in one fist, holding it triumphantly in the air. Then, he brought it up to his face and peered at it through a bulging eye. His breath no doubt smelled of strong whiskey, salty guga and tobacco. He watched the fish inhale through its gills, watched the way its mouth gaped open and shut again, and then he crouched and allowed it to slip back into the swirling loch.

With the oncoming wind, the catch was coming in swift and fast. No sooner than you cast a new line out was a trout latching onto the fly. Today, I did not feel that swell of pride as I often did. There was a rigid, thick sadness that had settled in the pit of my stomach in the last few weeks. It was no doubt going to be there for a long time.

The steel-grey clouds were nearly with us now. The water's surface was dappled with the intrusion of droplets.

Soon, we retreated to the grassy bank behind us, hoisting ourselves up onto dry land. Our boots nudged bait buckets, lures, hooks, plastic bags and tackle boxes as we swept them up into our bags.

White foam tips rode inland, the clouds ever swarming, the sky growing dark. It was becoming difficult to make out the far sea as the heavy, incoming rain appeared a distant mist. Angus clutched his hat to his head. The fabric of my clothes rubbed against my skin, and I struggled to pack away my gear as my hands turned red, soon becoming numb.

Hoisting our bags onto our backs, we headed around the loch, eastwards, towards the sea. There was a river that swung left just after you rounded one of the hills. Further downstream, Angus had parked his tractor.

I kept my head down, protecting my eyes from the onslaught. The sun, partially obscured, lit the land in spots like lightning striking the moor. In the distance, a faint rainbow began to form. The colours were murky and distorted in the haze of rain. Yet, as I choked on the freshness of the damp air, inhaled the rich, peat stench of the earth and felt the rain sting my cheeks with a coldness swept from the far Atlantic, there was a thrill in my heart as we stood in the eye of the storm.

We drew closer to the sea. When my father was a boy, the summer moorland was alive with sheep and people tending to their livestock. Now, it was a strange, quiet land. You could hear the howl of the wind, the lapping of waves against the base of the black cliffs, the downpour of rain against the loch and the odd flap of an eagle's wings. You did not hear much else. It was entirely suspended in some distant past that it could never quite escape from.

My vision blurred for a moment. I blinked away water. The coldness was beginning to make the delicate skin around my nose and eyes ache. I stumbled momentarily and my foot was submerged in a bog, sinking into the thick, oozing mud. I fell forward with two hands, pressing them into the mossy ground to pull myself back up. Cold water seeped like a filthy sponge, covering my skin just as my leg grew free and I was raised again to full height.

I turned around. I knew the moor around this loch like the back of my hand, but the shapes around me had grown distorted in the half-light. Behind me, Angus's figure was hazy, blurred by the torrent of rain. I called out for him to hurry up. He made no indication that he had heard.

What was initially thrilling was now beginning to make it difficult to inhale. My chest heaved as I took short, sharp breaths.

There was no real danger out here. I was safe by this loch that I knew so well. But the rain was so strong, so constant, so religious.

It was as the sun broke through from behind a black cloud and scatters of light revealed the glittering rain that I spotted him.

Stumbling forward, I reached the river. I collapsed to the floor and slipped into the swelling water, feet dislodging the rocks at the bottom. I could feel the currents beneath threaten to whisk me away. My hands landed on the grassy bank on the far side, but I had lost the strength to pull myself up. Clutching the moss, I was able to rest my chin on the verge so that my view was unobstructed.

Across the heather, across the foaming water, on the far shore where the hill sloped down to lap at the pebbles that scattered the ground, was the figure of a man I would have recognised anywhere, on any day, in any kind of weather. John.

'It can't be, it can't be,' I whispered, wide-eyed. Yet, there he was. Just catching the light. A broad figure, dark clothes. The man I had known since I was a young boy. He was stooping down curiously to dislodge a pebble from the beach.

A strong hand grabbed my shoulder, pulling me back. I turned to face Angus. His bare head was covered in sea spit and his back was devoid of his bag. Droplets hung off his white beard, blueish lips open as the wind roared and the river pushed against us. He was looking at me but his grey eyes were somewhere distant. They had a faraway look, the look he gave when he would tell me about his father's war efforts, or how his mother forgot his name by the very end. It was the same look he gave me three weeks ago when he returned from fishing and told me how John had drowned at sea.

My teeth began to chatter so fiercely against one another I could no longer call out. Then Angus was pulling me away, out of the river, and I was choking. I tried to call out, to fight against him. He hooked his arms through my elbows, dragging me backwards. I thrashed, kicked my legs, and flailed my arms, but I felt weak against the current and soon I stopped resisting.

Not once did I take my eyes off John. Not until the last second.

There was an urgency in the way Angus moved, not toward the man, but away from him. Dazed, I went with him. He did not let go of me once. I kept my eyes on the beach up until we rounded a corner and it faded from view.

‘Dia’s Muire dhuit. Beò is slàinte dhut,’ Angus croaked. I could only just piece together the words, quiet as they were. *God and Mary be with you. Alive and well with you.*

Three days. It had been three days and we had not seen each other, not spoken, not laid eyes upon one another. My wife had disconnected the phone from the wall so I was outside for the first time since the day on the loch. He had not answered my calls anyway.

Angus’ house was a low, grey bungalow facing over a harbour on the north side of the island. A drizzle of rain was beginning to emerge, but there was little wind chill as I left my car and approached the house.

The doorbell rang out, a low, discordant note that seemed to ring for a while longer around my head. No one answered. I stepped back, examining the windows. The curtains were closely drawn.

‘Angus?’ I called out, my voice carrying in the quiet evening air. Here, far from the main road, there was little sound when the wind dropped. Just the spatter of rain against my hood. I shouted again. Movement caught my eye and I noticed a sliver of light and a twitch of the curtains from his front room. Marching forward, I banged on the door with my fist, shouting the name of my old friend. Paint flaked off the door as my hand connected with it. Frustration gnawed at my insides.

I called for the better half of ten minutes until the cold finally seeped through my clothes.

Just as I was about to turn away, my heart like wet sand in my chest, eyelids heavy with exhaustion, I heard the unmistakable sound of a lock turning. The door slowly opened. Angus was soon revealed, standing there with a haggard face. His eyes sat deep in his head,

shadowed. Distant. He wore a knit jumper and black trousers, and as I drew closer, I was greeted by the faint scent of whiskey and a pungent, damp smell.

'What do you want, Alexander?' he asked softly, softer than I had expected.

'I need to talk to you,' I replied, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice.

Angus' brow furrowed, and he glanced around before stepping back to allow me inside.

He led me into his familiar front room, where a peat fire crackled in the hearth, casting long shadows across the furniture. I took a seat on the sofa, where the fabric had grown faded and partially disintegrated over the years. Angus sank into the armchair opposite me, his eyes on the flames. He did not offer me a drink. An empty whiskey glass sat on the table beside him.

'It was John we saw, wasn't it?' I began, but he cut me off with a sharp gesture.

'How can you be so sure it was John?' he interjected, his voice low and urgent. 'The weather was bad. It could have been anything. A crofter, even a stag or a large ram.'

'Angus, I know what I saw,' I said, frustration beginning to stir in my stomach. 'I saw his face, his eyes.'

Angus shook his head slowly, a look of pity crossing his grave features. 'We were much too far to see that, and you can't trust your eyes, not out there. Not after what happened. You miss him, we all do. I get that. But you didn't see what I did that night. You weren't there. The way he fell off the boat, it was...' Angus trailed off. He did not continue.

I opened my mouth to argue, but the words died on my lips. Angus returned to staring into the fire. There was something in his expression that I could not place. Something unfamiliar in the way his eyes darted around the room. His dark nails turned white as he gripped the arms of the chair, unwilling to speak on the topic any further.

'The cheese is good,' I said.

'The what, sorry?'

'The cheese,' I said. 'It's good.' I glanced at my wife. She was staring at me, mouth slightly parted. Her hair was trimmed into a neat, brown bob and the bristly ends of her fringe just caressed the top of her narrowed eyebrows.

'The cheese is hardly the important thing here, Alexander,' Mary said.

I swallowed thickly. Placing the cube of cheddar I had been clutching back on my paper plate, my arm fell to my side listlessly as I surveyed the room. It was thick with cigarette smoke. Amongst the tobacco was the dark, earthy scent of peat. Several faces turned away as my eyes found theirs. They turned to one another, whispering, and I felt a lump in my throat that was hard to displace.

It was a low room, typical of an older crofting house. The yellowish wallpaper was adorned with lurid green flowers. It loomed behind men and women grouped together, dressed in shades of black, white and navy. On the far side of the room was a polished, wooden fireplace. It dominated the room, taking up half of the wall space as a fire burned. Atop the mantelpiece were several pictures of soldiers from the First World War. I recognised Angus in one of them, fresh-faced at twenty. They were not in pride of place as they normally were, but rather, pushed to the end.

Now, in the middle of the mantelpiece, where I had dared not look until this moment, was a large, framed picture of John in his Battledress; a dashing man if there ever was one. The picture was from before his hair had begun to grey and before he grew that ridiculous moustache. He had been the girls' favourite back in school in a way I could only admire, never emulate. His features were characteristically Viking, betraying an island ancestry that stretched back many years. Light hair, light eyes, and fair skin not quite so tainted by the Northern sun as his Uncle Angus' was. I felt John's gaze follow me around the room, even as my eyes strayed. My mind flashed with images of the man on his boat, just him and Angus, John falling overboard - such a powerful body so weak and small against the force of the Atlantic Ocean.

Then I was flooded with the sight of him on the beach. That same figure. Lost, alone, on the shore of the loch in the pouring rain. A survivor. It stayed with me much like this heavy feeling in my heart and the water that welled in my eyes no matter how many times I dabbed them with a tissue.

It had only been a week since that day on the moors. I could not quite bring myself to go back there. To find him. Perhaps that made me a coward.

Beside the fireplace was the table of sandwiches and a rotary dial telephone that, too, had been pushed to the side. Hovering at the end of it was a strange-looking man of about sixty. He was just an inch too tall to stand comfortably straight. As a result, he stooped around with a hunched back. His gelled, black hair just avoided leaving a sticky residue on the ceiling. He clutched a cocktail sausage. It slid into his mouth as he craned his neck to look around the room through the lens of a pair of thick, black glasses. They soon honed in on me. I could feel the tightness of my collar around my throat. A bead of sweat ran down my back, stopping halfway, where my shirt clung to my slick skin.

'Here we go,' my wife muttered. She dabbed the corner of her mouth with a yellow, checkered napkin and plastered a smile on her face as the Minister began his approach.

Soon, the Minister arrived. He stopped just an inch too close. There was a sheen of sweat on his forehead, but he kept his blazer on. The white dog collar around his neck was flush against his pale skin.

'Minister,' Mary said. 'How lovely to see you, even if under such sad circumstances.'

'Indeed, indeed,' he nodded gravely. 'Alexander,' he turned to me, 'sad circumstances indeed. I would like to express my condolences for your loss.' He cast a sideways glance at Mary. She bit her lip and went to say something, but stopped herself. Instead, she took my plate from me, tugging it from my tight grip, and disappeared into the next room. As she left, the minister raised his chin, revealing a nose full of black hairs. 'You and I have known each other for many years. I do hope you will forgive me for saying this. I think, perhaps, you need to take some time away from the community. To grieve privately.'

He stepped even closer. His breath stank of scotch eggs and cocktail sausages. Perhaps a hint of rum, too. It was hot on my face and seemed to hover in the air around us as if it permeated from his skin. I attempted to swallow, but there seemed to be no saliva left in my mouth.

‘It’s been a tough loss for all of us.’

‘Of course, of course,’ he nodded, brows furrowed, lips pursed in consternation. ‘Just, you seem different. Some have mentioned you’ve been having,’ he swallowed thickly ‘-visions. You’ve not been attending church...’ he trailed off. ‘We’re worried about you, son.’

‘Forgive me if I am not at my Godliest, Minister,’ I said. ‘I have just lost my dearest friend.’ I stepped aside. ‘Please excuse me, I need some air.’

Slipping on my blazer, I left the living room, sidling through the throngs loitering in the hallway. In the kitchen, Angus stood by the sink, trapped in the corner holding a small glass of wine and a chocolate biscuit. The tufts of white hair at the side of his head were uncombed.

‘Angus,’ I swiftly moved beside him and clutched his arm, beginning to angle him towards the front door. It was cooler in the kitchen, but my cheeks were burning. I spoke through gritted teeth, all but dragging him. ‘Come with me, why don’t you? I’m just getting some fresh air.’

Emerging outside, a swift breeze met our presence. The front door shut behind us, echoing into the evening. We faced one another. I glanced over his shoulder. The Macleod house stood atop a hill, and as the road curved beside their family home, it dipped down a low hill and continued in a straight line that stretched toward my own house. Beyond, the landscape lay flat and open. Dusk had fallen swiftly. The ever-darkening skies were a shade of striking navy, fading towards a strip of yellow on the horizon. The final slice of colour was soon to disappear.

‘Alexander,’ he nodded at me, swallowing. His eyes darted around our surroundings, furtive, never once meeting mine. In the flickering white light of the front doorstep, he appeared

more gaunt than ever, as if he had not slept once in the last few days. The folds of his aging skin rested on the stiff collar of his shirt and the black tie he wore was smudged with stains.

'Angus,' I paused, searching his face. The words on my tongue felt knotted and thick and I struggled to spit them out. 'I'm not doing so well.' I fiddled with the button on my blazer. 'I need answers.'

'We've already spoken.'

'I feel like I'm losing it,' I continued, my voice wavering. 'I can't eat, I can't focus on work. Mary's been avoiding me lately. It's like I'm suffocating.' All of a sudden, I stepped forward, eyes thick with tears, grabbing his suit jacket with two hands. Still, he looked away. 'Did you really not see him, Angus? Am I going mad? Tell me!' I shook his body, desperate. 'Tell me if I'm losing it, please. Please.' I fell against him. My face was distorted as I pressed it into his shoulder. He slowly wrapped his arms around me to hold me upright as my sobs grew into violent tremors.

'We're all struggling, lad,' he finally said, his voice tinged with doubt. 'But sometimes grief plays tricks on the mind. You've got to let this go. John, he — he's in a better place. I can't say much more than that. He made his decision. He isn't coming back, son. He's gone.'

I broke away from Angus, stumbling backwards down the driveway.

'What does that mean? His decision?'

Angus held up his hands, coming towards me. I backed away further. He stilled. His hands fell to his side, as if in defeat.

'He... he didn't want to be here anymore. It was too much. After his Dad died, he wasn't the same. You know that.'

'No,' I shook my head. 'He wouldn't. He fell. It was stormy.' I let out a short, sharp laugh. 'I was always the coward. Not him, never him.'

'I saw it,' he said. His eyes were reddening, and there were dark bags beneath them. 'He threw himself off. I tried to stop him, but I wasn't quick enough. No one would have survived

that. Come on, son,' Angus stepped forward. There were ghostly shadows on his face from the light above.

I backed away from Angus completely, turning to run down the road until I stood at the edge of the low hill and fell to my knees. I leaned forward and pressed my forehead against the concrete, retching. Flashes of John on the beach came to me. They swarmed and disappeared. Blood trickled thickly down my temple. Soon I could not see John in my head any longer.

'Alex!' Angus called out, his voice distant, distorted over the faint din of a car engine. I pulled myself up.

The white line on the concrete stretched out ahead of me. A car was coming along the road. Its yellow headlights lit the way. As it swerved and countered, the indicator began to flash. Just as the car turned the corner, the headlights illuminated someone standing at the edge of the road, just between two patches of light from the street lamps. They walked towards me. Their pace was slow, spiritless, as if moving with great effort. It was as if a great wind was bearing down upon them, yet tonight, the air was eerily still.

I called out. The figure stilled. The car disappeared, the lights turning away. The figure was swallowed in the darkness.

'John?' I shouted. 'John, is that you?'

As I called, my legs began to work beneath me. Burning calves pounded against the ground as I hurled myself down the hill. I tripped and caught myself, struggling to work against the steep decline. Bits of road scraped against the floor, the impact jolting my ankles. Once I reached flat road I entered into a sprint. The wind rushed against my cheeks, my tie thrown over one shoulder, my suit jacket billowing a few seconds behind. I ran along the white line, passing between patches of light, moving between the white spotlights from above and the darkness that held me for a moment after each one. The houses blurred on either side.

My knees locked awkwardly as I brought myself to a jolting stop, staring out at the empty road. My fingers interlaced at the back of my head. I inhaled the evening air.

'Alex!' came that voice again. I whipped my head around, wind blowing through my hair as I swivelled. I turned to my left, to my right, looked ahead, looked behind myself. There was the hill, the flat road, the pavement to the side, the street lamps, the houses and the crofts, but there was no John.

Something white caught my eye and I looked down. I had stepped on something. I crouched on the floor, staring at the stray feather beneath my polished black shoes. I squinted at it and examined it. It was an eagle feather. A white-tailed eagle. Allowing my mind to drift, I stayed crouching there, staring absentmindedly at the large feather until my knees burned and I could not crouch any longer.

As I stood up, I turned towards my own house and began to follow the white line down the road, away from the wake, staring at my feet. I walked, one foot in front of the other, like an acrobat on a tightrope.

A set of footsteps sounded behind me, each coming a second after the other until the time between each one increased and they came to a sudden halt.

'Alex!' Angus called out. His voice was carried away on the wind, so much so that I hardly recognised it. I continued to walk for a few steps until I finally stopped, my heart still racing.

I turned around, and there he was.

John. Standing quite still, hands in his pockets. His silhouette was outlined by the silver light of the rising moon behind me and the street lamp above us.

He looked like the dreams I had of him lying flat on his back in his coffin. His blue fisherman's boiler suit was ripped at the shoulder, and as I stepped towards him, I saw how a faint stubble now lined his jaw. I paused, a faint wave of panic washing over me. It stole my words, shoved them down my throat until a lump formed and all I could do was clench my fists.

'Are you here?'

'Of course I'm here, Alexander,' he muttered. His gaze flickered away, then back to me. 'It wasn't supposed to be like this.'

'What happened on that boat? Did Angus do something?'

'Angus?' John looked taken aback. 'No, no.'

'You can't just show up,' I shook my head, first just once, then again with more force. 'You need to explain what's going on. You need to tell them you're okay. We need to go and talk to everyone,' I pointed up at the house. I could just see a sliver of orange light from the kitchen window. He cast a glance over his shoulder then turned back to me, stepping forward again. Now there was only a metre or so between us and I could see his glassy eyes, his cracked lips. There was an ashen tinge to his pale skin, and his cheeks were hollow. He smelled faintly of sea salt and the damp, wet earth.

'I'm here. But this is it.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know this isn't right. Us. It would never work.'

'No, those are my words. That's my line.' I laughed bitterly. My tears soon spilled over, rolling freely down my face. 'It was you who said we could go to the mainland. You said it was different there,' I pleaded. 'That they're more accepting. That we can be ourselves.'

John shook his head. 'You're needed here. I'm not.'

'Wait,' I frowned, watching as he began to step backwards. I reached out, trying to touch him. To feel him. To cement this moment, ground it in reality. He moved backwards again, out of reach. 'Wait, don't do this. Why are you doing this, I don't understand - John? Think about this, for fucks sake! John!'

He was moving now, not up the hill, but over the ditch at the roadside, over the fence, and swiftly through the grass. His broad figure seemed to shimmer in the fading light, but once he was out of reach of the lamp post his figure seemed to disappear entirely. He did not look back, not once. I felt a coldness wash over me like a damp cloth.

Glancing towards the house, that same sliver of light remained. The warmth of the peat fire beckoned, but my feet remained rooted to the spot, tethered by his lingering presence. My head ached, and my eyes felt heavy in my head. I stood in silence on the white line in the middle of the road, under the glow of the lamplight, with dried blood on my eyelashes, cruel words echoing around my head and a dull ache in my chest.

There was a flash of movement in the corner of my eye. I turned to look down the dark croft. If I squinted, I was sure I could see a distant figure, beckoning me over. I rubbed my eyes with two dry hands and stared again.

Then I stood in silence, alone, and stared at the stag.