

A Makar's Journey

By Marjorie Evasco

May 23, 1992. Thursday. 7:20 a.m.

I begin my residency at Hawthornden Castle with the morning sun and the trees outside my window looking new. Everything is new. Earlier this morning, I took a walk along the castle drive to smell and forest and listen to the elms, pines, birds and spring flowers who are the true residents of this glen. I am the one who is new here.



The sweet solitude of Hawthornden is summed up by the castle motto: *honesto otio quiesceret*. The writing fellows do their work the whole day and the castle staff takes care of food and keep, including laundry. Thursday is “Boswell” laundry day.

The only time the writing fellows get to talk with each other is during breakfast at the Hearth Room, aperitifs at the Garden Room, dinner at the Main Dining Hall, and coffee or tea at the Drawing Room.

For the first time then in my life, I have a whole month to myself: to think and write my poems, read and take long walks. Now, in the heart of this writing retreat, I write to give form to my memories and reflections. When Hawthornden Castle and the daily rituals of castle life shall have recede in time and space, when it shall have assumed a larger reality and entered the mythic, these words will perhaps enable me to re-experience this special period in my writing life lived in decent ease.

The train I took from King's Cross arrived in Edinburgh at 2:55 p.m. yesterday. The young Dr. Joe McAleer, the Castle Administrator, stood behind the McKenzie sign with his trusty wooden shepherd's crook. He had told me over the phone when I was still in London that he would carry the shepherd's crook to help me identify him. A kilt wouldn't have been as effective and a bagpipe would have been too cumbersome.

The slow drive to the castle allowed me to take in the landscape and as we moved along Lothian Road I felt myself slip far back in time. I thought to myself that this was going to be my first experience at living in a castle, and already I felt I was inside one of my childhood fairytales. I asked Joe if the castle had ghosts and he said with mock seriousness: "Don't worry, they're all very friendly."

Joe introduced me to Effie, the housekeeper, who opened the main door for us. I was brought straight up to the writers' floor which is reached through a narrow, winding stairway. Boswell doesn't have a fireplace, but the radiator keeps the cold Scottish air at bay. My writing room is just the right scale for me and this helps me feel at ease with the space. My attic window looks out to the elm and oak forest. I took photographs right away of my Laura Ashley bronze bed, the antique writing table, clothes closet and the settee facing the window. All in all, my room evokes comfortable country living.

At sherry time, (6:30 p.m.) I met the other fellows who had arrived yesterday. Helen Dixon, a novelist, who is in the Johnson room; Eva Tucker, also a novelist, who stays at the Evelyn; William Park, poet, who has the Herrick; and Douglas Skrief, another poet who is at the Brontë. Douglas said he was again wearing his special tartan tie for the second welcome dinner.

Dinner was a wonderful vegetarian feast prepared by Elaine: spinach roulade, green salad, and fresh fruits with yoghurt. Later, at the Drawing Room, Jose offered us whisky and Douglas gave a toast: "To Marjorie— may this meeting open ur eyes and minds to the world of Asia and teach us new things." I replied, "Here's to open doors and open windows." We have our first poetry reading afterwards, with Douglas reading his poem published by the Paris Review.

We retired at 11:00. After a good hot bath, sleep was this poet pilgrim's true blessing.

May 24, Friday. 11:00 p.m.

After my morning meditation, I went down for breakfast. I welcome our ritual of being together at the start of the day because it somehow balances the isolation we enjoy from 9:30 a.m. - 6:30 p.m. We cannot receive phone calls during our writing period and we cannot visit each other's rooms unless we are invited. Today, though, Eva and I had our picnic lunch of homemade soup and sandwiches in her room. We had such a merry time telling stories that Joe had to remind us afterwards that absolute silence is to be kept on the writers' floor.

William, Douglas, and I went on our first afternoon get-away trip to Edinburgh on the Scottish green bus. We went to Waterstones to get the *Gregory Anthology* where William's prizewinning poems are published. Then we went to Princes St., and had coffee at the Cornerstone Café. We had this crazy idea of posting a notice at the café bulletin board that three Hawthornden poets would descend upon the crowd to read poetry on Sunday at the café garden.

We came back late to the Castle and missed afternoon tea. We found Eva and Helen taking in the mild sun at the garden beside the Garden Room. At sherry time, we were informed that since the central heating was back, we would have to pay for our drinks from then on. We didn't mind

this since we had a delicious dinner prepared by Johanna: roast chicken stuffed with olives, rice, green salad, and lemon chiffon cake.

In the evening, William read his first two Hawthornden poems. We again had a discussion which made me feel we were having a literary workshop. I wonder when I'd get the courage to read them my work?

May 25, Saturday, Midnight

Joe read us the news at breakfast today. Douglas remarked: "This is just like listening to the TV news, Joe." We don't have a TV in the castle but we have all the English and Scottish newspapers, plus the major literary journals and periodicals.

Helen walked with me to the River Esk and all along the Castle Walk she identified for me the wildflowers and plants she loves so well: sorrel (also her daughter's name), foxglove, shamrock, broom, summer snow, shepherd's purse, dandelions. I told her that I will never read and teach Shakespeare the same way again simply because I now have a richer sensory experience to help me see, hear, taste, smell, and touch the poetry differently.

I spent the rest of the morning reading Penelope Shuttle's poetry. William had recommended her works and I had bought her latest collection, **Adventures with my horse**. I decided to request the British

Council at Spring Gardens to include her in my visiting program wish-list of poets I wanted to meet after my residency.

The afternoon was highlighted by an expedition to the caves beneath the castle. Joe was our tour guide par excellence, who had told us anecdotes of Queen Victoria's visit to Hawthornden Castle. We ended the tour at the garden where Bill tends to the grapes, strawberries, vegetables, and herbs.

O barely had enough time to finish my first Hawthornden poem, "Fiona's Stone," before the aperitifs were served. I decided then to read tonight three poems: "Fiona's Stone," and two of the latest I had written for my second collection, "Sagada Stills in a Floating World," and "Origami."

During tea, Douglas and I practiced our reading of "Sagada Stills." I showed him the various ways the poem could be read. Afterwards, we read the poem twice, using two different strategies. I enjoyed the experience. William suggested that I should stay longer in Britain so I could collaborate with other poets in similar performances. Helen and Eva liked "Origami" while Joe felt "Fiona's Stone" was a good way of remembering Ms. Cunningham.

Helen also read from her prize-winning novel, **Playing Foxes**. It has a fine Japanese flavour to it. William wanted her to read the ending of the novel so we'd know what happened to the relationship of Hideo and Anna. But we disagreed because we wanted to have the pleasure of reading the entire novel for ourselves.

May 26, Sunday, 10 p.m.

The morning of our first “killer brek”— a large breakfast for the stout of heart.

Jose was funny this morning, reading our horoscopes. After breakfast I showed Eva and Helen the sinister spot along the Castle Walk, a dark bend at the forest road where I had felt a presence watching me. Helen said it could be the gnomes or the legendary green men who inhabit the glen. Then she picked up a raven’s father and gave it to me as an amulet.

I spent the whole day writing furiously to catch up with the living.

At sherry time, I didn’t have any aperitif and at dinner. I declined the wine in preparation for my fasting day tomorrow.

June 1, Saturday, 11:40 p.m.

The first day of June was blessed with sunshine and I got up early to take my morning walk. Douglas joined me and we were the earliest ones at breakfast. Afterwards, we all piled up inside Gladys, the castle van, and Joe brought us to the Rosslyn Chapel. The curator, Judy Friskin, opened the chapel gate for us and brought us back to the 15th century when William St. Clair, Prince of Orkney founded the chapel. Himself an architect and mason, William St. Clair designed the chapel. However, it remains

unfinished. The small gem of a chapel stands witness to the skills and imagination of Scottish stone builders.



I was fascinated by the Celtic gods of vegetation, called the “green men,” who sprout vines from their mouths and have malevolent eyes. The little green men were interspersed with Christian images of angels and cherubs. Judy said that there were over a hundred of these pagan gods in this chapel, quite an embarrassing number, in fact. The intricate ceiling stonework is divided into four parts, each one with a different motif: stars, roses, circular and square paterae. The world-famous Apprentice Pillar was also impressive — it evoked the weight of blood and the history of wars in this chapel. Judy said that because of the murder committed here, the chapel had to be reconsecrated.



Our next stop was Rosslyn Castle, the sister castle of Hawthornden. We were brought around the rooms and then down to the old kitchens and dungeons. I was strangely moved by the yew tree at the west side of the castle. According to Judy, it is the oldest tree in the area. Its branches were once used for the archers' bows.



We were standing at the old kitchen when Judy's husband joined us. He told us the castle's ghost stories. One was about the black knight on a black horse rearing up at the castle drawbridge during pitch-black moonless nights. Another was about the old woman who had lived in the castle for a long time as its caretaker. She had made several tourists think that she was full of flesh and blood.

We were cold and famished by 1:00 p.m. Joe decided to join us for lunch at the Old Original Roslin Hotel. It is a charming place with garden seats outside the restaurant. We went in to sit near the fireplace for our lunch. The fireplace had pictures of Robert Burns reading poetry to his friends and a carved inscription which went: "His wee bit ingle twinkled

bonnily.” We had many naughty remarks on this one, until the waiter explained that “ingle” meant firebrand. The wooden frame also had carved salamanders and Douglas said, “Look, Marjorie, your poem!”

Back at our castle-home, I had sherry to celebrate the brilliant sun. Dinner was adventurous because we had the Scottish delicacy called “haggis.” This is a delicacy made out of ground and baked sheep entrails, perhaps not so strange to Filipino tastebuds already acquainted with *kilawin* or *sisig*. Eva had eaten it before and she was quite apprehensive, so at cocktails she had more than her usual sherry.

At the dinner table, the air was made more festive with the presence of Joe’s ceramic Scottish gnome, the “real” Dr. McAleer. It was seated next to Joe at the head of the table. Joe had his tartan hat on when he offered us the first round of whisky to go with the haggis. I like the texture and taste of haggis, but found the smell of suet so strange, so I disguised it with the tatties and neeps. Douglas and William even had seconds! We gave a toast to haggis and Joe read his poem “Ode to Haggis.” We also enjoyed reading Robert Burns’ poem in authentic Scottish brogue. The whiskey helped me a lot while I was struggling through two stanzas of the poem.

June 10, Monday, 10:30 a.m.

Woke up with feelings of uncertainty. At 7:30 a.m. I took a walk along Castle Drive and talked to the trees. When I joined the others for breakfast, the newspapers said that Mt. Pinatubo was acting up after a long sleep of

six centuries. I read the papers quietly, praying inside me that the children and all my friends would be safe from harm. The news sounds bad when one is so far away. And at Hawthornden, the quality of the news had heartbreaking proportions. My country, like Bangladesh, seems to have the monopoly of disasters.



June 16, Sunday, 6:00 p.m.

This was a difficult day to wake up to because I was irritated and sore from lack of sleep and very disturbing dreams. When I went down to the breakfast table, I was coughing from the cold. When I sat down, Joe showed me the papers with the blown-up pictures of the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. I

read the story and by the time I finished, I was very upset. Joe suggested I call Manila to find out how my children and friends were.

I was able to talk with Ross who told me about the ashfall, the mudflows, and the typhoon, earthquakes, the displacement, migration, and evacuation of the ones affected by the eruption. I was crying but she assured me things were all right with the children. She told me not to worry because Filipinos have that special capacity of adapting to the worst disasters; we get enough practice. What she said was meant to comfort me, of course, but I still felt sick at heart and when I came out of Joe's office, Effie saw me and put her arms around me. She brought me to the warmest corner of the kitchen and warmed my cold hands. Then, she offered me coffee and a cigarette. We close the kitchen door after Debbie, her daughter-in-law came in. The three of us talked about children and mothering , and about how *worry* seems to be any mother's middle name.

Effie suggested she'd drop me at Rosewell for Sunday service since she was driving our for the papers and some errands. It seemed like a good idea so I went up to get my coat and scarf. Helen met me at the stairs and when she heard I was going to attend the Sunday service, she decided to keep me company.

Parish Rosewell, Bonnyrigg



Helen and I came back in the cold wind and she promptly put me to bed with Effie's lemsip, a concoction of lemon, honey, and brandy. Jose had left instructions that I was to stay in bed the whole day. I complied with gratitude. Sleep was not very restful, though.

June 18, Tuesday, 2:30 p.m.

I am seated here on the stump of the old sycamore tree where William Drummond is said to have sat when he welcomed Ben Jonson to Hawthornden. The tree was struck down by lightning in 1916. Joe gave this information when he showed us yesterday old prints of Hawthornden in the 1800s. It is said that pilgrims visited Hawthornden just to see the old sycamore tree.

I can still sense some of its power in the old trunk which holds fast to the hillside. At its heart is a sycamore sapling. Its new branches and leaves now give me shade and screen the cold Scottish wind for me. I feel at peace here, able to say goodbye to this magical and ancient place, and able to go on.

Postscript: Sybaritic Leave

Among my good friends, sojourns are always occasions for celebrating our shared pleasure in discovering the world anew. One function of the *despedida* is to enable everyone in the circle to give a talisman for the “survival kit” which the traveller is expected to bring throughout the journey. Each talisman must be charmed with words: wishes (the more adventurous, the better), advices (mostly do’s), and precautions (meant to be disregarded in critical situations). We had done this ritual for Grace Monte de Ramos and Juaniyo Arcellana just before they got married; for Fanny Llego before she flew to Germany for her one-year scholarship; and for Adlai Amor who left for Switzerland to work with the World Wildlife Fund. It was my turn in 1991, and one propitious day in May, we gathered to celebrated the central journey of my sabbatical: six glorious weeks of poetry at Hawthornden Castle in Midlothian, Scotland. Needless to say, the seriousness of my pilgrimage was balanced by the humor and wit of the gifts in my survival kit Deep in my daemonic heart, my friends knew I was going to make my sabbatical leave a sybaritic journey.

When a poet, who realizes that much work needs to be done for the mundane projects, nevertheless defies deadlines and duty by choosing to gaze idly outside her window and listen to the playing of the breezes with the bamboos and her wind chimes, sometimes she can be lucky. In such open spaces, the rhythms of poetry may flow with relentless grace. And the

rest of the world can wait in peace. It was in this state of benediction when “Ochre Tones” was written. And from this poem grew the vision of the next collection which would carry it as the title poem.

Ochre Tones and Other Poems. Completed at Hawthornden. I close my eyes now and remember the very first time I saw the whole collection in my mind. I dreamed the finished book in my bookshelf, right beside **Dreamweavers**. It has forty poems divided into four sections. And I am the poet-chemist whose book contains her work with the elements and the elemental.

When Hawthornden became possible, my excitement over the prospect of concentrating on my poetry expressed itself in fantasies and dream-motifs which visited me in both sleeping and waking moments. In one, I met my old music teacher, Sr. Lucila, she who loved the saint who played music so beautifully the angels poured blood-red roses on her every time she touched the harpsichord. This teacher taught me the basics of Great Listening. In another motif, I saw Dr. Edilberto Tiempo, my teacher in 17th Century English Poetry at Silliman University, who helped our class discern the sacred and the cavalier in the poetry of this period, and the triumph of the metaphysicals in yoking the sacred and the profane by employing seemingly disparate images through precise poetic logic. It was in this class where I read the poetry of William Drummond, Laird of Hawthornden Castle. In yet another motif, I was at the Castlekeep poring over the books in the library, glancing once in a while at the old empty leather armchair where Drummond could have sat to read Ben Jonson’s masterpieces.

The folio of **Ochre Tones** remains open for more poems to complete their journey. The finished ones (re-visions, old and new) have come halfway around the world with me. I hear the other poems coming home any time now. And if they weren't as nomadic or as willful as I am, I would capture them all now in full form without compromising the intricacies of their movements and the notations of their soul dance.

*Arthur's
Seat*



The sybaritic journey is not yet over. I go back again and again to significant points in my travel maps and re-examine my explorer's notes, which are mere approximations of the clarity with which the world opened itself anew to my feasting: for example, there is the music of swans nesting on a bed of thrush at the bend of a waterway in Huizen; the color of poppies bursting in entire fields in Lasswade, you could hear the blaze of orange; the deep comforting hum of Arthur's Seat as I stood there on the summer solstice sunset while looking out to the Firth of Forth; the trance of the moon goddess on the waters of the English Channel, seen from the wind-whipped shore of Falmouth; and the texture of ripe cherries freshly picked from the summering trees in Schluein.

Huizen



My ears, eyes, nose, skin, and tongue remember well each feast of the journey. And everytime I go back into the writing, I am in my solitary retreat the the castle, taking the time to catch the melody of the oak outside my window, or checking if Drummond happened to pass by the new sycamore tree at the castle drive during his afternoon walk. I know that the sybarite in me can only write from the very heart of beauty, the pure space of listening angels. As it is, I cannot create poems out of the obligation to the idea of “the forthcoming book.’ But, if I’m lucky, I’ll probably welcome home the rest of my forty poems when they shall have finally agreed to continue dancing on the pages of the new book. Until then, I will have to wait in peace.

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from **Luna Caledonia: Five Filipino Writers in Hawthornden Castle. Ed. Ricardo M. De Ungria. Manila: Aria Edition, Inc. 1992.*

Poems:

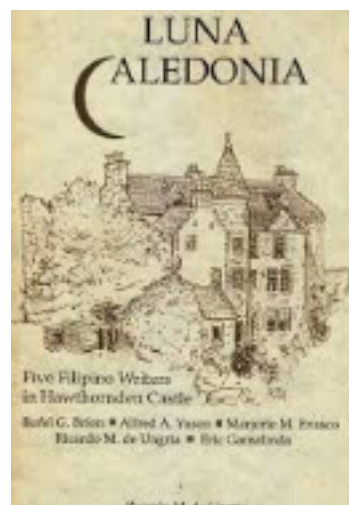
Rim of Fire

Poet in Exile

Fiona’s Stone

Griotte

Runes



Sagada Stills in a Floating World

Origami

Salt Sharers