

SAMPLER

Abandoned Gardens

ALSO BY ALICE KAVOUNAS

The Invited
Ornaments of Asia
Thin Ice

SAMPLER

Alice Kavounas

*Abandoned
Gardens*

*Selected and New Poems
1995-2016*

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from

The Invited

(1995)

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Scenic Wonders

i

I'm falling the full mile
to the floor of the Grand Canyon

where earth hits bottom, and walls measure years
inch by inch

like the marks a mother makes
above her children's heads.

ii

The dream continues. I appear amid
the tangle of life supported by a forest floor.

The silent mattress of pine needles
is threaded by invisible snakes. As I stage

my own brief scenes of comic relief, perform magical
transformations of character and sex,

something in this classic haunt
of children's nightmares and real life

seduction is beginning to tear me
limb from limb...

iii

But the dream continues. I'm in strange waters,
taking sounding of the ocean floor.

Warped ridges rise to meet me
as I float face down to the depths, finally

eye to eye with the grains of sand that stick
and separate like the buds of a parched tongue

when it cleaves to the roof of a mouth.
The waves of terror

don't wake me—now I'm falling through floor after floor
numbers flashing past. The dream continues.

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Riverside Drive

All day the river
flows past the living room mirror.
We dip in and out
breathing normally.
During dinner
the sun slips behind the mirror.
Later, we clear the table
fishing out the knives and forks.
The river runs to black.

First light. The living room mirror
wakes the opalescent river.

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Birthday Visit

Every step betrays him:
he's old now, and bent against the wind,
the Sunday Times billowing in his arms
like an unwieldy spinnaker
towing him down icy streets.
He won't see me
as he completes his small journey,
carrying home news of a world
he no longer inhabits.

I think he's thinking of the days he meandered home
through olive groves and orchards
his mandolin tucked beneath his elbow;
where Sundays passed in sunshine
and young men danced their dances
in the shade.

It's too late
to try to catch him.
I've lost my father
in his father's orchard.

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Cutchogue, Long Island

The fields are being burned tonight,
well before harvest.

The road to the sea
is a river of tar, impassable.

That rock, that rock. Worn down
beyond recognition; the smallest wave
swallows it whole. Even the sunset
is not what it was:

its fires banked; while small
animals search for the glow
of a camp-fire (the kiss,
the whispered conversation) up and down the furrows
that lead, flaming, to the shuttered summer house.

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1133 Park Avenue

Every door was closed.
The blinds were taut against the sun
and the children all in place
except the son they'd had to send away.

The mother lay
in a room at the back of the house
knowing it no longer mattered,
chain-smoking,
flipping through the fashion magazines
and listening
to the hum of the air conditioner.

It fell to the eldest daughter
to turn it off.
Sweating slightly in her tennis whites
she opened all the blinds
on the day her mother died.

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Abandoned Gardens

i

Like a migrant pair
who'd regained the homing instinct
you touched down
on littorals you'd resisted for so long.

Indigenous diphthongs, consonants and cadence...
Instead of lapping at your inner ear, or flowing
back and forth for forty married years
hollowing out a tideless, inland sea,

the lively cries of your native tongue
began to break over both of you; syllables
slapping you on the back – *Kalos orisate!**
Each face you looked into resembled your own.

* * *

Americanised, camouflaged in the dull plumage of drip dries,
you felt strong enough to untwist certain Athenian alleys.
But old intimacies have their underside; to go home
is to walk barefoot over miles and miles of *krokalia***...

Here in the bleached city of ma's childhood,
she readied herself to visit her dead. Stray cats
kept rubbing up against her bare ankles
like a litter of insistent memories. And you, Da,

sat and gauged the distance between now and then.
Sipping at the scaling coffees of your youth,
you planned how to navigate – without drowning –
the whirlpools of the wine-dark past.

After slipping through the Turkish nets
(catching kith and kin), this had been your first refuge.

'Birthplace of democracy!' a foreign city,
none too friendly to a stowaway of peasant stock,

even one whose language, after all, was Greek.
Still, you'd survived that rite of passage

and before migrating further, you'd perched here.
A world war and two children later,

you were returning
to see what was left of your father's lands.

Would those figs and olives still be fattening in the sun,
melons ripening on foreign vines?

The sensitive coast will remain closed to all visitors.

Operation Attila came as a reprieve. You meandered,
pretending interest in rocks and broken columns,
gazing impatiently at eyeless gods,
stumbling over the cool heads of toppled warriors.
Old quarrels made a mockery of your plans.
That rusting cargo of thoughts you'd hoped, at last,
to unshoulder in Anatolia, dragged at you daily.

You were just killing time, your and your Penelope,
the pattern of your journey unravelling.
You felt no itch to wander: Corinth, Delphi, Mycenae;
what of those ill-fated families, unanswered oracles?
The air was full of riddles.

The sensitive coast remained closed.
 It's as if that's what you'd always been, everywhere:
 a visitor and once more, unwelcome.

Holed up again in America, that odyssey a failure,
 the present began floating beyond your grasp.
 Did the towers of Manhattan become your Byzantium?

How you flew! Circling high above the Aegean,
 ordinary objects became unreadable,
 the faces of your American-born children a blur.

None of us could reach you in those last years.
 You'd escaped from an adopted country to your Aivali,
 those childhood orchards, the one sustaining memory.

I'm left holding your long-expired passport.
 Freeze-framed and flash-frozen,
 your frightened face stares out from that limbo
 shared by travellers and exiles.

'Date of birth.' Mis-recorded indelibly in ink.
 Some lazy, low-level American immigration officer!
 We joined in that conspiracy, celebrating
 shamelessly his slip of the pen, clapping each year

as you blew out more candles... Yours alien's fear
 of detection was unreasonable then. I understand it now.
 It saddens me, like your meant-to-be-amusing story
 about our made-up name, the centre-piece of family lore.