Abandoned Gardens
Also by Alice Kavounas

The Invited
Ornaments of Asia
Thin Ice
Contents

from The Invited

Scenic Wonders 13
Riverside Drive 15
Birthday Visit 16
Cutchogue, Long Island 17
1133 Park Avenue 18
Abandoned Gardens 19
A Narrow Passage 23
Monday Evening 24
The Man in the Lacoste Shirt 25
Hydra 26
Athenian Night 27
Fugue 28
Whispering Wordsworth 29
False July 30
After Veronika Voss 31
The Invited 33
The Visitor 34
Cheyenne 35
Nuclear Family 36
Walking out from Batworthy Farm 37
The Lizard 38
Swallowing the Sea 41
Winter Migrants 44
Cape Fear 45
Home Ground 46

from Ornament of Asia

The Road to Ithaca 49
On Seeing the Statue of Liberty for the Second Time 50
Aivali 51
Fall Weekends – I 53
Fall Weekends – II 54
Everything Is Before You 55
Ornament of Asia 56
The Red Sofa – II 58
Flags 59
The Red Sofa – IV 61
The Red Sofa – V 62
Paperweights 63
The Red Sofa – VI 64
Lunch in Ayvalik Harbour, Anatolia 65
La Sarrasine 67
The Red Sofa – VII 69
Pastoral Scene (after Samuel Palmer) 70
Letter to a Garden 71
Lure 72
Two Chairs 73
Open to the Weather 74
Suitcases 76
The Red Sofa – XII 77
So Soon, So Soon 78
A Writer’s Beach 79

from Thin Ice

Seal Harbor, Maine 83
Thin Ice 84
Villa Mokoras 85
Hair Trigger 86
Helter Skelter 87
High Summer, The Lizard 88
Neon-Green Man 89
My Arboretum: Vallier 91
Requiem Mass 93
Castles in the Air: Porthmeor Studios, St. Ives 95

Picasso’s Bicycle

Picasso’s Bicycle 99
Calligraphy 101
Tickets for the Opera 103
Riverside Drive, 1973  106
Caribbean Christmas with Friends  107
Ocean  109
Maen Eglos, Lizard Peninsula  110
Who Will Read The Runes?  111
Earthscapes: The Lizard  112
King Harry  114
The Wait  115
All of a Sudden  116
Wide-Eyed  117
Caul Bearer  119
Pinssssssss  120
None of It Matters All of It Matters  122
The Emperor’s Experiment (I)  123
The Emperor’s Experiment (II)  125
Tether Me  128
Will o’ the Wisp and What the Wind Said  129
On Reflection  130
Foreign Mirrors  131

The Piano and the Violin: A Short Story  133

Epilogue: The Long Now  143

Notes  146
from

The Invited

(1995)
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.