
These poems explore the nature of restlessness through a variety of landscapes and personas, both historical and imaginary. Many of these poems draw on elements of the traditional fable by investigating the risks of leave-taking, the journey, and the danger of curiosity.
WARNINGS & FABLES

by

Kyla Sterling

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Approved by

______________________________
Committee Chair
This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair_________________________________
Committee Members_________________________________

Date of Acceptance by Committee
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I.
Keyholes

Come closer: this house is full of keyholes.
Glass knobs
fractured, faceted—

You could spend your life here.
A door swings open:
    time stops
    quick as a watch.

Look: there you are,
sitting on the edge
    of a bed, a patchwork quilt,
    hand raised
    to comb your hair.

This is not a farmhouse.
There are no chickens in the yard,
    no tomato vines
    curling up the casement.

    This is no bad dream disguised
    as something clever.

The hallway’s full of white doors,
brass keyholes.

The walls are crumbling;
    ants carry off the smaller pieces.
Crickets have poisoned the well.

In the kitchen, a woman hunched
    over the ashes of yesterday’s kindling
    keeps your name in her basket.
Warnings & Fables

Be careful when you cross the street.

Don’t just look both ways—look up and down as well. The ground opens in mysterious places. A sinkhole at the corner of Franklin Street and Maple. I’ve seen the sky issue funnel clouds without provocation. A bank robbery. The teller says go home, they made off with everything we had.

I watched my own hand catch fire just for coveting an aspirin. Five perfect flames, blue light pouring from my nail beds. It isn’t much of an exaggeration.

You can still smell the smoke.

I’m telling you these stories to illustrate a point.

My mother choked on an apple core: five shining seeds that tasted like blossom, sweet as cyanide.

When they buried her, what do you think grew from her grave?

A thicket of nettle, a tangle of jewelweed.

The tragic column in the Sunday paper is nothing to me but a black and white warning. What you take and leave—

the fable of a child who drowned in a bucket of dishwater. Silver spoons and soap bubbles. It was a pretty death as such things go.
The Villain & the Helpless One

No flip-snap of the letterbox. No Sunday parade outside my curtained window. I haunt the vestibule in silence, wearing nothing, wearing the hours like garments:

a gutter sparrow, all bones and desire. Truth—dusty and avoidable—

collects like old boots beneath my low-sitting bed. Vera, I beg myself: undo this thing you’ve done.

And softer: for the sake of unanswered questions, Lord, save me from myself.

I’ve tied my own knot, took the part of both the villain & the helpless one in some storybook, locked in a steamer trunk, among the fox fur coats, the diary, & the long-lost, five-pronged key.
This Life with Bees

Bees see your face as a strange flower:
each eye a bloom. The darkness

pooling between parted lips,
holds something they would gather.

They measure the length of your collar bone,
the curve between each finger,

keep careful notes on your habits,
your growing. Outside of the apiary

nothing is ordinary. It’s more
than queen and colony.

It’s the investigation,
the taking.
Self-Portrait in a Chinese Fable

I devote myself to the study of Chinese calligraphy—
a bamboo brush with the hair of a weasel.

Plain walls, white wainscoting rises from the baseboard.
Light bulb swinging from a wire.

I practice self-imposed isolation,

semi-cursive lies,
black slash, elongated curve

that means love is never the word
you’re looking for.

I wear barely nothing: the curtain wrapped
around my body, tucked and folded
at my breasts.

Sheets of rice paper tacked to the wall billow
in the breeze from the open window.

These are the noticed details—an eight-armed star,
a black pebble, dry pigment,
an old mustard jar.

What matters most is precision, the fine line
the open palm.

My hair uncombed, twisting in all directions.

The only eyes that see me
are the eyes I paint: a mural
on white walls: black dragons, pupil-less.
What the Birds Predicted

Fifty jackdaws found dead
  on a street in Sweden.
  No one knows the reason.
The last day
of the old year—explosions
  in the air.
There was a shortage of seed, a shortage
of wine.  It was
  poor timing,
sooty birds lined the sidewalk,
limp as lost gloves.
Some see it as a reckoning:
  punish the sparrow
but protect his home.  Divide the sky
accordingly, a dusty book of auguries—
the crossed wings of a
chimney swift signal something,
a baby
  or a death.
Twelve vultures start a city,
a civilization.
  On St. Stephen’s Day
the Wrenboys parade the streets,
a dead bird nailed to a pole.
  The girls in the hotel wave red cloths.
Redwing blackbirds are dying in droves.
  There are fireworks
in Arkansas.  The first night of the new year.
  Fresh snow dotted black and red.
It is both lucky and a warning.
The Third Hour

What unintelligible trash lies strewn about the gutter
on the third hour of the morning, the night’s virulent unease.
What unmarked package rests outside her door: mittens,
a cold winter, slivered apples, a penknife once used to dig
a bullet from a man’s bleeding chest. What city?
What story? The street lamp and rain
cutting through the light. Smeared lipstick and hurt
feelings and a taxi cab the color of please, God, get me out of here.
What photograph? What boy who raises pigeons and knows
every inch of this gray landscape, every shadow
that is longer than it looks. He sleeps on the subway grate
under old newspapers. When the tower clock tolls—
the answer is a penknife and it was in the boy’s pocket all along.
Spontaneous Combustion

My bones burn better than matchsticks, brittle as kindling. More snap and pop than a leaping fire. You wake to a silhouette of ash, to the arid smell of bonfire, a vacant curve in my pillow. Later, you shake the sheets in the sunlight, hang them on the line to soak up a salt breeze, the sky a fresco: ultramarine, iris. Cloud-born, I twist into a frayed length of thick rope. A docking knot, wrapped twice around the cleat: over, under and pulled through. There is only a chipped memory of what came before.

I can’t recall my own name

or attach meaning

to the numbers you stenciled above the door.

I’m too far gone to pull back—

the Perseids in August, Leonids in November—

a white streak of heat, an arc of fire, violent shattering,

scattered dust.
Sunday

Sunday unravels in February,
a tangle of cloud
cover and dirty snow.

Shrouded, we enter the day
together
but have little to say.

This thread is split—
frayed
past the point of usefulness.

I listen to my thoughts,
to the extra voices
muffled on the radio.

You find nothing
to disagree with,
hitch the newspaper higher.

General pity, a reckoning with the facts.

The forecast is predictable:
doldrums in March,
a slight lifting in April.

If we sought comfort
in each other
what words would we scatter between us?

Some urge, some small exchange.

The morning parts
and burns its ruddy light.

What closes

*a door or the bour*

must have a hinge and handle.
The Trestle Bridge

Come, walk with me
along the slick grating
of the trestle bridge.

I’d rather be with you now
than alone in this tin can.

My mind’s a small-town carnival:

spinning rides, straw stamped
into mud by so many feet.

The day’s crumpled,

thrown in the trash bin
by 10 a.m. I’ll lean against

you, your thin shoulder

hardly blocking the wind.
The canal runs below us:

ducks bob for plastic, painted
turtles sun on the twisted
rubber of a blown tire.

Our shadow wavers upon

the water’s surface.
My body carries me

out of habit only.
Foxes

Displaced—they scavenge, circle
the house, drive the dog wild,
cry themselves hoarse for a mate.

Down the road the ground’s
cleared: blue shadow &
white relief, a stubble of broken
growth, wood scraps & ripped
greenery: a torn line of trees.
Houses are going up.

Foxes are on the move.
The pond dries in July,
peepers pitch a racket
from the rushes and tall weeds.
A neighbor keeps a shotgun
propped against the screen door.

For sport, he fires pellets
at carpenter bees nesting in
hay bailed in the back field.

But at night the foxes have him
worried: they circle the house,
avoid the razed lot, scream:

the sound of a murdered woman—
streaks of copper in a blue
and bleached-bone night.
Leaving Poem

Knapsack full, slung across her back. I’ve packed what my mother told me: ten grains of salt for protection, blue-diamond matches to ward off the night, the blanket I was swaddled in at birth.

Nothing in my hand save a small key that I swallow as soon as the cool air touches my face.

The screen door swings shut. I will pass the places that I’ve been before, the shoreline, the schoolyard. This is the way out, this is the path through the woods.
II.
The Fallout Shelter

I.
I clutch an alarm clock to my heart
to feel something
beating: time bomb orange—
a sunset I can no longer imagine.

II.
The day I entered
the sky was steel,
cut amber at the horizon.
Starlings flew
in restless patterns: swoop and turn,
a line-dried sheet
caught in the wind.
There were no rabbits, no field mice.
Sensing something,
the nervous creatures had all gone
underground.

III.
I know your doubting nature.
You took each worry of mine,
set it on a high shelf, out of reach.
When I told you I was dying
you looked at me without alarm.
I took your hand to my chest,
pressed it there. You touched me,
fingers undoing yellow buttons,
kissed me to forget. But I remember
the purple tint to my nail bed,
an unaccounted shortness of breath.
I saw all the signs while you hushed me.

IV.
Once I read a story
about a girl who was called
my name exactly.
We both looked best in blue.
Both collected typewriter keys.
She was murdered by her best friend,
when he left the window open one night.
A breeze gripped her around the throat,
she never recovered.

V.
The air folds around me,
hums through rusty ventilation.
The door is barred, reinforced
with poured concrete, seven locks.
Outside, I imagine the dust is poison.
I sit cross legged on the bottom bunk,
picture shuttered windows, shopping carts,
a scorching heat that turns the sand to glass.

VI.
We came to this place in the usual way.
A long walk by the sea,
tempered skies, chill water.
I said, it’s a doorway.
And you said you saw nothing.

VII.
I am no rabbit,
no field mouse.
I survived.

VIII.
I dreamt
that I walked along the seaside
a small bundle in my arms.
I held it close to my heart
like a most precious gift.
The bundle was a baby
wailing with hunger.
I pulled the blanket from his face
and offered him my breast—
but there was no human child,
only a one-eyed gull.
Keyholes 2

If I take you to this place
    you will only be unhappy.

    Your worried mind
as useless as a snagged sweater.

    There are hallways
    and so many doors
    that will remain shut
despite a slow rotation,
    despite a ring of keys.

    This is the question,
    answered.

This is your hand
    and this is the flame.

    Listen— your ear pressed
to the keyhole
    of an empty room.

What light
    pours like spilled water
from the slit
beneath the door?
Pocket Mouse

This is where we sat once,  
cinder blocks
for back steps, trumpet vine spreading
under the siding.

You played so many songs  
on your old harmonica
and I danced to them all.
When the heat went out,
you combed tangles from my hair,
fed me straight from the jam jar.
The mail piled in the corner—
old pennysavers, past dues.

You blew out the pilot light,
then scattered matchsticks about the kitchen.
I taught myself to thread a needle
in the dark, to mend a tear.

Today the yard is wilder than ever:
radio crickets, blue chicory.
I carry a mouse, named for you,
in the breast pocket of my flannel shirt.

She sleeps, paws to her eyes.
There are no apologies—
we have no words
in both our tongues for sorry.
The Marconi Operator

He wired ahead, my telegraphist lover:
cable lines stretching the Atlantic.
A call of distress on a cold night in April.
A star for every soul. Harold Sydney Bride
recalled a rag time tune, Philips at the machine,
pilfered life belt, list towards the bow. Save
Yourself. An upturned boat, a huddle of men,
ice crusting their clothes. His feet, frozen, crushed
by the pack of bodies. I’d keep that man
warm in my bed: wrap him in flying codes,
a ticker tape parade, thimble of whiskey,
a lone light flickering on the water.
Reports on Ball Lightning

I. (St. Petersburg, 1753)
Ball lightening blew the bottoms off Georg Richmann’s shoes. Kite and key, at the Academy of Science, a slow-moving globe creeping down the string until it touched his fingertips, killed him with light.

II. (Bavaria, 1886)
It rolled through hay loft, bounced twice upon the floor translucent: a great marble. She would remember its slow progress before it exploded in the air, turned the milk bottles blue, dusted her apron in ash.

III. (England, 1638)
The devil came for Bobby Read, the day the sky thickened, dark clouds hunching low. Bobby held a pack of cards, sat in the last pew, head back, jaw slack, quite asleep. The devil tethered his horse to the highest spire of Widecombe Church and tore through the roof in the guise of a globe of light, a peal of thunder.

IV. (Australia, 1907)
A lighthouse on a jutting rock: a sphere—hovering and electrical, took the breath right from the keeper’s lips, left him prone on the lantern room floor. His daughter saw a white ball pause at the window, heard her father’s voice slip past her, swing the light about, mind the storm.
V. (1984, Kentucky)
It moved with intelligence,
a celestial body—she thought,
a globe from heaven, orange
shot through with gold.
The talk show on the television
flickered, she leaned forward
on her floral sofa, spread her fingers,
opened her arms to receive it.
The Gull

The gull knows the truth:
he watches over her
in the stillest part of the night,
shifting his weight from leg
to leg, a shrug and puff
of greasy feathers.
She’s a soft picture of
fine yellow hair braided
for sleep, arm crooked
under her cheek, a thin
blanket covering everything
but an idea of her. He'll watch
the creamy skin of her upper arm.
His eyes are pebbles in the dark,
wet and glassy.
When she wakes, he'll lead her
to the water’s edge.
She’ll welcome the cold
that creeps higher: ankle,
knee, and up.
At the Crossing

A white light: an enormous eye
hurtling through the night.

A shriek of pressure. Breakneck speed.

I'll have no part in this parting.
My mouth is covered if you scream.
Culling the Flock

I slip-knot twine,  
loop it on a tree branch.  
A clean death,  
no sound but an escape  
of air, the fall of blood  
on last year’s leaves.  
This is the way it’s done.  
One quick pull of the knife  
and I’m back to the coop  
for another sleeping bird.

She wasn’t much younger than myself  
when she went missing.  
They dredged the pond, but only  
turned up a tire, a whole tree branch  
snagged in the reeds. For three days  
they dragged the dogs into the woods.  
Once I thought I’d leave this town.  
I could carry all I owned but there wasn’t anywhere  
to go—just a long dirt road. A highway.  
Whatever happened, I like to think she got away.

I can’t stress enough how calmly  
the drowsy hen waits, wings still,  
as I thread her foot through the twine,  
hang her by her ankle.  
Thirteen bits of rope  
and you’ll soon have a new feather bed.  
I’ll bear no blame  
if you don’t sleep well on it.
Burying Ground

What lost thing lies here—

old box sealed shut
as if it matters.

Riddle,
tether,
or dust of bones.

An early death.

The unnamed child.

A few words to live by.

You walk among these smooth monoliths,
homage to the vanished people.

You don’t know anyone
here, and yet
you stay.
Go Gracefully Instead

Gray light drifted through wood slats, disheveled sheets, my hair once looped around your wrist.

You took to railcar or waterway, brushed the dust from your tattered leather boots.

I sit on the cool concrete step, a chipped mug of strong coffee, a sliced pear dipped in honey.

On my lap, an Italian book of prayers, a strip of postage stamps to mark the pages. I search the wrong places.

The March ground softens, pools of snowmelt spreading under the hedgerow, thick with last year’s leaves.

If I should look for anything it’s this: the crocus that emerges anyway, pale white with purple threads.
Maria Spelterina, July 12th 1876

As a child she conquered the slack wire,
    the rolling globe. She dazzled Berlin and Vienna,
felt no fear on the raised platform
    when the line snapped in the Surry Gardens.

In the gray mist, her crimson skirt
    catches men’s eyes like a beacon.
She takes to the rope, eyes fixed on Canada.
    This is her art, each dip an instinct.

The falls thunder hundreds
    of feet below—her feet, immobile
in two peach baskets, the rope,
    a thin promise, stretching across the gorge.

Next time she’ll bind her eyes
    and cross manacled. Next time she’ll dance,
arms arced, and Niagara will be just a name
    on her list of conquests.
Main Beach

Come
    out of the deep water.

    Colors fade
in the pounding heat.

The sun
    at pinnacle position,

    your shadow
hugged close to your heel.

    Fragments
scattered
    in the sand:

    knobbed whelk,
jingle shell,

    angel wing. Open your hands,

let the small things
    sift through your fingers.
IV.
This is Wanderlust

I.  *A Traveler*

Rain falls fast against corrugated metal.

This house at night,

all drafts and gaps

between window sill

and pane.

Under threadbare sheets, I close my eyes

and issue edicts

that could be prayers but are more

shopping lists and

*send your regrets.*

At night I crave the source of the Nile,
a battered letter bag,

a traveler. I dream of

Dr. David Livingstone, cradled in the arms of a lion

somewhere in some jungle,

some outskirts, some small town near Philadelphia:

I can’t correctly report the order of events—factual

or otherwise.

From this distance it all blurs blue,
a spun globe, eyes closed, landing on a fault line.

This is Arizona.

This is a burnt plain somewhere in the Yukon

where long-footed hares

practice breathing

so quick and shallow

it doesn’t count as movement.

I could be anywhere—

only the silence stays the same.
II.  Restless

One morning I hope to wake to the newspaper
    all in German,
an alphabet
    carved into the baseboard,
    a ring of sooty light—a mouse hole,
    a kerosene lamp.

I don’t know if there’s a rodeo
    in Toronto.

There’s not a guide book at hand to tell me
if the yellow-throated vireo is common,
    uncommon, accidental—

blown so far off course
    that her wings split
    and multiply.

Questions crowd me: where and when
    the desired altitude for flight.
    I’d gild my ribs—
a basket, a golden cage for the unsettled heart
    that strains inside my chest.

Alone, in this same room each night—
    I am restless, never satisfied.

I keep a stamped passport
    hidden in a barrel-top trunk that says: I was here
and here, but never left home.
III.  *All the Wrong Places*

Before I die
I'll ride across the River Ganges
   on the back of a water buffalo.
   His skin sheds
   in the current
   reveals a captive prince

    who tells me to wrap my legs
    around him tight.

The shirt I wear will be thin in all the wrong places.

He'll hold his hands on my waist,
   frown, forehead creased
   like a folding map.

I'll unclasp the locket from my neck
   and say, *this is my secret.*
IV.  

_A Living Heart_

The warm globe of a hurricane lamp,  
half-forgotten cup of tea.  

I read until it’s too late to sleep—  

In Tel Aviv  
there’s a locked box with stars  

    painted on it: it’s twin  
    sits on the shelf of a curio shop  
    in the port of Tierra del Fuego.  

Each night a man puts in two pennies:  

    one for the Southern Cross  
    and one in payment  
    for the damnation of Magellan.  

An afterthought.  

The celestial sphere knows no language  
barriers, knows no system of currency,  
    no byword.  

I’ll leave in the night—  

    the shoes on my feet  
    caked in the dust  
    of several continents.  

This is the desert: Mohave, Sahara.  This is a basket  
    woven from cut reeds closing around  
    a living heart.  

   This is claustrophobia:  

wanderlust—old issues of _National Geographic_  
curl in the fire place.  

Kind traveler, take my hand.  Watch as skin  
    burns, turns charcoal, ash—  

   watch as it blows off the bones.
Notes

Self Portrait in a Chinese Fable references a Chinese legend that has been told in various ways. In one version of the fable, an artist is commissioned by the emperor to paint four dragons on the walls of a temple. The dragons are lifelike in nearly every way, but the artist refused to paint pupils in their eyes because he insisted that they would come to life if complete. The emperor ordered the artist to finish the dragons and as the artist predicted, the dragons flew into the night. According to the fable, the mark of a great artist was to not only produce lifelike images, but to actually capture the soul of the creature he was painting.

The title of This Life with Bees comes from “Self Portrait as Brueghel’s Beekeepers” from Jesse Ball’s March Book. The first line of this poem comes from a Live Science article published on February 4th, 2010.

The line in Pocket Mouse, “She sleeps, paws to her eyes” was adapted from A. A. Milne’s “The Dormouse and the Doctor.”

Harold Sydney Bride, referenced in The Marconi Operator, was one of two telegraph operators working on the Titanic. He continued to send out the distress signal until the rising water entered the wireless room. Bride survived the sinking of the ship by climbing onto an upturned collapsible lifeboat. Despite sustaining injuries to both his feet, Bride worked tirelessly to send personal messages to other survivors’ families after being rescued by the Carpathia. He served as a telegraph operator aboard a ship during World War I, and died in 1956, at his home in Scotland.

The poem Reports on Ball Lightning refers to an unexplained phenomena that still has scientists puzzled. Sightings have been reported for hundreds of years; most give similar accounts of a globe of light that moves slowly through the air, usually around the same time as an intense storm.

The title of Go Gracefully Instead comes from the poem “Herculaneum” from Lucie Brock-Broido’s Trouble in Mind.