

STERLING, KYLA, M.F.A. Warnings & Fables. (2011)
Directed by David Roderick. 36 pp.

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

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2011

Approved by

Committee Chair

©2011 Kyla Sterling

APPROVAL PAGE

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks to my parents, sisters, and grandmothers for their unfailing support.

Also, much gratitude to my thesis advisor, David Roderick, and my teachers, Stuart Dischell and Rebecca Black. Lastly, thanks to all my classmates for their feedback and friendship, with particular thanks to Erin Barrilleaux and Claudia McQuiston for both their time and generous attention to my work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I.....	1
Keyholes	2
Warnings & Fables.....	3
The Villain & the Helpless One.....	4
This Life with Bees	5
Self-Portrait in a Chinese Fable.....	6
What the Birds Predicted	7
The Third Hour.....	8
Spontaneous Combustion.....	9
Sunday.....	10
The Trestle Bridge.....	11
Foxes	12
Leaving Poem	13
II.	14
The Fallout Shelter.....	15
III.....	18
Keyholes 2.....	19
Pocket Mouse.....	20
The Marconi Operator	21
Reports on Ball Lightning.....	22
The Gull.....	24
At the Crossing.....	25
Culling the Flock	26

Burying Ground.....	27
Go Gracefully Instead	28
Maria Spelterina, July 12 th 1876	29
Main Beach.....	30
IV	31
This is Wanderlust.....	30
Notes	36

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,
pouring from my nail beds. It isn't much of an exaggeration. blue light

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. Smearred 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 hour
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 baled 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.

III.

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.*

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*.