

THE TALES

JESSICA BOZEK



LES FIGUES PRESS

Los Angeles

INTRODUCTION

Jessica Bozek's *The Tales* unfolds in the aftermath of "Operation Sleep," a mysterious military mission carried out by a very powerful nation. Like the best dystopian offerings, it is composed of the actual and complicated by the intellectual and amplified by the whimsical: think Anne Carson meets *The Canterbury Tales*. *The Tales* is a disturbingly beautiful assemblage of difficult images and narratives that exist, as the poet tells us, as a record of her thinking around a seminar on "Reading Disaster."

What words does the soldier take to the front line? Or what words do we have when we become aware that the front line is now inside of us? The necessary thinking of disaster is perhaps the true province of poetry—not just in the history of American poetry but in all poetries—the song against the vanquishing night, the fairy tale as a means of warding off the demons, of keeping the children "inside" the yard.

Or, what words to take from the front lines? Bozek's tales are purportedly the tales of The Lone Survivor, but they all appear to be in the voices of people who have also survived: The Seismologist, The Actor. There are also stories from the perspective of animals—The Bird, The Dog. These, brief, often Lydia Davis style brief, tales are elegant and evocative. "The Historian's Tale," for example, which consists of nine words: "The citizens covered their heads, sitting down to sleep." In this deceptively simple little narrative I am startled and disturbed to imagine the citizens with pie plates on their heads, frozen, like the good citizens of Pompeii, in the act of defense. The tale is both abstract and narrative, filled with character, action, and yet nothing of a traditional story, or poem for that matter.

So much of contemporary poetry either wallows too much in the general wash of feelings, or tends toward stacking statistics. I am all for using language to make me see something new: here language acts like a diving board. Reading *The Tales* felt like doing roly-polys in one of those enormous clown tents. I'm far too old to be doing somersaults, but my mind is not.

Every day when I walk to my office at the university, I pass by a sign that says "Curating Difficult Knowledge..." not that I need a reminder of this. I'm not a millennial freak, but in a time devoted with such fervor to hope, faith and positive thinking, I'm constantly reminded that my mind runs to the negative. And then I feel angry about this quick and easy assessment of thinking as either positive or negative. I would rather consider an or, or, or, scenario.

I would like to say that the reason I am more concerned with air-raid shelters, emergency gadgets and stockpiling food has to do with the Cuban Missile Crisis, or living upwind of America, or that my dreams of invasion have to do with being raised during the Cold War, or that my irrational fear of rain is about my messed up half-Catholic childhood, or that 9/11 sealed the deal on paranoia and suspicion, but the truth is it may be my relationship with language and poetry: I want language to be my emergency survival kit. I want it to wake me up. I want it, over and over again, to help me narrate my life, and then narrate it again.

Look, describe, look again, describe. I'm convinced there is something we are missing in our meander across the planet. *The Tales* reminds me of this.

Sina Queyras
Montreal
2013

The Tales

“Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.”

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

PREFACE

Once upon a recent time, a very powerful nation attempted to destroy another nation via a military mission deceptively named Operation Sleep. The very powerful nation succeeded, but for a single inexplicable survivor, known to those unmarked as the Lone Survivor. This book includes his story and many versions of what may or may not be the same story.

I

THE REVISIONIST HISTORIAN'S TALE

"Friendly coming in!"

The soldier with the soothing voice had come. White museum booties muffled his steps. He left his weapons, the sharp and the loud ones, behind the roadside rock. Some say his whistle was distinctive.

He told the citizens stories of quiet insects of soft foods of hair-limbs of lazy of red trees of porch chairs of windrows of pinking shears of lavender of loose sleeves of a sweater that grew from trees of wind of tremor of transport of archive of crystal-glint of lunar surface of honey of typewritten notes of names going rusty from non-use of wind of wind of wind. They closed their eyes to go. And from the collective weight of so many eyelids collapsing, the pilings started to sink. They would soon be underground, the soldier would soon report that he had watched their houses retract, until low-growth covered the roofs. He whistled and their dogs followed him back to his weapons. The streetlights glistened against the greasepaint on his face.

For years afterward, people talked about the first soldier to fell a nation with bedtime stories. They wondered if it was better to be stilled into atrocity or surprised by it.

"Friendly coming out!"

THE HISTORIAN'S TALE

The citizens covered their heads, sitting down to sleep.

THE SEISMOLOGIST'S TALE

It was fall and the soldier's stories made human piles of the citizens.

He went directly to the center of each town and his stories spiraled outward. The few who tried to flee were held by his soothing voice. The citizens stopped. They grew tired and leaned. They grew tired and sat. Engines idled. They grew tired and sought other bodies to entwine with theirs. Warm slow cotton piles formed throughout the towns. The ground grew heavy.

The center of each town sunk first. The earth's tilt was perceptible only to the animals, who knew the soldier as an earthquake-maker. But this tremor moved in a different way, had a different shape. It coned. Most dogs avoided the soldier's circles, kept watch from the town's edge. Most dogs detected in the soldier's voice a sense of mission. They detected a master beyond the soldier, though the soldier had all the trappings of an alpha-human.

The leaves were thin on the trees. By the time the soldier made his final circles, only children who hadn't learned the words remained awake. Without language they felt the leaves and the leaving.

THE PULMONOLOGIST'S TALE

They didn't know they were drowning.

THE LONE SURVIVOR'S TALE

In the months that followed, I was cold. I slept with the animals, who understood that *defense* does not mean, exclusively, irrevocably, *offense*.

THE SAVING: A FAIRY TALE

The loon's lesson.

Now under funerary green, the citizens are cut off from the surrounding lands. A loon teaches them that they can dive down into their own small lake and come up in another lake. The cost of this transport is that all communication must happen underground.