

In *The Truth Is* Avery M. Guess ensnares her reader in a terrifying drama of intimacy's invasions—incest, abuse, institutionalization, suicide, illness—that the reader, like the speaker, cannot escape. And yet, all the while, here too is the grace and salvation only the natural world offers us; here too is the guardian strength of ginkgo trees, thunderstorms, the Everglades, the ocean, the Miami sun. Here too is a whole woman's body, which, once she discovers she is never separate from the loving silence on which this good earth turns, becomes something so much greater than what she endures. And so do we.

—Rebecca Gayle Howell, author of *American Purgatory* and
Render: An Apocalypse

Avery Guess's debut collection of poems *The Truth Is* is a brave document of survivorhood. The poems bear witness to childhood domestic & sexual violence, and ask the reader to listen with compassion, love, and tenderness. Formally varied, at turns, spare, narrative, and fantastical, the poems move with agility through possibility while refusing easy answers. Guess's book offers a necessary testimony for our times.

—Cathy Linh Che, Author of *Split*

It is impossible to read the poems in this collection without taking a breath after each one, calculating everything at stake. *The Truth Is* dismantles our tidy narratives—its poems thrash with honesty, renouncing shame while demanding we, as readers, help carry the load. It challenges us to put more effort into the terms: *witness*, *survivor*, *risk*, and *reckoning*.

—Rachel McKibbens, Author of *blud*, *Into the Dark & Emptying Field*, and *Pink Elephant*

The Truth Is

Avery M. Guess



Black
Lawrence
Press

Contents

The Secret Swallower Reveals Her Swords	1
The Patient Talks of Electroshock and Lobster	2
The Sea Cucumber	3
How to Be a Survivor	5
Before the Quiet, the Storm	6
The Patient Attempts to Explain Cutting	8
Heart Patience	10
The Truth Is	11
The Eyes of God Were Watching	12
In Therapy, the Patient Is Asked to Define: Bundle	13
Each Night the Girl Makes a New Resolution	14
The Alligator Girl Becomes	15
Her Childhood Home	17
The Patient Admits	18
The Patient's Aversion to Bananas Begins	20
Attempts at Flight	22
Self-Portrait of the Patient as a Murmuration of Starlings	24
Nails	25
Two Objects and a Girl	26
The Body Keeps the Score	28
The Blue Notebook	29
The Glass Girl Recalls Her Transformation	35
The Patient	37
The Patient's Complaint	39
No Peace	41
The Patient Attempts to Explain PTSD with Time Travel Theory	45
The Patient Experiences a Flashback for the First Time	47

Walking South Beach after Hurricane David, 1979	48
In Therapy, the Patient Is Asked to Define: Polaroid	49
The Patient Attempts to Describe Her Experience with Depakote	50
The Patient Decides She Wants to Live	52
In Therapy, the Patient Is Asked to Define: Alimony	53
Hialeah Apocalypse	54
Listen	55
On Silent Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani	56
Serotiny	57
The Girl Stripped Bare	58
Memory	59
<i>Mala Madre</i> , or Song of the Abused Daughter	61
Moving to San Francisco, I Visit Laura and Alex and We Take a Canoe Out on a Frozen Lake to Check on Her Science Experiment	63
Suitcases	64
On Going Home	66
Acknowledgments	67

To Cathy and David, with all my love.

The Secret Swallower Reveals Her Swords

Imagine the first time someone looked at a sword and thought, *hey, I'd like to swallow that*. Imagine the first sword swallower was a girl, not a man or boy like you've been told. Just a girl from your neighborhood. Imagine she's been swallowing secrets for years, sees the sword and thinks *that would be easier. More filling*. But before she can swallow the sword, she has to make room. Release her secrets. She opens her mouth, reaches in to pull out the first secret and finds it has become a broadsword. She calls it Father and puts it aside. Next, she coughs up a fencing sword she dubs Depression. She draws more swords out. Names them after the secrets they carry—half a dozen, a dozen, two dozen—until she loses count and the clang of metal on metal no longer jangles her nerves. Imagine the last one's the smallest and hardest for her to reach, lodged in her heart as it is. A sword the size of a swizzle stick. The sharpest yet. Tugging it loose, she whispers, *Mother*.

The Patient Talks of Electroshock and Lobster

Lobster is all I remember about Pop-Pop's electroshock at the hospital on South Beach. He was given lobster on the ward and liked it. I didn't visit him there, didn't see him gorge on that sweet meat after his calculated convulsions.

But lobster is what I hear a decade later when the doctor suggests electroconvulsive therapy as a way to pierce depression's seal on my skin. This is no child's play, no white glue poured over fingers, set dry, and peeled off slow. No delight in a fingerprint's lingering kiss. No thrill in traversing the stifling layers, my tongue thick with language I can no longer speak. What the doctor suggests will not do. All I can think about was Pop-Pop and the lobster. Until the lobster becomes the ECT machine becomes the lobster, and I picture my skin angry like a lobster's tail post-boil.

Now, lobsters can be shocked to death. The CrustaStun can knock a lobster out in .3 seconds, kill it in less than 10. More humane than boiling, the device shortens the lobster's suffering by minutes.

If my depression could have been cured that quickly, I would have said yes. Yes to the current to lighten my mood. Yes to the lobster.

The Sea Cucumber

after Elizabeth Bishop

Each year is the same—rows of boys
and rows of girls line both sides
of the hall. Hushed walk to the waiting
bus. Dark green seats still stick to skin.

It's November. Insects scream loud
as car horns. No respite from Miami's
heat. Teachers count students *one-two-three*,
sit, then talk to parents—chaperones

who would rather be anywhere else.
The aquarium isn't far, but the drive
seems long. Kim and Jen make friendship
bracelets and a fight almost breaks out

between two of the boys—Jimmy's kicking
the back of Travis' seat. Each time the driver
hits a pothole, everyone's heads
come close to hitting the roof of the bus.

We're thirteen bottles of beer from the end
of the song when we lurch to a stop
in front of the Seaquarium. The noise level
rises as excited yells are carried forward

in a tidal wave of sound before we get off
the bus and back in lines. Let loose
upon the grounds, we ignore commands
of *walk, don't run*, and fling ourselves into the park.

Our group meanders past the dolphin enclosure,
the stingray exhibit, and the alligators
to Discovery Bay, where we learn about sea turtles,
tropical birds, and the other creatures

that inhabit Florida's mangrove forests.
The guide shows off starfish and sea urchins,
calls them echinoderms, which means "spiny skin."
Then she picks up what looks like wet dog poop.

Cries of *gross* ring through our group, but we step
closer as she explains this sea cucumber can eject
its internal organs for protection and then grow
them back. They expel their own guts, turn inside

out, in order to tangle or confuse their prey with sticky
filaments. Nothing else measures up the rest of the trip.
On the ride home, we all yell out our favorite animal.
No one mentions the sea cucumber for fear

of not seeming cool. It's as though those of us
who liked them best now share a secret language
all our own. One of shy excitement. A lexicon
based on knowing how to let go. How to survive.

How to Be a Survivor

Understand it's not about coming out
unscathed. Look to the ginkgo.
A living fossil, it's been through more
than we can dream of with our rootless
feet. Our leafless limbs. Six ginkgo trees
survived the bombs sent to fell Hiroshima,
sheltered under the parasol of the mushroom
cloud that bloomed above the city. They dug
in. Said no. Insisted on witnessing,
on bearing testimony. Accepted their scars
as proof they'd been through *something*.
Flung open leaves like fans to keep cool
in summer. Dyed their hair bright yellow
each fall to infuse themselves with the warmth
of a dying sun. Didn't linger over each precious
leaf fall. Didn't portion their pain out piece
by piece. Learned to let go all at once.

Before the Quiet, the Storm

Beyond my basement
window, a furious flurry

falls. The trees wear
their skeletons on the outside.

White line of snow bone
clings to trunk and limb.

A quilt of quiet covers
the restive street.

What if death
is not the absence

of sound,
but its opposite?

After dinner I push
a white tablet

the size of a baby
tooth past firm grip

of foil and cardstock
into my waiting hand.

It's my 24th attempt
to lasso the thoughts

that urge early endings.
Explain to my therapist

that maybe it's silence
I crave, not an exit.

As a kid I sought
stillness by laying

flat as a flounder
at the bottom

of the pool, a friend
standing square

on my back, her feet
holding me in place

until my held
breath gave out,

until I was forced
to breach the surface.

The Patient Attempts to Explain Cutting

1.

tug of undertow
the roil and churn

2.

buried metronome
thumping the drum

3.

tiptoe of ants on tile
dash dash dash dash dash

4.

scrape of barnacles
on scales, fish flesh

5.

sawgrass strand
teeth on edge

6.

tender white tulip
petal breaking red

Heart Patience

My mother just called to tell me my father's in the ICU.
His heart's not working right. Emergency surgery.
Two stents to open the path to or from that muscle.

For the past month, I've knitted and purled strands of red,
pink, and purple wool into tiny hearts to stitch together,
stuff, and give away. I've become a surgeon of yarn.

Here's what I know of hearts: they are two fishhooks kissing,
barbs pointing downward, a promise of pain.

The Truth Is

When I was a little girl, maybe four or five, I watched movies on my bedroom wall. Far across the sea of yellow shag carpet I'd sit cross-legged and hunched over on my bed. The truth is they were not real. The truth is I saw them, still. Even though there was no machine showing a world that didn't exist, no film wrapped around a reel like a belt around a fist.

The Eyes of God Were Watching

I was afraid to close my eyes,
scared He'd get me in bed—
my thin body covered
by a sheet with Peanuts characters.

Every night I'd scream, but no one ever came.

I wondered if I was making
any noise at all—my throat
raw with disappointment.

No one came.
Not my mother.
Not my father.

God watched me for months—
eyes two pinpricks of light—glaring
down from the ceiling's light fixture.

When I told him who was watching,
my father waited until dark,
turned out the lights,
and tracked the eyes to their source—
a reflection cast by my nightlight.

Maybe my father fixed it
out of love, or maybe he was worried
God would see what he was doing.

In Therapy, the Patient Is Asked to Define: Bundle

bundle (bun - del) n. mass of bones, muscles, nerves, flesh held in place only by clothes.

Use it in a sentence:

When I was seventeen, after having me recite the names of the first five books of Moses, my seventy-year-old Rabbi called me a “bundle of sex.”

Write a poem using each letter of the word as the first letter of each line:

Bundle

Bible study
under your
nebbishy gaze—
deliver me from this
lecherous
exodus from reason.

Each Night the Girl Makes a New Resolution

Tonight I'll be a dust mote on the red desk. An ant crawling outside the house. Tonight I'll slip between my shadow and yours. Lock my door. Hide in the closet. Cover myself with caution tape. Bathe in trash. Tonight I'll be the rabbit's heartbeat and quivering nose. I'll pretend I'm dead. Pretend I'm on Mars. Tonight I'll forget.

Tonight I'll speak in tongues. Tonight I'll fly at you—become a hundred palmetto bugs. Sting you like a jellyfish. Watch from the ceiling. Film everything. Take notes. Hide inside a book. Call on God. Jesus. Buddha. Kali. Granny. Tonight I'll forget.

Tonight you'll cry before. During. After. Tonight you'll admit you've done wrong. You'll stop. You'll stop. You'll stop. Tonight I'll forget.

Tonight you'll stay the fuck away. Get help. Get me help. Tonight it ends. Tonight I'll fight back. Tonight I'll forget.

Tonight I'll kill you in your sleep. Tonight I'll cut myself. Swallow pills. Kill myself. Tonight I'll forget.

Tonight I'll stare you in the eyes the whole time and make you watch. Tonight I'll forget.

Tonight.

Forget.

Tonight.

The Alligator Girl Becomes

Nights the girl slips into the alligator skin
she relishes the weight of husk—how her arms
and legs fit, how the surface welcomes her,
wraps her frame in its reptilian hug.

She remembers countless field trips
to the Everglades, her classmates shrieking
as the gator's mouth was held shut by
the guide's hand, proof of man's superiority.

She felt bad for the creature, on display
against its will for kids who would kill
it rather than listen to the soul song
of its bellows. The gator's cold eyes

always drew her in. Her mother says
the girl's skin is too thin. A gator's hide
is thick. Impervious. She still hasn't figured out
how to work the eyelids. She'll need them

to swim with her eyes open for predators.
For prey. Nights she dreams of flight
she understands she is becoming.
She's tapped into the genetic memory

of that common ancestor that kept her kind
close to the earth but saw her kin take to the skies.
They learned a different kind of freedom.
She grows adept at flicking her tail,

clacking her jaws, the high walk
and low crawl. Practices her log
imitation in the bathtub, snout
above water, breathing in. Out.

The night she leaves for good,
she tries on the prom dress her mother
bought after making her lose
fifteen pounds in time to get a date.

She smooths the dress down, enjoys
the slide of satin over scale, each bump
still visible through fabric. Her mother
would tell her to hide the lumps with Spanx.

The girl twirls for the bathroom mirror
one last time, then shreds the dress
with her claws. She won't need it where
she's going—back to the swamps.

She lowers first her head, then her front
and back legs into the toilet bowl, her diving
form a perfect ten, and with a snap of her tail,
she flushes herself away, leaves not a trace.