

“Jim Gunshinan’s poems about leaving the priesthood, about American boyhood and manhood, love and death, are openhearted and wry and honest—a soul’s journey readers are invited to follow.”

—*Kim Addonizio*



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(<http://alantefflamenco.com>)

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Dedication: For Tom Gunshinan



This is my father, Tom Gunshinan, and me on my wedding day. He had that same look of pride and love on the day I was ordained, and when I graduated from college. That look expresses how he felt about all his children. He is the face for me of unconditional love. He liked the poems in this book, though he thought he came across as a bit dull, and that I was too hard on my mother, his wife. I did think he was kind of dull when I was younger, and I have been kind of hard on my mother. Sorry about that. And thank you.

Thanks also to my editors Melissa Stein and Joan Romeo, and to my book designer, Jo-Anne Rosen.

Jim Gunshinan
July 2013

The Artificial Heart

It was mostly plastic and titanium.
My research involved
an ultrasound transducer

a thin stick, half the diameter
of a cigarette. It made noises
humans can't hear

aimed into fake blood flowing
around a fake circulatory system.
The sound waves, bat-like, bounced off

tiny plastic blood cells.
There was a piece of quartz glued
to the end of the transducer.

It shook out noise when it was shocked.
A computer listened
and made a map of blood flow

in the pumping chamber
of the artificial heart. When I was done
measuring shear stress and stagnation

could write my master's thesis
leave the basement of Hammond Building
the little piece of quartz

fell off the stick in front of me.
It lay there, exhausted and silent.
There was nothing to sound out

but the movement of skin, muscle and bone.
I unplugged everything.

I had no idea where I was going.

Heroes

When the four of us, brothers
turned a copper pipe, a block of wood
and firecrackers into a cannon

we sent, from the backyard patio
objects into the sky with a bang and laughter.
I supplied the ammunition—

the toy soldiers, the hard rubber balls.
We never knew where they went
though one of the soldiers

had a parachute attached to his shoulders
with plastic hooks. Bang
and it was gone, over the creek

into the sky of the wider world.
On a hill outside Da Nang
central Vietnam

on the South China Sea; my brother lies
inside a ring of sandbags
behind a fifty-caliber machine gun.

At home
I am bent over my desk
writing him a letter, *How are you?*

I am fine. I got straight A's.
I signed up for football. After a year
we picked him up at the airport.

You know how in the movies
the Green Beret will fall
on the hand grenade

to save his buddies?
It only slows down the shrapnel
a little bit, he told me.

Geography Lessons

When Kosovo split from Serbia
I didn't know if they both still belonged
to Yugoslavia. And why is Kosovo

filled with Albanians? I once saw Albania
from the Greek island of Korfu,
where my sister lived. When I asked her

Why don't women on the beach in Greece
wear bathing-suit tops? she said
This is Europe.

And all those countries above Iraq
with "stan" at the end of their names?
I knew a Stan once

in college. He was the first guy I ever knew
who wore clogs. He was from New Jersey.
I don't know the left side of Africa very well

besides Liberia, which was in the news
yesterday. I know a guy from Malawi
who left his family and country

because he was in trouble with the government.
We were in a dance class together
in Oakland. He had a positive relationship

with gravity, unlike Stan from New Jersey whose clogs
made an awful racket on the wooden floor
of our dorm room. I met a Peace Corps volunteer

home on leave from Moldova, a place I never even heard of.
When she came to the door looking for my housemate
she was eating jelly beans.

She opened her mouth and asked
What flavor am I eating?
She was tall, athletic, and had long brown hair.

Her name was Leslie. Crushed in her mouth
the red and yellow candy looked like
Argentina lying on its back, and I wanted

to go there, to cover that whole country
with my mouth, like a tsunami, and suck
her cherry and lemon jelly beans. But I couldn't

because I was a priest, and she came to see
my housemate, the pastor. I learned, however
that Moldova is between Rumania and Ukraine.

Two other places I'd probably never go to.
The story of my life then:
So much geography to see and none to touch.

Blue Cornflowers

Crimson roses cascade down the stacked, concentric layers
of our wedding cake.
Its paper-thin, dark chocolate walls

hold passion fruit.
The roses reverse the thousand steps I climbed
in a dream, before I was ordained

while the congregation below me became a blur.
It's dizzying, coming down to my body
waking up to find you in a white dress, under trees

in Tilden Park. I've hiked these trails alone for years.
The pine needles smell like cinnamon.
In the spring, poppies, like licks

of orange flame, have called to me
not to worship, but to stop, bend down, and love them.
I remember our first date. I was waiting

by the restaurant, in front of a florist stand.
You came around a corner, wearing a dress
the color of cornflowers.

Living by Water

A creek ran in our backyard, down a short slope
and paralleled our street, Hedin Drive, named after
one of the Korean War vets who developed

a plot of land a few miles from the D.C. border
within the boundary of what would become
the Beltway. At the end of the block

on Oakview Drive was a bridge.
Our street was a horseshoe
and Oakview closed it at both ends, to keep the luck in

or maybe out. I don't remember
ever following the creek under it
and going to the other side.

I saw Jimmy White feeling up his girlfriend
under the bridge, one Sunday morning
as I walked to serve the 6:30 Mass. I got into

a rock fight once, with some older boys at the bridge.
My friend Conrad—who a year later had open-heart surgery—
and I stood at the rail above and chucked

rocks down at them, I don't remember why. One grey rock
an almost perfect ellipse, a few inches end to end
landed between my eyes before I could duck. I screamed

Conrad ran, and a man painting a house up the street
got me and took me home. I stayed
in my parents' bedroom all afternoon

and didn't need stitches. My mom, a nurse
and so unimpressed by bodily damage
made me a butterfly bandage

by cutting two opposed triangles
from the standard Band-Aid. The room
was air conditioned, the only one in the house.

At the other end of our side of the block
two men—Mr. C and Mr. E—
within weeks of each other

went out just past the boundaries of their back yards
within the trees and scrub that lined the creek
and killed themselves with a rifle in the mouth.

Their blood must have seeped into the ground
and during the next heavy rain
it must have mingled in the creek

which continued into the Anacostia River
the Potomac, the Chesapeake Bay and then
the Atlantic.

It's as if they wanted to
join the general flow out of the suburbs
and their allotted quarter-acre.

My brother Tom, returning from boot camp
with a duffle bag over his shoulder, fresh from a long
bus ride came home on the Fourth of July

following the annual parade up to the school
where we watched fireworks. A few weeks later
he walked away in the other direction.

We had neighborhood hide-and-seek games
on summer nights. On Fridays
Mom made pizza for all the kids.

Down the block, Mr. Garvey showed
The Pit and the Pendulum
on a white bedsheet strung between trees in his backyard.

We watched it on our backs in the grass.
A few miles away black people were rioting
after the murder of Martin Luther King.

I turned nine on June 23rd.
We used to get half our age in dollars
to spend on a gift. Later when I was in college

and I tried to think
of something interesting to say, something to make me seem
sophisticated, I said

nothing much happened in the suburbs
but down the street
D.C. was burning.

Upon This Rock

From the basement
I'd hear him
coming home from work.

I'd hear the soft thud
of his black leather
wingtips

on the entranceway
linoleum; the pa-lunk
of his briefcase

on the floor
by the knick-knack shelf
where he would ka-lank

down his keys
onto a glass dish;
the rickety, metallic

winging open
of the louvered closet door
to hang up his coat

and the gentle *smooch*
of his kissing Mom
hello.

Then I'd know
that it was five-twenty, and exactly
ten minutes 'til dinner time.

The Man Dad Brought Home from the War

Ed Kasanski came to our house
early on Saturday mornings
to wake me and my brothers
grumpy and silent at first.

We went fishing by the thick, brown
fast-moving Potomac
never catching anything but catfish
and feasted on baked beans

dark pumpernickel and sausages
cooked over a fire we built ourselves.
On the way back we'd stop
for Catocin Mountain peaches

in August
or bulging chestnuts from Rock Creek Park
in the fall. One summer day
we came home, unloaded our peaches

and my sister asked Ed
to join us for dinner. He stood in the door
in the same old clothes he always wore:
his olive shirt and black boots

as old as the war
looking like the homeless man
kind people took him to be
so they handed him dollar bills

as he stood smoking a cigarette
outside the Hot Shoppes restaurant.
I don't want to be a bother, he said.
You're no bother, you're family, she said.

I don't believe he ever cried during the War.
He cried then, tears sweeter than peaches.
He tried to hide them but we saw a man
who would die knowing that he was loved.

Physics

When I was seventeen I came home drunk
and before going inside
ran laps around the family Impala

parked in the driveway.
Made circles hiking in Tilden Park
around the pain of leaving the priesthood.

I learned this becoming a man
running back and forth in gymnasiums
around cinder tracks

and in steamy weight rooms
trying to get stronger and numb
at the same time.

At the beginning of my new life
I fall at night into the little death
of sleep, insistent dreams

inviting me to remember the body's pain
passion and joy
that is like the sap

of a juniper tree, rising—
becoming grey-blue berries,
then medicine.

Black and White

It was the '60s, post-Vatican II
when priests and nuns were leaving in droves
to marry each other. They later got divorced
in greater than average numbers.

I grew up with them at St. Camillus School.
I had a crush on my first-grade homeroom teacher
Sr. Maria Lucia. She would meet me at the door each day
with a hug, wrapping me up in yards and yards

of her cool black habit. I don't remember
competing with the thirty or so other kids
for her attention, like I competed for my mother's.
Then there was Sr. Francis Joanna or Frannie Jo-Annie,

as my older siblings called her—my fourth-grade
math teacher, and sadistic. Because of the history lessons
my siblings gave me, I had nightmares about her in the summer
between my third and fourth years. And they came true.

Stressing the importance of long division, she once
shook me like a rag doll and banged my head
against the blackboard. Eventually I got it
and ended up excelling in math.

It was more or less an enlightened time
and so we said the terrorist nun was neurotic
and not simply evil; the affectionate one raised no red flags.
The neurotic nun was sent to summer school

at one of those renewal programs at a Catholic college,
where nuns and priests fell in love and studied
Liberation Theology. She came back nicer,
if not completely liberated.

She went by her own name after that,
Sr. Mary. There were other nuns, some of whom
dressed stylishly and it was rumored among the adults
that they wore makeup. But the two stand out:

One taught me the importance of the long division
between the joy of learning and the fear of failure.
The other taught me to feel yards and yards of comfort
and the soft space between hip bones and breasts.

Not the Mom We Were Used To

Mom cooked the sauce long and slow
with big chunks of pork on the bone
or pepperoni sliced thick enough

to fill the mouths of my oldest brothers
Tommy and Frank. She doled it out
on mounds of pasta to all six of us

so the littlest wouldn't
go away from the table hungry.
On this particular Monday

which was her cleaning day
there was stillness in the air
as though something big were going to happen

like before the August storms swept in
off the Atlantic and two hundred miles
inland to blow the leaves and branches

of the Weeping Willow
in our backyard
sideways.

Eight glasses of milk
stood before us, large glasses
and cold. I don't remember who did it

who tipped his over.
I do remember my Mom
making a slow deliberate circle

around the table, tipping the rest over
one by one
and the chill of more than 96 ounces of milk

spilling out over the table top
cascading over the edge, spreading
in a circle on our jeans, and

pooling in our Sears Jeeps.
So much given
and our mouths closed shut in awe and wonder.

Nothing Sacred

Black is in fashion
here in Berkeley and elsewhere.
I see mostly women
dressed in all black
clingy cotton dresses
and he-man black
sleeveless underwear tops.
I like the look
but don't like wearing it
myself. To me it says dead
from the neck down.
That's how I imagined
priesthood.
And the little plastic white tab
that bends into the collar
easy, like a childproof pill bottle is easy.
It's a tongue depressor.
Put it on and watch what you say.
Other people will, too.
I'm not a big fan
of black clothing and white tabs.
That old uniform doesn't connect
people
to the mystery of death and life
the way it used to
and needs to be
reimagined.
I'll take it off; live untethered
spend years getting used to gray
then blue, red, yellow.

Spring

I want to touch all
the women at Costco
as we go about our shopping
the terry-cloth towels
and the oranges.
The men seem handsome and strong.
Something is happening, rising.
All this fuzzy pleasure
rising behind my eyes and out.
(Does anyone notice?
People seem friendlier.)
And that terrible distance I've felt
between my skin and the world
has shrunk down to nothing
so big that it can't be crossed
with reaching out and touching.

I put it away years ago.
Too dangerous
too delicious, too bad
judgments like rat droppings
all around it; disease.
But there is a freshness
deep down things
even rats, even human beings.
It fills up my skin.
Funny I should feel this in Lent
which means *spring*.

I'm a peach. A ripe, fuzzy
peach
and I am eating myself.
Tried to give up chocolate
but ate eight-cookies'-worth
of chocolate chip dough
on the day after Ash
Wednesday.
Get out, Lent, heavy, denying
dull, repressing, body-hating thing
I was steeped in for too long.

Deep body groove
I know you're in there.
Think I'll plant flowers in you
and fruit trees and walk my dog
in you.
Lent images. Spring images.

Gehenna was the Jerusalem town dump
where garbage, the bodies of outlaws
and cast-offs, burned.
Even there, at the edge of the valley
something must grow
an olive tree take root, a fig
or the starry white flowers
of the bean caper bush.

Transformation

You smelled damp on the afternoon you died
like something growing in the dark; like mushrooms.
And your forehead was cool where my lips touched.
I whispered, “Mom, don’t be afraid. Let go.”

The nurse loosened the plastic mask
with the rubber band from around your neck
laying it on the soft flat rise of flesh
between your breasts and throat.

From lungs flooded with water, you brought up
a few rattling breaths and then stopped.
The look on your face at the moment of death:
peaceful, calm, serene.

I imagine the same look
as you watched each of your six children
being baptized. And other scenes:
the sad blue bathrobe you wore on Mondays

your cleaning day; the delight you took
talking about Pope John and Vatican II
or laughing out loud while reading
The World According to Garp.

And the black silences when I wondered—
a boy eager to please you—what I had done.
It was never something I did.
Your storms were your storms.

I saw light in your face the day you died
light coming
as from the stillness
below the wave-speckled surface of a lake.

Please Straighten That Up

I loved to look down that long hallway
after I’d washed and waxed it, admiring
the smoothness and shine of it. It was
the closest thing to heaven I knew.

Once, while it was still wet with wax
a small army of eighty-five-pound
football players
rained out of their practice

came charging down the gleaming hallway
all helmets, shoulder pads and cleats.
Another lesson in—
Nothing stayed perfect

after Tommy’s year in Vietnam
Frank’s long hair
rock and roll, the smell of dope
Jimi Hendrix blasting through the house

Dad yelling, *Turn off that goddamn noise.*
And burned-up neighborhoods in D.C. we saw
driving down North Capitol Street
and Rhode Island Avenue, on the way

to Griffith Stadium
where we watched the Senators
play baseball on a perfect green
diamond. Looking back

on all that riotous imperfection
I cleaned the hallways
at St. Camillus School.
Janitors for Jesus, we called ourselves

me and the other high school boys.
Now I'm still desperate
to make the world neat and clean
as if it is my duty to order the Universe, keeping death

and all kinds of disorienting
passion
at bay. So far I've lost my mother
my innocence and two careers

leaving, though, a number
of clean passageways.

Up from Depression

Two years ago I fell off a mountain
and deep into the earth.
I climbed back

through the Mercy
of friends, the treatment center
then poets and dancers. I found life

in the large eyes of the woman I held.
It was in her long legs
that lay warm across my thigh

in the morning.
I woke up dancing and then
came the hot sobbing and I looked

at the icon of Jesus on the wall
of my bedroom and said
Love, don't ever leave me again.

What the Body Wants

To get up off the floor
and dance. It wants to get up
out of a chair and dance; to get out
from behind a desk and dance; to get outside

The body wants to move.
The body wants to move and touch
and betogether with other bodies.
It wants to smell other bodies

and taste other bodies.
It wants to be up to its neck
in body. The body is tired of waiting
and resting beneath the weight

of the mind. The body falls asleep thinking.
It can't stand the wait
between inaction and action.
It doesn't want to write

or call somebody, talk or take a nap.
It wants to touch the world of bread
and warm coffee cups
soft cloth and rough cloth, pavement

tree bark and hear car sounds and water sounds.
It wants to tread on things
and to feel the weight of things.
It wants to squeeze somebody

and be squeezed.
It wants hot sun on its back, and breezes.
It wants to jump in water and float.
The body wants to fly.

It wants to feel with every cell
the pull of gravity, and the centrifugal force
of turning. It wants energy and tranquility.
The body wants to be big sometimes

to fill up rooms with shouting
and to fit into small, safe places.
The body wants to vibrate to its own voice
and to feel harmony with other voices

and dissonance.
It wants to dance slow and dance fast
to flow, to thrust, to bend, be still.
It wants to make beautiful lines

and be seen.
It wants to be fat and skinny
to burst out of its seams.
The body wants everything.
It does not want to be bounded
but loves to rub, push and bounce off
surfaces.

Compassion

The blackbird outside the Starbucks had clubbed feet
toes turned inward, making a ball at the end
of its spindly legs. I noticed when I stopped

for coffee and to read the paper
while my car got its three-thousand-mile
service next door. An hour later the bird was still there

waiting for a bit of my bran muffin to fall off the table.
I know that certain pollutants have an estrogenic effect
on birds and other small animals, especially in the Northeast.

The males become infertile and even take on female characteristics.
There's a famous black-and-white photograph
of a Japanese woman, naked in a large wooden tub

holding her daughter
a victim of mercury poisoning, just above
the water. The daughter's fingers are flexed and bent

her teeth protrude at a sharp angle from her gaping mouth
her far-off stare says she may already be in another world.
Her mother, hair wrapped in a white towel, is holding

her, also, with a mother's eyes.
Ivan Mestrovic's carved Pieta: God the Father
a weary old man, holds his dead son draped across his lap.

Lawrence Van der Post, a prisoner of the Japanese
in World War II, thought the British officers
should watch their comrades being executed

—the full arc of the sword coming down—
since the dying, and those who suffer
should have a witness.



Commute

Driving to work in the morning
along Grizzly Peak Road
I see, as usual
San Francisco Bay, the Golden Gate

with fog around its ankles, the City of
Oakland in the foreground, gray rooftops.
Off to the side, semicircles of downed eucalyptus
trees mark the parking spaces

of scenic overlooks. The tree trunks are joined
by thick chains.
There's a solitary red pickup truck
with no one inside to enjoy the view.

I drive down and into a curve
the car's second gear holds my speed, gently
and a lucid joy
begins everywhere at once.

My density is that of the car seat
the air, the trees
and the sun shining through the windshield.
For a moment, I am the light

and the glass though which it passes.

Kiss Me

Do it Mister President. Make me
your Valentine. Invite me to your cabinet.
Make me your Secretary of Energy

in charge of Faith-Based Initiatives.
Do it in front of millions—
old friends and former classmates.

Just a peck on the cheek
and while you're at it, put a medal
around my neck.

Make me a Navy Seal.
Let me stand behind you
in a dark suit and sunglasses

tutor your daughters
in math, and escort Michelle
when you are away.

Make me head of the Library of Congress
and chooser of the next five
Poets Laureate of the United States

me, me, me, Kim Addonizio
and then me again.
I want to ride in Air Force One.

I want to meet Steven Colbert.
Seat me next to Bruce Springsteen.
Or just pick me for your basketball team.

Call me by my high school nickname.
Pat me on the butt and say
Hey Gunsh, nice shot man.

Starter Castles

From the cozy living room
of the small gray cottage
I share with my wife and a dog
what the realtor called

a French country house
in a neighborhood of other small houses
a few with built-on second-story
master bedrooms

looming over one-car garages
I look up at a huge house on a hill
with complicated rooflines
high walls, and only a few windows.

I've never been to the medieval town of Assisi
but I've seen pictures
and that's where this house belongs.
All that's missing is the crenellation

for archers to stretch their bows
and loose their arrows.
The man of the house
might roll out the barbecue to the balcony

drop lit propane tanks on the envious
and foreclosed-upon below.
I hear the compressor compressing
from time to time, outside the castle walls

but that's the only sign of life. Maybe
if I had seen the owners
dropping their kids off at school
or walking the dog

I would view things differently.
But I imagine a childless couple
who travel most of the year.
Perhaps they live in coffins

and have refrigerators full of blood
from their night raids into the City.
The servants come and go at night like ghosts
through hidden doors.

Maybe there's a heliport on the roof
where the owners one day
dropped from the sky like gods.

Flamenco at the Thirsty Bear*

We ate tapas, drank amber ale
and sat so close to the stage
I could lean over and put my beer on it.

But I didn't. An old man played the guitar
a younger man, tall and lean, black-haired
sang in a high-pitched, wild language

that was spoken in ancient times, before Spanish
before the Romans. A woman danced, in a curvy
tight black dress meant for caressing. Her arms moved

like flames up and down an invisible ladder, one hand rising
the other falling, fingers snapping. She banged her black heels
pounding her passion into the wood of the stage.

She looked down to one side
and then the other, her look serious, focused within
like a woman bearing down in childbirth

or in that last, suspended breathless second
before orgasm. I could have caught fire.
But I didn't. I woke up at our table, with my wife and friends.

A few scraps were left on the table
some rice, a shrimp, empty bottles.
For a moment, we were all glowing, and in love.

*The Thirsty Bear Brewing Company
(<http://www.thirstybear.com>)

A Nature Poem

I was visited by a young stag
with thick felt on his new antlers.
He came outside my bedroom window
in Berkeley to eat the rotting plums

fallen over the fence from my neighbors' yard.
As he moved around the house, I followed
down the hallway with the framed pictures
on the wall, through the bathroom with two doors

my office and into the guest bedroom
where I saw him again through the window.
We went back and forth like that, from
bedroom to bedroom, until he had his fill.

I wonder why he came from Tilden Park
down the Berkeley hills, among all those houses
gardens, recycling bins, sidewalks
and curving roads to my house

to eat my fallen plums
and make me spin like a Sufi dancer?
Is he a deer who longs
for sweetness? Or is he like

those elephants who migrate for days and days
to get drunk off the overripe
fruit of the Marula tree
mango's cousin?

Portrait of a Woman from the Gardens of Egypt in the First Century

She looks at us with dark brown eyes
and rose lips applied with beeswax
on linden wood.

She looks as if nothing were between us—
not 1900 years, not nations being born
and dying

not war and famine, millions of lovers
the invention of the printing press
Newtonian and then quantum mechanics.

She could be my neighbor. I would love it
if she moved into the empty apartment
across the hall.

She seems to know something but is not
telling. Maybe it was the painter
who said, Stay still for another minute

for the wax is cooling or maybe
she was in love with the painter and maybe
wasn't married to the painter and

ready to burst with love and passion
for the painter. Or her children were bumping
her knees, feeling neglected.

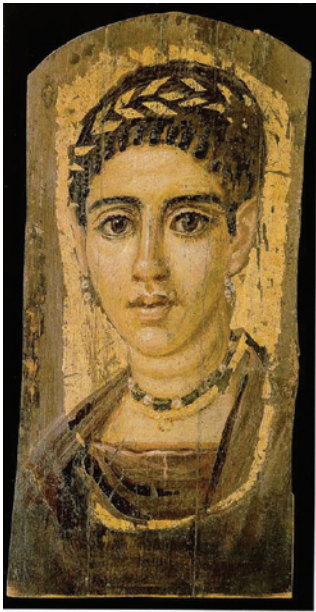
She knows something but is not saying it.
Maybe that nothing will change
in 1900 years

and she is looking at me, at us
with compassion. Hoping that we can adorn
ourselves with lovely pearls like hers

that there are still bread and children
and that people still find joy
in each other's bodies, that

war has ceased and everyone
feels cherished by someone. In this portrait
affixed to her coffin

nothing stands between
her eyes and mine. I feel that we will meet
and I will have to answer for my life.



About Jim Gunshinan

Jim Gunshinan is a science and religion writer and the editor of Home Energy Magazine in Berkeley, California. The magazine covers green homebuilding and renovation for an audience of home-performance professionals. He holds a master's degree in bioengineering from Penn State and a master of divinity from Notre Dame. Ordained in the Catholic Church in 1989, he ministered in a parish and at a small liberal arts college in South Bend, Indiana, and began the process of laicization in 1999. This is his first full collection of poems. He is married to Michele Nikoloff and lives in Walnut Creek, California.

“What the Body Wants” appears in an anthology of poetry and essays by the same name, published by Wood Lake Publishing, Inc. in 2004. The poem is also the title of a chapbook published by Wordrunner in 1999. Also, the poem is included in a program guide for Capacitor, an organization that works with victims of torture in Central America. This is his proudest achievement.

“Compassion” appears in the *Squaw Review* 2008.

Praise for the Poems

“Jim Gunshinan’s poems about leaving the priesthood, about American boyhood and manhood, love and death, are open-hearted and wry and honest—a soul’s journey readers are invited to follow. In one poem he asserts that ‘the dying, and those who suffer / should have a witness.’ So, too, should the living who struggle to get to a place of peace, who find themselves, at last, as Gunshinan does, awake in the presence of grace.”

—Kim Addonizio