

The Poetry of James F. Mulhern

A Slim Companion Handout for Students — Art of Telling, Unit II

Six Signatures of the Work

- **1. Plain Anglo-Saxon diction.** Shed, leaves, mirror, coffin. Latinate words are reserved for moments of conceptual reach. Plainness is the moral posture.
- **2. Elegy without theatrics.** Most of the poems are elegies. None of them weeps openly. Control is the form of respect grief takes when it has been lived with for a long time.
- **3. Closure by sufficiency.** Endings land softly: “and that is enough,” “your joy is that it does.” Not catharsis — accommodation.
- **4. Image as memory’s vehicle.** A crosswalk, a rake, a chopped piano, a robins’ nest. The concrete image carries the emotional weight.
- **5. The Catholic register, lightly held.** Ritual, gesture, ethic — never doctrine.
- **6. The teacher’s ear.** Patient cadence; the reader is trusted to arrive.

Where the Work Sits

Plain-style elegiac realism, in the lineage of Kenyon, Heaney, and Frost, inflected with a Catholic-Boston sensibility and a teacher’s patient cadence. Drawing from plain-style American lyric (Kenyon, Frost, Bishop), Irish-Catholic elegiac lyric (Heaney), late-confessional restraint (Doty, Olds), and the teaching-poet tradition (Stafford, Kooser).

Five Things to Take Into Your Own Writing

1. **Trust plain diction.** The reader does not need ornament to feel weight.
2. **Trust the small concrete image.** A crosswalk, a rake, a robins’ nest can carry an entire poem.
3. **Earn the ending.** Most of these poems end on a quiet acceptance prepared by twenty lines of patient looking.
4. **Withhold the autobiographical fact.** Until the image has done its work. (“The Nest” is the textbook case — the body cast is named only after the robins are.)
5. **Refuse to perform feeling.** Emotional control is not coldness. It is the form of respect grief takes when the writer has lived with the loss long enough.

A Poem to Carry With You

Piano

On that gray day, you chopped the grand piano with an ax.

Surrounded by yellow and red leaves on the hard earth,
you raised your arm to smash it all apart.
If I had left the window to join you outside,
I would have seen your tears,
glistening strings on the soundboard of a broken soul.

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"The quieter scenes show the mind of a talented writer at work... Mulhern demonstrates considerable powers of description, particularly when portraying his saddest characters."

— Kirkus Reviews

For the full study — six poems, full analyses, style and school discussion, real editor quotes, and eight discussion questions — see The Poetry of James F. Mulhern: Student Edition (companion booklet).