

The Poetry of
James F. Mulhern

A Student Study Guide

Selected Poems with Commentary, Style, School, and Discussion Questions

Art of Telling — Unit II Companion Booklet

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1. About This Guide

This booklet is designed for students of the Art of Telling salon and for any reader who wants a close look at the poetry of James F. Mulhern. The six poems gathered here are publicly available; the analyses are intended as starting points for your own reading. The discussion questions in Section 6 are for class conversation — there are no answers in this booklet. A separate Instructor Edition contains model answers for the teaching version of the same questions.

How to read the poems. Read each poem twice aloud before turning to the commentary. The first reading is for the sound. The second reading is for the meaning. The commentary is meant to deepen, not replace, your own attention.

2. Six Poems for Study

Each poem appears in its full published text, followed by a short commentary on why it is effective and what techniques are at work. The poems are arranged from the most accessible to the most formally adventurous.

The Crosswalk

Today I saw a father and son
stepping onto the crosswalk.
I braked and watched them pass.
Son on father's shoulders,
headed to the park with swings.
I drove on, thinking of you
and wondered why you
never lifted me and held my legs
or brought me to the swings.
But you were not that type of father.
Once, we built a shed together.
I heard you say at a family party years later,
"Remember when Danny and I built the shed."
But it wasn't my brother
who cut wood and hammered nails with you.
I was bothered just a bit.
I had other memories,
like when you held my hands as we knotted my tie,
how we both looked in the mirror,
and I saw myself in your face.
You patted my shoulders.
Someone crossed the room and paused to take a picture.
It was on the table by your coffin.
Your hands on mine.
Proof that we had closeness for a moment,
and that is enough.

First published in Impspired, Feb 2020; reprinted Academy of the Heart and Mind, Feb 2020; The Galway Review, Dec 2019.

Why it is effective

The poem opens on a small public moment (a father carrying his son across a crosswalk) and uses that present-tense image as a doorway into private grief. The doorway is not announced. The speaker simply

drives on, thinking of you — and we are inside the meditation. The grief is never declared; it accumulates through small, accurate domestic details: the shed, the misattributed memory at the family party, the knotted tie, the photograph by the coffin. The final two lines (“Proof that we had closeness for a moment, / and that is enough”) do not paraphrase the poem; they *settle* it. The reader feels the speaker decide, in real time, that this much was enough.

Techniques at work

- **Plain diction.** Almost every word is Anglo-Saxon and ordinary — crosswalk, shed, tie, mirror, coffin. The plainness is the form’s ethical posture: this writer will not be elevated above his subject.
- **Catalogue of remembered detail.** Five separate memories accumulate: shed, family party, knotted tie, mirror, photograph at coffin. The catalogue does the work that argument would have done.
- **Volta by acceptance.** Most elegies turn at a moment of grief. This one turns at a moment of *sufficiency* — “and that is enough”. The unusual move is the poem’s emotional signature.
- **Image-as-photograph.** The literal photograph by the coffin is also the metaphorical photograph the poem is making for the reader: a single still image that has to carry the weight of a whole relationship.

Leaves

That fall day we raked leaves from behind the shed.
Smell of earth and wet decay rose in the cold air.
We could see our breath.
Worms and beetles scattered through a fence.
I saw dirt and thought we had finished.
“Not yet,” you said.
The gray sky grew darker and the wind chilled.
When your flashlight showed not a speck of leaf,
You said, “We’re done.”
Today I look at the wet leaves below.
I kneel and clear your grave.
Again, I smell the earth and feel the biting cold.
The damp leaves shimmer like tears, not many,
that drop on the yellowed grass.
“We’re done,” I hear you say.
I say a prayer, cross myself, and rise.
I see my breath and imagine I see yours.
I should leave, I think, but not yet.

First published in The Galway Review, May 2022.

Why it is effective

The poem is built on a single doubled image: the speaker raking leaves with his father in childhood, then raking leaves at his father's grave in the present. The doubling is structural and emotional. The father's catchphrase "We're done" closes both moments — once spoken by him in the past, once heard by the son in memory at the grave. The poem ends on refusal: "I should leave, I think, but not yet." The son will not let the father's catchphrase be true a second time.

Techniques at work

- **Mirrored scenes.** Stanza 1 establishes the childhood scene; stanza 2 places the adult speaker at the grave; the catchphrase bridges them. The form is a quiet diptych.
- **Anglo-Saxon sensory diction.** "Smell of earth and wet decay," "the gray sky grew darker," "the biting cold." The body is in the poem because the words are.
- **Repeated catchphrase as refrain.** "We're done" appears twice, once in each scene. The repetition is the poem's argument.
- **Final negation.** The closing line refuses the father's instruction. The poem ends on resistance to closure — a deeply un-sentimental elegy move.

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.

First published in Academy of the Heart and Mind, Feb 2020; VerbalArt anthology.

Why it is effective

Six lines. One image. One unsparing metaphor. The poem catches a moment a son saw through a window — his father chopping a grand piano with an axe — and lets the closing line do the entire interpretive work: "glistening strings on the soundboard of a broken soul." The piano becomes the father; the strings become tears; the soundboard becomes the soul. The metaphor is sustained for one line and stops.

Techniques at work

- **Compression.** At six lines, the poem is closer to imagist verse than to standard lyric elegy. The compression forces every word to bear weight.

- **Conditional regret.** “If I had left the window to join you outside, / I would have seen your tears” — the poem’s entire grief sits inside an unrealized conditional. The son *did not* join the father; the poem is what survives that not-joining.
- **Conceit (extended metaphor).** The piano-as-soul conceit is the seventeenth-century device of Donne and Herbert deployed here in plain American speech.
- **Imagery as withholding.** We never learn why the father destroyed the piano. The withholding is the poem’s power.

The Nest

I imagine you looking at the robins’ nest
in the Maple outside your bedroom window.
You can’t see the blue eggs, but you watch
the male bring his partner dry grass and twigs.
He offers dirt, too, dipped in a birdbath
or garnered from a swampy spot at the yard’s edge.
The female cements the nest, protecting
her brood of four or five.
Sometimes you stare at your body cast,
a remnant of your spinal surgery,
but most hours you watch the tree, the birds,
the clouds, and the sky.
The days pass slowly, but at the two-week mark,
you see tips of yellow mouths,
like tulips or other flowers you used to smell
in the lawn beyond.
You think of the day your hardened mold cracks open
and you walk outside.
How you will look upward, smiling widely,
scanning the blue and clouds and sun,
hoping to glimpse a fledgling, or any free bird,
flying far across the sky.
Where it travels is not your concern.
Your joy is that it does.

First published in Impspired, Oct 2021; VerbalArt anthology.

Why it is effective

A long-line free-verse poem that does the rare thing of writing entirely in the second person. The “you” is recovering from spinal surgery in a body cast, watching robins build a nest, watching them fledge, and imagining the day the cast cracks open and the speaker (now the convalescent) walks outside. The poem

is patient in a way the convalescent has to be. By the closing two lines — “Where it travels is not your concern. / Your joy is that it does” — the speaker has earned a small theology of release. The poem does not say “hope” once.

Techniques at work

- **Second-person address.** The poem speaks to the convalescent rather than *as* the convalescent. The distance is part of the tenderness.
- **Parallel structure.** The watcher watches the parent birds; the watcher imagines being watched, in turn, by their own future free self. The poem is built on this nested watching.
- **Catalogue of patient observation.** Twigs, dirt, birdbath, swampy spot, body cast, yellow mouths, tulips. The accumulation is the convalescent’s long time.
- **Earned theology.** The closing two lines could have been pious. They are not, because the entire poem has earned them through twenty-two lines of literal looking.

To Be

I’d like to be
the Wife of Bath’s scarlet stockings
Poor Yorick’s skull
Dickinson’s sherry in the glass
Gatsby’s dock
Hulga’s wooden leg
a flattened sneaker on a road
a crushed beer can in a dumpster
a lost sock under a couch
a rip in a screen
a penny on a walk
a snail’s shell beneath a bush
a crow’s feather on a deck
a broken twig on a lawn
a puddle by a drain
or that dried leaf you crumble in your hand.

First published in Impspired, Oct 2021.

Why it is effective

A list poem that begins as a literary catalogue — Wife of Bath, Yorick, Dickinson, Gatsby, Hulga — and descends, item by item, into the ordinary: a sneaker, a beer can, a lost sock, a snail’s shell, a crow’s feather, a broken twig, a puddle, a dried leaf. The poem’s pleasure is the leveling. Famous literary symbols and discarded everyday objects are placed on the same shelf. By the final line — “or that dried

leaf you crumble in your hand” — the reader has been quietly conscripted: the “you” crumbling the leaf is, suddenly, the reader.

Techniques at work

- **Catalogue form (Whitman, Christopher Smart).** Sixteen items, all introduced by “I’d like to be.” The form is older than English-language poetry.
- **Anaphora-by-omission.** The phrase “I’d like to be” is stated once at the opening and silently understood before every subsequent item. The omission is the rhythm.
- **Allusion as ladder.** The poem climbs through five literary touchstones and then drops, deliberately, into the discarded. The descent argues that the literary and the discarded share a quality the speaker wants — they are all *object*, no longer protagonist.
- **Reader implication.** The closing “you” places the reader inside the poem. The leaf the reader is crumbling is also the poem itself.

Current Events

One day there is no news.
The anchors stare at empty teleprompters.
Eyes wide and twitching, lips quivering,
they look into the camera.
We change channels.
See black screens or people scrambling on sets.
They pass blank papers and whisper.
We can’t hear them and don’t care.
Too tired to move, we stare
through windows at trees and sky.
The wind blows and birds fly.
Somewhere snow falls and thunder booms.
But not here.
There is no weather.
No drama, conflict, or story.
No wars, crimes, or political crises.
No empty talk.
No sound and fury.
In a forest, sitting on a sycamore,
Thoreau’s wood thrush sings.
Deep in a dark sea cave,
the Emperor angelfish knocks.
The lesson ends
as the bell rings.

Students walk,
and someone slams the door.

First published in The Font: A Literary Journal for Language Teachers, Sept 2022.

Why it is effective

A satirical poem that imagines a day with no news — anchors at empty teleprompters, blank screens, silent papers — and uses the silence to remind us what is actually happening in the world: wind, birds, snow, thunder, the Thoreauvian wood thrush, the Emperor angelfish, the bell, the door. The poem is structured as a media-studies satire that turns into a quiet ecological hymn. The closing four lines reveal it has been a classroom poem all along: “The lesson ends / as the bell rings. / Students walk, / and someone slams the door.” The teacher-speaker is the one who has been thinking through the silence.

Techniques at work

- **Speculative premise.** “One day there is no news” — the poem is structured as a thought experiment, not as observation. This is a different mode from the elegies above.
- **Anaphoric negation.** “No drama, conflict, or story. / No wars, crimes, or political crises. / No empty talk. / No sound and fury.” The repeated “no” clears the ground for the natural images that follow.
- **Allusive surprise.** “Thoreau’s wood thrush,” “the Emperor angelfish,” “no sound and fury” (Macbeth). The poem layers literary allusion underneath the satirical surface without flagging it.
- **Frame revelation.** The classroom frame is held until the last four lines. The reader does not know the speaker is a teacher until the bell rings. The form is the joke.

On Style and Technique

Across the six poems gathered here, certain habits are unmistakable. They are the marks of a recognizable voice working in a recognizable tradition.

Six signatures of the work

1. *Plain Anglo-Saxon diction*

The reader will find shed, leaves, mirror, coffin, tie, dirt, twigs, sneaker, beer can. Latinate diction (“insignificant,” “catastrophe,” “transcendence”) is rare and reserved for moments of clear conceptual reach. The plainness is a moral choice, not a limitation — the same choice Jane Kenyon makes in “Otherwise.” The reader is trusted to feel the weight of an ordinary noun.

2. *The elegy without theatrics*

Most of these poems are elegies. None of them weeps openly. The grief is delivered through structural means — a refrain, a doubled scene, an unrealized conditional, a closing acceptance. The model is Bishop’s “One Art” and Heaney’s elegies for his parents: control as the ethical posture.

3. *Closure by sufficiency rather than catharsis*

The endings repay close attention. “And that is enough.” “We’re done, I hear you say... I should leave, I think, but not yet.” “Your joy is that it does.” These are not catharses. They are quiet accommodations — the kind a long-married couple makes at the end of a hard day. The poems land softly, on purpose.

4. *The image as memory’s vehicle*

In nearly every poem, a single concrete image holds the entire emotional weight: the crosswalk, the rake, the chopped piano, the robins’ nest, the crumbled leaf, the bell at the end of class. The images are never decorative. They are how the meaning travels.

5. *The Catholic register, lightly held*

A reader who knows where to look will find a Catholic background woven through the work — “I say a prayer, cross myself, and rise,” the recurring sense of grace as a small unearned moment, the moral weight of accumulation. The author was a finalist for the Tuscany Prize in Catholic Fiction in 2013. The Catholic frame is present but never doctrinal; it surfaces as ritual, gesture, and ethic, not as creed.

6. *The teacher’s ear*

Several of the poems (“Simply Silly,” “Current Events”) are explicitly set in classrooms. Many others have the cadence of someone who has spent decades reading aloud to students — the deliberate pace, the patient repetition, the trust that the listener will arrive. The voice is a working teacher’s voice as well as a poet’s.

A short way to name the style

Plain-style elegiac realism, in the lineage of Kenyon, Heaney, and Frost, inflected with a Catholic-Boston sensibility and a teacher's patient cadence. Compressed, image-driven, emotionally controlled, ethically attentive, and unwilling to perform feeling. The poems are short, lucid, and built to survive being read aloud.

What School Does the Work Belong To?

Schools of poetry are messy categories. The honest answer for this body of work is that it draws from several traditions and belongs cleanly to none. Four schools sit closest.

1. *Plain-style American lyric (the closest match)*

Often called the “plain style,” this lineage runs from Robert Frost through Elizabeth Bishop, William Stafford, Jane Kenyon, Ted Kooser, and into the work of Mary Oliver and Ada Limón. Its convictions: plain diction, regular syntax, concrete image, restrained emotion, a willingness to land softly. The poems here — “The Crosswalk,” “Leaves,” “The Nest” — are textbook examples. If a literary critic had to place this work in a single tradition, this is the placement.

2. *Irish-Catholic elegiac lyric*

A subtradition with deep ties to Seamus Heaney, Eavan Boland, Paul Muldoon, Derek Mahon. Its hallmarks: the elegy as the dominant lyric mode, the local working-class scene as the legitimate site of serious art, Catholic ritual as background music. “Leaves” is the poem in this collection that sits most clearly in this lineage — the grave-tending son is the speaker Heaney established in “Digging” and returned to throughout his career.

3. *Confessional / late-confessional lyric*

The poems work with private biographical material — a father, a brother, surgery, the death of a parent. But they refuse the high-pitched register of pure confessionalism (Lowell, Plath, Sexton). They sit downstream of confessional poetry without being inside it. Call this “late-confessional restraint.” Mark Doty, Sharon Olds in her quieter moods, and Jane Kenyon all worked here.

4. *The teaching poet tradition*

A loose tradition rather than a school: poets who spent their working lives in classrooms (Stafford, Kooser, Robert Hass, Billy Collins, and most of the MFA generation since the 1980s). The marks are pedagogical patience, attention to the second-time reader, an ethic of clarity. The classroom poems in this collection — “Simply Silly,” “Current Events” — belong here unmistakably.

A working summary

The poems sit at the intersection of **plain-style American lyric** (Kenyon, Frost, Bishop), **Irish-Catholic elegiac lyric** (Heaney), **late-confessional restraint** (Doty, Olds), and the **teaching poet tradition** (Stafford, Kooser). The most accurate single label is plain-style elegiac realism with a Catholic-Boston inflection.

What Editors and Gatekeepers Have Said

The quotations below are drawn from real, published reviews, editorial statements, and award citations on the writer's work. Each is cited with the source. They are reproduced here so that students can see how the field has actually received the work — not how the writer would describe his own.

From Kirkus Reviews (Starred Review)

"A luminous, beautifully told fairy tale grounded in history and elevated by spirit."

— Kirkus Reviews — Starred Review of Give Them Unquiet Dreams, named a Kirkus Best Book of 2019

From Kirkus Reviews on the descriptive power of the work

"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

From The Missouri Review

"The novelette impressed the editorial staff with its well-written, complex characters, themes of the piece, and its fantastic voice."

— The Missouri Review on A Prayer for Home

From Readers' Favorite

"Mr. Mulhern's writing displays all of the storytelling prowess of the contemporary Irish masters, yet manages to blend it in exquisitely with the use of modern day American settings... it is not often that I am thoroughly enthralled with a book, but Assumptions and Other Stories was a compelling read."

— Trudi Lopreto, Readers' Favorite (5-star review of Assumptions and Other Stories)

From Kirkus Reviews on Molly Bonamici

"A gleefully and wonderfully odd protagonist eases readers into a bare-bones plot."

— Kirkus Reviews on Molly Bonamici

From The Wishing Shelf Book Awards

"A compelling coming of age story with a cleverly crafted plot and a strong element of 'trying to fit in.' A finalist and highly recommended."

— The Wishing Shelf Book Awards on Give Them Unquiet Dreams

From a Wishing Shelf reader response

"This is a gripping family saga as the boy attempts to understand his role in his rather 'odd' family. The character work is excellent; the central characters spring off the page."

— Female reader, age 48 — Wishing Shelf Book Awards reader panel

From Aesthetica

In 2021, the author was **shortlisted for the Aesthetica Creative Writing Award** specifically for his poetry — one of the most competitive U.K. open competitions, drawing thousands of submissions annually. The shortlist itself is the recognition; Aesthetica does not typically issue individual editor statements about shortlisted writers.

From Tuscany Prize for Catholic Fiction (2013) and Pushcart Prize Nomination (2017)

The writer was a Finalist for the Tuscany Prize in Catholic Fiction in 2013 and received a Pushcart Prize nomination in 2017. Both are gatekeeper recognitions — the Pushcart in particular is the most-cited

measure of acceptance in the American literary small-press world. Pushcart nominations are extended by literary editors as their best work of the year; they are themselves a form of editorial endorsement.

On the volume of publication itself

Across the past decade, the writer's work has appeared in **more than three hundred literary journals and anthologies internationally** — a publication record that is itself a verdict of editors. Every appearance represents an editor having read the work, accepted it from a competitive submission pile (typical acceptance rates: 1–3%), and chosen to print it. Three hundred such decisions, made independently across journals on three continents, are themselves a body of editorial endorsement that no single quotation can summarize.

A note on what we have and have not quoted

Every quotation above is real, verbatim, and cited. The author's editorial reception has been strongest in fiction (where *Kirkus Reviews* issued a starred review, the rarest of their categories). His poetry has been recognized through journal acceptance and shortlist citations (*Aesthetica*) rather than through extended published reviews — a normal pattern for a poet whose work circulates primarily in literary magazines rather than book-length poetry collections. As future poetry collections appear from Silver Current Press, the body of editorial commentary on the poetry specifically will grow.

6. Discussion Questions

Eight questions for class discussion or independent study. The Instructor Edition of this booklet contains model answers; this Student Edition does not. The questions are meant to be wrestled with, not solved.

Q1. "The Crosswalk" ends, "Proof that we had closeness for a moment, / and that is enough." Why does the speaker land on "enough" rather than on grief or anger? What does that closing word do to your reading of everything before it?

Q2. In "Leaves," the father's phrase "We're done" appears twice — once in life, once at the grave. How does the repetition change meaning between the two appearances?

Q3. In "Piano," the speaker writes, "If I had left the window to join you outside, / I would have seen your tears." Why does the poem keep the speaker at the window rather than have him go outside?

Q4. Most of "The Nest" describes robins; only late do we learn the watcher is in a body cast recovering from spinal surgery. Why withhold that information? What does the late reveal change?

Q5. "To Be" lists sixteen things the speaker would like to be — starting with literary objects (Wife of Bath's stockings, Yorick's skull) and descending into discarded ordinary things (a flattened sneaker, a crushed beer can). What is the poem arguing by this descent?

Q6. "Current Events" turns out, in its last four lines, to be a classroom poem. The teacher-speaker has been thinking through what would happen if there were no news. Why does the poem withhold the classroom frame until the end? And what does the closing slammed door do?

Q7. Looking at these six poems together: what is the speaker's relationship to grief? Is it like Bishop's, Heaney's, Kenyon's, or something else?

Q8. What do these poems teach a beginning poet?

Sources

All quoted poems and editor statements are publicly available at the following links.

“The Crosswalk”: [Impspired \(Feb 2020\)](#) · [The Galway Review \(Dec 2019\)](#) · [Academy of the Heart and Mind](#)

“Leaves” and “Moving Forward”: [The Galway Review \(May 2022\)](#)

“Piano” and “Brother”: [Academy of the Heart and Mind](#) · [VerbalArt anthology](#)

“The Nest,” “To Be,” “Simply Silly”: [Impspired \(Oct 2021\)](#)

“Current Events”: [The Font: A Literary Journal for Language Teachers \(Sept 2022\)](#)

“Copacetic”: [Trouvaille Review \(May 2020\)](#)

Kirkus Reviews — author page and reviews: kirkusreviews.com/author/james-mulhern

Readers’ Favorite reviews: readersfavorite.com

Author’s site: authorjamesmulhern.com

Silver Current Press: silvercurrentpress.com