

All We Ever Needed

The Architecture of Mercy in the Fiction of James Mulhern

A Critical Essay



A Critical Reading of James Mulhern's *All We Ever Needed*

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Abstract. This essay offers a sustained critical reading of James Mulhern’s short story collection *All We Ever Needed* (Silver Current Press, 2026), tracing the book’s recurring themes (inheritance, faith and its counterfeits, care disguised as cruelty, the porousness between comedy and horror), its central motifs (salt water and the “cure,” candy and food as vehicles of love and poison, the useless object that turns out to be sacred, the recurring Feast of the Assumption), its character archetypes (the profane grandmother-confessor, the charlatan-healer, the watchful child-witness, the disintegrating institution), its network of literary and religious allusion (Scripture, Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Hunter S. Thompson, Titian, Dante’s structure of descent), and the craft techniques that bind them: free indirect discourse braided with unreliable first-person retrospection, the comic-grotesque register, and a prose rhythm built on accretive, catalog-like sentences. It argues that Mulhern’s abiding subject is the indistinguishability, at close range, of love from harm, and that his sentences are built to keep both possibilities alive at once.

I. The Governing Idea: Mercy Without Innocence

James Mulhern tells us, in the author’s note that closes *All We Ever Needed*, exactly what he thinks he is doing: “I write from mercy rather than judgment, and I extend that mercy to every character I make.” It is a clarifying sentence, because it forecloses the easiest misreading of this collection — that its author is a satirist delighting in the grotesqueries of drunk grandmothers, con-artist psychics, and homicidal narrators. He is not. He is something harder to be: a writer who insists on tenderness toward people who do genuinely terrible things, and who refuses the reader the comfort of a clean moral distance from them.

This is the critical key to the book. Nearly every story pairs an act of care with an act of harm so tightly that they become one gesture. In “Assumptions,” the opening and title-anchoring story, a boy pours whiskey sours for a widow who has just been institutionalized by grief; the same scene that establishes his tenderness toward “Lovely Peggy” also shows the family degrading her for sport, “puffing on Lucky Strikes and Parliaments” while likening her features “to a bulldog’s.” Care and cruelty are administered by the same hands, in the same breath. The title phrase itself becomes the thesis, delivered at the close of “A Bath”: after a fraught reckoning between a battered daughter, her evasive mother, and a watching grandson, all three retreat into an ordinary intimacy — “There was no conversation. I heard splashing and my

grandmother's sighs as my mother rubbed her back... For a few moments, the three of us had all we ever needed." The sentence does not resolve the story's violence; it simply sets beside it the modest, bodily fact of people tending to one another. That juxtaposition, unresolved and unapologized-for, is Mulhern's signature move.

II. Recurring Themes

A. Inheritance as Both Blessing and Contamination

Mulhern's people inherit almost everything — faith, cruelty, appetite, wit, even crime — the way one inherits a family recipe. Molly Bonamici, the narrator who anchors five of the eight stories, absorbs her grandmother Nonna's moral logic wholesale, including its most monstrous extension. Nonna's creed is domestic and reasonable on its surface — "You've got to have compassion for her, Molly. She's been through a lot" — yet the same Nonna easily justifies petty theft ("She won't notice them missing... Don't ya agree, Molly?") and eventually, in "Mia Bambina," supplies the poison that kills a roommate, delivered with the chilling domesticity of a woman baking for a beloved grandchild: "Sure, mia bambina. What's one more ingredient? Not a problem." The horror of the collection's darkest turn is not that Molly becomes a murderer; it is that we can trace, story by story, exactly how she was raised into the capacity. Inheritance, in Mulhern's hands, is never a metaphor for gentle continuity. It is a mechanism, and it transmits damage as efficiently as it transmits love.

B. Faith and Its Counterfeits

Religion in this collection is rarely a source of stable comfort; it is a live wire that runs through kitchens, beaches, and church basements, connecting genuine devotion to superstition, grift, and cruelty. The Feast of the Assumption — "when Jesus's mother... was taken to her heavenly home" — recurs across two separate stories ("Assumptions" and "Useless Things") as the occasion for a "cure in the water," and each time the ritual produces the same three-part rhythm: comic bickering, an accidental baptism by wave, and an undertone of real, if inarticulate, spiritual hunger. Alongside this sincere folk-Catholicism, Mulhern sets a rogues' gallery of religious counterfeits: the storefront healer "Lady Jane," whose fake British accent slips into "a Georgia twang," and who tells a teenager she will become "an Angel of Death" while "giggling like a little girl"; the New Age shopkeeper Myra Bocca, who activates a customer's "forehead chakra" while planning to steal her credit card. Mulhern's target is not faith itself but the commercial

and psychological uses to which faith and its imitations are put — a theme he makes explicit in his own gloss on the collection's title story, "Altogether Beautiful," where the doctrine of the Assumption is read against Peggy Fleming's grotesque and holy body. The epigraph to "Assumptions," drawn from the Song of Solomon — "You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you" — is not incidental decoration; it is a deliberate, almost defiant, act of scriptural reassignment, draping the language of divine perfection over a woman the narrator's own family calls "the homeliest damn woman" anyone had ever seen.

C. The Comedy That Precedes Horror

Mulhern's structural signature is the story that behaves like farce until, without changing its voice, it becomes something closer to a horror story. "Useless Things" is the clearest instance: two-thirds of the story is broad comedy — a fake-cancer scam to jump a line, a healer with a "Georgia twang," slapstick beach-wave pratfalls — and then, on the same porch where the comic set pieces occurred, the narrator discovers Mrs. Muldoon's decomposing corpse, rendered in unflinching clinical detail: "Her skin was green, purple and black... A bloody maggot emerged from her right ear." The tonal hinge does not creak; Mulhern never signals the shift with a change in diction or pacing. That is the technique's entire power — comedy and death share a register in his prose because, in his account of experience, they share a world. "Myra Bocca" repeats the pattern precisely: broad comedy (a stolen credit card charged for a television and pornographic DVDs titled *Debbie Does Dallas*) resolves into a graphically described traffic fatality, complete with a bystander directing chest compressions by silently counting the beat of "Stayin' Alive." Mulhern is working in a long tradition of the American and Irish grotesque — Flannery O'Connor's violent grace, the black comedy of Synge — but his innovation is pacing: he refuses the reader any warning bell.

D. Watching as a Form of Complicity

Several stories turn on children or adolescents who watch adult suffering with a clinical, sometimes erotic, curiosity that implicates them in what they observe. The boy in "Assumptions" studies Peggy's dying voice and calls it his first encounter with "death's glower." Molly, throughout the linked stories, catalogs bodily decay with the eye of a coroner — "I kneeled down and pressed my finger against a dark purple spot above her right ankle; the skin was so cold" — and admits flatly, of Mrs. Muldoon's corpse, "I guess you could say I was mesmerized." This is not simple childhood insensitivity; Mulhern is dramatizing the particular ethical peril of the writer's own instrument — attentiveness

itself — when it is turned on suffering without the mediating protection of adult tact. The watching child becomes, by the collection's end, an adult who acts on what she has learned to observe without flinching.

III. Motifs

A. Salt Water and the Cure

Water is Mulhern's most disciplined motif — so disciplined that its recurrence across two separate stories in the same collection is clearly an act of authorial design rather than coincidence. The Feast of the Assumption beach scene in "Assumptions" and the nearly identical scene in "Useless Things" (same beach, same "cure," an almost identical description of "the waves beyond glimmer[ing] like sparks from an unquenchable fire") function as a diptych: two women, two summers, the same ritual, the same startling collapse into an accidental baptism by "a spirited breaker" that "razed them in its wake." The repetition is the point. In his author's note, Mulhern explicitly defends this kind of return as a governing aesthetic principle rather than a lapse: "This is why, across my work, I return again and again to the same scenes, the same symbols, the same faces. I do it deliberately... What looks like repetition is recurrence, and recurrence is how the spirit comes to know itself." Water in these stories cures nothing in a literal sense — Peggy dies delusional, Mrs. Muldoon dies within weeks of her "cure" — yet it consistently produces a moment of unguarded joy and touch, "kneeling forward, laughing so hard that they cried." Water washes nothing clean; it simply makes contact briefly, gorgeously, possible.

B. Food and Candy as Vectors of Love and Poison

Mulhern repeatedly makes food the medium through which love is expressed and, twice, through which death is delivered. Peppermint candy appears first as an innocent childhood pleasure — "enjoying the deliciousness of peppermint candy, swinging our legs together" in "Assumptions" — and then becomes, in the story that bears its name, a murder weapon: a teacher poisons a peppermint with Visine "to lightly rub" onto a student's candy, in retaliation for classroom humiliation. Chocolate chip cookies undergo an identical transformation across two stories: in "Mia Bambina," Nonna's cookies begin as an act of grandmotherly love ("Nonna loves mia bambina") and end as the delivery vehicle for the cyanide that kills a hated roommate — "Not a problem," Nonna says, agreeing to bake "the special cookies" as though asked for an extra egg. This motif is the collection's most disturbing formal achievement: Mulhern trains the reader, story after

story, to receive food-as-affection uncritically, then weaponizes that trained response against the reader directly.

C. The “Useless Thing” That Is Secretly Sacred

The collection’s title-adjacent phrase, “useless things,” operates as an ironic motif that inverts itself by the end of nearly every story that deploys it. Nonna dismisses the possessions of the aging and dying as clutter — “When you get old you accumulate a lot of useless things, Molly. And then you become one of them” — and the story ends with Molly holding a gold necklace from the dead woman’s final gift, pronouncing it, in the story’s closing line, “A useless thing.” But the story has just spent its final pages proving the opposite: that even a corpse, even a cheap piece of costume jewelry, carries unbearable weight. The irony recurs in “A Bath,” where sea lettuce scraped from the rocks of Clew Bay — “‘Twasn’t the best food, but it was all we needed” — becomes, decades later and an ocean away, the emotional key that unlocks the entire story’s meaning, quoted almost verbatim in the collection’s own title. Mulhern’s motif work depends on this kind of long-distance echo: a phrase planted in one story’s margin becomes, chapters later, the frame for the whole book.

D. The Body in Decay

Mulhern does not flinch from physical decomposition, and he uses it with unusual frequency as a motif rather than a shock effect. Two separate corpses in this collection — Mrs. Muldoon and Myra Bocca — are described with near-identical clinical attention to skin discoloration, fluid, and insect activity, a repetition that cannot be accidental. Mrs. Muldoon: “Her skin was green, purple and black... a bloody maggot emerged from her right ear.” Myra Bocca, struck by a car: “the skin from her nose had ripped off revealing the cartilage... Her dentures lay on the street, smeared with blood and phlegm.” The doubling suggests that Mulhern is not interested in any single character’s death so much as in death itself as a recurring visitor to these communities — an idea he makes explicit through Hunter S. Thompson’s line, quoted directly in “Useless Things”: “We are all alone, born alone, die alone... we shall all someday look back on our lives and see that, in spite of company, we were alone the whole way.” The corpse, appearing twice in near-identical language, becomes less a plot event than a structural refrain — a memento mori embedded in the architecture of the book itself.

IV. Character Archetypes

A. The Profane Grandmother-Confessor

Nonna (also called Helen in “Assumptions” and “A Bath”) is the collection’s central archetype: a foul-mouthed, whiskey-drinking matriarch who dispenses both moral instruction and moral corruption in the same sentence, often the same breath. She can say, with total sincerity, “You’re a beautiful, smart woman... Who needs them anyway? Men are not so great,” and, moments later, casually reveal she stole silverware for her mobster boyfriend. She is Mulhern’s most fully achieved character precisely because she resists synthesis: readers cannot decide whether she is the collection’s moral center or its original corrupting force, and Mulhern plainly intends that irresolution. She recurs, with variations, as Nana in “A Bath” and Nonna throughout the Molly Bonamici stories, functioning as a kind of stock figure — closer to a *commedia dell’arte* type than a conventionally “rounded” character — who nonetheless produces devastatingly specific dialogue: “Cause she’s rotten, Molly... She had the gall to tell one of the judges that she filed divorce simply because she wanted to find out how much money Lazarus had.”

B. The Charlatan-Healer

Lady Jane, Myra Bocca, and (in a lower key) the faith healer subplot of “Useless Things” collectively establish a recurring type: the woman who performs spiritual authority for profit and validation, often while being, herself, in genuine psychological or financial distress. Myra’s introduction — “I’m a bit psychic... I’m activating your forehead chakra” — is immediately undercut by Gabe’s deflating observation that her “psychic” perception of Massachusetts origins was simply an accent, and later fully demolished by Alexander Michaelis’s testimony that she is “evil... a sociopath.” Yet Mulhern denies the reader an uncomplicated villain: Myra dies moments after being unmasked, in a grotesque accident that briefly restores her humanity — “However dishonest she was, she didn’t deserve to die that way.” The charlatan-healer archetype exists in this collection to be exposed, and then, immediately, to be grieved.

C. The Watchful, Precociously Clinical Child

Molly Bonamici, the boy narrator of “Assumptions,” and Billy in “A Bath” all share a defining trait: a preternatural verbal and observational intelligence that alienates them from the adults meant to be shaping them, and that eventually curdles (in Molly’s case, explicitly) into something dangerous. Molly’s IQ of “148, almost genius level” is

mentioned twice by other characters, always as a kind of warning label. This archetype allows Mulhern to narrate scenes of adult depravity through a voice too young to have the moral vocabulary to condemn what it sees, producing the book's characteristic flatness of affect around horror: "I turned, accidentally stepping on one of Mrs. Muldoon's bare feet. The skin cracked; a clear fluid oozed..." The sentence continues in the same register as any other observation in the story. That flatness is not authorial insensitivity; it is a rendering of a child's-eye view in which moral horror has not yet been taught, only cataloged.

D. The Institution in Slow Collapse

Schools, in "Peppermint Candy" and "Drenched to the Bone," function as a collective archetype: bureaucratic structures that perform concern (incident reports, I.E.P. meetings, security cameras) while failing, structurally and repeatedly, to protect the people inside them. The vending machine looting, the broken surveillance cameras ("Evidently, she screwed up. She didn't have the damn camera on"), the tar dust falling from an unmaintained vent, and the near-strangling of one student by another in a classroom — all in a single story — build a portrait of institutional entropy that mirrors, at a civic scale, the domestic entropy of the Molly Bonamici stories. Principal Jackson, revealed late in "Drenched to the Bone" to be quietly overwhelmed by a mother with dementia and an unemployed brother, exemplifies Mulhern's insistence that institutional failure is not incompetence but exhaustion — another instance of the collection's refusal to separate cruelty from suffering.

V. Allusion and Literary Lineage

Mulhern's allusive range in this collection is wide and used with unusual precision, functioning less as ornament than as argument. The epigraph from the Song of Solomon ("You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you") frames the entire title story as a meditation on how scripture's language of perfect beauty might be extended to a woman conventionally regarded as monstrous — an interpretive move he elsewhere elaborates fully under the same title, "Altogether Beautiful." Titian's *Assunta* receives a full ekphrastic treatment in the same story — "A startled Mary, arms spread above her upturned face, is being lifted on a cloud toward heaven... It is difficult to tell whether the crowd of apostles below is reaching to pull her down or to push her upwards" — and that ambiguity (rescue or restraint?) becomes a visual thesis statement for the whole collection's treatment of care and harm as indistinguishable gestures.

Poe appears twice, doing double duty: Helen Thano vomits during a classroom reading of “The Pit and the Pendulum” in “Peppermint Candy,” linking Gothic dread to the mundane cruelty of adolescence, and is later invoked (mistakenly, by a character who confuses him with Shakespeare) in “Mia Bambina” — a small, very funny piece of characterization-through-misattribution that also gently reminds the reader how casually literary knowledge is possessed, half-possessed, or performed by Mulhern’s people.

Thoreau and Emerson anchor “Drenched to the Bone” as the occasion for the collection’s most explicit meditation on conscience versus institution — “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind” — and Mulhern extends this Transcendentalist frame outward into his own authorial voice in the closing “Note from the Author,” where he names Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman directly as the writers who taught him “to trust the inner light,” “to look long and closely at the near and the small until they open,” and that “a single life, honestly told, contains multitudes.” This is a rare and valuable document for a critic: the author explicitly supplies his own genealogy, situating a book about grandmothers, faith healers, and grotesque deaths within the visionary, democratic tradition of nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism — a claim that rewards a much longer separate study (see Section VII below).

Hunter S. Thompson’s dictum on solitary death, quoted verbatim in “Useless Things,” and Karl Marx’s “opium of the people” (misquoted by a student as “the oxycodone of the masses” in “Drenched to the Bone,” then corrected by the teacher-narrator) round out a pattern: Mulhern likes to let his characters half-remember or garble the tradition they are inheriting, dramatizing at the level of a single misquotation the same process of imperfect transmission that structures his plots.

VI. Craft Technique and Style

A. The Accretive, Catalog-Driven Sentence

Mulhern’s prose style, particularly in scenes of sensory abundance or decay, favors long accretive sentences built from serial appositives and lists, a technique that mimics the overwhelming, undifferentiated flood of memory itself. Describing Peggy Fleming in the collection’s opening paragraph: “Her face was swollen and pasty, with broken capillaries that sloped down the sides of her nostrils, flooding the arid plain of her skin, like some dreary river and its tributaries eking over a delta of nasolabial folds to terminate in the red seas of two droopy cheeks.” The sentence extends an anatomical description into a

full topographical metaphor — face as riverine landscape — without pausing for breath, and this expansive, clause-stacking method recurs at moments of both beauty (the Nantasket Beach passages) and horror (the corpse descriptions), suggesting that for Mulhern, intensity of any kind — comic, erotic, grotesque, sacred — demands the same syntactic strategy: accumulation rather than compression.

B. Free Indirect Discourse Braided with Retrospective Irony

Mulhern's first-person narrators consistently blend the voice and vocabulary of their past, younger selves with the interpretive hindsight of an adult narrator, often within a single paragraph, without typographic signal. In "Assumptions," the boy who "shook my head, wondering... what a jinnit must be" is the same narrator who, sentences later, delivers a fully adult reading of the Assumption dogma's theological history and Pope Pius XII's 1950 declaration. This is a controlled anachronism, not a lapse: it allows Mulhern to hold childhood's innocent literalism and adulthood's ironic knowledge in permanent, unresolved tension — formally enacting the book's thematic obsession with inheritance and its long-delayed comprehension.

C. Dialect, Malapropism, and Comic Diction as Characterization

Mulhern renders working-class Boston Irish and Italian-American speech with exacting phonetic and idiomatic precision — "Terties" for "thirties," "cazzone" mistaken for "calzone," "squash rot" for alcohol-induced dementia, "knackered" and "crikey" marking the Scottish-inflected Evy — and he consistently uses these malapropisms not for condescension but for warmth and comic release, often at exactly the moment a scene threatens to become unbearably sad. Nonna's insult, delivered mid-argument, that Mary Muldoon should ask for money because "she keeps a stack of cash in her bread box," lands as pure comedy precisely because it interrupts a scene of real cruelty. This is a difficult tonal high-wire act, and Mulhern's control of it — knowing exactly how long to let a scene stay funny before it turns — is the collection's most consistently impressive technical achievement.

D. The Deadpan Ending

Mulhern regularly closes his stories on a single flat, unembellished line that reframes everything preceding it without any authorial comment. "A useless thing" ends "Useless Things"; brief, deadpan closing lines of this kind recur across the collection, most devastatingly in "Peppermint Candy," which ends not with confession or consequence

but with chilling procedural calm: “I retrieved the peppermints from my desk drawer and placed them in my satchel. I would share them again another day.” The refusal to editorialize at the exact moment the reader most wants editorial guidance is a deliberate withholding, and it is what gives these stories their unusual, lingering unease — Mulhern trusts the juxtaposition of the plain sentence against the preceding horror to do the moral work no character will do explicitly.

E. Stylistic Range Across the Collection

It is worth noting, finally, how much stylistic ground this collection covers under a single authorial signature. “Assumptions” and “A Bath” work in a lyrical-elegiac register built for memory and grief. “Useless Things,” “A Nun’s Arse,” and “Myra Bocca” shift into a broader comic-picaresque mode, dense with dialect and incident. “Peppermint Candy” and “Drenched to the Bone” move into a spare, present-tense, almost clinical realism suited to institutional settings and slow-burning despair. That a single collection can hold Titian, cyanide-laced cookies, Thoreau, and a joke about calzones without tonal collapse is itself a mark of authorial control: the variety is not inconsistency but range, unified by the consistent moral seriousness beneath even the broadest comic scenes.

VII. Conclusion: What the Book Insists On

All We Ever Needed refuses its reader the comfort of separating the people who love us from the people who damage us, because in Mulhern’s world these are, with remarkable consistency, the same people, and sometimes the same gesture. The book’s closing “Note from the Author” supplies the theological frame explicitly: “The sacred, I believe, is not far off but here — in a kitchen, a sickroom, a stretch of shoreline, the face of someone loved and lost.” Read against the stories themselves, that sentence becomes almost unbearably literal: the sacred, in this book, really is in the kitchen — in Nonna’s poisoned cookies as much as her chocolate-chip ones, in the bathwater as much as the bruise that precedes it. Mulhern’s critical achievement is to have built, story after story, a version of mercy that has fully absorbed its own capacity for harm, and to have done so through prose disciplined enough — in its sentence rhythms, its recurring motifs, its refusal to editorialize — to make that difficult mercy feel, by the book’s end, entirely earned.

Works Quoted

James Mulhern, *All We Ever Needed* (Philadelphia: Silver Current Press, 2026). All quotations are drawn from the collection's stories "Assumptions," "A Bath," "Useless Things," "Peppermint Candy," "A Nun's Arse," "Myra Bocca," "Mia Bambina," and "Drenched to the Bone," and from the collection's "Introduction" and "A Note from the Author."