



Rick Mulkey

Distinguished Kansas Poet

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Rick Mulkey is the author of four poetry collections including *Toward Any Darkness* (Word Press, 2006), *Before the Age of Reason* (Pecan Grove Press 1998) and two chapbooks, *Bluefield Breakdown* (Finishing Line Press) and *Greatest Hits: 1994-2003* (Pudding House Press). Individual poems and essays have appeared in such journals as *Denver Quarterly*, *The Literary Review*, *Poetry East*, *Connecticut Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Shenandoah*, and in several anthologies including, *American Poetry: The Next Generation*, and *Poems and Sources*.

His awards include a Hawthornden Fellowship for a writing residency in Scotland, and the Charles Angoff Award in poetry from *The Literary Review*. Rick has taught at a number of universities and colleges in the U.S. and in Europe.

He currently directs the BA and MFA Creative Writing programs at Wichita State University.

Insomnia

The way, from 30,000 feet, the earth
looks like marble, or sorghum swirled
in a batter, beaten and mixed up,
this is how it is in the beginning
of the middle of the night.
We think we need miracles
but it doesn't have to be
parachutes opening, or the chemistry of yeast.
Why not my life as sawdust
layered over a concrete floor, or the muddied
light of rain puddled in a footprint,
or an olive ground into white linen?
How can we resist waking?
The night is a lie whispered
in our ears, the breath perfumed
with the scent of fresh peaches
and only a hint of hurt in the hard, bitter pit,
a dark bruise rooted in light.

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Gravity

The two a.m. face of the waitress rising
over a steaming pot of boiling beans
in an all-night diner near Hays, Kansas;
the well-fed hawk resting on power lines;
the astronauts of Apollo, of my childhood,
playing games in zero G's with floating jello and ballpoint pens;
Skylab--both in orbit and freefalling into the Pacific;
my first lover buoyed above me, the weight of her breast
on my mouth, her wrists thin and brittle as birds' wings;
the brute whack of a Mark McGuire homerun;
the scar on my father's chest where they'd opened his ribs,
the weight of the human heart a mere 11 ounces;
the theories of Newton and Einstein, the theories
of my friend Steve on theories, how everyone's got one,
and how theories on force and resistance pushed Steve
over the mountain where, according to witnesses,
his car soared twenty feet before arcing
downward into the cliffs; James Dean;
the implosive spirals of Elvis, Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain;
the coal-blackened faces of miners near Logan, West Virginia
stepping from the mountain's shaft into moonlight;
Hunter, at three, calling out, "Be careful. You'll fall like an angel,"
and me surprised that he knew that phrase,
so surprised I start to say how it's too late,
Daddy's already fallen. But I think he won't get the joke.
Those Sunday rides as a kid in my Dad's Caprice convertible;
how the leaves on the maple and oak flared in the sunlight,
the way the limestone cliffs, solid and sheer, rose above us,
while below the gem-studded New River shimmered and shimmied;
the way my Dad always took the same highway,
the way his loose curls flew around his face like a boy's,
how he laughed and reached to hold my mother's hand,
the way she smiled back and breathed easily,
the wind carrying us to no particular destination,
only the hum of the engine and the thumping mantra of the road;
how the following day we'd rush to work and school
and clean house and pay bills while the air around us would sizzle
with arguments and fear, betrayals without forgiveness;
how for a few hours every Sunday there was the road,
and those first evening stars reflected in the river;
and of course there's always the river forced lower and deeper,
and dawn the color of bruised gills ,
and the fishermen stalking the trout, casting the cricket into eddies
so it dances just enough to lure the fish to surface
because the trick, you see, is not to cast a shadow,
the trick is to believe we're made of light,
and we've never really fallen.



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Blind-Sided

"Only one person is known to have been hit by a meteorite. On November 30, 1954, Mrs. E.H. Hodges of Sylacauga, Alabama, was sitting in her house after lunch when a 9-pound stone crashed through the roof and hit her on the thigh."--Walter Sullivan, We Are Not Alone

Nine years and three days later I drop to the earth
with considerably less speed, but with as great
an impact, or at least that's how my mother tells it.
And she lived to tell about it, as did Mrs. Hodges,
once she recovered from the shock, the thrill
of coming as close to the eternal universe, eternally,
as a few inches. But isn't that always the way.
One moment we're minding our own business,
wandering about in our lives, no apparent course,
the next we're rolling diapers into a meteoric knot
and hurling them into the pail.
Or, as with my friend J., we're finishing
our lunch when out of nowhere a wife stiffens in her seat
and looks across the room. There's nothing there,
but still she looks, hoping that the words will fall
from the heavens. There is no easy way
to say it, so she leans into the table
and without apology says she's had enough,
that it's her turn to find herself, that the monotonous
orbit she's been forced into won't do. Her tight, stony fists
hang in her lap. Silences stretch light years,
and all the feeble attempts at reconciliation
will never reach her now. It's the same feeling
as when Mark Preston blind-sided me,
stone-hard knuckles snapped the ridge of my nose,
a stream of blood flared into the parking lot.
Some other kid might have swung back, but I was horrified
at the pool filling my palm. My blood,
I repeated to myself as I sat there
quietly while a friend finished off the guy I believed
was trying to finish me. He never knew what hit him.
Nor did Mrs. Hodges until they calmed her, medicated
her from a pain that wouldn't end. Years later she'd wake
to the fiery ache in her leg, a reminder of what she'd
been and what she'd become, survival's gravity
twisting her life into one deep breath, like the first breath
that coughs up the phlegm of another world and deposits
it right here in this one where all around us stars
flare into bits of battered stone, and the universe
leaves each of us alone to explode in all directions.

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