

## EDWARD DAHLBERG, TEACHER\*

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*Kansas City is a vast inland city, and its marvelous river,  
the Missouri, heats the senses.*

—Because I Was Flesh

*But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying,  
save they to whom it is given.*

—Matt. 19:11

**K**ansas City was never vast to me, and, since I knew neither shelf of the continent, *inland* had no meaning. The river Missouri was reported as a suicide ditch; the newspaper carried inky photos of police with malignant grappling hooks. The city and I shared the heavy wastrel days of my youth—the memories of childhood that are the phantom pains of the amputee. The Church was a gray proctor, but it gave me gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Kansas City is a market town with belligerent exhausts of monster trucks, battered ramps of loading docks, and the weak-colored, three-copy bill of lading. Most men's histories are written in bill receipts. Kansas City feels the waves of the nation around it, the tossed stone that does not cause the ripples but is impressed by them.

“Homer sang of many sacred towns in Hellas which were no better than Kansas City.” Edward Dahlberg returned to the city of his youth to teach at the University of Missouri—Kansas City the spring of 1965; his audience were creative paupers, for I was one of them.

Women filled his classes. Cameoed dowagers with rouged jowls and red velvet capes, young brittle-lipped girls whose pens took notes nodding like steadfast crochet needles. A fluorescent insect hum came from the lighting

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fixtures in the large room, terraced with rows of chairs with wide spatula arms. The university had the charm of the nondescript. Originally a small private institution, it had a few simple sandstone buildings with red clay gable roofs—"pigeons had a universe in their eaves." I moved about the buildings with the vacant motions of a vagrant. My education has a Jesuitical residue, and at eighteen the difference between the Spanish Civil War and the Franco-American War (which I adopted from a can of spaghetti) was not yet clear.

The draft in the corridors raised the fabric around the wrist that February. Edward Dahlberg came into the room in a heavy umber coat, mounted a creaking pine dais, was introduced by the head of the English Department, who listed Dahlberg's books soon to be published. Patches of white hair lay across his head; above a frieze of mustache was the strong nose, as galling as the golden calf. Dahlberg announced that this would be no class of dry syntax; rather he would have us read truthful books that would quicken our pulses and dilate our sensibilities. These were not the regions where books were taken by the nervous nonce lives of his students. Taught as young critics, they demanded the incest of fiction. There is no misfortune esteemed as a novel—an image to a primitive people has more power than the life it represents. A man of strong parts will be shunned, whereas the thinnest fictions will pulse, transfused with the plasma of professors. Homer said the last song is always applauded the loudest; the students were in the din of the continual midst. The ancients and sages are considered the brackish past for the word *quote*, and its usage has become inhuman. It now denotes a bloodless severance. Phrases are put in quotation marks to disavow them in scorn or to allow the impasse to realize itself in print. We are provided with adages, truisms, and the gnomic line, but like the doubtful chiropractors they manage to crack our backs but do not give us spines. Edward Dahlberg partakes of the multiple rhythm of the blood of the writers who were as anonymous to his students as he was

Edward Dahlberg told his class if they would read *The Compleat Angler*, they would be more quiet. The masters' candidates were concerned with dredging up Faulkner, whom Dahlberg refused to discuss as "the literary figure of the Century," as one graduate student was wont to put it, because it was an ordeal to read his books. A lathy navy veteran asked him a bogus question about oriental art, its suggestive qualities and its relationship to our abstract painting. He paused to let the hiss of sophistry out between the words of his question, which contained the antithetical approach he considered Edward Dahlberg's prose to have. The class waited, alerted.

He answered that he did not know enough about oriental art to instruct the fellow, except that as Lao-tsu uses a slight linen manner and is in no way an elliptical mind so he believed their art to be. The filling-in the student allowed himself was the blending of his own empty spaces. He then told of an afternoon

he spent with the painter Willem De Kooning in De Kooning's lower East Side apartment. The painter stood at a window that looked down upon an alley of corrugated ashcans, wet, unhealthy skin of cardboard, sunken cellar windows agape like severed lower jaws and exclaimed to the persons in the room: "Isn't it beautiful?" with a smeamy sincerity.

Dahlberg showed simple horror at this and told De Kooning, "Children could not help but be maimed if they have such sights scratching across their memories," and quit his company.

Papers were read on novels we had selected that, as he advised us, were not sufficiently bad to be book publishers' forewords. The numbers in the room started to lessen; none returned with a green bough. Two wantons with yellow teeth and pants with brass zippers for their gentle central seam missed his classes because even they fell under a reproachment. The older women whose memories loosened as their vessels collapsed fell off from the front row where they commanded his gaze if not his imagination. But as I would pass out of the building I often saw him walking with a straight-limb girl who had always spoken in a soft manner. I never said a word to her, though during the recitations of student papers her bowed back eased my *rigor mortis* contemplations.

He recommended all of Sherwood Anderson, so a few papers were written on *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Poor White*. The night before, he told us, he visited a home where the child of the family kissed his hand. He was very moved, for he told it twice. A paper was then read by a boy on *Poor White* that was dim sociology. Dahlberg asked why he did not include the meaning of the seed, the machinery invented to harvest it, and the sterile seed the man delivered to his wife; The boy had not pondered this and was not concerned with how much love or "hot sperm" went into the making of a child. When Anderson's own lines were read, Edward Dahlberg would lean back, close his eyes, and say: "Yes, very good. Thank you."

Edward Dahlberg would nod his head while his thumbs muttered at his waist and thank the young person who would repeat such lines to let him dwell on and release their powers to his listeners.

In his creative writing class there were some two dozen students. Women in the special education division who took these courses so their wells of sensibility might be dipped into. One businessman was included who sat immobile in a corner chair with a suit the color of corrosion. His face had a translucent skin that showed catacombs of veins, red and periwinkle. He was auditing and seemed comfortable in this position. Throughout the semester he offered only the diction of pleasantries, and finally Edward Dahlberg asked him if he might do a paper. The men spoke and his awry face flamed:

"I've worked for my company twenty years and I have had eighteen electric shock treatments . . ."

He stopped and began grasping air with his mouth. Dahlberg sat at his desk in a plain of silence that followed whereon passed annals of intrusions of suffering. He said: "I am very sorry for you."

The man never reappeared.

Edward Dahlberg forsook a lecture only when he was in need of a physician. The head of the English Department announced this and called for remarks about the author in residence. After their objections he told the students Dahlberg was fond of using "inkhorn words," which was an enema synthesis they found a comfort.

The writing class had decomposed to a half-dozen. Another male, a speech teacher of twenty-four who needed the credits to get his master's degree in order to teach some hapless students the next year, and an assortment of female poets. Dahlberg sat with his legs crossed with gray exhaustion over his face and the tops of his unraveling many-colored socks exposed when a woman volunteered to read a children's book she had written. He had spoken against the children's dilutions of the classics before, but consented with alarm for there was no other offering during the period. She began: "Winnie was a puppy who looked like a mop and rode the elevators of downtown Kansas City until everybody knew his name . . ."

Edward Dahlberg, American artist, sat with his face shrouded by his hands.

She continued: "He would walk around the Plaza, for he lived with his master in an apartment . . ."

"Stop," he said, hardly audible. "Stop. Please."

The panes in the building's long windows were mottled and May filled these thin pools with color. Only after asking permission would Edward Dahlberg read from his own works and this late in the semester. He read from *The Sorrows of Priapus*: "Socrates described love as the sting of a tarantula. We see that desire dominates the old as well as youth; the senile forget to button their clothes, and leave the door of their trousers ajar . . ." He stopped and looked up at his class of housewives and the one young man, who "desperately wanted to have feelings."

"Why do you stop?" asked one of the mothers from the back of the room.

He hesitated, but turned the pages from the spot and replied: "You should be frank on paper, but I'll decline to read this passage aloud."

He had once before remarked on the Scottsboro case—the verdict of which I knew nothing about—saying, if he could be pardoned: "I would not use the washroom after the woman involved."

Justice was within that remark and, I thought, in the measure of his balance that knew a frank page and could find reason to leave it be.

In the larger class the navy veteran again asked a question with an imper-

tinent unction on it, but quoted a line from the autobiography in doing so. After hearing his words come from the man's lips Edward Dahlberg said: "Since you remember what I have written, I have seeped into your soul, and it will take you quite a few years to realize what that means."

The veteran was silenced as were the others as he remained thrust out over his desk, the pine bending aloud while under his weight.

He often said, "Read my books, don't look to me." When someone would say an agreeable thing about him, he said, quoting Prince Myshkin, "Thank you very much for liking me." In the writing class delivered by a *deux ex machina* adviser there was the "Miss Missouri" of that year. She was the daughter of a talented family who would tour counties playing at fairs, livestock shows, and, in larger cities, nightclubs. Their traveling bus had large gleeful letters of advertisement on its side. She played more than one instrument and more than one at a time. She wrote a paper on *Madame Bovary* and defended Emma, which Dahlberg amended and reminded her it was Flaubert who said, "I am Madame Bovary." She had a peculiar way of standing that amounted to a contestant's at attention. Her smile was as ready as an opening curtain. She was absent frequently because of the family's raucous touring, and Dahlberg had been asking her to perform for the class if she refused to write more papers. He finally shamed her into doing a song, which she did in a timely up-tempo fashion, tapping her thigh, standing forthrightly but without the aid of her silk "Miss Missouri" bandolier. She sat down after applause and the meager looks of the other women and asked Edward Dahlberg if he would sing—the same number, for it was an old one. He tipped back his chair, raised his jaw, and, making a rapids of his throat, sang. And he sang!—a slow original blues version of the tune. He often grieved he could no longer see the image of his mother before him. I grieve that I can't remember the simple verses of the song he sang before us.

When I last shook his hand I was sure of dropping out of school. I had his book, unread, *Alms for Oblivion*, which I asked him to inscribe. He did, bending low above the page, for his "sight is starved." I looked into his face then; the left eye had turned a robin's-egg blue and the other, which caught into you as he said: "I sympathize with your predicament, as you know I must, but you should stay in school lest you become entangled by Sears Roebuck."

All I knew was that he had seeped into my soul and I no longer could follow the shambles of his figure silently down the steps of that midland university.

He returned to Kansas City the following semester, I learned, and became ill; having no quickened students he left shortly after. A small editorial in the student newspaper complained of the money the English Department paid him, about half the price of a Chevrolet. In a public lecture he gave to Kansas City,

he said that for those who did not read his books, "It was their loss."

He had given out a list of books that he wanted his students to read, not for the class but during their whole lives, for these were such books. His classes, too, were for his students' whole lives; but the stories of his friends Dreiser, Anderson, and Crane, his beloved Ford Madox Ford were only place-names to his listeners. "I sing of Oak, Walnut, Chestnut, Maple, and Elm Streets." Ford Madox Ford called it "jocund fate," but is this what returned Edward Dahlberg to Kansas City, a town that "nursed men, mules, and horses as famous as the asses of Arcadia"?

Edward Dahlberg was bleached in a town that is still green and meadowed; I too neglected him there, though I now know that Kansas City has its living region in Edward Dahlberg. It is he who has a vast inland city and the marvelous river that heats the senses.