

## *Because I Was Flesh* by Edward Dahlberg recommended by Pablo J. Davis

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Pablo J. Davis—director of the South Atlantic Humanities Center—recommends *Because I Was Flesh* by Edward Dahlberg. We hope that individuals, book groups, families, and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



*Because I Was Flesh*, Edward Dahlberg’s remarkable 1964 autobiography, could well be titled *A Portrait of the Artist as His Mother*. I know of nothing in American literature quite like this painful, brilliant, unsparing, and deeply moving book.

Philip Roth, in *The Facts*, contrasted maternal and paternal influences: “To be at all is to be her Philip, but in the embroilment with the buffeting world, my history still takes its spin from beginning as his Roth.” Dahlberg’s equation is different: unknown father, and mother distanced from him by the struggle to survive and his shame at that struggle, her loneliness, rough edges, and homely looks—yet of course she is the very marrow of his being.

If almost brutal in rendering Lizzie and her flaws, this is no *Mommie Dearest*; the sins troubling it are the son’s own. Dahlberg pitilessly bares his shame, lusts, and stunted filial love. Nor is *Flesh* a scented Mother’s Day card. There is no easy washing of guilt—only suffering, sacred memory, and catharsis.

Dahlberg recounts Lizzie’s Western wanderings—New Orleans, Memphis, Louisville, elsewhere—ending, in 1905, in Kansas City, where she sets up a “lady barbershop” (women barbers, not customers); her battle for respectability in the face of hardship and anti-Semitism; her tenacious she-bear’s defense of her cub; her ill-starred search for love, or at least companionship, from a parade of bedraggled, morally dubious, and often comical suitors; the grown son’s abandonment of her and distant witness to her physical decline.

*Flesh* is also a lovesong to a vanished,

brawling river town with “more sporting houses and saloons than churches.” This “vast inland city, and its marvelous river, the Missouri, heats the senses; the maple, alder, elm and cherry trees with which the town abounds are songs of desire, and only the almonds of ancient Palestine can awaken the hungry pores more deeply.” Kansas City was his Tarsus, the Kaw and Missouri Rivers “the washpots of joyous Dianas from St. Joseph and Joplin.” Fleeting, unforgettably, Dahlberg evokes the barbershop, its jostling, rivalrous women; its leering, lusting customers; the city’s railroad yards and taverns, jazz and commerce, boarding-house operators and con men. But the city is also “burial ground of my poor mother’s hopes; her blood, like Abel’s, cries out to me from every cobblestone, building, flat and street.”

Dahlberg’s language is an astonishing creation: in his hands, English is almost created anew into a different tongue, full of gnomic pronouncements, built out of pieces of Homer, the Old Testament, Whitman, Dickens as refracted through W. C. Fields, and slight Shakespearean admixtures. Archaic, often arcane, still it weaves a spell through its poetic distillation and incantatory power.

“Should I seem to mock that *mater dolorosa* of rags and grief,” the writer pleads, “know that all my laughter lies in her grave.” Dahlberg’s mother becomes a towering figure—tragic, heroic, yet life-like as one of Rembrandt’s old women. Transfigured, she is a maternal Odysseus, Penelope-less; a Sisyphus endlessly pushing her rock up the mountainside of her aged son’s memory; in the end, less Mary than Christ.