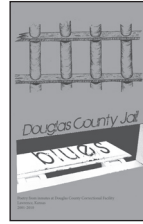


## Tough Nicknames

By Al Ortolani

Book Review:

*Douglas County Jail blues*, edited by  
Brian Daldorph, Coal City Review, 2010.



**B**rian Daldorph's students are students of violence and drugs. Writing class helps untie the snarled knots of their lives. They—convicts—attempt to untwist ropes, to free a strand of thought with poetry. They think about the past and about the future, reflect on the conditions that landed them in the Douglas County Correctional Facility. As poet Jesse James writes in "My Pad & Pen": "I fail at most everything until my pen unwinds. / Words unveil, through mists of time in my mind." Douglas County's incarcerated speak without pretension. Their poems are young and heart-felt, written by characters with colorful nicknames like Chopper and Deuce. They speak to the reader honestly with little room for misinterpretation, though sometimes with a belly laugh, sometimes with tears. Michael Harper writes in "methamphetamine":

I should come in a baggie that says, "Death for Sale," \$100 a gram  
Sorry 'bout your luck, but you see I only have one goal  
That is to ruin your life and slowly take your soul

In "A Mid-Summer's Nightmare," Vogue Rogue identifies the isolation he feels behind bars: "I watched the evening news from *here*, / I watched them with that body-bag; / the hopeless weight, which made it sag." Rogue concludes his "Desolate: A Sonnet" with the following couplet: "So I count down the days until I'm— 'Free' . . . / Yet still within that prison—which is me!" Reaching beyond walls, built from either cinder blocks or self-reproach, is a predominant theme in the blues. It is present in the remorse that follows missed chances. Donndilla Da Great writes in "Hope":

Malcolm X tap me on the shoulder  
 and I asked him why was everyone  
 telling me to pray when I wanted  
 hope, and he said, Prayer is hope  
 and didn't I recognize that when  
 I seen Jesus. Aw man I missed Jesus!

The poetry of Danegrus Dane dips more decisively into darkness, when in "Danegrus Dane: Confession of a Killer," he reflects, "why every time I look out / the window I'm the guy standin' there / holding that big silenced Desert Eagle." He has learned from past experience to meet violence with violence:

I guess the  
 best way 2 kill a killer is 2 send another;  
 I guess that's why they sent me.

However, there is a catch in this contract: "it'll be quick, at least / I don't think I'll let me suffer."

*Douglas County Jail blues* is dedicated to the late Joe Parrish, a Lawrence, Kansas, song writer and guest instructor in Brian Daldorph's writing class. Jail Programs Director Mike Caron recalls in his introduction how Parrish, "came to class like a moth drawn to a lantern. . . . He understood the pain and longings." Parrish knew that the *blues* poets embraced hard situations. These inmates flounder in recidivism. Yet, their voice in poetry helps them glimpse small truths, even if fleeting. Daldorph writes in his preface, "What Truly Matters," that he wishes writing class had "brought about the changes in inmate lives that many of them would like to make." He says that even if lives changed for only two hours on a Thursday afternoon, it was nonetheless a small improvement. When the *blues* poets write their gritty magic, they voice pain. They speak of hope. They don't ask for a "Get Out of Jail" card or even for Joe's empathy. Instead, they try to untangle.