

Jail Time



poems by **Brian Daldorph**

Poetry Writing at Douglas County Jail

By *Brian Daldorph*

“Who’s got one more? Who’s got one more?”

It’s almost 3 o’clock in the classroom at Douglas County Jail in Lawrence, Kansas, and writing class ends at 3, but inmate Jackson’s keen for one more poem from one of the fifteen or so students in the class, one more poem, one more. That’s the way class is here. Once it gets going it’s hard to stop.

For 12 years, I’ve been teaching weekly writing sessions for male inmates at Douglas County Jail. Class always starts with a read-through of inmate poems from the previous week which I have typed up and copied into packets. Then we free write for 20 minutes or so. Finally we take it in turns to read our just-written poems, or poems we’ve written during the week and brought in.

The population is pretty transient: guys come and go from the class as they go to trial, move on to a state correctional facility or get released. Though we usually have about 15 inmates in the class each week, there’s a big turnover of faces in the circle. Some inmates attend the class for many months. Others appear once in class and we never see them again. Some return to the class after five or ten years.

Here are some lines from poems from this week’s class at the jail (July 2012):

*Then I woke up with 23 dollars
in a bruised kind of town . . .*

*We robbed ourselves, leaving our minds damaged,
trying to repair what there’s left to salvage . . .*

*Waiting is all I seem to do anymore,
waiting for court, bond, to walk out the door . . .*

*Lightning bolts
Are something beautiful
Until it hits iron steel . . .*

*God, bring out of me the man,
Show me who I really am . . .*

*if scoring was a job I’d be president
my addiction knows no precedent . . .*

Week after week I’m amazed by the talents and enthusiasm of the inmate writers--their raw energy, their urgency to convey in words who they are in this world and what’s most important to them.

It’s common enough for my incarcerated students to feel powerless. They have to accept the label of criminal, and someone else’s way of telling their stories. But when they start to write they can find their own words to describe themselves, and say, “No matter what you call me, *this* is who I am.” I often see the exhilaration that this new power can bring. As Ryan McCarty, English graduate student and long-term jail class assistant, put it: “It’s amazing to see someone discover that writing can be a source of power. It gives them a sense of importance that being an inmate, by definition, tends to take away.”

I have seen lives transformed by inmates seizing the opportunity to tell their stories, to express what’s most important in their lives. Though long-term good might come from the class, my basic goal is to help inmates through a hard time by holding a class that many of them look forward to. Mike Caron, Programs Director at Douglas County Jail says that over and over again he hears inmates proclaim that it is the writing that has kept them from going crazy.

According to Caron, inmates often find respect for their poetry written and read in class: “Real respect and appreciation is a totally new experience for so many in here. It is not enough to set anyone on a new road, but it is an essential step in changing the sense of utter despair and self doubt that permeates the vast majority of those who find themselves locked up again and again.” About twenty-five inmate poets were published in *Douglas County Jail Blues*, an anthology including some of the best poetry written in the class from 2001-2010, which I edited with Caron.

I’d started out thinking I’d run the class as a workshop, focusing on critiquing inmate poems. I tried to do it this way. But the class turned itself into what it needed to be, a forum for the group of inmates who join the writers’ circle each week to share, write and listen. So there’s little discussion of poems--in class, at least. There’s only just enough time to get around to everyone’s work. Inmates in the circle listen carefully to what’s read. They relish the opportunity to hear what that guy over there is *really* thinking.

It’s almost 3 o’clock and we all want one more poem, one more honest expression.

Inmate Nick says, *Well, I do have one more song*. He sorts out a sheet from a thick stack, clears his throat, starts snapping his fingers, tapping on the desk, then raps about his hard-hearted lover.