

## Down Inside

*for Robert Clark, with respect, admiration and gratitude, a poetic version of your story as recounted in your compelling memoir*

*“This story of the loss and regaining of identity is, I think, the framework of all literature.”  
–Northrop Frye*

*“People live inside of stories that structure their lives.” –James Joyce*

Down inside

the belly of the beast

down inside me

down inside the darkness within & without

down inside the hole

that swallows the light

that would let us see

what we don't want to see,

hear what we don't want to hear,

say what we don't talk about.

Down inside the prisons

to our left or to our far right

& the ones *behind* the eyes

where Jekyll meets Hyde

& insists on hiding still.

Down the rabbit hole  
to the other side  
wandering for 30 years  
in the fenced-in wilderness  
threading the maze  
the mayhem & the unexpected magic moments,  
then surfacing at last  
a little worse for wear  
a little sadder but wiser  
on society's carefully guarded beach-head  
surviving to tell the story  
nobody seems eager to hear  
nobody seems eager to reveal,  
surviving to tell the warts-&-all tale  
of something that doesn't quite survive,  
doesn't quite trust  
what you & I  
turn a blind eye to,  
doesn't get too comfortable

with the polite domesticated silence  
that suffocates the wee small voice  
down inside  
that needs to speak,  
to testify, to hold court,  
to write that message in a bottle  
& set it free  
not knowing whose shores  
it'll wash up onto next.

Something cast adrift, left behind  
still languishing or taking root  
in the shadows cast  
by the beast  
who bears our name,  
tethered to the haunted house  
where justice  
(or perhaps punishment)  
has pitched its ragged tent,  
where the keys to all the locks

have been lost, or hidden,  
perhaps only misplaced  
perhaps not much longer  
here down inside  
down inside  
each unknown known  
squarely in our midst  
we somehow manage to ignore  
manage to wall out, lock up, block off,  
manage to manage  
though we're all doing time,  
though we're all serving a life sentence,  
though we're all chained or linked together  
in the same big, beautiful, crazy, scary boat.

*-Michael Hurley*

Kingston

Presented 10 May 2019

## **22-Year-Old Feet**

*for Robert Clark, pathfinder, map-maker, witness, with our thanks*

“Ring the bells that still can ring.  
Forget your perfect offering...”  
-“Anthem,” Leonard Cohen

You’re 22.

You think you’ve come to Kingston

to train to be

a phys. ed. teacher

back home in T.O.

You think it’s a slam dunk.

You think this & you think that.

You don’t expect

your next 30 years

are curled up inside

the tiny bud

of a seemingly raNdOm notion

to volunteer

*volunteer*

at a prison

*a prison!*

of all things

smack dab in a small city

coalescing out of skeletons  
marinating in ancient seas  
with the unlikely unpromising unappealing moniker  
“The Incarceration Capital of Canada.”

Welcome to K-Town, Robert Clark.

You won't be the only one

not escaping

over its limestone walls.

And guess who built those walls,

those proud public edifices,

those grim gothic prisons,

young man?

Who knew?

Those 22-year-old feet

didn't figure on

a future that's made up its mind

to set 'em walking up & down inside

countless corridors & ranges

& leaping red-tape morasses

in 7 different federal prisons,  
& wearing twice that number of hats,  
& seeing it all from more angles  
than a Cubist painting.

Who knew?

At 22

you don't see yourself

in what could be a movie script

(with a *Tragically Hip* soundtrack)

dealing with daring escapes, lockdowns, murders,

suicides, riots, the "blue wall"

& things that go bump in the night

(& even the day)

courtesy of guys named *Hobo*, *Hostage*, *Brutus*, *Bernardo*, *Snake*, even *Conn*,

courtesy of guys with sort fuses,

or no fuses,

courtesy of guys in uniform

sometimes with similar wiring

or without faces somewhere in deepest darkest Ottawa

enjoying the unmitigated contempt  
of “offenders” & staff alike.

Nobody – let alone yourself –

can yet imagine you

you arranging hockey games in max-security Millhaven

or you chilling in a darkened gym

with 300 inmates

watching *Hang ‘Em High*

courtesy of a bank robber projectionist

or working with victims of these men

themselves often victims of victims.

Who knew?

Still your 22-year-old feet

somehow find themselves

crossing thresholds

descending down inside

inmost caves,

brailing their way



along this strange & daunting path  
this sketchy road  
of trials, temptations & transformations  
no one else seems called  
or willing  
or resolved  
to move along  
as if ...as if your *life* somehow knows  
where it's going  
even if you haven't a clue.  
It's forgotten to tell you  
as it forgot to tell Frodo or Neo,  
Luke, Indy, Dorothy, Anne with an "E," Hermione, Captains Kirk & Jack  
and others summoned to unwelcome quests  
*listen* – you're in the right place  
however forbidding or frightening or frustrating  
right where you need to be  
& are damn well needed to be,  
right on time,  
with – who knew? –

the *Right Stuff*.

Those 22-year-old feet  
are about to leave the Shire  
far behind.

For three decades  
they're no longer in Kansas, Toto  
(or Kingston  
as most know it).

And when they return  
return to walk down main street  
*nothing* will be the same,  
nor will you.

Journeys through the cracks  
in the system  
are funny that way.

That's how the light gets in.

Who knew?

Who knew?

Something inside us

knows the price of admission  
& volunteers anyway,  
ventures through the looking glass,  
vaults across the Edge of The Wild,  
lighting whatever candles are at hand  
then comes back  
back from Mordor, Millhaven or those lost places within  
with a story  
*needing* to get out,  
a tale to tell,  
a bell to ring  
trusting there'll be an ear to hear it,  
another heart to share it  
& someone else's 22-year-old feet  
unsteady, uncertain, untried  
to carry it  
down inside  
once again.  
Once again  
carried forward

by some...some insistent voice  
down inside  
reminding us  
who we truly are  
is larger than who we *think* we are,  
that we work on ourselves  
to help others  
& we help others  
to work on ourselves.

Who knew?

-Michael Hurley

Kingston

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