In Canada if you suffer with mental illness

If you're Indigenous, if you're Black, if you can't pay the bills

We don't fund more beds, we don't pay for treatment

We lock you away in prisons where it seems more convenient

It actually costs more, but still our use is more frequent

Jails are where we warehouse people with addictions

We say it's a medical issue but then hand out convictions

And we say let's talk about mental illness but this remains hidden

In fact, they make money off phone calls from prison

The barriers to help become actual barricades

Behind bars and in cages where people are erased

Solitary confinement just increases their rages

The UN calls it torture but we continue with placements

Over 80 percent of women in jail are victims of trauma

But we continue to act like their punishment's karma

Residential schools passed down from Grandmother to mama

And if, like so many women, you start to self harm

They'll put you in isolation behind locks and alarms

They'll strip off your clothes, put you in a suicide gown

Leave the lights on all night, sometimes you're strapped down

If you're wondering if suicide's cured by this humiliation

Most people lie and say they're better just to stop being degraded

And they'll arbitrarily cut people off their medication

Does this sound like the kind of treatment we should have in this nation

Did we ever ask why there's so many Indigenous people in there

And the rate of Black women goes up every year

And who do we think ends up shot by the cops?

Mentally ill black men outside a coffee shop

Or why our jails are more crowded than ever though our crime rates have dropped?

And once you have a record good luck getting a job.

And I know people so desperate they tried to get caught

Because it was the only thing they could think of to get the addiction to stop

In winter there's homeless men who go in for the cot

But please don't think there's comfort just because the meals can be hot.

I know people who died in there, some by suicide

I could talk about a woman who set herself on fire

And if you die in a prison in this province no one has to inquire

It can take years for families to find out what even transpired

Ashley Smith who the staff watched expire from behind the locked door

Off the top of my head I could think of a dozen more

Is this what we sentence people to in the court?

And there's suffering passed down generation to generation

Abuse of Indigenous people a legacy of colonization

And our solution isn't more care, it's more legislation

Mandatory minimums leading to over-incarceration

And mental illness is more acceptable in some populations

But when it's young black men it's seen as a problem with behaviour

Black women aren't allowed to suffer from anxiety or depression

It's seen as bad attitude, anger or aggression

And parents are told they can't get attention until their child's been arrested

So many dont get any help until they're in the system

For some kids in care that's their entire existence

Young girls go from group homes into exploitive conditions

People get out and they suffer with PTSD symptoms

These are the stories that no one wants to listen

To question why prison expansion projects cost millions

And tough on crime policies get votes for politicians

In this country there's money in prisons

And the mentally ill are the primary victims

Prison is not housing, therapy, or rehabilitation

It's a cycle of poverty, pain, and desperation

I'm sorry if my poem isn't a message of inspiration

But too many are living in a crisis situation

How can we talk about stigma and and suicide prevention

Leaving out the largest population that programs never mention

It starts in the schools with detention, then suspension

And then we lock people away with no intervention.

If you have a loved one in prison all I can say is be strong

If you're struggling doing time keep your head up hold on

And for families who never talk about what's going on

And deal with the shame alone while the sentence is long

I say to you, the shame isn't yours it's the system that's wrong

And one day I pray that the bars will be gone

And there'll be treatment, supports, and funding for beds

Resources for counselling, coverage for meds

And a diagnoses won't be a label we dread

And as a society we choose compassion instead.