

## Being Autistic

I spent 40 years pretending to be someone else

Hiding my autistic traits

Shaking hands

Looking into eyes

Pushing myself beyond what I had

To hide who I am

Because who I am is not wanted

Who I am is not 'normal'

Who I am can't do everything that comes easily to others

Sit still

Don't touch things

Don't stim

Don't think you're special because you're not

Conform

Kill who you are to be someone else

Someone worthy of space and love

I pushed myself and I beat myself up

I learned to hide

To laugh when others do

To stifle my laughter

To not allow myself to show these unwanted traits

Although they slip out

They always slip out

Too smart to be evaluated

Wrong gender to be autistic

Too much of a reader to be dyslexic

But excluded from the gifted program simply because

They thought I didn't have leadership potential

When I asked for help  
I was told I didn't need it

A lifetime of masking  
Smile and frown at the right time  
Always policing myself  
Presenting a front

A front that can be employed  
A front that can be accepted  
A front that can be loved

Not me

We have social skills  
They are just different  
We have empathy  
Deep wells of it  
We feel everything  
Deeper and stronger  
It's overwhelming  
We just show it differently  
Sometimes we meltdown  
Because we can't hold it all

I only learned who I was because everything crumbled  
My health has paid the price for  
Giving all the energy I didn't have  
Just to make others okay with my existence  
Chronic migraines  
My body wore down from stress  
I fell off the cliff

All sorts of testing  
Meanwhile I kept crumbling

And in that crumbling I fought for myself  
Researched with the drive and precision of  
An autistic person  
Self-diagnosed  
And people said no  
I can't be autistic  
I can talk  
I can look them in the eye  
I don't look like the  
Autistic people on TV  
Played by non-autistic actors  
Written by non-autistic writers  
Treating us as oddities  
Playing out stereotypes

The health tests led to new diagnoses  
Fibromyalgia  
A central nervous system condition  
That causes widespread pain  
Fatigue  
Weakness  
Plus a plethora of other symptoms

The neuropsychologist  
A person whose job it is to evaluate people  
Was shocked that I am very intelligent  
That I am autistic  
Because I looked in his eye  
I could talk

And I have breasts  
The whole time misgendering me on purpose

I got my diagnosis  
Because everyone told me I was wrong  
I had to fight to get evaluated  
Called 50 doctors  
Wrestled with insurance  
Was lucky to pay 250  
Instead of 2500  
Privileged  
They gave me one choice of doctor  
Who labelled me with  
An offensive and outdated term  
The name of a Nazi who exterminated us  
And called me high functioning  
As if that should mean something  
As if it was a compliment

I celebrated  
Only other autists understood why  
People finally had to see me  
In all my autistic glory  
Instead they told me I don't look autistic  
As if autism has a look  
That they wouldn't have known  
As if that is a compliment  
They still didn't want to see me

I can no longer mask  
Not the way I could  
Not the way I'm expected to

Because of autistic burnout  
I can't do other things I could before

I'm learning how to unmask  
But I can't just turn it off  
It's a knotted string I can't untie  
So many knots that I can't count them

Bit by bit  
With people I trust  
In public spaces  
I will get there  
Because others get to exist  
And I should too

I turned to writing  
The little I can currently do  
While my migraines are milder  
Advocating for others and for myself

I paint  
To watch the colors dance  
Into something new  
But can't do any of the  
Marketing needed to sell  
Paintings that come from  
An autistic brain  
The words to explain  
The energy to give  
Is lost behind the burnout of  
40 years of masking  
If I ever even had it

I am not broken  
I never was  
I am disabled  
By a society that doesn't include me  
My needs are not special  
They are not asking for more  
They are just needs  
Like everyone else's

Special needs  
Differently-abled  
Are ableist terms  
That non-disabled people use to  
Feel better about being a part of the system  
Built on racism  
Working with it  
That disenfranchises  
And stigmatizes us  
We must dismantle it all  
We can't fix  
Something that is working  
Exactly how it was designed

People call me  
High functioning  
As if they know  
My struggles  
My strengths  
And what I should be able to do  
As if it's a compliment  
As if it means I'm better than other autists  
Other disabled people  
And I just want to yell at them

For trying to put all of us in boxes  
That only harm

While they give me their ableist stamp of approval

That I never asked for  
I dream of a service dog  
I'll never be able to afford  
And a life of painting  
That lets me be myself  
That doesn't make my body crumble  
Until I collapse and have nothing

I don't want to be a sideshow  
I don't want to be an oddity  
I want to be included  
I want spaces that don't hurt  
My autistic eyes and ears  
I want people to stop abusing us

Listen to us and research before asking

It takes more energy for us

Autistic

Dyslexic

And more

To speak

To answer questions

To do it in the way neurotypicals want

Because god forbid

People think we're rude

For speaking our language

Without fluff or flowers

Just honesty

I give past depletion  
Unpaid intellectual labor  
With the bonus of hate mail  
From neurotypical people  
Not because I can afford to  
But because I have to  
For autistic kids  
For autistic adults  
For my autistic self  
Because I dream of a better future  
For everyone who is neurodivergent

I don't want to be a token  
I want people to see the autism spectrum  
In all its beauty  
In all its variations  
In all its strength and fragility  
And work to include us  
With us

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This poem is paired with the painting "Lift"