

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"