

The Spectrum

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About the Spectrum

The Spectrum is produced by and for autistic adults. We welcome submissions on any topic from autistic people who are over 18.

The Spectrum is published quarterly, in January, April, July and October, in print and online.

To submit an item to *the Spectrum*, please go to **autism.org.uk/theSpectrum** and follow the link to submit your work.

Although most issues are themed, submissions on any subject are welcome. Only some of the magazine's content will follow the theme. All submissions may be edited, especially for privacy, libel and for fitting the space available.

Please note that *the Spectrum* receives many submissions each quarter, so it is not possible to respond to every one, nor for every contribution to be printed. Discussions on editorial choices will not be entered into.

Pieces that appear in *the Spectrum* are credited using the author's first name only, unless the author requests an alias. This is done to protect their privacy.

The National Autistic Society promotes *the Spectrum* on social media using pieces selected from the magazine.

Please note: the views expressed in *the Spectrum* are not necessarily those of the Editors, the National Autistic Society or those involved in the publication of the magazine.

The Spectrum online version is available at **autism.org.uk/theSpectrum**

You can email *the Spectrum* at **spmag@nas.org.uk**

History

This magazine was founded as *Asperger United* in 1993 by Pamela Yates and Patricia Howlin, in association with the Maudsley Hospital, and Mark Bebbington and Judy Lynch of the National Autistic Society.

This was in response to a recognised lack of services for autistic people and the potential for self-help and networking as a means of support.

The purpose of the magazine was to develop a publication that was truly the voice of the people it was aimed at.

The name *the Spectrum* was suggested by dozens of people and chosen in an online poll in 2018.

The former Editors and Sub-editors are Richard Exley, David Wright, Martin Coppola, Ian Reynolds, John Joyce, the Goth and Charlotte.

In 2024, Fiona and Charlotte, autistic members of the National Autistic Society's Content team, became joint editors. In October 2025, Helen, another autistic member of staff, took over from Charlotte as Co-Editor.



Welcome to the October issue

This issue started around a theme to match the spooky season. However, we must acknowledge that fictional narratives about autistic people are becoming frightfully mainstream and are spoken by leaders who have the power to spin and spread these false narratives.

This acknowledgment is not about spreading fear amongst ourselves because we do not need more of that. It is about recognising that the public fear about autistic people is based on fiction, but the fear experienced by autistic people is not.

It is also important to take a moment to acknowledge the death of Jason Arday, an eminent autistic British academic, author and professor, whose death was a devastating tragedy.

Given the significant risks autistic people experience with their mental health, there needs to be more compassion about the ways autistic people are treated and more focus on platforming autistic voices in public discourse about autism. If you ever need help, please reach out to someone you trust, call Samaritans on 116 123 or go to autism.org.uk/contact-us/urgent-help.

In a world that does not understand autistic people and can create real harm through the way autistic people are spoken about, our collective voices matter. Finding spaces centred on hope and shared experience matters. We hope the voices in the following pages speak louder than the fear that can cloud the current narratives. Remember, the stories told by us matter more than those about us.

Yours,

Helen and Fiona

The Editors

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Artwork

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There's more to me

By Abby

© Abby 2026



I'm not a disease, or need a cure.
You don't see life underneath, only death
on the shore.
"How could they thrive, in a world so
confusing?"
There's more to me, than what you're
assuming.
My mind works differently, but that doesn't
mean I'm dumb.
You should see my potential, not discard
me like gum.
We're not all savants or excel at school.
There's more to me, than being an idle
trophy or tool.
"Vaccines cause autism" is the biggest sin
on Earth.
How can protection against measles
cause something I've had since birth?
I'm no less human, so don't treat me as
such.
There's more to me, than some
misinformed crutch.
"Everyone's a little bit autistic" is a phrase
that should be gone.
"Autistic people lack empathy" couldn't be
more wrong.
"You don't look autistic." Since when did
autism have a look?

There's more to me, than the cover of the
book.
Benefits are cut, left and right.
Caught in the middle is us, full of fright.
Punishment is the last thing we need.
There's more to me, than a world
consumed by greed.
I'm not an adult with a child's mind.
Claiming we're incapable suggests you're
blind.
To call us high or low functioning makes us
feel degraded.
There's more to me, than information that's
harmful and outdated.
You don't see why I'm having a meltdown.
A simple dog barking can cause my mind
to drown.
I need time to focus, not be expected to fit
into society.
There's more to me, than being
overwhelmed with anxiety.
Myths about us should stay as myths.
All they create are detrimental rifts.
See us for who we are, not for what we
should be.
Look deeper, because there's more to me.

A downside of living alone

By James

© James 2026



I fear being ill
As I live alone
Not being prepared
For the occasional mishap
An embarrassing situation that could arise
No one to shout out to within easy reach
When you need help
They're nearly always at the end of a phone
So, I try to be careful about daily life
I minimise risks
And usually, it works
And when it doesn't
Or becomes difficult to manage
I usually reach for the phone.

Anxiety

By Lewie

© Lewie 2026



Content warning: This poem is about the effects of anxiety.

She enters the room
I begin to shake
mind crowded in insecurities
starting to break
heart beating out of my chest
beads of sweat tumbling down my brow
I can't get rid of her
she's been haunting me for years now
her presence is suffocating
making the air thin
drowning in deep water
struggling to swim
her arms wrap around me tightly
squeezing, until I run out of breath
the room goes dark
I feel close to death.

I am not the childhood version of me you remember

By Joshua

© Joshua 2026



I heard another autistic person speaking online, and something in me went still.

It wasn't what he was saying. It was the way he was saying it: a particular rhythm in the voice, an emphasis, a shape to the sentence. Suddenly, I could hear my mother doing an impression of me as a child.

There it was.

A piece of me I'd forgotten, preserved in somebody else's imitation.

The strange part wasn't that my mother remembered something about me that I didn't. Families do that. They keep the old footage. They remember the phase, the phrase, the thing you did with your hands, the food you refused, the sound you made, the joke that became family shorthand.

The strange part was realising how easily those memories can become ownership.

Other people remember your childhood and, without quite meaning to, begin treating their memory of you as more authoritative than your present knowledge of yourself.

They knew you then.

Therefore, they know you.

Except, I'm not the childhood version of me you remember.

And neither are you.

That sounds obvious until autism enters the room.

Autistic people are constantly being narrated by other people. Parents,

teachers, doctors, partners, journalists, employers, researchers, politicians. We're described from the outside so often that an outside description can begin to feel more official than the person standing in front of you.

Then adulthood arrives, and the hierarchy doesn't necessarily disappear.

You can be 36 years old and still find yourself arguing with a story that began when you were six.

This is where memory becomes complicated.

I don't think families are lying when they remember us differently. I don't think every childhood anecdote is an act of violence. Sometimes, an old story really does give us evidence we no longer carry ourselves.

That moment of recognition online did that for me.

My mother's old impression suddenly stopped being just an impression. It became data.

Not proof. Not diagnosis. Not a verdict.

A clue.

Something I could place beside other things I know now.

That distinction matters because autistic adulthood often involves reconstruction. Not inventing a new self but going back through the archive with new language.

What did I actually experience?

What did other people observe?

What did I learn to hide?

What did I learn to perform?

What changed because I grew up?

What changed because I adapted?

What only looks like disappearance because I got better at keeping it private?

Researchers usually call some of this camouflaging or masking. The language isn't perfect, but the underlying point is useful. Autistic adults describe learning ways to fit social expectations: suppressing visible behaviours, rehearsing responses, imitating other people, forcing eye contact, monitoring the body, calculating what should appear spontaneous.

Some of that can help us move through the world.

Some of it can also make the world very confident that it knows us.

That's the trap.

If I successfully adapt, the adaptation itself can later be used as evidence that there was never anything to adapt to.

The better the performance, the stronger the fiction.

So when an autistic adult reinterprets childhood, he isn't necessarily rewriting history.

He may finally have enough context to read it.

There's a difference.

The mistake is assuming the external account automatically outranks the internal one.

That mistake gets worse when we freeze autistic people in time.

Childhood becomes evidence against adulthood.

Adulthood becomes evidence against childhood.

Either way, development itself becomes suspicious.

But autistic people grow.

We learn.

We compensate.

We fail.

We recover.

We become more articulate about experiences that once existed without language.

We can become less willing to tolerate things we once survived.

We can become better at something without becoming less autistic.

None of this makes the earlier person fake.

None of it makes the present person fake either.

That's the fiction I want us to stop telling: that there must be one permanent, externally recognisable autistic self, and that whichever version other people remember most clearly is the real one.

No.

Human beings have histories, not screenshots.

I'm allowed to know more about myself now than I knew when I was a child.

I'm also allowed to know more about myself now than my family knew when I was a child.

They are witnesses.

They are not owners.

And that, for me, is where the October

theme of fear and fiction meets something very ordinary.

Not the dramatic fear that autistic people are dangerous.

Not the old fiction that we don't feel empathy.

Not the sensational stories told about vaccines, cures or epidemics.

Something smaller.

The fear that if an autistic adult becomes the most authoritative interpreter of his own life, everybody else has to surrender a little power over the story.

Parents may have to reinterpret memories they were certain about.

Professionals may have to admit an assessment saw only one moment.

Families may have to retire jokes that stopped being funny when the child acquired adult language.

And autistic adults may have to revisit a past that isn't neatly recoverable.

That can be uncomfortable.

It's also necessary.

I want the right to reinterpret without pretending I can perfectly reconstruct.

The right to say, "I remember this differently."

The right to say, "What you saw was real, and what I felt was real too."

The right to say, "I changed."

The right to say, "I'm still changing."

That voice I heard online didn't hand me a completed theory of my childhood.

It did something more useful.

It opened a door.

Behind it was an old family sound I suddenly heard differently.

I'm not the childhood version of me you remember.

I'm the person who survived long enough to remember him differently.

And I get a vote.

Research note

This piece was informed by research on autistic camouflaging, including Laura Hull and colleagues' qualitative study "Putting on My Best Normal" (*Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 2017), which examined masking and compensation in autistic adults; Louise Bradley and colleagues' study of autistic adults' experiences of camouflaging and its perceived impact on mental health (*Autism in Adulthood*, 2021); and Beatrice Rui Yi Loo and colleagues' qualitative study of how camouflaging can begin, continue and change across the lifespan (*Autism*, 2024).

Process note

Generative AI was used materially as part of my disability-related accessibility, research, drafting and revision workflow. The lived experience, argument, governing voice, structure, source choices, revisions and final editorial judgment are mine, and I take responsibility for the finished work.

I don't like change

By Olivia

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I don't like change or new things. I never have done - they freak me out. I may love dance, but I don't want to go to a new dance school or class. I know my order for a restaurant before we get there, and then it's sold out. But it's okay because I know I don't like change, so I already had a plan B dish in mind in case this happened.

I recently did a job interview where I was asked: "what is something you struggle with, can you give us an example and how did you overcome it?" I talked about my fear or anxiety about change and how I have learned to deal with it better. I shared how I now know I am worrying and stressing because something is a change or is new, rather than being worried about what the 'thing' is itself. That means I can understand this reaction is likely to happen and articulate this to others ahead of time, meaning they can help me, and I can give myself the grace when I struggle with it. It also means I can generally get over it faster. I mean, it still affects me, but now I understand it, so the impact is slightly better. It is slightly easier to 'see' what is happening and, therefore, push through it.

My interviewer then asked me: "Well, there is a lot of change in this role, how will you cope?" It almost made me laugh because I think this is the fiction of an autistic person's fear of change, that none of us can handle any change at all. Change at work (say, rotational placements or a new project), you can usually see coming,

can find out about, utilise existing or new relationships for support, and you are generally in some control of some of the aspects. That I can do.

My fear of change is going to the supermarket and them not having the one thing I'd decided on. My mum saying she's made muesli, but I already knew I was having toast for breakfast. Worrying I'll misunderstand the staff lunch policy, and wanting to watch and copy someone else first. The 'little things' that don't use my 'professional' brain.

You think an autistic person will do the same thing in the same way forever. Many of us do, but many of us don't, and many of us have routines and consistencies that an employer would never even notice (if I haven't left the house each day, I walk to M&S and Sainsbury's at about 6pm).

I took a risk with the answer I gave in that interview. I talked about my dislike of change, while also overriding my fear of being publicly autistic and talking about it at work. A real fear, given the stereotypes and ableist cultures that still quietly or loudly pervade the workplace. It felt like a little fight against my fear and your fiction. One in which I won.

I got the job.

Autism and misinformation

By Adam

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From my perspective, it is becoming increasingly difficult for autistic people to thrive in a society that is not built with our needs in mind. This issue is particularly important to me because certain media outlets and politicians continue to promote misleading, harmful and sometimes dangerous misinformation about autism. Rather than encouraging informed discussion based on research and evidence, these false narratives are often used to stigmatise autistic individuals, especially those from ethnic minority and LGBTQ+ communities.

The recent misinformation linking autism and paracetamol use during pregnancy is both harmful and unfounded. Although evidence has shown these claims to be misleading, they can still cause significant stress and anxiety for families who may worry that taking paracetamol during pregnancy could lead to autism. As a result of this misinformation, there is now an important need to reassure expectant mothers that autism is not caused by paracetamol use during pregnancy.

When discussing autism and health, I am increasingly frustrated that autism is still viewed as an illness or disease that needs to be 'cured'. Autism is not an illness. It is a hidden and often invisible neurological condition. While autistic people may face challenges with social communication, social interaction, sensory differences and co-occurring challenges such as stress and anxiety, autism also brings many strengths. These can include unique ways of thinking, creativity and a strong attention to detail. As a neurological condition, autism affects how we communicate, learn and process information. Autistic people often have different and equally valid ways of understanding the world. Because we think differently, we may need more time

to develop and reach our full potential, but autism is not something that needs to be 'cured'. It is a natural part of who we are.

I am becoming increasingly concerned about how autism is represented in the media, particularly on social media. One issue that continues to frustrate me is that major news organisations and media outlets still do not do enough to consult autistic people with lived experience when covering topics related to autism. Too often, commentators, broadcasters and public figures who are not autistic appear to make assumptions or draw conclusions without seeking meaningful input from autistic individuals. In my view, people with lived experience should be given more opportunities to share their perspectives and contribute to these discussions. While I hope I am mistaken, it sometimes feels as though autistic voices are being given fewer opportunities to speak openly about issues that affect them, particularly on major media platforms. As a result, some autistic people may feel unheard, overlooked or excluded from conversations that directly impact their lives and communities.

As misinformation, harmful narratives and negative stereotypes continue to spread throughout society, it is becoming increasingly difficult for autistic people to navigate everyday life. These misconceptions can lead to autistic individuals being unfairly judged and, in some cases, subjected to bullying, harassment and both verbal and physical abuse. As a result, many autistic people may feel pressured to hide their traits through masking rather than being accepted for who they are. I worry that this can come at the cost of their wellbeing, confidence and sense of identity.

Unfortunately, I find it difficult to end this article on a completely positive note. I fear that autism is increasingly being viewed through a negative lens, despite ongoing efforts to promote understanding and acceptance. While we must continue to challenge misinformation and advocate for autistic voices, I admit that this can sometimes leave me feeling

discouraged and losing trust in certain individuals. Nevertheless, I believe it is important that we continue speaking out, sharing our experiences and ensuring that autistic perspectives are heard rather than overlooked.

Fear, beauty and human life

By Hyun

© Hyun 2026



Fear is colourless.

When fear takes away every colour,
it takes away the colour connected with
the word fear as well.

The only thing one can observe
is a landscape without colour,
and colourless air moving in and out
of the body in scattered waves.

The person observes that fear knows
it is colourless, because they carry
memories of colours within them,
memories that still remain.

A quiet flow of air arrives
and slowly brings colours back
to the colourless landscape
and the person standing within it.
Now I can see the sunset,
its reflection falling softly
upon the moving ripples of water,
where light begins to breathe.
I stand and make a butterfly
with my hands beneath the sunset,
then I dance with that butterfly
in my bare feet beneath the glowing light.

Author's note:

Fear can take many forms, including misinformation about autism, stereotypes, sociopolitical narratives and other forms of misunderstanding. But none of these forms of fear can overtake the beauty of human life – the human life autistic people experience.

The phantom of my own opera

By Caitlin

© Caitlin 2026



Spending my life performing a role I never auditioned for.

Overture

I don't remember auditioning for this role. There was no queue outside a theatre, no script in my hands, no line of directors asking me if I could hit the right notes. However, I still found myself on stage. Everyone else seemed to know the choreography. They knew when to laugh, when to speak, when to be quiet. They knew how much eye contact was enough, how loudly they were supposed to talk, how to tell when a conversation was over. I watched them carefully, then I copied. No one told me I was rehearsing for the role of being normal.

Act I: Christine

Christine is young and impressionable, learning her way around a world that already seems to know what it expects from her. That was me. I was always watching. Watching how other girls made friends, how they talked, what they did with their hands, how long they looked at someone when they spoke. I became very good at imitation. I wasn't handed any stage directions, so I wrote my own - smile here, laugh now, look interested, don't say that, don't ask too many questions, don't make it weird.

Act II: The Mask

The Phantom had his mask; I had mine.

His was visible; mine wasn't. Mine was made from tiny things: expressions I practised, conversations I rehearsed, reactions I copied. It was knowing when to pretend I wasn't overwhelmed, smiling when I wanted to leave, saying "I'm fine" because explaining why I wasn't felt harder. It was becoming whoever the room seemed to need me to be.

The audience applauded.

"You don't seem autistic."

"You're so confident."

"You've come out of your shell."

I wanted to explain that they weren't seeing me, but rather a very successful performance.

Act III: Backstage

Every theatre has a backstage, a place the audience doesn't see. Mine was the walk home after a social event, my room after a long day, the silence after too much noise, the hours spent replaying conversations, wondering whether I had said the wrong thing.

Backstage, Madame Giry might have noticed.

She always seemed to notice things other people missed.

There were people in my life who did too. They noticed I was sensitive, worried. They knew certain things overwhelmed me, and that sometimes, I needed to disappear for a while. Still, nobody knew the name of the show, so it was called other things. I was shy and awkward in classes at school. I was too emotional and sensitive about certain topics. I was an overthinker in my driving lessons. I was the weird girl during freshers' week of university, who cried due to the change in routine. I was difficult to read emotionally in my past relationships.

So I kept performing.

Act IV: The Audience

The audience is generous when you get the performance right - they smile, applaud, tell you how well you're doing, cheer, but they don't see backstage. They don't see the costume being pulled tighter or the actor forgetting their lines,

or when the music becomes too loud. They only notice when something goes wrong. And when it does, the audience can be so cruel. They boo, they jeer, they make fun of you. The mask slips, and the performance stops. Suddenly I'm too much, too emotional, too sensitive, too difficult.

The Phantom has always frightened people because they don't know what is beneath the mask. I think people are often frightened by autistic people for the same reason. Not because there is something frightening underneath, but because they don't understand what they're seeing.

Act V: Raoul

For a long time, I thought Raoul was the life I was supposed to choose - the ordinary, straightforward one. The life where you simply grow up, make friends, get a job, fall in love, know what you're doing and move neatly from one act to the next. I thought if everyone else could follow the script, eventually I would learn it too.

Act VI: The Phantom

At 26, someone finally told me what the Phantom was - autism.

And suddenly the theatre looked different. The things I had spent years

criticising myself for began to make sense. The rehearsals. The exhaustion. The sensory overwhelm. The endless analysis of conversations. The feeling that everyone else had received a handbook I had somehow missed. I had spent years terrified that someone would discover the monster underneath my mask, but there was no monster; there was just me. This is the thing about masking - you can become so good at hiding yourself that you start hiding from yourself too.

Finale: The Curtain

I still wear the mask sometimes, and I probably always will. There are rooms where it feels safer; there are stages where the costume is useful, but now I recognise it's a costume.

I know that the person underneath the mask isn't a Phantom. She doesn't need to be fixed, learn every line perfectly, perform every night. The audience can wait, the music can stop, the curtain can fall, and for once, I don't need to take a bow. I can simply go backstage, take off the mask and be myself.

Perhaps the Phantom was never the monster - the monster was the belief that I needed to hide.

Next issue's theme:

The suggested theme for the January 2027 edition is focused interests. You are invited to interpret this any way you like and respond to it in writing or with visual art.

We also welcome submissions on any other topic of your choosing, unrelated to the suggested theme. Remember to complete a permissions form for your submission, as we can't publish anything without it. Please submit work at autism.org.uk/thespectrum.

Fear and fiction

By Fabbihah

© Fabbihah 2026



A lot comes with fear. Fears that we face as autistic people in this world. Fears about who might say what next or what the news will portray on live TV. Fears of the next way we will be stereotyped. Not if, but when. Because that's the reality. A reality that must be broken.

Fear of what myth those around me will believe before getting to hear me out. Because fiction has consequences. Real-life consequences.

The fictional story of an autistic person who has no empathy for those around them. The autistic person who is too much to handle. The autistic person who 'does not look autistic', but instead 'looks normal'.

I could probably keep going. That's the problem.

A collection of sentences, some heard so often and repeated more times than countable, that they now stop sounding fictional. Somewhere between each of those words, that individual is lost.

I always feel I have to prove myself before even uttering a word. I feel as though I must withhold any proof of my diagnosis, any body language that could give a sign and bite my tongue even before I am given the chance to speak. Somehow, I can find myself worrying about whether I am 'autistic enough' while also worrying about being seen as 'too autistic'.

It's a walking contradiction, it feels. There's an expectation that I should be able to explain myself perfectly, while simultaneously defending myself against assumptions that I never created. That we, as autistic individuals, never created.

There are many external fears around autism. It is so often demonised, presented as something that should be feared, or that autism that prevents you from succeeding but instead holds you back. That we all need fixing, medicating, saving or need to be spoken for.

But what do you do when the thing we should fear is not actually autism, but instead the fiction that society believes?

Because the reality is much more complicated than the stories we are so often given. Autism does not have one face, one personality, one way of communicating or one version of a life.

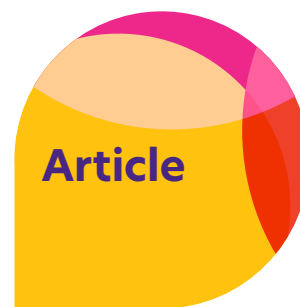
And perhaps that is the part of the story we need to change. Not asking autistic people to fit the fiction, but allowing the fiction to finally be replaced with reality - the different reality each autistic individual experiences daily. How, just like allistic members of society, we are all just as different to one another, with a lot in common.

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My life - as a colourful mermaid

By Lillian-Joyce

© Lillian-Joyce 2026



My legs dangle over the edge of the pool as I wait for the water to morph them back into a shimmering blue and purple tail. I like colour, lots of colour. Not like the current style of clothes, where everything is a single shade.

This morning when I woke up, I chose purple and blue flowered leggings. I wanted my colourful side to shine. Yet now, after a long day of swimming in the pool at a work meeting, retrieving words and ideas from beneath the waters to present to my coworkers, my colours feel stuck deep in my lungs.

Blood hums in my ears as I think of forcing myself to take yet another deep dive. The last session of the day has begun. A time to connect one-on-one with coworkers in the deep end. Already the pool is full of people diving underwater to find words to communicate life's concerns with each other.

"Come on," says my friend, her legs now a plain black tail. "Let's get started."

Filling my exhausted lungs with air, I follow her beneath the surface of the water. The light reflecting from all the other tails flipping and flapping under the water glares into my eyes. I blink, almost missing the words she hands me.

"...he no longer feels close to me," she says. "Every day, I mentor people in how to keep their relationships stable, but in my own...I'm not sure if he even loves me."

The pressure of the water burns in my ears. I must focus, ignore the flashing conversations around me, regulate my facial expression and swim deep to gather words of understanding. It all takes oxygen. But my lungs have already run out.

Resigning, I pull an emergency answer from my back pocket: "Yeah, I'm sorry."

Propelling upward, I break the surface of the water and drink a mouthful of oxygen. I wish she'd notice the colours on my tail and understand without words the limited space within my lungs.

Returning to the pressure of keeping the conversation alive, I attempt to show her my true colours using words within my lungs' diving capacity. "Can you really see my words with all these glaring lights?"

"Yes," she replies, missing my invitation, "can't you? Do you need glasses?"

"No," I answer, "I don't," and return to pretending that I can store the same amount of oxygen in my lungs like the rest of the mermaids.

The right words. Words that speak the true colours that I'm made of. They always rest in a place deeper than I'm able to dive.

Porridge.

By Bunni O

© Bunni O 2026



Tear-torn mulch papered predilection,
pathologise full spectrumed light.

Weighting mouthful wording

Oat sickfoam filching

flinch porridged running mouthfoot

too cold,

too hot.

I scald my tongue,

palating every syllable firstly

before I spew unto faces.

Mulchmade mâché self-digestion

birdbabied soft chew my
raw-jaw flavours

oatpasted pilfered story

wordwash pallid incomprehension

to receive grace, their words take
my place

too blunt,

too emotional.

But just as I am upright, speaking
legible, negligence inked by us
we don't deserve your help.

Fluency-frisked, patdown proof
competence copyright gulpgullet.

Regurgent evidence,
porridged patter, entitlement-etched,
filing clarity as closure

too able,

too costly.

Fitted futures they draft me to,
beggars belief the less I speak

too well,

too worth it.

Sticky teeth bar feeding, spat out
the other side

regurgitated and itemised,
belly emptied of my name.

Author's note

This poem explores the frustration of finding the words to begin advocating and describing your experiences for yourself, and, paradoxically, the fear that people may start believing you less.

There can be a demand that gets placed on autistic people before anyone will help us: make yourself understandable first. Chew it down, soften it, make it easy to swallow. It's the physical effort of masking carefully enough to be taken seriously and the fear of what happens when your ability to self-advocate is overridden.

And the moment you're finally able to encapsulate your struggles and experiences, your own clarity is weaponised against you.

I fear that this paradox is more to do with control than it is necessarily policing our experiences. If someone can decide a person is 'not really' disabled the moment they become self-advocating, then whoever holds that power can get to define disability on their own terms and dismiss the people most able to explain what they need. That shapes policy. It decides whose account of disability gets to count, and it quietly erodes the right disabled people have to speak for their own future.

Underneath my work is the sense that speaking plainly is itself a risk. If I mask 'too well' or explain myself clearly enough, it could cost me the help I need.

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