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PICKING A THOUSAND SCABS: COPING IN A-SHARP

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Stairway to STEM

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Picking a Thousand Scabs: Coping in A-Sharp

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Stairway to STEM

In this poem, the author describes a pre- and post-diagnosis review of her life and the effect a lack-of an autism diagnosis had on her focus moving through education whilst being a Latinx youth. The author writes about her experiences coping with communication and social deficits, racism, abuse, and autistic burn-out, to shape a perspective for educators apply for their learning environments.

When I was a kid moving around schools
I tried to objectify my view on the rules
They weren't all the same in all of the places
But I noticed a pattern when it came time to try cases
An impression was made about rules in play spaces
A question was made about rules in gray areas
A session about rules just came off as hysteria
Something was off about the way the world worked
Like I was missing the manual or the coupon book

It was time to read a poem that had Spanish words
And the teacher called on me to read the verse
I was confused because I didn't speak Spanish
I decided speaking up could probably cause damage
So I read the passage
I didn't say the words right and as I was reading
I noticed my class was whiter than me

When another teacher said it was time to "observe"
My peers complained, but I did the inverse
I didn't see an assignment to do
I saw a method to the unpredictable new
To look at the context surrounding the clues
Fourth grade science taught me to describe
I learned how to use facts to decide
I could feel peace when things were as they should be
I connected what I felt to what I would see

When I thought about my future
or what to do for work
I thought about my talents
then the benefits and perks
I thought about meaning and when I got the gist
I decided that I wanted to be a scientist

My parents divorced and I felt the Earth shake
My soul trembling in fear of the quake
Searching for identity
Trying to feel around while the infrastructure was crumbling
Constant chaos of the mind
I locked myself in to protect
I began to solve problems through a slight disconnect

Throughout my teen years I rebelled where I could
Maintaining my grades meant I could stand when I stood
Although every time it came time to choose
Between the devil I didn't and the devil I knew
No matter what choice I would make, I would lose
I stopped trying to find the line
I drew one instead and called it mine
I started using my wits to bemuse
To turn the tables on the hidden rouse

Searching for identity while searching for the rule book
It's hard to focus on studies when you have everywhere to look
I wasn't really the type to act up in school
Although I operated with a different set of tools

"Get a job or quit school band", they told me in a rule session
They were sure I wouldn't get hired, we were in a recession
I smugly announced where I would serve for my crime
I was the new cashier for a place called Pretzel Time

I bought a computer and began to learn
Long after time served, I made it to work
And when I had to quit because of the transit
I knew at that point, I had had it
I sold my time pining for freedom
Reading for hours learning how to leave them

My obsession to get out wearing me thin
Obligations stacked to the height within
I grabbed opportunities as they came by
but my mind doesn't live on the street where they drive

My first time at Pretzel Time for four months showed me
That the adult world I thought existed was phony
There were two guys there who called me 'spick' and other names
Went through my purse and baritone case
Knew my address and how much I got paid
Like, it was bad
And you know what's so funny?
I would have rather been there
Than at home with my stepdad
Did you catch that I quit because of the bus
And not because those dudes were dangerous?
I could've reported, but I knew it was pointless
They knew where I lived
I couldn't afford to be thoughtless

After a break and when we moved on a different street
I decided to see the woman who hired me
She was happy to see me for summer work
I was happy to see she got rid of those jerks
And yet wasn't long until I began to think
About legal adult things I could do at seventeen
When my grandma finally had a room free
I appreciated it when she offered it to me
My mom acted at first like it was fine
Then she seemed to lose peace of mind
She tried to tighten her grip
But to keep me around she loosened it
These were the things on my mind
Instead of college or the academic grind

And eventually my peace bubble caught fire
Due to the shattered promises of liars
My bubble didn't pop so much as melted
And in the gooey mess, I felt it
I couldn't keep up with all life's deceptions
No matter how quickly I solved its equations
I hated the systems that I was locked in
The actions others made based on my gender and skin

Even after high school I remained angry
Lied to my face all the time and left hanging
Not really sure how to tell who to trust
and how to tell if someone could be dangerous
Communication was always absurd
Did you know there's a structure for nouns, articles and verbs?

Not any old one that makes lots of sense
But the kind of structure that puts listening on offense
Using talking to defend instead of explain
What ridiculous notions they've made me entertain

I've fallen for for-profit college schemes
Twice, in fact, like a deer in high-beams
I struggled with paperwork and financial aid laws
I couldn't figure out where the heck the line was
And I found myself struggling to make ends meet
I couldn't understand what I was missing

Then I was told something when I was twenty-five
Something that sparked me electric, alive
I was informed by a doctor I was autistic
and things clicked into place for me in an instant

All the times I misread situations
All the times I misheard conversations
Every wrong proposed explanation
The false dichotomy that became a taunt
"Are you sure you can do that?"
and "Do whatever you want!"

What they don't tell you when you get diagnosed
Is that you review your life in a microscope
Imagine living in a house where you know the floor plan, but it's too dark to see
Getting a diagnosis was light invoking memories

All the things that I didn't understand
Would throw me for a loop when I let it out of hand
Understanding that my brain operates a different way
Was integral to discoveries I've made and what I now say
I wondered why no one thought to test me as a child
I get a little ruffled when people say my autism is mild
A diagnosis would have changed my life
At any age prior to twenty-five

So, the next time you have an autistic someone in your class
Take a sec to think about their possible past
Use that beat to find support you can give
And in that way autistic people can live