

**Understanding Highly Sensitive and Autistic Experiences through Dialogical Self
Theory and Poetry**

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Abstract

Autistic women and highly sensitive people have historically been underrepresented in medical research, academic scholarship, media, diagnostic frameworks, and broader societal understandings. As a result, many have been left without the language or frameworks to understand and express their lived experiences. This autoethnographic essay explores how poetry and reflective writing, through the lens of Dialogical Self Theory (DST), can serve as tools for identity reconstruction, meaning-making, and self-compassion for late-diagnosed autistic women and highly sensitive people. Through personal narrative and poetry, I explore my experiences as a highly sensitive person and autistic individual, though at the time of the essay's original writing, I had not yet received a formal autism diagnosis. Personal narrative and poetry become vehicles through which previously misunderstood experiences are externalized, revisited, and reinterpreted. By engaging with multiple I-positions through writing, autistic and highly sensitive individuals may develop a more authentic understanding of themselves, fostering self-acceptance, agency, and inner peace.

Keywords: autism, late diagnosed autism, autistic women, highly sensitive person, poetry, narrative, Dialogical Self Theory

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I am the witch
the wolf
who only comes out at night

The plummeting wave
the wooden wind chime
the sound bath
the singular howl

I rise only in silence
like the moon in the night

And when I rise
I Rise
more radiant than the sun
gentler than the falling feather

Heart beat and flesh
my breath becomes a river—*ahhh*
And I feel the tingle up my spine
warmth in my shoulders

Magic begins to flow out of my body
 and I am one with
 the ocean
 the air
 the dust visible in sunlight.

Simply turn on Netflix, and you will see more and more shows featuring autistic characters. It is no surprise that autism has made its way into modern pop culture; however, many of these identities still belong to white boys and men (Price, 2022). So, what does this mean for the autistic woman whose lived experiences are different from those of men? How do autistic women understand their own identities when they are not largely depicted in research (Price, 2022)? How do autistic women find meaning in their identities if their experiences are not acknowledged under the autism umbrella?

This essay aims to illuminate the lived experiences of autistic women by using narrative therapy—specifically through writing poetry—as a tool to both reframe and reclaim their identities, to understand the impact of masking, and to consider how they wish to present themselves in modern day society. Through writing and the Dialogical Self Theory (DST) (Hermans & Gieser, 2012), autistic women and those who suspect they may be on the autism spectrum can gain deeper insight into their past experiences and cultivate a renewed sense of understanding and self-compassion.

I will take an autoethnographic approach to this essay, situating myself as both subject and researcher. To open, I have not been diagnosed as autistic. Instead, many years ago, I discovered the work of Dr. Elaine Aron (1997) on highly sensitive people (HSP), and my life

was forever changed. For the first time, I felt understood in terms of my sensory issues as well as my behaviours and emotional responses. But after my child was diagnosed as autistic, I found myself listening to the psychologist explain traits my child possessed that I, too, carried. My first thought was simply, “Well, my child must do that because I do that.” However, after further research and a conversation with a colleague who holds a PhD, a few master’s degrees, and is also on the spectrum, he stated that he felt highly sensitive people were just undiagnosed autistic women. “Did the chicken come first or the egg?” he asked me. And so began my spiraling and researching as I realized how many HSP tendencies overlapped with those of autistic people. During this time, I began to notice my masking abilities were unravelling, and skills I used to be able to handle, such as socializing or wearing itchy clothing, I could no longer bear. Price (2022) discusses that it is common for autistic people to regress after an autism diagnosis, as their masking abilities are suddenly found out. In other words, once the egg has cracked, it cannot be repaired. So, while I await my own diagnosis, perhaps I need to embrace this new baby-chicken version of myself, which I am doing through writing.

In *Raising an Autistic Girl* (Eberstadt, 2024), the author lists several dozen common autistic traits found in girls and organizes them into four categories: emotional, psychological, behavioural, and social. In this essay, I will list one or two traits from each section as an epigraph and then respond to them through a poem. The poem will serve as a launching point to discuss narrative therapy, DST, writing for healing, and the reformation of one’s (possible) autistic identity. I am nervous to take this route while I still await my own diagnosis, but I feel confident in my understanding of both autism and DST to make a concise argument about the therapeutic benefits of poetry and writing in reclaiming one’s identity that may now be understood as disabled. However, as my diagnosis is not confirmed, I will be using the term *highly sensitive*

person when explicitly referring to myself, and *autism* or *autistic* for those with a clinical diagnosis.

Theoretical Framework

While talk therapy can be helpful, writing offers a unique therapeutic benefit: the freedom to express oneself honestly, without shame or fear of judgment. Private writing allows individuals to develop a deeper understanding of themselves, for “in journal therapy the primary focus is on developing intimacy with the self” (Bolton et al., 2006, p. 27). This intimacy with the self can be discovered through private writing because there is no audience. This freedom is key for autistic people who have spent much of their lifetime masking in an effort to fit in, that is, hiding one’s autistic traits to blend in with neurotypicals (Evans et al., 2024). Thus, the lack of audience is one step in unmasking and better understanding who they really are outside of societal expectations. For the undiagnosed autistic, or the autistic who does not feel safe to disclose their disability, a secret remains, and in secrets, shame is easily bred.

Charon (2006) argues that writing is a form of narrative medicine, even noting the health improvements people report when their secret is finally revealed. Writing can be the first safe step in understanding one’s lived experiences, for “telling our story does not merely document who we are; it helps to make us who we are” (Charon, 2006, p. 69). Writing allows individuals to better analyze their identity and make sense of it.

For example, I carried a lot of guilt after I moved to San Francisco with my then-boyfriend and found the experience incredibly overwhelming. Often at night, I withdrew to the bathroom where I soaked in the bath. The sound of the city was simply too much, and in the bathroom, I could close the door, turn off the lights, and lie in a body of hot water, having complete control of my sensory environment. These are the facts, but these facts often left me feeling like a failure, like I could not keep up with my boyfriend. I was in my early twenties, in a new country and city, and the nightlife (and I do not just mean bars; I mean casual dinners at restaurants) was more than I could manage. Many years later, through the act of honest,

vulnerable, and objective writing, I was able to reframe these experiences. Rather than seeing myself as a failure, I recognized those evenings spent in the bathtub as my way to find sensory healing. The writing process helped me understand, including in my present-day life, how deeply my sensory disruptions and needs affect me. I have begun to better understand my identity as a highly sensitive person, possibly someone who is autistic, which has given me a lot more grace and understanding of my needs. If this is a disability, should I not approach my identity in a way that allows me to genuinely thrive in my environment, rather than merely survive?

By further uncovering some of these lived experiences through writing, I have begun to witness multiple I's interacting with one another: the 'I' of who I thought I was, the 'I' of who I am today, and the 'I' of who I might be tomorrow. Hermans and Gieser (2012) would explain this as the occurrence of both internal and external dialogues within the self. The internal is the self, and the external is the dialogue influenced by cultural and societal factors, thus creating inner democracies that interact with one another. These dialogues may sometimes be opposing, yet they all remain integral parts of the self. By reframing my identity as someone deeply impacted by their environment, rather than as someone who does not fit into it, I open the possibility for multiple positionings. This multiple positioning is part of DST, which Lengelle et al. (2018) argue involves “the ‘external positions’ of the world in which we were and are socialized and which formed our identities [that] have become *internalized* selves and sometimes become I-prisons” (p. 82).

Given that so many autistic women have failed to meet traditional diagnostic criteria—criteria rooted in racism, classism, ableism, and sexism, originally presented as saving high-functioning autistic boys and men from Nazi death camps but, in reality, functioning as a fascist tool that harmed autistic people (Price, 2022)—it is no wonder their identities feel trapped in prisons. However, with DST as a way of deconstructing the self, compassion becomes possible when understanding that these experiences were misinterpreted. In understanding these

experiences, autistic women can begin to feel at home within themselves and see their power by unmasking, even in a society better suited to neurotypicals. Thus, a new I-identity emerges when deconstructed and better understood through writing, where “I-disabled” can also become “I-as-safe,” as powerful, and as authentic to the self.

Emotional Experiences

Girls may seem more immature than their neurotypical peers and may be perceived as highly sensitive (Eberstadt, 2024, p. 22).

I thought everyone startled like the doe.

When coyote eats rabbit,
does not everyone cry?

I explain to my own little doe the circle of life,
but she cries as I once cried,
before I learned I had to toughen up to survive.

To don a mask, to stuff my sensitivity inside.
To no longer graze the grass,
but walk confidently, boldly, a lion on the prowl.

I was never one to howl, though,

I was never one to fight.

I was always meant to listen, to cradle, to kiss, to graze.

To wrap my arms around the great Willow

as it cried.

You're not alone, I'd whisper.

And only whisperings were heard after sunset,

when the lions and the cougars were at rest,

and I felt safe enough to search for wildflowers.

When the sun rises and the flowers open,

I've learned to stand tall in the dawn,

to not fear the other animals, the wind, the rain,

to let myself crumble like dust when I need to crumble,

for the dust is what nourishes the Earth,

the Earth nourishes me,

and I cry for the rabbit

as I cry for the coyote,

and I see we're all just the same.

I have always been a highly sensitive person, a trait shared by 15-20% of the population (Aron, 1997), though more recent studies suggest upwards of 31% (Lionetti et al., 2018). Throughout my life, people have often told me that I am “too sensitive,” the word “too” implying that something is wrong with me. I always found this strange. What is normal about watching violent movies in which women and children suffer? I remain adamant that such viewing is not normal, but it is socially acceptable. While my younger sister could stomach films like *300* (Snyder, 2006), I avoided them at all costs. I still remember the beheading scene in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (Donner, 1982), glimpsed through my fingers despite my parents telling me to close my eyes. It has haunted me ever since. I have never watched *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997) in its entirety, though I have spent hours researching the event.

It was not just films, though. In school, I often struggled to keep up with other children. My sensitivity sometimes held me back, though I also felt it allowed me to remain gentle, humble, and kind. Others saw me as weak, naive, and gullible. I often became the butt of a joke because I believed people sincerely, despite the absurdity of their comments. I did not always pick up on social cues, other than knowing that something was going, and that it included me. I learned to laugh at jokes made about me to avoid further embarrassment and, in doing so, assimilated into high school norms to fit in. Beyond the high school pressures, though, there were often headaches which, looking back, I now understand came from the noise, the lights, and the long hours spent being at school. As I approached my later teens, I was not just out of sync with people emotionally, but my body did not want to keep up either. While a snowmobiling accident ended my dreams of a career as a ballet dancer, there was relief, relief that I no longer had to keep up with the other dancers. It was as if my broken back had saved me.

When my daughter was born, I knew she was different. Everyone knew she was different. Her vocabulary was advanced, her eye contact and observations sharp like a focused lion, and

her ability to mimic, even recite storybooks, was nearly perfect from memory. She was a little adult in a one-year-old's body—gifted, I thought. But her tantrums became alarming, beyond the typical terrible twos. When I brought them up to her doctor, along with my thoughts that she might be gifted, I was greeted with a smile that clearly meant: every parent thinks their child is gifted, special; yours is just the same. So, I carried on, too sensitive, too scared, to know how to further advocate for her. I was not the expert. I was just the mom, as society told me.

At age four, she declared herself vegetarian, the little doe mortified by the lion and family members who hunted the bunnies. I tried to explain the circle of life, how humans need to eat, but I could not argue with her. I wanted to tell her that I knew how she felt, for it broke my heart, too, but we had to eat, as did the lion, and she was getting tired of beans and tofu, too.

When she was diagnosed as autistic at the age of six, I felt both relief and sadness. The relief was feeling validated for trusting my instincts to seek a formal diagnosis. The sadness was that she truly faced challenges beyond the norm, a sensitivity beyond the norm. That was when things began to shift for me. Aron's (1997) research asks individuals to answer true or false to a set of 23 questions. If the score is higher than twelve, you are probably a highly sensitive person, meaning your central nervous system processes information to a greater extent. I answered true to all 23 questions, and after my daughter's psychologist began to explain her results, I realized how many of them reflected the traits of highly sensitive people (HSP). We are not just talking about sensitivity to loud noises and lights, but also emotional responses, clothing, food, even the weather. The emotional toil of navigating such intense external factors leaves both my daughter and me exhausted. But here I was, the masked lioness who had a successful (enough) career, was educated, married, and raising two children. I was doing it all, even as the doe within me retreated further, hiding in my bedroom because I could not bear another moment of... anything. Now, here was my little doe. How was I going to raise her? To mask, to become the lion? Or to live authentically, and remain the doe?

Lengelle et al. (2018) suggest that writing provides “the means through which we detach

ourselves from outmoded identities: we write, we read it over, and we also become an observer (i.e., in DST terms, we develop meta-positions) with the ability to see the bigger picture” (p. 87). For me, writing has allowed me to move outside of the identities I created in an effort to survive and into a place of greater compassion. Without my daughter’s diagnosis prompting me to reflect on my own experiences, I may not have ever been able to take a meta-position of myself. But now that I have, writing has become the tool that has allowed me to reframe these former identities into new and more holistic versions of myself.

Whereas Aron (1997) describes HSP as having a character trait, autism is a developmental disability. By writing and rewriting my past experiences, I have been able to come to terms with these varying and, at the moment, still underdetermined identities. Charon (2006) writes that “narrative knowledge enables one individual to understand particular events befalling another individual not as an instance of something that is universally true but as a singular and meaningful situation” (p. 9). Whether trait or disability, at the very least, I have begun to acknowledge my experiences as my truth. In this reclaimed or proclaimed identity (even if only to myself at the moment), there is not failure, but growth.

Social Experiences

They may be very adept at changing to fit in with the group they are in (Eberstadt, 2024, p. 23).

I’ve always liked the changing colours—
like autumn leaves giving way to red, orange and yellow.
Or when the grey clouds pass after a storm
and the sun begins to peak through a rainbow donning above the lake.

In the evening, before the sky draws black,
and the blue radiates pinks and purples, cotton candy clouds.

I thought I could change colours, too.
A shade of blue and green like a crystal lake,
or yellow and orange like the wildflowers.

But every time I changed a little
I wilted.
And soon my petals
began to shed
until there was
nothing
left of
me.

A key trait or characteristic in late-diagnosed autistic women is their impeccable ability to mask (Price, 2022). The thing is, I thought masking was normal, and to some extent, it is. What is not normal is having post-traumatic stress responses to ordinary events, especially when, fortunately, one has not experienced any classic traumatic experiences. I began to realize this during my therapy sessions: I was exhibiting behaviours aligned with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yet there was no apparent reason for me to have PTSD. Over time, and with a good therapist, I began to understand how symptoms of PTSD can arise from high masking capabilities (Price, 2022). In short, I was masking to such an extreme degree that I was burning myself out until I became incapable of functioning. So, I began to write—write and write until I realized nearly all my life was one giant mask.

Still, I remain on a wait list for a diagnosis, and my current therapist has been transparent about not being an expert in autism, yet in our work together, one thought remains: by writing, I am becoming the expert of my life. Bacigalupe (1996) argues that when experts allow their clients to write with them, including writing their own stories and letting the professional serve as a witness, clients can better understand their sense of self, story, and purpose. By writing my own story, and interrogating my inner democracies, I have been able, without an official diagnosis, to move into holistic health as I better understand my needs. For example, masking is a form of safety in the public sphere, yet it leaves me in complete burnout in private. Instead, I have been experimenting with ways I can demask without defaulting to burnout, allowing me to reconnect with my *doe-self* rather than my *lion-self*. The *doe-self* embodies emotional and physical well-being but understanding it has required careful inner interrogation in order to understand the *doe* not as a weak or a threat, but as a centred and essential part of my being. There is no need to change myself if I can understand the core of myself as valid and whole. So instead of searching for colour in the external leaves and wilting in the evenings, I can appreciate the colours in my own home.

Psychological Experiences

They may seem very insecure and eager to be accepted by others (Eberstadt, 2024, p. 22).

I set the table with the finest china—
 my mother's, her mother's—
 deep burgundy plates, bowls, and wine glasses.
 I watch as they eat and drink,
 refilling their bowls before they notice they are empty.

Mine seems to empty itself,
 though my lips never touch a spoon.

When my bowl cracks,
they laugh like loons in the night.

And I wonder,
why does the deer serve its predator?

Bertrand (2023) uses the metaphor of the self as a chambered nautilus, where the self evolves and expands through writing practices aimed at personal development:

The shell of this cephalopod expands as it grows ... writing helps us to build new, larger chambers and to move into them as our sense of self evolves. Within each chamber, we engage in a narrative shift(s) until we reach a new level of awareness or ‘master narrative,’ which tells the story of our life experiences and describes the meanings we attach to them. (Bertrand, 2023, p. 85)

When I wrote the poem above, I began to recognize not only the cruelty I had endured from so-called friends, but also the ways I had inflicted similar harm on myself—through masking, serving, and pleasing others at the expense of my own well-being. In the same breath, I also began to develop empathy for those around me. For example, when someone was mad at me, I began to understand their frustration, for I had not been my honest, authentic self with. In some cases, people had outright wronged me; in others, they simply aligned their values with society and lived life as they saw authentic. I had not lived the same way and had instead put myself in vulnerable positions, where others did nothing but drink the soup that was served to them.

Through DST and writing poetry, I have come to understand the harm masking has caused me and have begun extending grace to those who could not be expected to understand the real me. Now that I have asked why the deer serves its predators, I can begin asking who I truly am and who I want to surround myself with. To come out not only as a highly sensitive person

but as someone who is possibly autistic, are these people safe? If they are not, then why am I holding onto these relationships? Would it not be better for me to let them flow down the river and see what new streams I come across? If they are safe, just how do I come out as autistic to them?

In my MAIS 621 class, we were instructed to write a minimum of 1,000 words a week in our journal for the duration of the four- to six-month course (and my hope has been to continue this practice). There were times at the beginning when I did not know what to write about, but by the end of writing, I always came out with a new insight, perspective, or sense of relief and authority. This is not coincidental, either. Research shows that writing for 20 minutes a day about stressful events can improve one's health, both physically and mentally (Cameron & Nicholls, 1998).

However, there is a catch: individuals must not only write about the facts but also seek to understand the underlying messages beneath the facts—for example, by looking for meaning in a way that creates a satisfactory understanding of the events, and perhaps alters one's prior understanding of the story (Cameron & Nicholls, 1998). For autistic people, rumination runs strongly compared to neurotypical individuals and can leave them trapped in a hamster wheel (Price, 2022); as such, the ability to rewrite one's narrative is crucial in objectively seeing the self. For example, without writing about my experiences as a potential autistic person—and writing through some of the same problems time and time again—I would not have had the courage to ever ask myself why the deer continues to serve its predator.

Naturally, and for years, I held onto the same friendships out of loyalty, though certainly not loyalty to myself, but loyalty to maintain a certain image and honour the historical significance that friendship held. By writing and examining the multiple I's within me, I no longer have to see myself as a victim in a harmful relationship; I can move forward by critically reflecting on the power imbalances I have experienced. Research shows that we are naturally inclined to make sense of situations around us, and that “once we understand how and why an

event has occurred, we are prepared more to deal with it should it happen again” (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p. 1250). For the autistic individual, the very act of writing can move them from a place where events simply happen to them to a place where they can function through and around those events, reclaiming their identity, sense of self, and safety.

Psychological Experiences II

They may have been diagnosed with mood disorders (including BPD or narcissistic personality disorder) before receiving an Autism diagnosis (Eberstadt, 2024, p. 22).

The therapist asked if I was moody.

I said I felt more like a flower

at night,

sweltering

in the heat,

shivering

in the cold,

giving

when the bumble bees neared,

withdrawing

at the crunch of hiking boots.

The therapist asked if I was moody, and

I wondered what exactly I had done.

In 2019, a year after my first child was born, I received my first clinical diagnosis of depression, which, in hindsight, was certainly postpartum depression. My therapist at the time asked if I tended to be moody, leaving me utterly confused. Was it not obvious that my mood was shaped by my surroundings? Being called moody felt like being gaslit by a professional to whom I had borne my soul. Once again, I did not feel moody; I felt sensitive and in response to

my environment. In my opinion, moody described someone who was self-absorbed, indifferent to others, and lacking self-awareness.

Understanding one's story objectively and in a way that creates meaning is bound to produce benefits. However, for an autistic individual, it is crucial, as autistic girls and women are more likely to be misdiagnosed with conditions such as anxiety, depression, or even bipolar disorder (BPD) (Price, 2022). While anxiety and depression can coincide with autism, antidepressants or anxiety medication will not help autistic individuals cope with being autistic. There is no cure for autism, and while medication can alleviate some of the negative side effects (i.e., anxiety and depression) that come with navigating a misunderstood condition, it does not help the autistic individual understand themselves in the compassionate way that requires support beyond medication.

Furthermore, receiving an early autism diagnosis—not a misdiagnosis of conditions like BPD or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), though ADHD often co-occurs—can help decrease the risk of developing depression, anxiety, and eating disorders later in life (Eberstadt, 2024). In other words, the sooner autistic individuals understand themselves and can begin writing their own narrative, the better their outcomes for success.

As a high-masking highly sensitive person, I've always had an intense interest in people, which is common among high-masking autistic women and part of why many autistic women fly under the radar when it comes to diagnosis, because their masking skills are so finely attuned (Eberstadt, 2024; Price, 2022). With my own keen understanding of people and social behaviours, I knew I was not the moody person she described. I was not the narcissist.

However, I will admit that in discovering more about autism, moodiness can accompany the palette—but not due to narcissism—rather due to one's inability to cope in a neurotypical society that does not cater to divergence. If one is constantly exposed to stormy waters, it is understandable to react in order to keep the ship from sinking. For autistic individuals, though, without awareness of how to steer their ship, sinking is quite common, resulting in meltdowns or,

in my case, what is most likely an autistic shutdown. It is not that I have abandoned ship; I *am* the ship, and the ship no longer functions.

Of course, I could hold onto the label of moody and see only what is wrong with me, or I can see my sensitivity and understand that I am reacting to my environment. To be a healthy individual, I need accommodations. Writing has allowed me to discover some of these, the most obvious being writing itself—a therapeutic tool that allows me to reframe a mischaracterized identity into one that needs to slow down. Perhaps I should not set my sails straight into the wind but find rest on the shore.

This has been especially crucial in parenting as a highly sensitive person who is possibly autistic to an autistic child. For my child's sake, it is absolutely necessary that I have my supports in place to ensure she also receives hers and that I can remain stable during her storm. It is also my job as the parent of an autistic child to help her understand her multiple selves, for example, letting her know that she is not the storm. Instead, she is the ship responding to the storm. As time goes on, and she learns to read and write, I hope to instill this cognitive DST through the practice of writing.

Writing is, after all, as I have discovered within myself, a form of stimming. It is not just the therapeutic benefit of uncovering meaning, but also the physical motion of pen to paper. Feeling the ups and downs as I scribe each letter produces immense sensory relief and calm. When stimming has historically been something to be corrected (often through Applied Behavior Analysis therapy, such as teaching children not to flap their hands (Price, 2022)), it is a relief to find a stim through something socially acceptable.

Behavioural Experiences

They may impose very strict rules on themselves/aim to control themselves and their environment to deal with stress (Eberstadt, 2024, p. 22).

I tried my hardest to leave my shell,

I even flew to a new country.

Left my shoes at the door,

ran barefoot through the dewy grass hoping,

hoping,

I was good enough to endure this new city.

I tried my hardest to leave my shell,

starved myself thin just to fit in.

Gave him my heart, soul and mind

so I wouldn't have to feel how strange everything felt.

Felt foreign,

felt abused,

but I was good at smiling.

I tried my hardest to leave my shell

until one day I realized

I didn't have to leave my home.

I could trust my home,

follow my home, put it on my back,

carry it in my pocket.

I could feel my home.

Know it was safe,

and I was safe within.

Lengelle (2023) writes that our “collection of sub-selves or what in DST is referred to as ‘I-positions,’ position themselves (e.g., I-am-educated), reposition (e.g., but I need to expand my knowledge), and engage in counter-positioning (e.g., I am ignorant about a great many things)” (p. 478). I lived in San Francisco for only two years in my early twenties, and now I am much closer to 40 than I am 30, it was such a pivotal time for me that I write about it often. Up until that point, the move was the biggest decision I had made in my life, and though it was filled with lots of wonderful moments and friendships I still hold closely, it was incredibly difficult. The sensory stress of the city, combined with the disruption of my environment and routine—and my extreme motion sickness, which is also common in autistic folks (Eberstadt, 2024)—made me sick to my stomach upon arriving in this new city. As my years went on there, I would not say I was actively engaging in an eating disorder, but I look back at photos and see how skinny I was, a result of following the unhealthy eating habits of my then-partner, coupled with chronic stomach aches and digestive issues, also common among autistic individuals (Eberstadt, 2024). It should be noted that I was with this partner after years spent with someone who was emotionally abusive, and so with this new partner, who was stable and kind (though perhaps stoic and egotistical in his belief that he was entirely noble), I held onto this new social and relationship script as if it were the Bible. And yet, time and time again, I found myself a sinner as I could not make sense of this new life into which we were settling.

Only recently have I begun to write about these formative years through the lens of being possibly autistic. I have been interrogating the many selves I felt while I was in San Francisco: scared, excited, exhausted, inspired, trying, failing, succeeding, faking it. With the use of DST, I have been letting these inner democracies and truths coexist, for each of them holds memories and deserves gentle care, rather than simply clinging to failure. While I look back at that chapter of my life with appreciation for all I was able to survive, I also realize that I do not have to

subject myself to experiences that make me feel as if I were just surviving.

In fact, whenever my then-partner was away and we were not jumping into yet another Uber to attend a tech start-up dinner party, I often found myself wandering around the outskirts of San Francisco, taking in the city at my own pace. The weather and wind at Ocean Beach often felt violent and unpredictable, but I found quietness and stillness in the Redwoods. I had a camera, pen, and notebook in hand, and I did what I did best: observe, write, uncover, discover, heal, reclaim, proclaim. In writing to understand the self, I found a quiet yet powerfully rebellious way to take what was and shape what will be.

Conclusion

I have shown how narrative writing—through poetry and DST—can serve as a powerful tool for reclaiming identity, particularly in understanding the autistic self across emotional, social, behavioural, and psychological experiences. By writing one's story, acknowledging the multiple selves that live within, uncovering meaning in past circumstances, and allowing space to rewrite narratives that were either falsely believed or no longer serve the individual, writing becomes a way to reframe identity toward agency, authenticity, and wholeness. This paper contributes to supporting autistic individuals in moving from a place of perceived disability to one of ownership, gentle power, and agency, honouring the self as valid, whole, and deserving of a free and meaningful place in society.

And when dawn approached,

I no longer longed for dusk.

I took myself to the river and bathed.

And when the birds sang,

I sang back,

Together we flew through seasons unfazed.

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