

# Worn Unwilling

by Meridith Byrne

We didn't choose the mask.  
It was fitted at birth,  
fastened with careful hands—  
loving, maybe.  
Afraid, always.  
They told us it would help.  
Integrate.  
Stop the sway.  
Keep a safe volume.  
Smile like you mean it,  
but not too much,  
that's weird.

We wore it through classrooms  
where joy meant scolding,  
and silence meant success.  
Where questions were interruptions,  
and honesty was rude.  
We wore it through jobs,  
through dinners,  
through years  
of being the wrong kind of tired.  
But the seams split.  
Our skin blistered.  
Our breath shortened.  
And still, they say:  
Be normal.

We didn't wear it for you.  
We wore it to get by.  
Now we are tearing it off—  
nails scraping straps,  
scars beneath fabric,  
the shock of unfastening  
a kind of gavotte.  
We were never hidden.  
You just didn't like to see.

We are not sorry.  
We are not quiet.  
We are not  
wearing your mask.

