Running Hot: On Fire, Feedback, and the False Comfort of Flesh

Most autistic grounding practices rely on tactile feedback—touch, pressure, sensation.

Mine *don’t*.

Not since the glowing cast iron took something away.

When I was twelve, I fell hands-first into the mouth of a cast-iron stove. It wasn’t an accident in the traditional sense. It was a systems failure. I had been assigned a protocol: keep the fire alive or face consequences. And when the logs slipped, I reached in. No gloves. No second guesses. Just instinct, obligation, and terror.

I cooked my own flesh for just long enough to hold the structure together, lest my face would follow.

The fire was resurrected.

It just wanted a flesh tribute; a demand to which I was already accustomed.

For the next three weeks, I treated the wounds myself. Peeled away skin like soft plastic wrap. Scrubbed raw nerve endings. Hid the damage beneath sleeves and fists. No one noticed, or if they did, they deferred. Eventually, when the tissue became too inflamed to pass, my father noticed. My mother responded with zinc oxide and threats. I was instructed to do better, heal quietly, and never burden anyone with my damage again.

Since then, my hands have never quite been mine.

They look real enough. They function. But they lie. Nerve endings are unreliable narrators. Feedback loops don’t close cleanly. To ground myself, I must either crush muscle deep enough to trigger a dull echo from under the skin, or look directly at my fingers to confirm they’re obeying. If I reach for reassurance, I receive nothing. At best, noise. At worst, silence.

There is no comfort in touching what you can’t feel.

Most people never think about how the hands are the fallback system—tiny processors constantly validating the world through contact, friction, temperature, weight. When panic hits, they press palm to desk, hand to chest, fingers to skin. I cannot. My panic recurses inside a vacuum. No pressure strong enough to cut through scar tissue. No signal clean enough to override the noise.

So I recalibrated.

I don't ground through touch. I ground through logic. Through feedback analysis. Through watching others disassociate and tracing the code backwards to see where the glitch first fired.

What they call dysfunction, I call recalibration. What they call trauma, I call architecture. I’m not healed. I’m wired around it. That’s how I survived. That’s why I remember.

So when I see neurotypical bodies running default scripts—press hand to heart, deep breath, relax—I don’t envy them. I don’t hate them either. I just know we were never built to run the same firmware.

They run soft.

I run burned.

And I’m still processing.