

# STILLP • INT

A MAGAZINE IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

## DUCKBUTT

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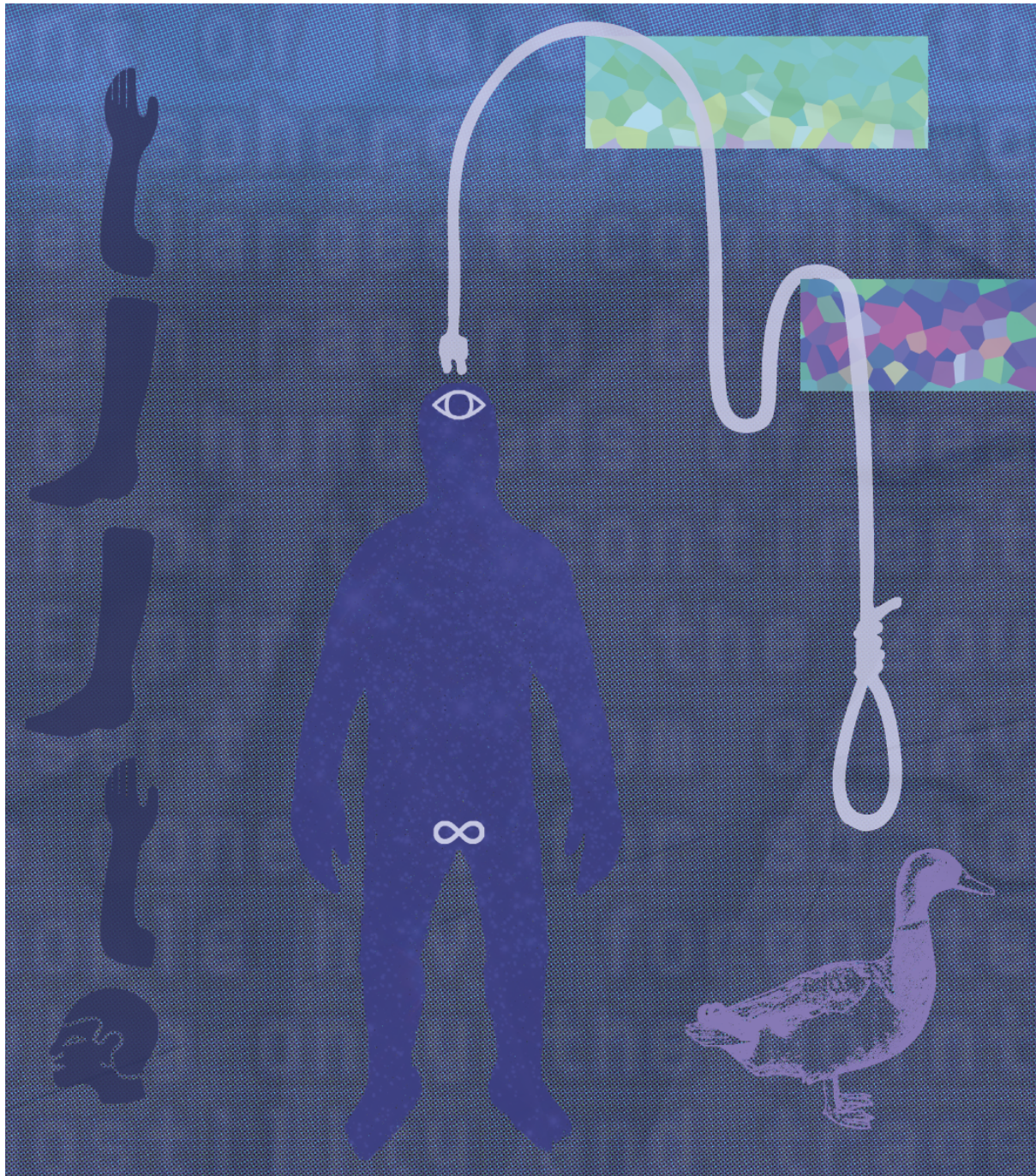
When I was 10, I looped an orange extension cord around my neck, cinched it tight against my throat, and stepped off the back of the grey corduroy couch in our basement. I dangled in the air for a moment, legs thrashing, before the knots gave out because I couldn't tie for shit. I couldn't tie a tie (and still can't) and my shoelaces were always raggedy from coming loose and getting stepped on. I'd been in Boy Scouts for all of a week, uniformed up with a bunch of white boys who liked fishing and camping and the "great" outdoors, so I dropped that in a hurry, never got my knot patch or whatever.

I landed flat on my back on the concrete floor. What little air that hadn't been choked out of me rushed out my body. I stayed there for a few minutes, catching my breath and sobbing, and then I stood up, wrapped the extension cord up exactly as it was before, when my dad'd last used it, and went to the bathroom. I looked at myself in the mirror, at my bruised, reddened neck and the tearsalt trails on my puffy cheeks. I splashed cold water on my face and rubbed cocoa butter on my rope-burnt neckflesh until I looked normal enough again, then I cleaned up the bathroom, dried off the counters, and made sure the rafter beam I'd tied the extension cord around was undamaged. No one could know.

I had almost died once before when I was 13 months old. I came down with a severe bacterial meningitis infection, slipped into a coma for a month. The doctors told my mom I wouldn't make it and that, even if I did, there'd be brain damage that'd likely result in deafness and severe learning disabilities. 5 months later, I was reading on my own. A few years later, I was featured in the Neighbors section of The Des Moines Register for being a spelling/reading prodigy. Days after starting kindergarten, it was clear that I was far beyond the other kids, so the school and my mom chose to skip me up to 2nd grade.

At 5 years old, I could outthink my older classmates when it came to the problems on the overhead projector. I could do complex long division in my head in a fraction—pun intended—of the time as my classmates. I could spell any word thrown at me and probably give the definition for it, too. I tore through *Where the Red Fern Grows* and *Peppermints in the Parlor* and *Aliens Ate My Homework* and a whole bunch of other books far above my grade level, whatever I could get my hands on from the library and the dozens of books I'd order on the most holy of days: The Scholastic Book Fair.

At school, my mind was prized—as much as a Black mind can be in a place like West Des Moines, Iowa—but outside the classroom, in the halls and the locker rooms, during gym class and the school dances, I was always lagging behind. In high school, I was still just a

*God Body – CRICE*

baby next to my classmates, underdeveloped in almost every way, except one: my big booty.

When I walked, my butt stuck out, or so I'd been told. There was one main intersection where kids gathered during passing period. Because it was right by the nice bathrooms and led to the cafeteria as well as the main entrance, heading to lunch or leaving school meant running the gauntlet. I wasn't the only one they went after—lots of other kids got hit with a barrage of Iowa's most common high school insults of the early-2000s, consisting largely of variations on faggot and retard—but there were key differences between me and everyone else.

For starters, because I'd been skipped up, I was two years younger, smaller, weaker. I was two years behind on making friends, on having crushes, on understanding myself, on knowing how to handle anger, embarrassment, shame. I was two years behind as a human being, and I was always playing catch-up.

Second, I was a Black kid—one of a few dozen or so in the whole school. When I walked the gauntlet, I got lit up by white and Black folks alike—the former'd call me nigger, the latter'd call me oreo—and sometimes, I'd shout back but I couldn't take any of them in a fight, not by a long shot, and usually just hurried past as best I could.

Lastly, most other kids didn't have an older brother in the crowd also doling out those insults. Stan, sometimes he was one of the loudest of the bunch. And he was the one who first pointed out that my butt stuck out like a duck's when I walked, letting everyone know that I had a real serious case of duckbutt.

When I'd get home, if no one else was around, I'd go upstairs and examine myself in my mom's full-length mirror. I watched myself walk towards and away from the mirror, sometimes slow, sometimes fast. I shifted my weight around from one foot to another, from the balls of my feet to my heels and everywhere in between. I even tried walking toe-to-heel but it didn't help any and, besides, it just felt ridiculous. My only option was to pop my belly out, push my hips forward, and pull my shoulders back. It made my back hurt and I'm pretty sure doing it long-term fucked up my spine, but it worked—no one talked about my duckbutt after that.

I lived for the stretches of time when I was alone in the house and all I could hear were the sounds of water rushing through the pipes, the whispers of pages turning as I read, the soft clicks of my fingers tapping on controller buttons. Not because I loved being alone—quite the opposite—but because, when I was, I didn't need to worry about the world around me. I could retreat into my mind and be liberated, for a time, until I heard footsteps overhead. I learned early on how to tell everyone's footsteps apart; sometimes that brief heads-up was the difference between safety behind a locked door or suffering my father's wrath.

My father would beat me with his hands, his belt, a 2x4, whatever. He'd corner me in whatever room I was in and because my room wasn't clean, because I was reading instead of doing my homework, because I was watching TV after school, because I was listening to rap, because this, because that, and just because, he'd come after me. Once, on Christmas Eve in 1992, he hurled my 4-year-old body into a wall for trying to peek at my presents.

Stan got it worse than I did, and then he took it out on me. He forced me under toy buckets and plastic totes and sat on them while I begged for him to let me out, hyperventilating from my claustrophobia. He bent my wrists near the point of breaking the same way my father did to us. Once, he poured boiling water on me and I screamed so loud I heard a sound like a record scratch in my ears. Back then, I wasn't afraid of the cops. I was too young to for the Rodney King beating and the suburbs of Iowa aren't known for their police presence. I was more afraid of physical danger inside my house than I was outside of it, in fact.

But unlike everywhere else I went, Blackness wasn't an anomaly at home—it was the norm. My mom read me Black versions of fairy tales by this guy Fred Crump Jr. *Hansel and*

*Gretel* became *Hakim and Grenita*, for example. *Jack and the Beanstalk* became *Jamako and the Beanstalk*. *The Ugly Duckling* became *The Ebony Duckling*, with the cover sporting a sad little black-feathered duck looking out at the yellow-feathered ducks having a good old time. *Rumpelstiltskin* kept the name, but the cover showed a Black Rumpelstiltskin and a Black woman with a fluffy natural afro, dressed in brilliant green robes, turning the straw to gold. Our walls were adorned with photos of Malcolm and Martin, as well as paintings of Black women ranging in skin tones, from light-skinned, red-haired, and freckled to dark, blue-black skin and hair cut bald-short and stretched-out, long-limbed Black boys playing basketball on a busted hoop.

My father believed in Black excellence to a fault, although for him, it meant something closer to Black perfection with himself as the ideal. Anyone or anything less was not worth his time or attention. I used to think I grew up hating my Blackness because of my father, but I don't believe that anymore—I learned to hate my skin and my Blackness from white folks. No, what my father taught me instead was how to hate myself, how to see nothing but inadequacy, failure, and imperfection.

I lasted the longest out of my mom and my siblings as the one with the best grades, the most educational achievements. He took me with him on trips to Atlanta or Kansas City and bought me all the books and candy I wanted. In the end, though, it all backfired. In response to pitting me and Stan against each other—among many, many other things—and the hurt he inflicted on all of us, I stopped doing my homework, started cutting class, began racking up detentions and suspensions. I may not have been strong enough to fight him, but I did know exactly how to get under his skin. I remember him coming at me with his belt afterwards and chasing me into the corner of the bathroom. I remember balling myself up between the toilet and the wall, shielding myself with my hands from his blows which came at me with such force that, when he missed, they left scuff marks on the wall.

I liked to pretend there was another world behind my mom's mirror. It was one of those big wooden ones that rotated end-on-end and I imagined that, if I could only get the angle right, if I could only find the right magic words to say, I could move through to the other side like Alice, to somewhere—anywhere—else. I wanted so much to disappear and leave this world, filled as it was with pain and hurt and fear. I knew it was impossible. I knew there was no other world than this one, but that didn't stop me from doing whatever I could to escape it.

Stan and I shared a bathroom, accessed through a small room—a hallway, really—connecting our bedrooms. There were built-in bookshelves on either wall that stretched up to the ceiling and a built-in bench seat where I often sat, my back pressed up against the window that looked out over our front door, buried in my fantasy and sci-fi books. I spent a lot of time there, disappearing into worlds filled with elves and dragons and spaceships and lightsabers, stories of good and evil, right and wrong, hungry for worlds where the just triumphed over the cruel. Time would pass unnoticed until the light began to fade, the sun-warmed glass on my back grew cool, and the threat of other people brought me back to my reality.

In one of the upstairs bedrooms in our first house was a brass four-post daybed up against the wall, fitting just under the wooden frame of the large east-facing window. From up there, you could look out across our backyard, at the red-yellow-blue striped playset my

father'd bought and put together for me and my brother. That window always caught a great breeze, setting the sheer white lace curtains aflutter like kites, and the sun filtering through the cloth made the room glow with light. I spent entire afternoons on my back watching the fabric billow and following the clouds as they slid across the sky. Maybe it was the sunlight and the heat on my face, maybe it was the breeze from the window, but whenever I napped there, I had the best dreams. Dreams where I was flying away from my home and my father. Dreams where I was in Florida with my brother, hunting for lizards like we used to, back when we were almost inseparable. Dreams where I was the hero, the boy without fear or grief or pain, the boy who could not be hurt. Dreams where we were free of my father's abuses, able to be who and what we wanted to be, and Stan's back to being my best friend, my closest confidante, my big brother.

At night, all I had were nightmares. I was afraid of the dark and of letting myself be so physically vulnerable. I slept with my back to the wall as a defensive measure from threats both imagined and real. More than once, my dad terrified me by popping out of the closet or grabbing me from under the bed as I was falling asleep. On those nights, or on the nights that I was sleepless with anxiety because my parents were shouting at each other, again, I calmed myself by looking at the glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to the ceiling and picturing myself floating through space, drifting through the stars, weightless, unbothered by the cold or the absence of oxygen.

When that wasn't enough, I imagined myself floating in one of those sensory deprivation tanks, cradled by the water and plunged into darkness, cut off from the physical world and left only with my mind, the sound of my beating heart, and the soft exhalations of breath into the nothingness around me.

Locking myself in the bathroom with the fan droning in the background was the next best thing. There was this blue bathmat in our bathroom the color and texture of Cookie Monster, bright against the gray tile. I can't even begin to estimate how much time I spent on that mat—which we didn't wash nearly as often as we should have—reading *Calvin and Hobbes* or some video game magazine. I wonder if it would be more or less than the time I spent reading on the toilet itself, a habit that made me an expert on anal fissures and the many types of hemorrhoid cream before I even hit puberty.

Most of the time, however, I was hidden away downstairs in the unfinished part of our basement, the only light in the room coming from whatever JRPG (Japanese role-playing game, for all you normies) I was playing at the time. One weekend, I beat a videogame—*Xenogears*, to be specific—in one contiguous 70-hour playthrough. I sat cross-legged in the chair I'd taken from my dad's dental office with a TV tray in front of me, surviving off of cans of orange soda—Sunkist, never Fanta—and bowls of cereal with milk from mini-fridge I'd dragged to within arm's reach. I didn't sleep, didn't turn my PlayStation off once, and took but a single bathroom break—after three days of soda and cereal and nothing else, you can be damn sure I needed my trusty hemorrhoid cream—and when I finally did emerge from the basement after three days without seeing or speaking to anyone, I startled my mom, made her jump in surprise. She'd thought I was at a friend's house all weekend. She hadn't noticed me at all.

That's what I wanted out in the world—I wanted to be so small and invisible that no one noticed me coming into a room or looked to me to lead the class every time Black History Month rolled around or quacked at me as I walked through the halls or snuck glances and the occasional snicker at me during the (much too many) movies about slavery.

But I couldn't turn invisible. I couldn't power up like Goku in the episodes of Dragon Ball Z I used to rush home to watch. My body was weak, vulnerable, a prison for my mind. My mind could roam far and wide, traveling freely through worlds like and unlike this one, but my body was stuck in the very white state of Iowa, and the even whiter city of West Des Moines where everyone looked at me funny and tried to touch my afro, trapped in a house ruled by fear and pain.

There was nowhere to turn, no way out I saw except to string myself up and hope for the best. If I was dead, I wouldn't have to fear or feel anything ever again. I could leave the prison of my body, even if it was just for the nothingness that awaits us all, and be free.

The third time I came close to dying was early on the morning of April 17, 2011, when I lost control of my mom's SUV while driving home, very drunk, from a bar down the street. The tires lost contact with the gravel road beneath them and, for a moment, I felt like I was floating, weightless. Then the world tilted sideways and the ground rushed up towards my window and the glass shattered and my memory went dark. The SUV rolled four times before coming to a stop in a ditch on the side of the road. About half a foot from my skull was a rusty metal fencepost that would've gone right through me if I'd gone just a little further.

I only drank for five years, but my drinking escalated real quick. Being drunk—and I mean blackout drunk, because that was my only setting—was the closest I could get to feeling nothing without being dead and gone and I took to it like a duckling to water. I was doing my undergrad at the University of Iowa at the time, drank my way through a semester's worth of financial aid in a month, sold all my possessions, floated checks at all the gas stations in Iowa City until they caught on to me, reached out to all the relatives I never talked to over and over for "grocery" money, pinched beers from friends while they were still passed out—anything to keep myself as numb to reality as possible, which worked real well, right up until it didn't.

After the accident I started lifting weights again, going for runs most mornings, taking my mom's dog for long walks. I went on solo trips to parks and museums, took myself to the movies, and treated myself to nice, quiet dinners. I moved away from Iowa, at long last, and found a job in Austin as a middle school mentor where I, for the first time—and so far, the only time—felt competent at my job, like I was doing good work that mattered. Between my therapy, medication, and my weekly atheist/agnostic A.A. meeting, I felt solid.

And then, one day, a student asked me, *Hey Mister, why you always walkin like that? Like what*, I asked her.

She stood up, leaned her torso back, and thrust her pelvis forward. *Like this*, she said as she walked around the room, her belly puffed out, mocking the duckbutt-reduction stance I spent hours perfecting in my mom's full-length mirror. My cheeks got hot with old shame, my throat choked up with old trauma, and I turned away from her to fix my face. Right away, as if by instinct, I started thinking about how to correct my stance, how to

reshape my body and my gait to keep myself safe, how to protect my body from the judgments and comments of others and as much as I tried to shake it, her words and a sudden hyperawareness of my body stuck with me.

I had been thinking about Blackness, my body, and her words when Zimmerman got away with murdering Trayvon just a few months later and after his acquittal, I felt a tremendous shift in how I saw myself and my skin. With each subsequent killing between then and now, I've become more and more aware of the power of Black bodies, the fear of Black bodies, and the beauty of Black bodies as folks flooded the streets again and again, blocking highway traffic, lying down in intersections, and marching through downtowns to demand respect for Black humanity, Black lives, and Black existence.

I was—and often still am—ashamed that it took so much Black death for me to realize I could no longer reject the reality of my Blackness and my body. Not when Black kids were getting gunned down in seconds while playing in parks. Not when Black kids were getting murdered for playing their music loud. Not when Black kids were comforting their mothers as their loved ones died right in front of them in the driver's seat. I could no longer be still or quiet, not when I had so much skin in the game.

The other day, my therapist said to me, *The story of your body has been written by others. By your father, by your brother, by the racist society we live in. Maybe you need to come up with a new aesthetic. Maybe you need to rewrite that story.*

Then he gave me an exercise. *Look in the mirror. Take pictures of your whole body, have your wife help. And then look at yourself and write what you see, not what you think about what you see. Start with your hands.*

Here's what I *think* about when I look at my hands: The feel of a tallboy of PBR. The calluses from opening so many cans and bottles. The pain of my fingers getting bent back by my brother. Learning how to swim from my father and trying to bend his fingers back as he kept my head under the water— *You can't be afraid of the water*, he always said before forcing me underneath the surface. The scars from the car accidents. The skin I cursed for years, for making me so visible, so vulnerable. Hands too weak and ineffective to protect me from my brother or save me from my father.

Now, here's what I see: Two hands with nubbins on my pinky fingers from the extra fingers I was born with, one of few traits my father and I share. Eight fingers with hair between the first and second knuckles and two ring fingers with hair between the second and third. Fingers that have worked, over the past several years, to write and fight against Black death, Black pain, Black despair. I see a wedding ring of dark wood, ringed with gold leaf, on the finger of my Black boy hand after believing for so long that I would never be loved, that I would never know how to love others but, more important, that I would never know how to love myself.

I do not know my body. Most days, I still wish I was rid of it. But I'm learning my body and how to love it best and as I look at my hands right now, I see my skin—my smooth, beautiful, Black skin that starts at my fingers and runs up to the top of my head and down to the tip of my toes, that covers my rounded belly and wraps around back to what I now consider my best asset: my rotund, once-mocked, stretch-marked, supple-cheeked, award-

winning (according to a contest judged by a dozen strangers at a nude pool in New Orleans), and delectably sumptuous duckbutt.

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*CRICE* is Connor Rice, an award-winning multi-media artist from Southside Minneapolis. His work is heavily inspired by hip-hop, street art and ancient propaganda. He uses art to document the issues and motifs of pan-Africanist realities throughout time and space.

*God Body* is a portion of the full accompanying artwork originally featured on [stillpointmag.org](https://stillpointmag.org).