

stick figures

if they are standing in the middle of the street, it's easy enough to drive around them, as you would a piece of cardboard or a dead cat. Turning your sprinklers on will discourage them from hanging around the front of your house; loud music and smoke from barbecues will also keep them away. They are not a problem, just another part of the suburban landscape, their brittle legs moving as slowly as clouds. They have always been here, since before anyone remembers, since before the bush was cleared and all the houses were built.

Adults pay them little attention. Young children sometimes dress them in old clothes and hats as if they were dolls or scarecrows, and are always scolded by parents, whose reasons are unclear. 'Just don't,' they say sternly.

Some older boys take great delight in beating them with baseball bats, golf clubs, or whatever is at hand, including the victim's own snapped-off limbs. With careful aim a good strike will send the head – a faceless clod of earth – flying high into the air. The body remains passively upright until smashed to splinters between heels and asphalt.

This can go on for hours, depending on how many the boys can find. But eventually it stops being amusing. It becomes boring, somehow enraging, the way they just stand there and take it. What are they? Why are they here? What do they want? Whack! Whack! Whack!

The only response is the sound of dead branches falling from old trees on windless evenings, and random holes appearing in front lawns, dark sockets where clods of earth have been removed during the night. And sure enough there they are again, standing by fences and driveways, in alleyways and parks, silent sentinels.

Are they here for a reason? It's impossible to know, but if you stop and stare at them for a long time, you can imagine that they too might be searching for answers, for some kind of meaning. It's as if they take all our questions and offer them straight back: Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want?