

THE CANYON

Once, when we were kids, we would explore the canyon. Always, we held the fear of rattlesnakes in our chests. There was a tree with a tire swing, off limits. There was an Albertson's bag, crumpled by wind and stuffed with ratty clothes. We thought both the bag and tire swing belonged to a wizard. That the scattered sticks were wands. But the tire swing disappeared a long time ago. Nobody can remember if we found the rope frayed, or if the whole thing simply vanished. If that meant the wizard really *was* a wizard.

CUL-DE-SAC

The children back then piled into the cul-de-sac, expanding its belly. One year, a child was devoured whole. This time, we could see the frayed remains. No mystery there. A crunch, a squeal (not from my brother, who had been reaching for his football), and vomit. The squeal came from the tires, the vomit from the driver, a teenage girl. I never actually saw it, just smelled something rancid and sour emanating from the car as the girl stepped out, shakily, and cupped her face in her hands. The radio was still blasting pop songs as the football, with my brother's name sharpied on, rolled out from beneath the car unscathed.

We saw a baby rattlesnake's corpse long before this ever happened. The body was coiled, the whole swirl flattened to the pavement where the tire barreled through, though the spared flesh on either side of the tread marks still sat raised up, like a speed bump next to the flat concrete. We expected to see a similar flattening. A curl, perhaps, into the fetal position, and the body rolled out like dough on a kitchen board, but it was somehow whole. It was no snake, no slither

caught in the tires. Just a body, launched twenty feet out and clacked and rattled against the ground like a tin soda can. It was just hollow.

STREETLIGHT #1

The Halloween after, we walked the crosswalk to the other, bigger neighborhood, encouraged by dads who wanted us to stay normal and called after by moms who wanted us to stay alive. The bigger kids wandered into the street to prove they weren't afraid, but their heads swiveled back and forth, and their arms herded us back onto the sidewalk when we slipped too close to the edge. In between the streetlights' bubbles of yellow, we huddled together, then stretched out like an accordion again under the next light. We could have drowned in the stuffiness of invisibility, but we didn't.

We still took two handfuls when the buckets said "Take 2." But at any crossing, we waited our turn. As long as it took.

THE MAGNOLIA TREE OF OUR FRONT LAWN

The magnolia trees of our lawns also vomit, like that teen girl. The petals, vanilla-velvet, float to patchy grass. The muddled brown only seeps in later, spreading a dry husk across the flower.

Everyone else maintains a lawn without the husks. On ours, that is all there is. The dining table is no longer a dining table because nobody eats there. What's left of something once you strip the name away? What's left of a person once you peel back the skin and the soul has withered away?

On my brother's perfectly made bed, there is still a football, placed there by my mother years ago, before she shut the door and never looked back in. My father steals it away. He steps onto the street with slippers on and chucks the football at the side of his car, denting the driver side door first. The ball rebounds, landing in his gut, and he slams it onto the driver side door again, again, again; a thud, thud, thud, until he crawls around to the front and craters the hood, or tries to, right where the cavity sat on the *other* car.

My mother leans out of the front door and deadpans, "Dinner is ready." She doesn't ask about the craters. I don't think she even notices them.

THE STREET SIGN BEFORE THE STOPLIGHT AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD CORNER

Our street unhinges itself agape like a baleen whale, though most of the plankton miss the mouth, plankton encapsulated by steel and wheels and rubber tire tread that squeals, and the people in the cars who don't see the entrance sign, a timid beige within the planter, until it's too late.

The cars will wrap around the median like a conveyor belt, stuffed into a red light before the U-turn, and, swimming in the buzz of chatter with their passenger, or dancing to some pop song, will make the same mistake over again. After having entered the street, they will dance and turn into the cul-de-sac. And there will be a crunch, a squeal, and some vomit. Another child will be frayed, until the wind crumples their body like a bag, and a flattened football is later slammed into the trash, and they, like a tire swing, disappear.