



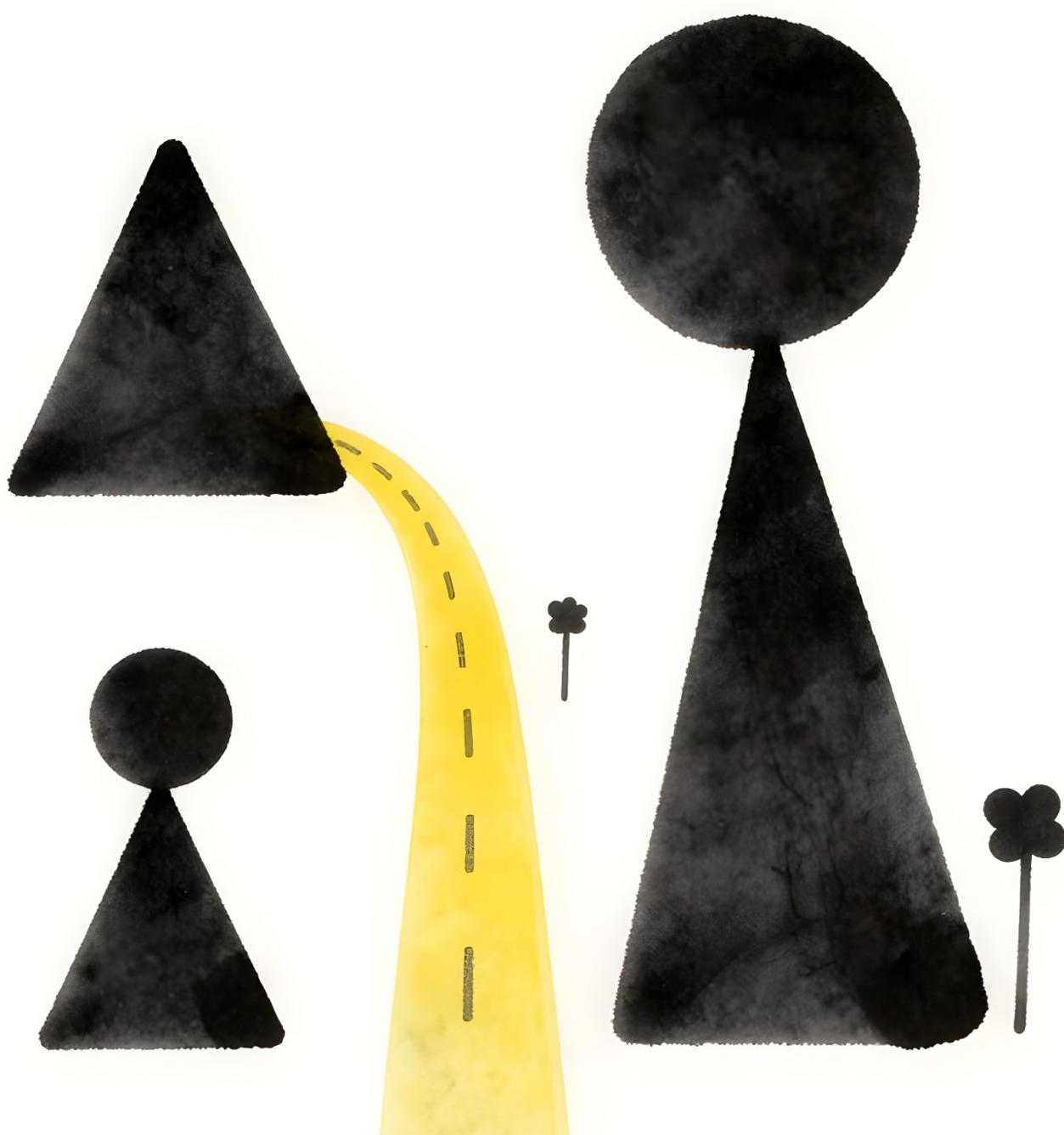
Runaway

Craig Kirchner

I was born hitchhiking,
breast fed on Interstate
and Motown.

Mother dreamed of a garden,
plaited wildflowers
and gypsy weed.

Her teeth were the stars,
her breasts home in the rain,
illegally squatted under nurturing trees,
waiting on the charity of berries
and a dry back seat.





Stung

Rebecca Faulkner

Even cattails sense my shame,
jeans soaked from a riverbank
slip, I'm clumsy and stung again.

Again, my mother sighs, grabs
my wrist as welts rise, galoshes
splash the stream where she seeks

out dock leaves, darkly green. Palm
sized, smug nettle neighbors, veins
ripe with sticky sap she rubs hard

against my knuckles. As pond skaters
skim the surface, every plant becomes
her—ones that burn, ones that heal.



La Moustache

Howard Mckenzie-Murray

Although the babysitter hadn't budged on the sunlounge in 30 minutes a singularly shitty mood radiated visibly off her. She lay supine by the pool way beyond Cancer Council recommendations under a double coat of SPF 50+.

Something had happened—a ridiculous standoff with the seven-year-old brat inside about her heart medicine. Kid had a ticking time-bomb in her body, a heart that could blow any second, and she refused point-blank to take her medicine.

The child, the *time-bomb*, Darcy, appeared smack-dab in a block of late-morning UV looking for all the world like a gigantic butterbean in her pale yellow, one-piece bathing suit. She wore a healthy, a *comely* padding of baby-fat that made you want to bite into her calf as she ventured down the steps, chin-up, barefoot, pigeon-toed.

'Siddown, hun,' the baby-sitter patted a deckchair. It was a burial of the hatchets. 'Take a load off.'

The child gave the babysitter a non-committal squint. On her own terms, she laid her towel on the sunlounge, righted the chair so it was a perfect ninety-degrees to the pool and, only then, climbed up. Her frown went sunward like she was a solar-powered child recharging her battery.

'What you *looking at?*' Darcy cried.

The babysitter was giving the child a lazy look behind cat-eye sunglasses. She now lifted the glasses and dropped one eyebrow critically.

‘I’d like to have a nice, long talk to you about something. Now it’s just us two gals.’

‘About what?’ the child asked.

‘Well, that’s the thing. I’d *like* to just level with you, but...’

‘But *what?*’

‘Indoor voice, hun. But... I’m not sure you’re old enough. Didja have your medicine?’

‘I’ll have it when I *feel* like it!’ Darcy shouted.

‘O, I forgot.’

‘Are you a forgetful Fred?’

This drew from the babysitter the tribute of a reluctant smirk.

‘What’s your name?’ Darcy asked the babysitter.

‘You know my name. Are *you* a forgetful Fred?’

‘Just *answer*. It’s a trick.’

‘Chloe.’

‘And what’s this?’ she pressed her nose-tip with her pointer finger.

‘A nose.’

‘And whaddameye holding?’ she cupped her hands.

‘Nothing.’

‘So *Chloe—knows—nothing!*’

While Darcy collapsed hysterically into the sunlounge the babysitter queasily regarded her: an unexploded mortar shell in bathers.

‘*That’s* what I was afraid of.’

‘What?’

‘I just don’t know if you’re old enough, *mature* enough really, to handle what I wanna tell you. It can be pretty risky.’

‘Handle *what!*’ she yelled.

‘Let’s be civil, why don’t we?’

The child stuck her chin out *away* from the babysitter: her pre-selected conversation-ender of the month.

‘D’you know where mum and dad are?’

‘They didn’t tell me, hun. Not a peep on the subject.’

Darcy eyed the babysitter—two, pale blue lie-detectors that scanned the babysitter’s face. The result: inconclusive.

‘Wasson your mind?’

‘D’you know what dah vaws is?’ Darcy asked.

‘Dah vaws...? No, what? This another trick?’

‘*No!*’ she squealed. ‘I’m *asking!*’

‘Well,’ the babysitter sighed. ‘I don’t know what dahvaws—... *Divorce?*’

‘That’s what I *said!*’

‘O hell’s bells, hun. Whereja hear that?’

‘*Do* you?’ she shouted shrilly.

‘Could we have this conversation *after* your medicine?’

‘I *said* I don’t *want* to.’

‘See, here I am about ready to spill the beans and you go and act like this...’

The girl’s singular response, a bull’s-eye for eloquence, was to push out her bottom lip. But then: ‘Spill what beans?’

The babysitter sat up on her greasy elbow and drove a look at Darcy as if she was ready, come what may, to get down to brass tacks. Woman to woman.

‘Do you know about the Exultant Conductor?’

‘The what?’

‘The Exultant Conductor?’ She looked at the child blankly. ‘You *don’t* know about the Exultant Conductor?’

‘Umm... I know a little.’

‘The Exultant Conductor who stands in the centre of the universe?’

‘Yeah.’

‘In a red peacoat?’

‘Yeah.’

‘With big, fat brass buttons?’

‘Yeah.’

‘O well... There’s no need to go into it then,’ the babysitter swung her head back down onto the sunlounge pillow. ‘That saves time.’

‘Well... I don’t know *everything* about him.’

‘What do you know?’

‘I know he’s in the centre of the universe. Aaaand... he’s gotta coat and buttons.’

‘The basics. *Everybody* knows that. But d’you know about his moustache?’

Darcy shook her head.

‘They call him La Moustache because he has this big, fat, *ridiculous* moustache—a foot long—like a Russian Hussar. And he’s been smiling this big, fat, *ridiculous* smile ever since the universe began. Even on the worst days—’

‘When it’s raining?’

‘You bet your boots. All soggy, he’s still got a big, fat smile on his face.’

The child’s incredulity rose on a wave and her half-closed eyes skated off across the pool. Then, as if the shimmering heat-haze softened her cynicism, her eyes did a neat U-turn back to the babysitter.

‘Whaddabout when you have a toothache?’

‘Uh-huh. When *you* have a toothache *he* has a toothache. Because everything that happens happens to him too. He’s the Exultant Conductor. But even *then* he’s still smiling.’

‘Why?’

‘Nobody knows.’

‘And aiiiiir-verything happens to him?’

‘Everything. He’s not the Exultant Conductor for nothing.’

‘Has he been shot with a bowen arrow?’

‘Not one, hun. *Hundreds*. They’re *still* sticking out of him too. Every which way. Because everything that happens happens forever.’

‘And has his head been chopped off?’ she brightened.

‘Too many times to count.’

Darcy frowned. ‘Then *why* does he keep smiling?’

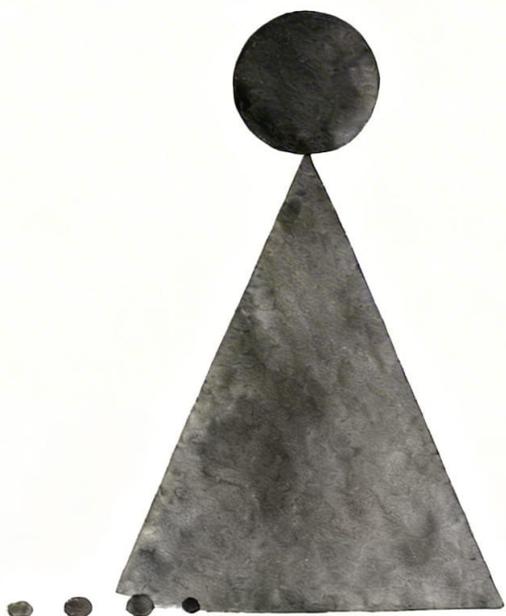
‘Nobody knows. But he’s been smiling since the world began. That’s all we know. In his red peacoat.’

‘With buttons.’

‘So you *do* know about him!’

Darcy nodded. ‘He’s god-a big, fat, *ridiculous* moustache and he’s smiling a big, fat *ridiculous* smile,’ she said with her hands. ‘Ever since the world began.’

The two gals lay down, cool as cucumbers, as the robot pool cleaner kicked in. *Apropos* of nothing at all, the child hinged up and went inside to pour a capful of raspberry-flavoured liquid from a glass bottle in the fridge.





Christening

Erin Matheson Ritchie

Betrayal is a white hot moon
streaming over our bed;
me, a gaping fish,
smothered under sea foam sheets.
A hook in my mouth,
a hole in my gut,
blood staining your mother's quilt.



THE WALKING DEAD

Stephen Philip Druce

As children we were
so poor we couldn't
afford funerals
or shoes even.

Corpses became
makeshift footwear.

We'd have to stick our
feet into the asses of
the dead bodies so
we could walk around.

I remember a lady asking
me why I was wearing her
mother on my foot and
not the dead man in the road.

I did try on the dead
man for size but he
had an enlarged
prostate which rubbed
against my toes.

He had goofy teeth too,
so I couldn't put my
foot in his mouth at all.

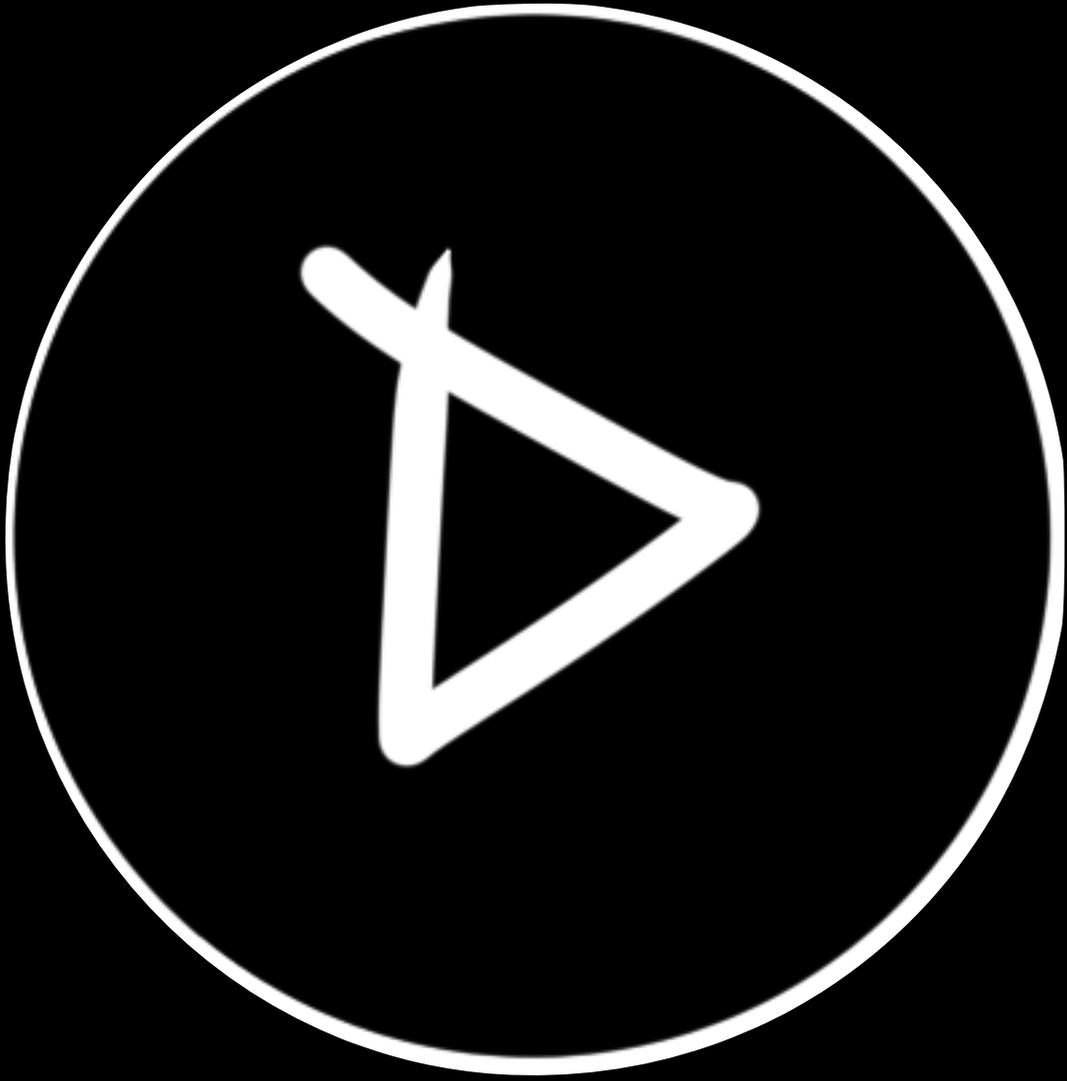
The same lady then
asked me why I didn't
put my foot into her
mother's mouth instead.

I'd already tried that but
her mother was toothless
so it was a loose fit.

Then she asked me why
someone with a bigger
foot didn't try on her
mother's mouth.

There was a man with
the perfect foot size, but
but there were no other
corpses around for him
to wear at the time - so
he'd have looked a bit
silly with just one shoe on.





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“La Moustache” by Howard McKenzie-Murray
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Book: [This Is Where We Say Goodbye](#)

“Christening” by Erin Matheson Ritchie

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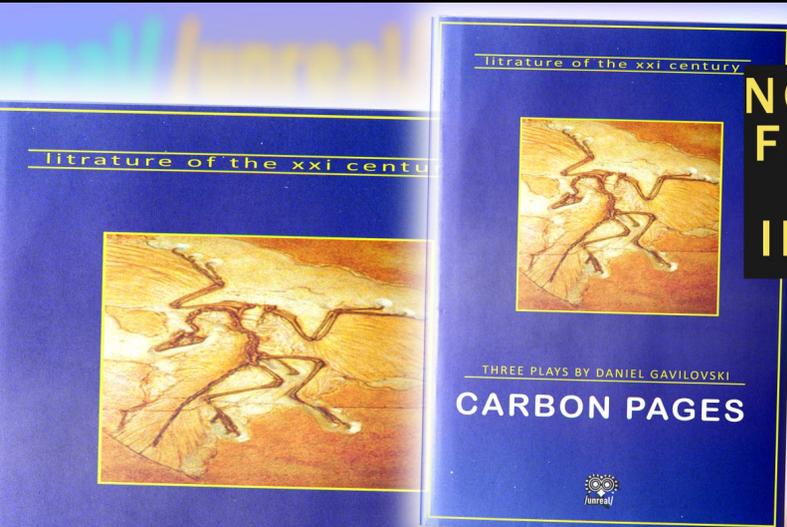
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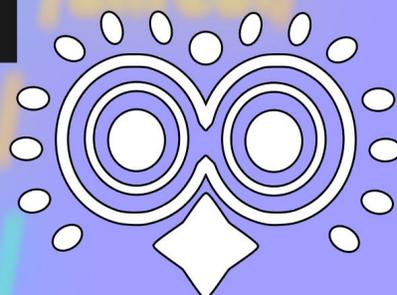
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You come from 4chan's darkest break,
 They fell off harder than the B.S.R of one james krake,
 Their own birthspawn /lit/ called a defect,
 Unreal has no time for dogs—guess that's why they're always chasing Tales.
 From Ogden to Rhyme And L.A to New York,
 from northermost China to Australia they glaze your work,
 at the Rolling Stone launch parties the same whisper snakes about:
 "When IS Crash Test coming out?"
 Unreals are winners—Uploads? We don't do that here.
 Their podcast is so old Dan Baltic still had hair
 They have the fat stack, one article is plenty.
 Should we do some work? Eh... maybe next year.
 Your anthologies are fairest by far,
 Only thirty dollars a page, it's cheaper than a car,
 I took out a mortgage and sold my thirdborn,
 it still didn't cover the islamagood bazaar,
 But I digress, all this tangent, this whole poem's not the best
 Let's return to juicy questions; when do preorders open for Crash Test?
 When will the postman be McNaughton on my door?
 quoth the raven: nevermore.

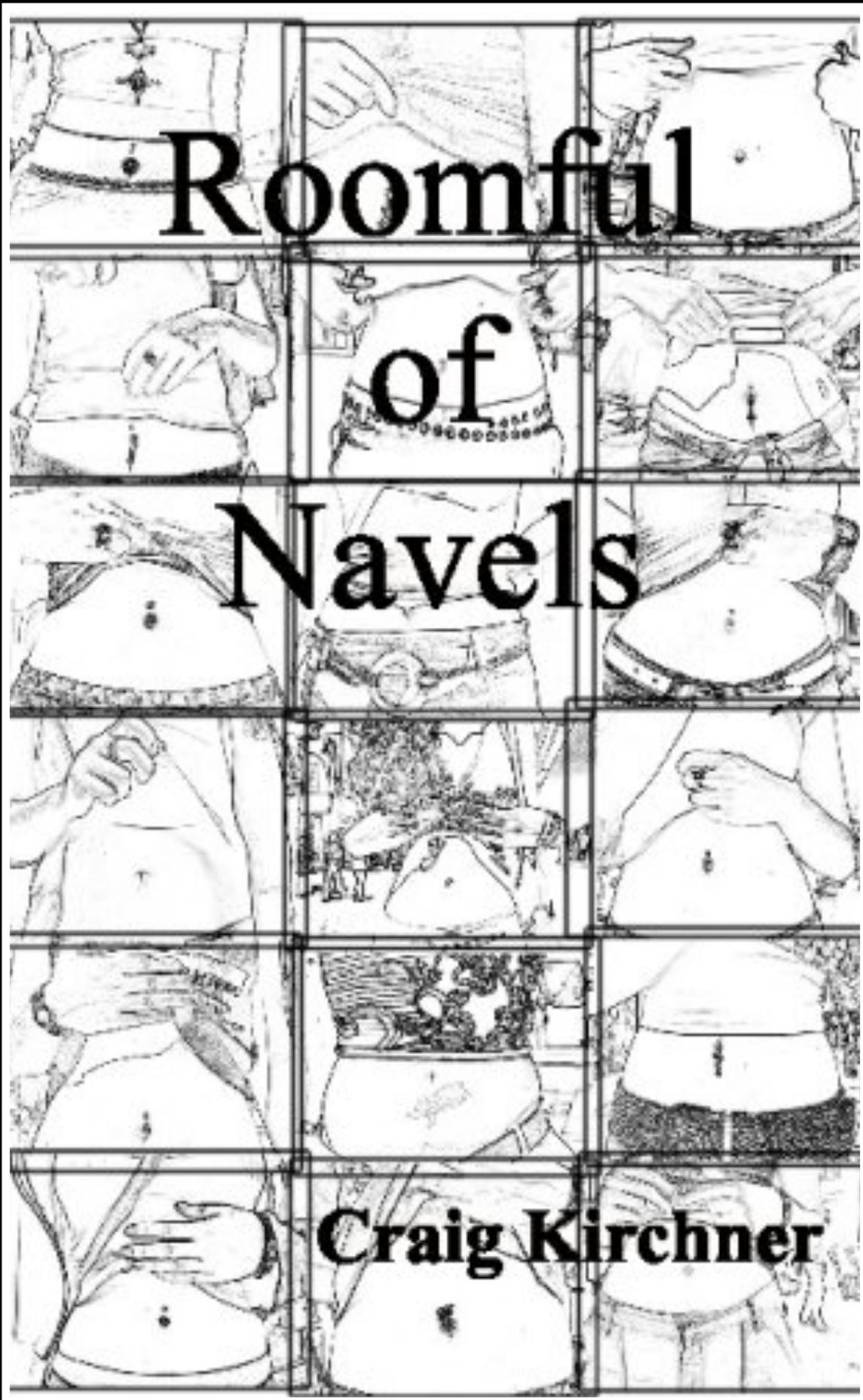
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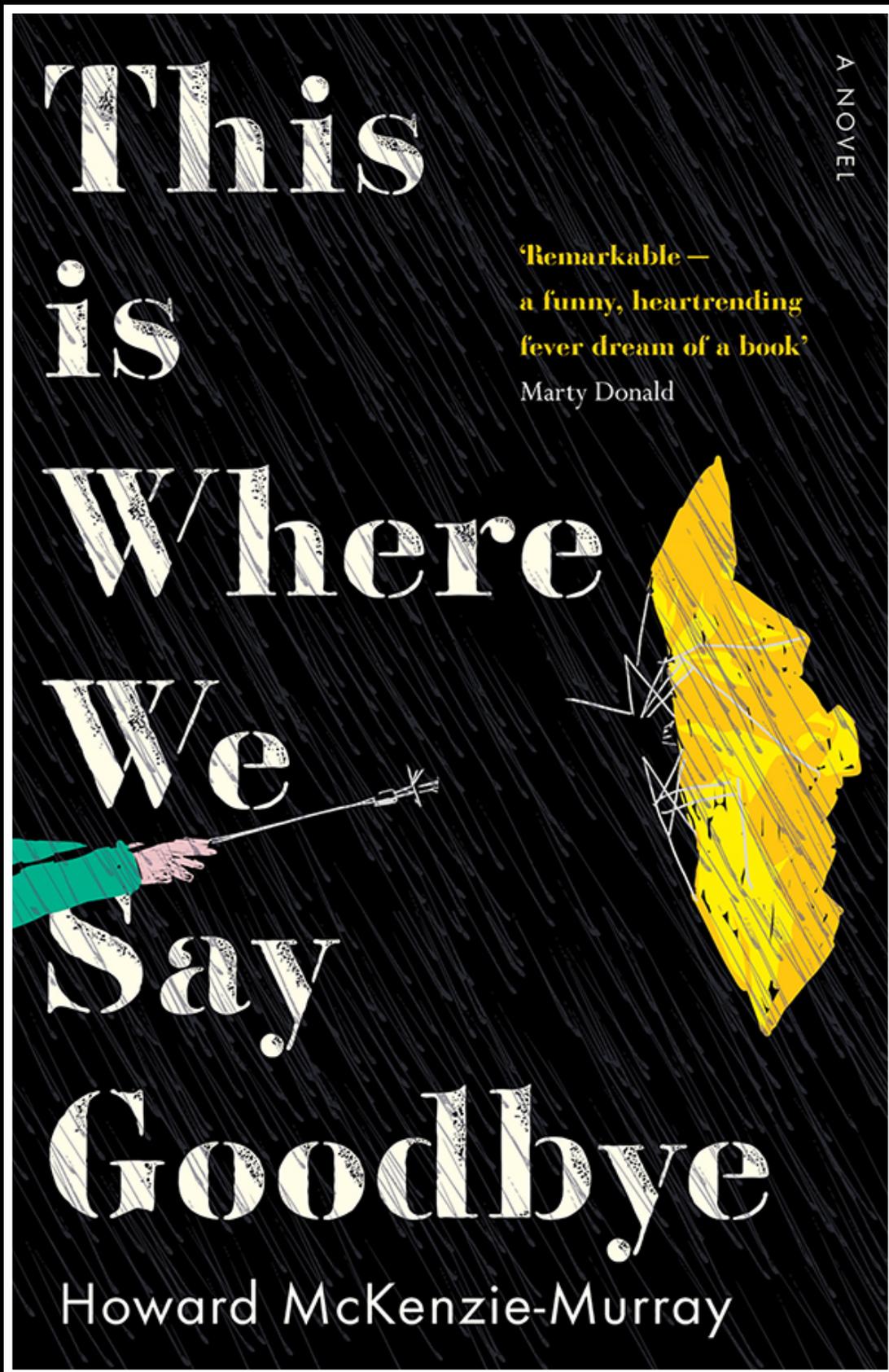


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