

YOUNG SKINS

‘Colin Barrett’s sentences are lyrical and tough and smart, but there is something more here that makes him a really good writer. His stories are set in a familiar emotional landscape, but they give us endings that are new. What seems to be about sorrow and foreboding turns into an adventure, instead, in the tender art of the unexpected.’

Anne Enright

‘Colin Barrett is a young man in the town of the short story, but it’s fair to say he has the run of the place. This is a joyously fine collection, crackling with energy and verve, fit for the back pocket of anyone who loves a good story well told.’

Jon McGregor

‘Language, structure, style – Colin Barrett has all the weapons at his disposal, and how, and he has an intuitive sense for what a short story is, and what it can do.’

Kevin Barry

‘Incredible ... Human violence, beauty, brilliance of language – this book reminds you of the massive things you can do in short fiction.’

Evie Wyld

‘Should you be surprised that yet another superbly articulate and word-drunk writer has come out of Ireland? Perhaps not; but when that writer’s work is as moving, as funny, as spectacularly evocative as *Young Skins*, you should be astonished, and amazed, and grateful. Some of the stories in this debut collection are amongst the best in the language. That a young writer possesses a talent this great is a cause for celebration, matched only by his ability to control and harness it. A minute after finishing this book I was itching to read

Colin Barrett’s next.’

Niall Griffiths

‘Colin Barrett is a writer of extraordinary gifts. I loved this compelling and utterly persuasive collection, the strongest debut

I’ve read in some years.’

Joseph O’Connor

‘A new fabulous and forensic voice to sing out Ireland’s woes.’

Bernard MacLaverty

‘Exciting and stylistically adventurous.’

Colm Tóibín

‘Magnificent ... A stunning debut ... The timeless nature of each story means this collection can – and will – be read many

years from now.’

Sunday Times

‘A bravura performance in which he simply outwrites many of his peers with a chilling confidence that suggests there

is far more beneath the surface than merely the

viciously effective black humour.’

Irish Times

‘The best collection we’ll read all year: a massive new talent, and stories that will make you yearn and nod and cry.’

Bookmunch

YOUNG SKINS

Colin Barrett



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YOUNG SKINS

THE CLANCY KID

My town is nowhere you have been, but you know its ilk. A roundabout off a national road, an industrial estate, a five-screen Cineplex, a century of pubs packed inside the square mile of the town's limits. The Atlantic is near; the gnarled jawbone of the coastline with its gull-infested promontories is near. Summer evenings, and in the manure-scented pastures of the satellite parishes the Zen bovines lift their heads to contemplate the V8 howls of the boy racers tearing through the back lanes.

I am young, and the young do not number many here, but it is fair to say we have the run of the place.

It is Sunday. The weekend, that three-day festival of attrition, is done. Sunday is the day of purgation and redress; of tenderised brain cases and see-sawing stomachs and hollow pledges to never, ever get that twisted again. A day you are happy to see slip by before it ever really gets going.

It's well after 8 PM, though still bright out, the warm light infused with that happy kind of melancholy that attends a July evening in the West. I am sitting with Tug Cuniffe at a table in the alfresco smoking area of Dockery's pub. The smoking area is a narrow concrete courtyard to the building's rear, overlooking the town river. Midges tickle our scalps. A candy-stripe canvas awning extends on cantilevers, and now and then the awning ripples, sail-like, in the breeze.

Ours is the table nearest to the river, and it is soothing to listen to the radio static bristle of the rushing water. There are a dozen other people out here. We know most of them, at least to see, and they all know us. Tug is one many prefer to keep a tidy berth of. He's called Manchild behind his back. He is big and he is unpredictable, prone to fits of rage and temper tantrums. There are the pills he takes to keep himself on an even keel, but now and then, in a fit of contrariness or out of a sense of misguided self-confidence, he will abandon the medication. Sometimes he'll admit to the abandonment and sell me on his surplus of pills, but other times he'll say nothing.

Tug is odd, for he was bred in a family warped by grief, and was himself a manner of ghosteen; Tug's real name is Brendan, but he was the second Cuniffe boy named Brendan. The mother had a firstborn a couple of years before Tug, but that sliver of a child died at thirteen months old. And then came Tug. He was four when they first took him out to Glanbeigh cemetery, to lay flowers by a lonely blue slab with his own name etched upon it in fissured gilt.

I am hungover. Tug is not. He does not drink, which is a good thing. I'm nursing a pint, downing it so slowly it's already lost its fizz.

'How's the head, Jimmy?' Tug caws.

He is in a good mood, a good, good, good but edgy, edgy, edgy mood.

'Not so hot,' I admit.

'Was it Quillinan's Friday?'

'Quillinan's,' I say, 'then Shepherd's, then Fandango's. The same story Saturday.'

'The ride?' he inquires.

'Marlene Davey.'

'Gosh,' Tug says. 'Gosh, gosh, gosh.'

He worries his molars with his tongue.

Tug is twenty-four to my twenty-five, though he looks ten years

older. As far as I'm aware, his virginity remains unshed. Back in our school days, the convent girls and all their mammies were goo-goo-eyed over Tug. He was a handsome lad, all up through his teens, but by sixteen had begun to pile on the pounds, and the pounds stuck. The weight gives him a lugubrious air; the management and conveyance of his bulk is an involved and sapping enterprise. He keeps his bonce shaved tight and wears dark baggy clothing, modelling his appearance after Brando in *Apocalypse Now*.

'Well, me and Marlene go back a ways,' I say.

Which is true. Marlene is the nearest thing I've had to a steady girlfriend—and if we've never quite been on we've never quite been off, either, even after Mark Cuculann got her pregnant last year. She had the baby, just after Christmas, a boy, and named him David for her dear departed da.

I ran into her in Fandango's on the Friday. There was the usual crowd; micro-minied girls on spike heels, explosively frizzed hair, spray-tan mahogany décolletage. There were donkey-necked boys in button-down tablecloth-pattern shirts, farmers' sons who wear their shirtsleeves rolled up past the elbows, as if at any moment they might be called upon to pull a calf out of a cow's steaming nethers. Fandangos was a hot box. Neon strobed and pulsed, dry ice fumed in the air. Libidinal bass juddered the windowless walls. I was sinking shots at the bar with Dessie Roberts when she crackled in my periphery. She'd already seen me and was swanning over. We exchanged bashful, familiar smiles, smiles that knew exactly what was coming.

There is the comfort of routine in our routine but also the mystery of that routine's persistence.

Marlene lives with her consenting, pragmatic mother, Angie, who even at three in the morning was up and sat at the kitchen table, placidly leafing through a TV listings magazine and sipping a cold tea. She was happy to see me, Marlene's ma. She filled the

kettle and asked if we wanted a cuppa. We demurred. She told us wee David was sound asleep upstairs, and be sure not to wake him. In Marlene's bedroom I bellyflopped onto the cool duvet; her childhood menagerie of stuffed animals was piled at the end of the bed. I was trying to recall the names of each button-eyed piglet and bunny as Marlene tugged my trousers down over my calves.

'Boopsy, Winnie, Flaps . . . Rupert?'

Now my calves are paltry things, measly lengths of pale, undefined muscle all scribbled with curly black hairs; their enduring ugliness startles me anytime I glimpse them in a mirror. But Marlene began to knead them gently with her fingers. She worked her way up to my thighs and hissed, 'Flip over.' You have to appreciate a girl who can encounter a pair of calves as unpleasant as mine and still want to get up on you.

'She's a nice one,' Tug says.

A fly lands on his head and mills in the stubble. Tug seems not to notice. I want to reach out and smack it.

'That she is,' I say, instead, and take another sup of my pint.

And just like that Marlene appears. This happens frequently in this town; incant a body's name and, lo, they appear. She comes through the double doors in cut-off jeans, sunglasses pushed up into her red ringlets, zestfully licking an ice-cream cone. She's wearing a canary-yellow belly top, the better to show off her stomach, aerobicised back to greyhound tautness since the baby. A sundial tattoo circumscribes her navel. Her eyes are verdigris, and if it wasn't for the acne scars worming across her cheeks, she'd be a beauty, my Marlene.

Mark Cuculann follows her in. Marlene sees me and gives a chin-jut in my direction; an acknowledgement, but a wary one; wary of the fact that Cuculann is there, that big Tug Cuniffe is by my side.

'There's Marlene,' Tug says.

'Uh huh.'

The Clancy Kid

'So is she *with* the Cuculann fella then or what?'

I shrug my shoulders. They have a baby so it's only fair they play Mammy and Daddy; it's what they are. Whatever else she does or does not do with Cuculann is fine by me, I tell myself. I tell myself that if anything I should feel a measure of gratitude towards the lad, for taking the paternity bullet I dodged.

'She's looking fair sexy these days,' Tug says. 'You going to go over say hello?'

'I said hello enough Friday night.'

'Better off out of it alright, maybe,' Tug says.

I slide my palm over my pint like a lid and tap the rim with my fingers.

'D'you hear the latest about the Clancy kid?' Tug says after a lapse of silence.

'No,' I say.

'A farmer in Enniscorthy reckons he saw a lad matching the Clancy kid's description with, get this, two women, two women in their thirties. They stopped into a caff near where this farmer lives. He talked to one of them. Get this, she was—well, German, he reckons. Talked with a kind of Germanic accent, and they—she—was enquiring about when the Rosslare ferry was next off. Little blondie lad with them, little quiet blondie lad. That was a few weeks back though, only the farmer didn't put two and two together till after.'

'A Germanic accent,' I say.

'Yeah, yeah,' Tug says.

His eyebrows flare enthusiastically. The Clancy kid has become something of an obsession for Tug, though the wider interest has by now largely run its course. Wayne Clancy, ten, a schoolboy out of Gurtlubber, Mayo, went missing three months back. He disappeared during a school excursion to Dublin. One moment he was standing with the rest of the Gurtlubber pupils and two teachers on a traffic island at a city-centre Y junction—the lights

turning red, the traffic sighing to a halt, the crowd of boys and girls crossing the road—and then he was gone. At first the assumption was that wee Wayne had simply wandered off, disoriented by the big-city bustle, but it soon became apparent he was not just lost but missing. His disappearance haunted the front pages of the national papers for all of May. The established theory was that Wayne was snatched, either right at the Y junction or shortly after, by persons unknown. A national Garda hunt was launched, Ma and Da Clancy did the tearful on-camera appeals... but nothing happened, and nothing continued to happen. No boy, no body, no credible lead or line of enquiry could be unearthed.

Everyone's interest was piqued, for a while, given the proximity of Gurtlubber parish to our own town. But things go on, and bit by bit we began to care less and less.

Tug can't let the Clancy kid go. He can't resist the queasy hypotheticals such an open-ended story encourages. *What-ifs* proliferate like black flowers in the teeming muck of his imagination. Left unchecked he'll riff all evening about unmarked graves packed with lime, international rings of child traffickers, organ piracy, enforced cult initiation.

I tell him, lighten up.

'They could be lesbians,' Tug says. 'German lesbians. Who, you know, can't have a child. Can't get the fertilisation treatment, can't adopt. Maybe they got desperate.'

'Maybe,' I say.

'The Clancy kid looked Aryan. You know? Fair-haired, blue-eyed,' Tug says.

'All children look Aryan,' I say, irritated.

Marlene's laughter, a high insolent cackling, carries down the yard. She and Cuculann have joined another couple, Stephen Gallagher and Connie Reape. Cuculann is tall, underfed and rangy, like me; Marlene has a type. She is cackling away at something Gallagher has said. Everyone else, including Gallagher, looks

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abashed, but Marlene is laughing and batting Gallagher on the shoulder, as if pleading with him to stop being so hilarious.

'But it wouldn't be the worst end for the lad. It wouldn't be an end at all, really,' Tug says.

A waitress comes through the double doors, bearing a quartet of champagne flutes on a tray. Marlene waves her over and distributes the drinks, stem by stem, a strawberry impaled on the rim of each flute. Cuculann pays, and as Marlene drops the napkin that held her ice-cream cone onto the tray I catch the telltale twinkle on her ring finger.

'Wouldn't it not be?' Tug says.

He reaches over and drops his paw on my forearm, shakes it.

'Be fucking super, Tug,' I say.

He cringes at the snap in my voice. My mind, I want to say, has been enlisted in the pursuit of other woes, Tug, and I can't be dealing with the endless ends of the Clancy kid right now.

'Oh,' Tug says.

He tucks his hand under the opposite armpit, like he's after catching a finger in a door jamb.

'You're in a mood and it's—' he looks over, sniffs the air, '—it's Marlene. It's that loose cunt Marlene,' he says.

I make a disapproving click with my tongue. I jab my finger at him.

'I'm easy as the next man when it comes to getting his end away, but Tug, there's no need to be throwing round them terms.'

He leans back and his span thickens.

'I'll say whatever I want. About whoever I want.'

'You really are an enormous fucking child, aren't you?'

Tug grabs the sides of the table and I feel it shudder and float up from under me. I snatch my drink and lean back as the coasters go twirling off the edge. Tug sways and the table follows his sway, crashing against the concrete. People nearby yelp and jump back.

I daintily disembark from my stool, one foot then the other,

keeping my eyes on Tug's eyes. His lips are hooked up into a sneer, his breathing fast and gurgled.

'I'm sorry, Tug,' I say.

His nostrils pucker and flare and pace themselves back to an even rhythm.

'That's alright,' he says, 'that's alright'.

He rubs a palm over the dented round of his skull and looks at the capsized table with an expression of broad mystification, like he had nothing to do with it.

'Come on,' I say, 'let's head.'

I drain the sudsy dregs of my pint and plant it on a nearby table.

Everyone backs away as we pass by, me in Tug's wake.

I know what they're thinking. Manchild gone mad again. Manchild throwing another fit. Oddball Manchild and his oddball mate Jimmy Devereux.

'Hi Marlene!' Tug says cheerfully as we trundle by her table.

Marlene is unfazeable as ever. Cuculann beside her is hunched and close-shouldered, braced for action.

'Well, big man,' Marlene says.

She looks at me.

'And not-so-big man.'

'Are congratulations in order?' I say.

I lift up the ends of her fingers, straightening them out for inspection. Marlene slips her hand from mine and covers it over with the other.

'Too late,' I chuckle, 'I saw it. Nice aul' hunk of rock.'

'It is,' Cuculann says.

'Very pretty alright,' Tug says.

I can feel him behind me, the looming proximity of all that mass, restored to my side and prepped to go ballistic at my word.

Marlene's bottom lip does something to the top, and she fixes me with a look that says: *pay attention*.

'Jimmy, I'm gone very happy,' she says. 'Now, please, fuck off.'

Outside Dockery's the evening sun is in its picturesque throes, the sky steeped in foamy reds and pinks. The breeze has grown teeth. Shards of glass crunch underfoot like gravel. There are cars parked in a line along the road, and one of them is the tiny, faded silver hatchback Cuculann boots around in. It sits there bald as an insult on the kerb, a wrinkled L-sticker pasted inside the wind-screen.

'Look at the state of it,' I say.

I wallop the flat of my palm against the pockmarked bonnet.

Tug looks at me wonderingly.

'It's Cuculann's car,' I say.

'The thing's a lunchbox,' Tug says and laughs.

'A pitiful thing to be chauffeuring your bride-to-be around in,' I say.

'Awful, awful, awful,' Tug agrees.

'Tug, are you off your meds?' I say.

'No,' he grunts.

He places the palm of one huge hand on the hatchback's roof and begins to experimentally rock the vehicle back and forth, the suspension squeaking in protest. Tug has never been a competent liar; his size, his physical advantage, means he's never needed to develop the ability to dissemble. You can always tell the truth, always say what you mean, if you're big enough.

'Be awful if you were to tip that thing onto its head,' I say.

'Easy,' Tug says.

He rocks and rocks the car until it is squeaking madly on its wheels and bouncing in place. It is parked at an angle, parallel to the lip of the kerb which is a couple of inches off the street, an angle that favours Tug. At just the right moment Tug bends down and digs his hands in under the springing hatchback's bed and pulls up with all his might. The wheels leave the kerb. For a moment the car hangs on its side in the air—I see the vasculature of blackened pipes that run along its underside—then Tug lurches forward and

the hatchback goes over onto its roof with an enormous crunching sound. The passenger window shatters, the glass skittering in diamonds around our feet. The wheels judder in the air and Tug reaches out and stills the one closest.

'Well done, big man.'

Tug is puffing, his cheeks inflamed. He shrugs his shoulders. A car drifts by in the street. Child faces jostle in the rear window for a look at the overturned hatchback. An old codger ambles out of Dockerys, fitting and refitting a wilted pork-pie hat onto his trembling head. His loosely knotted tie flaps at his flushed, corrugated face. The codger grins yellowishly.

'How are the men?' he says.

'Fucking super,' Tug says.

The codger salutes us and wanders right by the wrecked car, not seeming to notice it at all.

I look down and see, half in and half out of the shattered window, a brown leather handbag, its contents scattered in the gutter. There's wadded tissues, loose coins, crumpled sweet wrappers, a ballpoint pen, receipts, a roll-on stick of underarm antiperspirant, a gold-rimmed black cylinder of lipstick. I pick up the lipstick, unsnap its cap. I go to work on the passenger door. In bright red capitals I spell out my plea:

M A R R Y M E

'Shit,' Tug says, and clicks his jaw. 'Hardcore, Jimmy.'

I shrug and pocket the lipstick. I pick up all the other things and put them in the handbag. I pass the bag through the broken window and tuck it into the passenger-seat footwell.

'Back to yours, big man?' I say.

'Sound,' Tug says.

Tug lives on the other side of the river, in Farrow Hill estate with his mam. Like Marlene, his da is gone, in the ground ten years now.

Big Cuniffe's heart burst ushering yearling colts from a burning barn. Tug's mother is a sweet old ruin of an alcoholic who spends her days rationing gin on their ancient, spring-pocked settee, lost in TV and her dead. You say hello and she offers an agreeable but doubtful smile; half the time she has no idea if you're part of the programme she's engrossed in, a figment of memory, or actually there, a live person before her. Sometimes she'll call me Tug or Brendan, and she'll call Tug Jimmy. She'll call Tug by his father's name. Tug says there's no point correcting her. These distinctions matter less and less as she settles into her dotage.

We pit-stop at Carcetti's fast-foodery and chow down on chips as we take the towpath by the river. Slender reeds brush against one another as cleanly as freshly whetted blades. The wet shore-stone, black as coal, glints in its bed of algae. Crushed cans of Strongbow and Dutch Gold and Karpackie are buried in the mud like ancient artefacts. Thickets and thickets of midges waver in the air. They feast on the passing planets of our heads.

Up ahead a wooden bridge traverses the river.

The bridge is supposedly off limits. During a spring storm earlier this year a tree was swept downstream and collided with the bridge and there it still resides, the great gnarled brunt of the trunk rammed at an upward forty-five degree angle amid ruptured beams and splintered fence posts. The bridge sags in the middle but has not yet collapsed. Instead of removing the tree's corpse and fixing the bridge, the town council erected flimsy mesh fences at both shores and harshly worded signage threatening *a fine and risk of injury/death* to anyone attempting to cross.

But the fences have been trampled down, for the bridge is a handy shortcut to Farrow Hill and, despite the council warnings, is still regularly used by estaters like Tug to get in and out of town.

As we approach we see that there are three kids playing by the bridge: two very young girls and a slightly older boy. The girls look five or six, the boy nine, ten.

The boy has white hair—not blond, white. He’s wearing a cotton vest dulled to taupe and a pair of shiny purple tracksuit bottoms, one leg ripped up to the knee. The girls are in grubby pink short-and-T-shirt combinations. The boy’s face is decorated with what looks like tribal warpaint—a thumb-thick red-and-white stripe applied under each eye, and a black stripe running down his nose. He’s wielding an aluminium rod—it could be a curtain rail, a crutch, the pole of a fishing net. One end of the rod is crimped into a point.

‘What are you, an injun?’ Tug asks him.

‘I’m a king!’ the boy sneers.

‘What class of a weapon is that? A lance, a sword?’ I say.

‘It’s a spear,’ he says.

He stamps up along the flattened fence and hops back onto the towpath. He goes through a martial arts display: slashing the air with the rod then spinning it over his head, fluidly transferring it from one twisting hand to the other. He finishes by leaning forward on one knee and brandishing the crimped end of the rod at Tug’s sternum.

‘This is my bridge,’ he says, baring his teeth.

‘And what if we want to pass?’ Tug says.

‘Not if I don’t say so!’

Tug proffers his crumpled bag of chips.

‘We can pay our way. Chip, King?’

The boy reaches into the bag and takes a wadded handful of vinegar-soaked chips. He examines the clump, sniffs them, then peels the chips apart and divides them between the girls. The girls eat them quickly, one by one. They tilt their heads back and make convulsive swallowing movements with their necks, like baby chicks.

‘Good little birdies,’ the boy says, and pats each girl on the head.

They giggle to each other.

‘You shouldn’t take things from strangers,’ Tug says.

'I gave them the chips,' the boy says, tapping his vested breast with his spear. 'What business do you have across the bridge?'

'We're looking for someone. A boy. A little blondie-haired fella,' Tug says, 'a little bit like you. He went away but nobody knows where.'

The boy knits his brow. He steps back up onto the fence and peers along the curvature of the river.

'There's no one like that here,' he says finally. 'I would've seen him. I'm the King, I see everything.'

'Well, we have to try,' Tug says.

Leave it be, Tug, I want to say, but I say nothing. So much of friendship is merely that: the saying of nothing in place of something.

I turn and take a quick look beyond the towpath, along the way we came. A hill leads up to the road and beyond that is the squat, ramshackle skyline of the town. I hear—or think I hear—sounds of distant commotion, shouting, and I picture Mark Cuculann outside Dockery's, raging at the inverted wreck of his car. Marlene will be by his side, arms folded, and I can envisage the look she'll be wearing, the verdigris glint of her narrow-lidded eyes, a smile flickering despite itself about the edges of her lips, lips painted the same shade as the proposal I scrawled for her on the passenger door. I feel for the cylinder of lipstick in my pocket, take it out, give it to one of the girls.

'More gifts,' I say. 'Well, let's get going then, Tug.'

Tug goes to step past the boy. The boy draws up the rod and jabs the crimped end into Tug's gut. Tug grasps the rod, twists it towards himself. He mock-gasps, and claws the air.

'You've killed me,' he croaks.

He staggers back, and folds his big creaking knees, and puddles downward, dropping face forwards flat into the grass, arse proffered to the sky like a supplicant.

'You've done it now,' I say.

I toe-nudge the fetal Tug in the ribs. He jiggles lifelessly. The boy steps forward, mimics my action, toeing the loaf of Tug's shoulder. The girls have gone silent.

'How are you going to explain this to your mammy?' I say.

The boy's eyes begin to brim, even as he tries to keep the jaw jutted.

'Ah, he's set to start weeping,' I say.

Tug, soft-hearted, can't stay dead. He sputters, raises his head, grins. He eyes the boy. He hoists himself up.

'Don't be teary now, wee man,' he says, 'I was dead but I'm raised again.'

He lumbers up over the fence and out onto the bridge and I follow.

'Goodbye King!' Tug shouts.

As I pass him the boy scowlingly studies us, arms folded, aluminium spear resting against his shoulder.

'If ye fall in there's nothing I can do,' he warns.

The bridge creaks beneath us. Halfway across, the thin gnarled branches of the dead tree spill over, reach like witches' fingers for our faces, and we have to press and swat them out of our way.

'So tell me, Tug,' I say.

'What?'

'Tell me more about the Clancy kid. About these German lesbians.'

And Tug begins to talk, to theorise, and I'm not really listening, but that's okay. As he babbles I take in the back of his bobbing head, the ridges and undulations of his shaven skull. I take in the deep vertical crease in the fat of his neck like a lipless grimace, and the mountainous span of his swaying shoulders. I think of the picture of the Clancy kid, scissored from a Sunday newspaper, that Tug keeps tacked to the cork board in his room. The picture is the famous, familiar one, a birthday-party snap, crêpe birthday crown snugged down over the Clancy kid's fair head, big smile revealing

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the heartbreaking buck teeth, eyes wide, lost in the happy transport of the instant. I think of Marlene. I think of her sprog, so close to being mine. I think of her sundial navel, her belly so taut I can lay her on her back and bounce coins off it. We all have things we won't let go of.

The beams of the crippled bridge warp and sing beneath us all the way over, and when we make it to the far shore and step back down onto solid earth, a surge of absurd gratitude flows through me. I reach out and pat Tug on the shoulder and turn to salute the boy king and his giggling girl entourage. But when I look back across the tumbling black turbulence of the water I see that the children are gone.