

**‘Feed it to the dog’ by Ash Shirvington**  
**First runner-up**  
**2023 Young Writers Award**

**Feed it to the dog**

A boy melts from the bush, straight out of the trees. He slithers free of the dirt like a worm, chasing the rain, frenzied and mindless and thrashing. He drags himself up the bank of the dam, drenched and decomposing, made of more leech than boy. The treetops rustle and he is there, watching, hackles raised.

He runs, listening to the wind howl in his ears and his heart thump in his chest.

When he’s finally tired, he crouches in the brush at the base of a strangler fig, bare toes burying themselves in the dirt. The smell of mildew and damp earth lingers in his nostrils. He feels content with the thought of laying his body down amongst the tangle of roots, cushioned in the leaves, and letting the fig encase him with tender hands.

It starts to rain. The boy doesn’t mind. He figures that boys are made of rain in a way that girls aren’t.

But even here, with silence laying dense over the bush like a fog, the boy can still hear it. That horrible noise, drawn from deep inside the beast’s chest. The dog had growled at him today. He had known it was coming for a long time, maybe even the minute mum had brought the pup home. The boy remembers searching through the mess of black fur trying to uncover its face, and finding teeth much too big for a pup, stained brown.

It had been years since then, and the dog wasn’t a pup anymore. It was a force.

Mum loved it. The perfect guard dog, she said. Who it was guarding, exactly, was unclear.

Maybe he was being dramatic, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to shake the feeling of the dog’s breath on his skin for days to come. The smell of rot and plaque and blood and fervour.

A beetle crawled out from under a leaf near the boys' foot. A tiny thing. Delicate, iridescent, with black eyes gazing up at him. The boy took the beetle in his calloused hands gently, holding it like a mother might hold her child. With the precision of an artist, he plucked a piece of shell from its back. Turned it over in his fingers.

It had happened like this. Mum had banished him to the laundry, saying, "Lucy, I am at my wits end. Do not bother me right now."

The boy loved mum. He didn't mind loving her – it was compensation. He knew it was just until he moved out and started his own life, because that was the contract between mother and child.

So, he had tried to not make her angry, and thought he was doing quite a good job at it too. But then she had walked in on him trying to trim his non-existent moustache hairs with her sewing scissors over the laundry sink (and the floor), and that was the end of that.

She held his face in her hands and stroked his hair tenderly. She loved his hair so much that he thought it might belong to her. She had spent hours brushing and conditioning and curling it earlier that morning until the boy's scalp was red and raw.

"My girl," she had whispered, "My beautiful girl." The boy shrank and shrank and shrank underneath her grip.

Mum had locked him outside then. *A teachable moment*, she said. *The world won't be as kind to you as I am*, she said.

Outside in the heat, the smell of melting tar was strong in the air. The boys' insides bubbled and boiled. He imagined he was the cause of the heat waves curling off the pavement, with his mind.

That's when it happened. It came from behind him – a flash of white teeth, red gums, black fur. A growl humming over the boy's shoulder, right next to his ear.

Dogs and boys didn't speak the same language. That much was obvious. The boy didn't even try, he just ran and ran until he felt as frenzied and savage as the beast that was chasing him.

The bush had found him then. He had laid in the grass and imagined sinking deep into the soil. Maybe he would never even have to go home – he could sleep in the brush, survive on witchetty grubs and honey ants and drink water straight from the sky. The fig tree was all the comfort he needed. It stretched above the boy now. He could see remnants of the ghost gum it had swallowed, long ago. He thought he would like to be loved that much someday.

After pulling each piece of the beetle's shiny armour from its back, the boy moved on to its legs. Plucked them one by one. Each limb fuelled the frantic beating of the boy's heart, and he laid them out on his knees like spoils of war.

The beetle looked a little saddened. The boy stroked the empty space between its eyes, trying to cheer it up.

Finally, he was satisfied. He bundled his collection of parts into his pockets, then brushed the beetle off his knee without a second glance. Left it laying in the dirt, staring up at the endless sky, its wings crumpled and torn.

Mum was waiting, when the boy returned home that night. Right in the doorway – the houses maw.

The boy hated when people told him he looked like his mother. They meant it as a compliment, absolutely – she was breathtaking, made of autumn, all auburn and hand knitted. Her cheeks were freckled and rosy red. But the boy knew that she bit those cheeks, on the inside, when she closed her mouth too quickly. He could smell the blood. Her teeth were too sharp. But people never got close enough to notice that.

Her yellow dress against the evening sky made it look like she was made of sunlight. Her expression ruined the mirage as the boy got closer. Her eyes fell on his hair as he crunched up the gravel driveway.

“What did you do.” Her nose was wrinkled and her eyes were downturned at him like she was trying to figure out what kind of creature had just crawled its way onto her property.

The boy recalled earlier that day, finding a pair of rusty scissors by the dam and cutting his hair in the reflection of the water. It had seemed harmless at the time.

“I just like it better like this,” the boy said, softly, cautiously.

Mums face ripples like the surface of a lake. The boy can’t recognise what’s lurking underneath it. She steers him inside and sits him at the table, taking the seat across from him. Her eyes are trained on him carefully, her hands massaging the spaces between her knuckles.

“There is a certain way things are done in this world, Lucy. You know that, don’t you?”

The boy nods. He knows he is agreeing to a lot of things, and some of those things lived in the spaces between words.

“I have a good life.” She smiles, but in the close-lipped type of way. He wonders if she knows he’s already seen what’s hiding behind her lips, fastened to her gums – those dog teeth. If she knows, he doesn’t see why she would hide them like she did.

“I have a good life, and you will have a good life too. Understand?”

The boy nods again. He can smell rotting fruit.

Mum seems satisfied. She pulls him into a hug. Her arms encase him. He can hear her heart through her chest.

She tells him there is a surprise waiting for him on his bed. When he leaves, he knows she is watching him. So is the dog, somewhere, although he can’t see it.

When he makes it to the safety at the top of the stairs, he can’t help but perch himself behind the railing, in the darkness. He watches her.

There is a gecko on the table. The thing looks at her expectantly, as if she might be harbouring a moth sized snack for him to eat. She squishes him gently underneath her thumb. The dog materialises under the table. She drops the lizard into its waiting mouth.

The boy's room wasn't the same as he had left it. His bed was in the wrong spot, and the curtains were drawn. He had left them open.

He refused to look at the thing, the gift, that lay on his bed. He knew what it was already. She left him a new dress at least once a month, without fail. A silent reminder. He was a rabbit captured in a stupidly simple trap.

There was a mirror fastened to his wall that mum had installed last month. The afternoon of that same day, the boy had wrung the neck of a magpie right outside her window.

There were too many things that watched from that mirror. He stood in front of it now, and the eyes of some gangly thing met his own. Patchy hair, hacked and frayed at the edges where this morning it had been silken and smooth. Skin mapped with tiny scratches and scars, dappled and pockmarked. He looked wild and harsh and a little bit scary. The boy liked that. Boys were meant to be made of wildness.

But there was something else in the mirror, something that made him frown. Maybe it was the softness of his cheeks, or the curve of his hips that were slowly making themselves known. He pinched and prodded at them ruefully.

Growing older meant learning the ways of discontentment.

The boy walked to his bed and dropped to his stomach with a thud, dragging himself through the dust underneath, feeling like he was crawling down the gullet of some great beast. He crawled and crawled and when his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he found a crumbled cardboard box in the dust, wrapped in duct tape, nestled in the corner.

Inside the box was a mouse. It was still alive.

It was tired, though. Its little eyes were droopy and its mouth hung slightly open, like it didn't have the energy to close it.

Did mice have family?

Of course they did – everything had to come from something else. That was a fact of the world. Somewhere, the mother of the tiny thing in the boy's hands was waiting for her baby to come home.

In the darkness underneath the bed, it felt nice to be the only two creatures in existence. The boy placed a kiss on the mouse's forehead.

Something joins the two animals in the dust, in that moment. It is made of the seeds of hesitation and maybe even introspection, if that is something a boy is capable of.

It sits, and it watches.

The boy ignores this new beast. The rush of blood in his ears drowns out its murmurings well enough. He places two thumbs on the mouse's chest and presses down until he hears a dull pop, feels the stifling of one tiny heartbeat and the soft final exhale of two crushed lungs.

Mum was in the kitchen. The boy could hear her as he snuck to the bathroom in his sneaking socks, the fuzzy blue pair with the extra soft padding.

He scrubbed at his hands until they bled, mingling with the blood of the mouse, covering the sink with flecks of watery red.

Carefully, carefully, he had removed its furry pelt. Slit the knife under the top layer of skin, working the blade like a paint brush. Unzipped fur from mouse as easily as unzipping a jacket from a boy.

He had left the body in the garden, for the dog to eat.

The boy looked at himself in the mirror above the sink. He imagined what it would be like to unzip his own skin. His mother would probably like to keep it, but the boy wouldn't mind throwing it out.

Movement drew his eyes. There was a skink on the mirror.

The boy struck, slamming his hand into the glass faster than the skink could react, trapping it underneath his cupped palm. The urge to kill raged in his heart like a storm. He thirsted for it, destruction and mutilation and pain and power. *My girl, my girl, my girl.*

The fragility of the thing trapped underneath his palm lit a horrible temptation. He almost gave in – but something made him wait.

Maybe it was the frenzied beating of the lizard's heart. The soft tickle against his skin as it wriggled and thrashed. The beast of introspection had joined him again. It watched over his shoulder, its gaze a harsh spotlight.

The boy had never been able to picture himself as a grown-up. It's not that he wanted to die - he just knew, starkly, painfully, that he was too small. Too small, too disposable, too irregular and frightening to ever be left alive. And someone would find him and they would squish him for the crime of existing in a form as small as his. Maybe he wouldn't even have to wait, he remembered thinking to himself. Maybe he was already dead.

But he was beginning to realise that he was alive – he was alive and the skink was alive and their hearts were beating and the boy was angry, so angry. But the anger was different now.

He drew his hand away from the mirror slowly. The skink eyed him mistrustfully. It flicked its tail once, twice, and then it was gone, disappearing into the space between blinks.

The boy was in the bush again. Above the gum trees the sun hung fat and lazy in the sky, the scent of rain lingering humid in the air.

He'd left the dress his mother had gifted him on her bed, laid delicately on her satin sheets. It had never really been meant for him, anyway. The dog had watched him as he left. Its eyes told him it knew he wasn't coming back. Maybe that's why it let him leave.

The boy wondered what he would do that afternoon. Maybe he would climb the fig tree and let the sun kiss his skin. Maybe he would dive into the lake and search for some undiscovered creature, a dinosaur or a dragon. Maybe he would drink the sky and let himself imagine the world belonged to him.