

## 2024 ADULT SHORT STORY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

### The Snallygaster

By Michael Norton

“A mummified turd.”

That’s what my little brother called it, but I know that’s just boy-talk and meant to make me squirm and squeal and toss our family treasure into the fast-flowing river where the cornhusks and animal waste and women go.

It’s a tooth. An ebony cuspid from the Snallygaster that has been in the family for years and years, and if I’m wrong then our father is wrong, and so is his mother and her father and his mother, and if you don’t defend your family, you might as well be a mud-scrapper outside the town gates, even if you’re defending it from your own brother.

And anyway, you can’t mummify a turd because a turd doesn’t have a heart or a spleen or lungs or a soul, and anyone who ever knew how to mummify anything is long gone and buried, their graves washed over and their stones, engraved with one of the great dead languages, stand at the bottom of the sea.

My brother just wants me to feel bad. I’m not sure why. I don’t think he really knows why either. Here are the things that I do know for certain:

*One.* That the tooth is a tooth and that it came from the gnarled maw of the Snallygaster.

*Two.* That I am not allowed on the hunting trip today, nor tomorrow, nor tomorrow’s tomorrow, and that I’ll “be ready when I’m ready,” which is awfully confusing and awfully unclear, and clarity is the soul’s true cry (*I think*).

*Three.* That I’m not a child anymore. I see the children of the town, and I’m definitely not one of them, though I was quite recently. I thought, back then, that one day I would magically transform into an adult, that I would be tall enough to look down on everyone, and be cocksure and savvy and know about a hundred thousand things and have these marvelously stable opinions that would never bend or break like reeds in the wind but rather would stand unwavering, but instead I turned into what I am now, which doesn’t really have a satisfactory name, so I feel like some halfway creature, like the Snallygaster, just a bunch of mismatched components. I have to stand in the part of the river where the sandbars slow the current with the other women every month by the light of the mocking moon. No one ever confuses me for an adult. The Snallygaster has feathery wings, but no one ever confuses it for a bird; it has a scaly body, but no one ever confuses it for a lizard. Its tentacles don’t make it an octopus. Of course, living memory does not contain the beast. These reports and rumors of its appearances are older than the tooth that is 100 percent not a turd, and this tooth hung around my great-grandfather’s neck, so no, my great-grandfather who survived the end of mostly everything did not waltz around with a turd around his neck, thank you very much.

*Four.* I don't have anyone to talk to about this, but if I did, they would appreciate the cool clarity of a numbered list because they would be like me. And no one is like me. And clarity, I think, died in the Flood.

The hunt is today. Hunt days make me feel small and worthless. I want to go. I want to be out there. I want to see the monster. I don't, however, revel at the thought of holding the blunderbuss.

"Wouldn't even fire if they tried. It don't work no more, and anyway, they filling it with acorns and acorns isn't bullets," and on this point, I reluctantly agree with my stupid little brother. But Still: It's a gun and guns are abhorrent things.

Getting eaten by the Snallygaster is an abhorrent thing too. So is having to wade into the river when no one is splashing or swimming, so are crimson eddies and how water sweeps away everything, and so is having to squeeze string-bugs all day instead of traveling to the edge of the known world to try—and heroically fail—to find and defeat the dreaded Snallygaster.

String-bugs are *sø* sad and stupid, which is why I think I love them. Killing them for their strands of string is *sø* awful, but no one cares but me.

The ways in which I'm like a string-bug: String-bugs are disposable little things with squishy pale bodies and hungry little mouths; they eat whatever is given them, and never ask for more or less. They never leave the town. Born indoors, they are squeezed by society and then left to die in a low boil to extract every last inch of the precious string that is used for everything from fishing nets to Sunday bests.

The ways in which I'm not like a string-bug at all: String-bugs have a purpose.

In the winter, when every other animal is smart enough to sleep. Instead, we, non-string-bugs, huddle in the hearth glow and whisper summer stories to keep ourselves warm. The adults in town get bursts of all-consuming boredom that blisters into either unutterable acts in the snow or arts-and-crafts. Last winter, it was the latter, and the collective energy of a people, of a people who have managed to survive after time stopped, after the world died, of a people of which I'm presumably part and parcel, created a statue to honor a bug. "The string-bug," the Mayor's speech started. I hate speeches so I left and didn't hear the rest. Something about sacrificing ourselves for the greater good, I bet. The Mayor's job is to give speeches and disappear for months on end; my job is to squish bugs.

The hunt is today, and I'm angry. My anger sits inside my throat, making it impossible to speak, so everyone enjoys assuming that I'm a daisy or the downy edge of a feather or a tiny pebble, taciturn. No one knows that I'm a forest fire, terrible heat and sound, and my throat is choked by blue-black ash.

I want to go a-hunting. Please don't misunderstand me (she says to no one, she says to herself): I abhor violence. I abhor the blunderbuss and all its connotations and context, and I even abhor the acorns, though I know it's not their fault. I abhor the looks on their faces: Martha Soot with her bandanna and blades, grinning; Albert Stone snarling, eyes forward like a picture of a tiger I saw once in a half-burnt book; Charity Lighthouse licking her lips like a hungry cat; and my father

with his straight little mouth and straight little gaze, a tight little determination to do today what his mother and her father and his father couldn't ever do: find and kill the Snallygaster.

When the communal kitchen burned to smolders in the night, it was the demon-thing (and not the watchmen's juniper gin and heavy eyes). When the rotting-egg rains blew in from the west and curled the leaves of the crops and stung the eyes of those unwilling to stay indoors, it was the demon-thing (and not the past). *When sickness fouls the air, the demon's breath is near.*

We've never seen the demon-thing.

I want to a-hunting. I want to see the gummy stump where the night-black tooth around my neck once stood proud and shone in the starlight like an obsidian beacon before my ancestor ripped it from the mad beast's mouth (*or, at least, that's the story I've curated for myself*).

I want to rub it in my brother's face.

See? *Nah nah nah*, you see it? The missing cuspid! *How can you see something that's not there?* he'd probably say in his sing-song voice. He is stupid but quick with comebacks.

After I squeeze my allotted bushel of string-bugs, I'm done for the day. I'm done for the day, and the sun is still rising, I'm done for the day, and the hunters won't be back for weeks. One hunt lasted a month, and I'm done for the day.

I followed the path down to the edge of the forest.

"There is nothing beyond the edge," a popular town adage. On clear summer nights, the light-showers explode and shimmer over where we all know other towns must be. Whether a warm invitation or a fiery warning, the light show is spectacular. Since there is nothing beyond the edge—except, of course, the hunting grounds of the Snallygaster—no one talks about the light-showers. Framed in the flares of many-colored fires, we all look up, and never into each other eyes. To do so would be the highest form of insult.

The hunters leave in the earliest spring, one step behind the melt line, hoping to catch the Snallygaster just waking up from hibernation, a vulnerable sliver of time. I'm watching them from the farthest point of my tether, invisible, tight as string-bug string. I'm bound here in the town that kept going after so much else ended. The hunters go on and on, and I'm jealous. I need to see it.

When I get like this, I clutch the tooth on its chain around my neck. It feels like a dagger. I don't take it off anymore. After the anger often comes this shaking stillness, heartbeat in the tip of my toes, wobbling. And then a true silence, a true stillness, though without calm, without peace. I want to go a-hunting in the sylvan mist in the morning when the moon isn't mocking, but rather beaming down an approving smile, a hymn for adulthood, amen.

The hunting party is gone. And the town has shrunk, collapsing in on itself like a bad redberry pie. The waiting is the hardest part. And I've been done for the day for most of the day, and the river fractals out to about a hundred thousand little streams, and the biggest of them winds its way past the edge of the town, and no one has told the water that there is nothing beyond the

edge. The water doesn't know that where it's coming from and where it's flowing to does not exist.

I dip my feet up to my ankles in theoretically impossible water, which is cool and smells like stone. I'm still in that state of sacred stillness after the rage of anger. It's sacred because it's mine and no one can take it from me.

Something moves in the bushes on the other side of the narrow stream, and I assume it's a ground pheasant or a woodland rat. But it shakes the bushes too violently for me to be right. If I were to scream, I don't think anyone would come a-running. I sit and wait for whatever it is to emerge.

I bet it's my brother trying to scare me. I tell myself that over and over until I see a flash of scaly skin. Or, at least, I think I did. Lightning erupted in my legs and I ran home without looking back.

Home, holding the monster's tooth against my body, I am breathing hard and heavy. I had to tell someone. I couldn't keep this all inside.

So, I'm telling myself, the only one I can trust for now.

