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Regeneration

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HONORABLE MENTION
JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION

Regeneration
by Sara Johnson

“This is the first blue moon on Halloween since 1952,” Lewis says to me, stepping off the sidewalk. Ninja fighters and space invaders crash by, their orange, plastic pumpkin pails knocking violently from side to side.

“It’s an infestation,” he sighs, watching the kids fight each other to climb the steps of a huge house. He tips his head back and points his ketchup bottle to the sky. “Hey, Theo, check out Orion’s belt.”

Lewis likes the sky. He likes that if he stands still long enough he’ll be under a new galaxy. He has that kind of patience for the sky, but not for anything organic. He works in an observatory at MIT, recording numbers that correlate to space.

The street is littered with chunks of charred pumpkin. “I can’t believe it’s only 7:00 and they’re smashing pumpkins. We used to wait to do that until at least 9:00 or 10:00.”

“Kids today.” Lewis sighs again. He is a massive hot dog, arms forced out to the sides by foam, his face framed in red felt.

“It’s a statement about processed meat, about factory workers in the 21st century,” he shouted in defense of his rented hot-dog from his room. I know he really just wants to say things like, “Wanna touch my hot dog” and “How’d you like to go home with a big wiener.” He practiced different combinations of these in the bathroom mirror before we left.

In high school girls hated us; guys beat us up. In college there were fewer football players to shove us against lockers, a vast improvement, but we were still invisible. After graduation,

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we moved to Boston and gave up on people entirely to cultivate our CD collections like shiny, plastic gardens. On weeknights we play Trivial Pursuit. On weekends we go to Roy's Bar, a small music club around the corner where obscure, small label bands play. I like to think the band members were like us in high school, hated, skinny, weird. The girls at Roy's were the first women to ever pay us any attention. For some reason they find the very clunky glasses and thrift store clothes that got us beat up in high school, sexy.

We know all the music labels our favorite bands are signed to, that President Kennedy kept a pet rabbit named Zsa Zsa, which two U.S. cities have giant pandas (Atlanta and San Diego) and until recently nothing about girls. But we're starting to figure it out. We are late bloomers, goofy geniuses. Princes of Dork. The girls seem to like it. Hey, whatever works.

We arrive at Hillary's party early. We met her at Roy's during a concert, but she is not us. She has always been beautiful, always known what to do with it.

"Do you want to do a lap around the block? We're pretty early."

"So?" He looks at me blankly.

"Hey, guys!" Hillary opens the door, her chest threatening to pop out of tightly wrapped green Saran wrap. Tiny. White. Miniskirt. Lewis's mouth drops open. He had sex with her last summer and can't seem to understand that it will never happen again.

"Fabulous costume . . . you must be a green M&M. Did you know that the Rolling Stones insisted their dressing room be stocked strictly with brown M&M's. If only they had known about the green ones."

We are full of facts. He reaches out to hug her, desperately hoping. We are full of fear.

She puts her hands out to stop him, "Don't. I'm starting to

unravel.”

“Damn shame, Hillary, damn shame,” I push past Lewis. I kiss her on the cheek, casually holding her by the hip. I can do these things because I never slept with her. Lewis doesn’t understand, she likes everyone . . . once.

Hillary looks at me, one hand still on the door and one hand on her plastic waist. “Are you a Goth boy?”

“Nope.”

“You’re a mime?”

“My face is painted black not white.”

She crunches up her perfect nose and tugs at the Saran wrap.

“Chimney Sweep!”

“No, no. I am the absence of light.”

“Oh, Theo, you’re so strange,” she rolls her eyes and waves us into her house carefully, stepping away from Lewis as he mopes by her. The party is already packed. Even this early people are fighting to talk over each other.

The kitchen counters are lined with jars of candy corn, black and orange jellybeans, and plastic spider rings. A sign scrawled in magic marker reads, “Guess how many and win a prize!!!” Cardboard cutouts of pumpkins and witches on broomsticks, the kind that haunt third grade classrooms, are stuck to the walls with scotch tape. Orange and black streamers twist down from the ceiling towards a punch bowl on the table.

In the laundry room people are bobbing for apples. Weak with laughter, they smear makeup and face paint away from their eyes. Madonna is picking her fake eyelashes out of the sloshing water.

“This reminds me of a church party,” I say thinking about how when we were kids, the youth group spent weeks planning our annual haunted house.

A shark attack victim complete with cut up wetsuit and half a surf board overhears me. “It won’t feel like church when you

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start drinking that.” He points to a black plastic cauldron in the middle of the table.

“Did you know sharks actually prefer to eat what they can swallow whole?” Lewis says to the victim.

“It’s just a costume,” the guy staggers off towards the smokers’ porch.

We make a beeline for the green punch with its floating eyeballs.

“Taste like shit,” we simultaneously agree.

An hour later Lewis is dancing, or more like jerking from left to right. He’s knocked down most of the party streamers with his hotdog bun. He’s normally a bad drunk, but tonight he’s a real mess. Having exhausted the game of head butting people, he’s wrapping himself in green Saran wrap.

“Anyone want some of Hillary’s leftovers, preserved for freshness, a 6 foot hotdog for you.”

I can’t watch anymore. I head for the porch. As the heavy cloud burns my eyes. I am convinced smoke will somehow clear my head which is full of cold spaghetti and peeled grapes. I have haunted house brains.

“He must be a chimney sweep.”

“No, I’d say a black hole.”

“I think he’s a newly paved road in Alabama.”

A water nymph, a very sexy mobster, gun tucked into skirt waistband, and a lamp with pink ruffled lampshade on her head appear in the cloud of blue smoke.

“Maybe he’s nighttime,” the lamp says. It occurs to me suddenly there are very few men at the party and everyone is completely trashed. I smile at them, liking my odds.

“No, ladies. Not even close. I am the absence of light. I will try to speak loudly since it is so very hard to see me.”



The sky is clicking by like the seconds hand on a watch. If Lewis was not inside knocking around lighting fixtures, he could have told us about the speed of planetary rotation and pointed out which stars were which. It's me and the lamp talking and talking. We like the same bands. We hate the same movies. Hair falling below the pink lampshade, long, curly, blond. I have to concentrate on not reaching out to wrap a coil around my finger, concentrate on what she's saying so I can say the right things back. I voted for Nader, she voted for Gore. We like the beach and mountains equally. She frequently bites her thin upper lip. We deduce we have been to 6 of the same concerts at the club around the corner. We are sure we look familiar to each other. She is afraid of death. I am afraid of cockroaches. Brown eyes like melted fudge. Too much green punch and the magnetic urge to lean closer and closer. North to South and South to North. She is dressed as a lamp and I am the absence of light for God's sake.

"Hey, we should hang out sometime. Maybe go up to Roy's together. I heard that Lambchop was going to be playing there next week. Can I get your e-mail address?" E-mail is easier than calling. I am reaching into my back pocket for my pen when she says,

"Not a good idea."

"Why not?"

"I can't afford to."

"I'm on discount," I lean in closer to her, "Blue Light special." I am killing me tonight.

"I have mishaps."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, after being dumped, I have accidents."

"What are you talking about?" I push the pen back into my

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pocket.

“Well, after my first love dumped me on New Year’s, I went to a hotel party and drank lemon martinis, lots of lemon martinis. I ended up talking to some guy on the balcony. I had been drinking all the drinks left on tables and on the bathroom counter, so it didn’t bother me that he was unconscious.”

“That’s not good.” I shift uncomfortably.

“Not good at all. I explained to a random, passed out guy that my ex was going to certainly call me the next morning. I decided I couldn’t wait until morning, so rather than go back through the crowded hotel room, I thought it would be easier to climb down the balcony to get to a pay phone. Long story short, I broke my ankle, tore a ligament in my knee and shattered my wrist. I heard the ex thought I jumped on purpose and I swore I would never love again. You know the whole routine.”

“Sure.” But I didn’t. Since our recent entrance into the women business, Lewis and I had dated lots of girls, even figured out what to do in bed. I developed a terrible appetite my personality couldn’t keep up with, but never really wanted anyone in particular. She doesn’t seem to be as drunk as I would have to be to be saying all of this.

“So after Ex #1 was Ex #2. A year later I got dumped again, this time on St. Patrick’s Day. I was determined not to drink a drop, not to do anything pathetic to put me in the emergency room.

“About an hour after being dumped, I decided I needed immediate clarification on ex #2’s comment about me ‘being out of tune with myself.’ And since of course we were still ‘friends’ . . .”

“Of course,” I am running an emergency credential check on her. Everything was going so well. No one wants to know you are fucked up, about the times you were weak. She is crazy to

tell me, even with that lip biting thing I am starting to like, she puts me off. I want to leave, but I have to consider that our friends are mutual. People I really like, really like her. Maybe she is just drunk.

“So I decided it was a good idea to drive over to my ‘friend’s’ house, one whole hour after we broke up. Creeping along in pre-St. Patrick’s parade traffic, I decided to listen to a mix tape he made me. I guess I thought it would provide clarity. I was fishing it out of my glove compartment and I didn’t see this St. Patrick’s Day float in front of me with these huge boards hanging off the back and I drove right into it.”

“That should be illegal,” I say, thinking of all the times I have seen flat bed trucks loaded with long objects protruding off the back like giant lances pointed right at windshield level. She is a Leo. I am a Taurus. We fear the same hazards.

“I know, right? Anyway I’m not going that fast, but the boards come through the windshield on the passenger side. The glass goes everywhere and I end up with these.”

She pulls up her sleeve and shows me the pink scars that cross her bicep. Nice arms. Just below her shoulder, I see a tattoo of a purple starfish.

“Did you know that a starfish can cast off one of its arms and it will grow an entirely new starfish?”

“Yes, I did,” she rolls her sleeve back down. “So there’s my damage.”

“Um. . .What does this have to do with me?”

“Because if we go out and I fall in love with you. . .”

“How do you know that would happen?” I interrupt pushing the pen deep inside my pocket.

“Because, I always fall in love then get dumped on a holiday. It’s my fate or something. We’ll go out a few times and I’ll get attached. Eventually we’ll break up and before I know it, I will have hacked my pinky off chopping onions because I’m think-

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ing about you. Or maybe one day I am crying and because I am rubbing my eyes too much, I develop some kind of infection and lose an eye. Or maybe I will be distracted one day thinking about you, and I walk into the street and get hit by a car. It's all very possible."

Except for the falling in love part. Too strange, too weird, too much too soon. She is completely insane. I look around for Lewis, a way out. I see his hotdog still bobbing through the fogged window. I look down at my blackened hands, the black pigment absorbing all light. Hillary is outside, topless, making out with a guy from a band I have seen play at Roy's. A roach can live 9 days without its head. A hamster on a wheel can run about 8 miles a night. In Kentucky 50% of first time marriages are teenagers. Hitler was claustrophobic. A can of Spam is opened every 4 seconds. The world teeming under the clicking sky is weird.

I look back at her clear brown eyes and understand immediately. She considers every infinite possibility, views everything in networks and correlations. She sees the invisible lines between the stars that make them constellations. She's just one of those people.

"Maybe with me you'll regenerate," I say leaning my arm against the pillar holding the roof up, holding me up over her. "Maybe this time you'll grow an extra kidney, or your hair will double in length."

First she looks confused, then seems to consider this seriously. She doesn't move away from my lean. She bites the lip I think I love.

"Maybe I'll build you up," I whisper.

I lean in to kiss her, clumsily grabbing her once shattered wrist. Unfortunately, I miss, catching half her lips. I accidentally knock off her lampshade. It plummets over the railing like she did one New Year's Eve. I expect her to look over the rail

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after it, but she doesn't move. With half my lips on half of her lips, we stand touching, not really kissing. Suddenly I realize how strange this must seem to her. She pulls away. I am in high school again.

"I-I'm really sorry. . ." I say. I am 15 again. All the women in the world are like Hillary, and they hate me. I look over the railing but can't see her lampshade. Suddenly I feel very sober. Looking back at her, I'm ready for the way girls have always looked at me.

Her eyes are narrowed, her bottom lip pushed out. I feel sick.

"I would fall in love with you. So you can't have my e-mail. It was nice meeting you, Absence of Light."

And she and her beautiful lampshade are gone.



"Did you know it takes 71 pounds of pressure to rip off the human ear," Lewis says, kicking a piece of blackened pumpkin through the damp street.

"Really. So, if your ear gets ripped off what do you do?"

"Oh, you can either have the original frozen and reattached or have a new one regenerated."

"How do you regenerate an ear?"

"There's a company here in Cambridge doing it: livers for alcoholics, lungs for smokers, ears for artists." He stops behind a parked car, leans awkwardly, bound by the hotdog suit, and vomits.

I wait patiently and think about a lab full of ears, upper lips, chunks of livers, and lungs growing in agar.

"But," he spits, "it will still be years before they can grow you a new dick."

"That's too bad." She never told me her name.

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We keep walking, Lewis kicks at rejected Bit-O-Honey candies and boxes of raisins strewn across the street. A rough river of dried leaves flows an inch above the sidewalk as the wind picks up.

“Hey, did you notice Hillary watching at me?”

It never stops with him. “Um. . . don’t know. I wasn’t really paying attention.”

“I think I’m starting to get through to her. We had this kind of weird, good moment in the kitchen. It wasn’t what she said, it was what she didn’t say. Like there was something between us even if it didn’t make any sense. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

Lewis has to duck to fit in the door. He collapses on the couch, his arms and legs forced awkward distances from their mates by thick foam.

“Dude, please take off that thing. It’s starting to scare me.”

“I feel at home in it,” he rambles. “It’s like my second skin. I am the sausage filling protected in its casing.”

“Lewis, I’m serious. Don’t sleep in that thing.” But he is already gone.

After scrubbing off the black paint, my face is raw red. Climbing into bed, the exhaustion hits me. Everything is bothering me: the waistband on my boxers, the sound of the dusty heater humming, the smell of my pillowcases. The sheets feel cold and damp. A draft is whistling through the window over my head. On the inside of my eyelids, I watch the floating dots. I’ll get her number from Hillary. I am drawing lines between the dots in my eyes, trying desperately to form constellations.

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