On Display

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The fly keeps buzzing past my head and it’s hot in here. I don’t see it but I can hear it. It’s hard to keep lying here, with the buzz flying and the sweat dripping into my eyes. Each sliding drop stings, as the sweat has mixed with dust and has turned my forehead into a series of dark streaks. And the fly keeps on its merry way, buzzing and flapping and shrilling in my ears. And it’s hot. And cramped. It’s dark and hot and cramped in this little space. I can feel the beads of sweat rolling down my neck, down my chest, then getting pulled into my already soaking black t-shirt. The wet shirt is catching every tiny dust bunny and making it into a faux sweater of mottled grays and whites and cobwebs. And in this tight space, there are plenty of screws poking into me at regular intervals. You think they would plan on people crawling through ducts and make them more habitable. But instead, they never clean them out, and I have to slide through piles of dust and across these little screws that rip through my sweater and make a thousand small scratches along my forearms and stomach and legs. And the whole while this damn fly won’t leave me alone. I’ve stopped crawling and I’m watching now. The fly knows this. He wants to see what I see.

Through the grate I can see her. She doesn’t dare move. She holds her head high as middle-aged women moves around her, barely giving her a glance. How can they not see her for her beauty? Her arching eyebrows look as if they were painted on by an artist. Her mouth is a perfect shade of pink and it doesn’t move, stoically. Her skin is a perfect milky shade of white from head to toe that makes the lines of her joints barely noticeable. The skin has a shimmer that glows in the bright lighting. Her bright baldness isn’t off putting. It just separates her that much more from the rest. She stands there, unmoved, as these old hens peck at shirts and pants, all lying in neat piles around her.

And she wears the most beautiful dress. It’s light and low cut, draping her slender frame. From this angle, I could probably see down her dress, but I would never do that. It’s disrespectful. She’s putting herself out on display, bearing her soul in front of these pinching and grabbing old women that don’t deserve to be in her presence. I bet these old ladies have grandsons back at home that they make watch soap operas all afternoon and take to dinner parties to impress their grabbing and prodding friends.
I would bet they never let their grandsons stay up late and watch the news or have friends over for sleepovers. And they pinch your ear for saying the wrong thing in church, and don’t let you have dessert when you didn’t eat all of your peas but you only had one pea left and it fell on the floor and you can even see it has a cat hair on it, but no, you can’t have a piece of pie. And they grab and prod at these neat stacks of clothes, holding them up in the air as if to see what would have looked good on them twenty years ago and then put them back in a crumpled, folded pile.

But she doesn’t care. She’s wearing a beautiful dress above them all and its more revealing than anything these old hags could get away with. And her breasts are perfect and small, coming to small points beneath the loose fabric. But I don’t look at them for long, out of respect. I look down at my arms instead. They’re specked in lines of dust and sweat that cling to the arm hair. There’s a screw digging into my left arm but I don’t mind. It is my penance to her. Even the small pool of blood that is a sticky mess of hair and dust and dead flies is fine with me.

Ah, the fly! It has stopped buzzing and landed on my arm. It doesn’t move. I think it sees her. The fly is also entranced by her poise and grace on stage, in front of this unworthy audience of naysayers and ne’er-do-wells. We can both see our reflections in the shine of light from her hairless head. She knows that we watch her and she smiles.

Her smile makes it easier to bear up here. It’s so hot and the dusty air is hard to breathe. As long as I don’t think about them, the scratches are barely noticeable. I hope she can’t see them. That would be very embarrassing. But I’m sure she can’t, with the bright lights down there and it being so dark in here. I just wish I could see the back of her dress, see how it drapes over the soft curve of her back. I think I can make it there, but I can’t turn around. It’s too tight of a space. And my legs have fallen asleep. Dammit. All this jumbling around is making too much noise. I can see my nana looking up at me through the grate with concerned eyes. Dust is falling onto the bright-colored piles of shirts below me. Dammit. I have to start moving. And the fly has started its buzzing and the game begins all over again. I can see light coming through a grate ahead and a bend comes right after it.

I can see the back of her dress! It’s gorgeous and low-cut, falling to the small of her back. Her shoulder blades are perfectly aligned and peek from the edges of fabric. It really accentuates her neck and looks like the kind of dress a model would wear. I bet she could be a model. Not like these frumpy old ladies that sit around the house doing crossword puzzles.
and pick at the edges of the table cloth until they're all tattered. And
definitely not that man— that mall security guard being led into the store by
the beady-eyed crow that looks like my nana. But it can't be my nana. I was
at her funeral.

It was so quiet at the funeral and the organ music playing in the
background. All the bridge ladies wore matching pink hats. They looked
ridiculous all in a line together. But everyone turned around, even the priest,
and looked at me. I shouldn't have laughed. Nana shouldn't have laughed at
me. They shouldn't have poked and prodded at me like they pick apart these
neatly stacked pants. Buy one, get one half off, that sign says. She stands on
display next to the sign, her hands stiff in jointed angles as the soulless old
women shuffle to the soulless muzak.

And that nana keeps squawking and pointing at the ceiling, where I
was just minutes ago. That guard is dumb and fat and would never fit into
a size two, like the beauty he stands in front of. He could never be good
even to stand on display, in front of the thousands of people that buzz by
each day. He could never hold that same pose, never moving an inch. Even
as he's yelling up at the ceiling tiles, I know that he could never stand there
with milky skin and soft pink lips, and face the crowd of grabbing hands that
prod and poke at you, staring.

Logan McDonald writes both non-fiction and fiction, although he prefers
fiction. Look for his first novel in a bookstore near you in the Spring of
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