

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 43

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June 2009

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### Recommended Citation

Presente, Henry (2009) "Last Day on the Job," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 43.  
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol9/iss1/43>

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## LAST DAY ON THE JOB

Henry Presente

"Tell me everything is going to be alright," she pleads, but there is no escape. The elevator plunges, throwing us a few feet into the air before it grinds to a stop. She lurches into me.

"Take my hand," she cries, jamming her fingers into my palm and breaking my hold on the broken emergency phone. I wince as the phone falls and cracks into my bruised knee, which has been inflating like a purple balloon since I fell while trying to climb through the ceiling a minute ago. Smoke is crawling into the elevator cabin. She's breathing in quick gasps.

"Hold me," she demands, and crumples against my body. We're deep inside the courthouse—too deep for firehoses or wishful thinking. No rescue could make it in time. The smoke is adding up and we sink to the floor.

"Save me," she whimpers, so I stand up to pantomime a hero again. I unbutton my shirtsleeves, pry my fingers between the elevator doors, and wrench. On the other side of retirement, my hands were strong and thick and welded metal for battleships. Not long ago, I couldn't feel shirt buttons through the calluses on my fingertips. I feel everything now. I feel light-headed. After a minute of futility, I pull back from the elevator doors and lean against the wall, panting and stroking my soft, white beard with a soft, aching hand.

"Do you want me?" she murmurs, sitting cross-legged on the floor and suddenly peaceful and calm. I'm surprised until I see the heroin needle in her hand and the hole in her arm.

"You'll never have another chance. Do you want me?" she asks. She licks her lips, drops the needle, and rope-climbs the dangling emergency phone to her feet. She locks me in a stoned, sultry stare and slips off the shoulder straps of her blue dress. It falls like a curtain and leaves her body glistening and bare, except for tattoos of two dragons that climb her ribs like ladders and lasso her breasts with long tongues. I snap my eyes to the floor.

"Look at me," she declares, convincing my eyes while my brain is still considering the argument. The hazy smoke between us rolls back the mileage she's put on her body. She's a looker—a luscious brunette—just a few years older than her husband, my useless grandson, who was probably late for his court appointment like he's late for everything else. No doubt he is standing outside in the snow right now, shivering as he watches the fire and the real men with real jobs trying to do something about it. If nothing else, this mess spares me from singing his praises in court as a character witness.

"Take me," she commands, crossing the elevator in a single step. She lifts my hand to her breast, and my fingers graze against green dragon scales that feel just like warm skin.

"Take me," she insists, inching closer and brushing my beard with her cheek. Her earrings are the little white pearls my wife gave her before she passed away. I bend down and pull her dress back up. After I replace the straps on her shoulders, I tug gently on her ear and her eyes brim with tears.

"Forgive me," she says, reaching up to grasp my wife's earring between her thumb and forefinger. I swat away her guilt with a wave of my hand. Then I hold my arms out to make her understand that hard feelings can't exist where we are. But when she steps into my embrace, rests her chin on my shoulder, and clutches two fistfuls of the back of my shirt, I allow myself a sigh.

If she weren't here, I wouldn't have to play all these parts. I wouldn't be climbing up elevator ceilings or worrying about hurt feelings. I would be sitting quietly—or humming a Bob Dylan tune if I felt like company. I would be pissing in the corner and enjoying five minutes free from responsibility.

"I'm scared," she says, pulling me tighter and gouging her fingernails into my back. I stroke her hair and rock her gently this way and that, but I am coming up empty in a search for something comforting to say.

Some piece of the elevator—some cable or pulley—begins to groan under the strain. It's not a high-pitched whine, just a

grumble earned after a long day on the job. I contemplate how much more I have in common with this battered piece of metal than the confused girl in my arms.

"I don't want to die," she sobs, reminding me that I still have one more thing to do before I can clock out.

"It's okay, darling. I'll see you on the other side," I say, using a smile and a little kiss on the cheek to soften the sentiment. They're the right tools for the job. As her stranglehold eases, I feel the blood returning to my head.

"See you," she mumbles.

When the elevator finally drops, she does not scream. We fall weightless and calm, and on the way down, she opens her arms and sets me loose. With those few seconds of freedom, I listen to the wind rushing by, which sounds enough like bubbles escaping from a beer to give me one last smile. I always liked a cold beer at the end of a tough job.