



Peter Newton
Part-Time Gods



First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
Snapshot Press, Orchard House, High Lane, Ormskirk L40 7SL

at www.snapshotpress.co.uk/ebooks.htm

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Typeset in Minion Pro

Cover photograph © Didier Aires

Design by John Barlow

Part-Time Gods

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First thing, flip on the bird switch. Rewind the dream spool. Advance to exactly the right spot for remembering. Someone else scrolls the clouds sideways, pops the sun in and out. Someone else calms this ocean, kicks that one awake. Cue the seagulls. There's the Department of Safe Passage over there. The Office of Serendipity down the hall. It's a sprawling complex no one would believe. Still we take a lot of grief from the outside. But like I was tellin' a buddy of mine the other day in the break room, it's not up to us which shoes to wear every morning. For cryin' out loud, not everything's covered in one almighty handbook. Hey, while you're standing there, dial up the magic on that.

magenta sunrise
my belief in
what I don't know

The Anatomy of Hope

We are all on guard. Waiting for word. The topic is locked on the missing Malaysian plane. Thirty-four days of near-constant coverage and tonight they're calling it: The Anatomy of Hope. A blatant ratings grab no one seems to mind. We are listening for the cockpit voice recorders. We are spellbound, hypnotized and desperate for that errant ping. The panel invites us to dive deeper into the mystery. During the commercial break, there's been an outbreak in Africa. A car bomb in Kabul. I am standing in my quiet kitchen, staring back at a row of windows. A soldier at lost attention. The world is in ruins and I am thinking maybe these people on the plane have gone searching. That kingdom of kindness I've heard tell about. Or was that only me talking, spreading rumors of a better world.

mid-winter
the drive-thru cashier's
scripted greeting

Paradise Road

Every morning of late . . .

their friends failing
my folks
going steady

I wake writing in my head . . .

Paradise Road
my shortcut
to and from school

the eulogy for someone I love.

graveside
one step closer
to knowing him

Whooping Creek Church Road

Out here you get used to the solemn faces filing past on their way to pray. Heading to their primitive one-room church in the woods. We heathen sinners learn to live with the history and the old haunts. You learn to let it go, just wave matter-of-factly at the pickups that pass as if you belonged here from the beginning.

You're proud of your ramshackle shotgun shack. All the place of worship you need. Out in the middle of nowhere. Perfect for a transplant like you who likes sleep when he's asleep, space when he's awake. The nearest neighbor a new farmer who just moved in a half-mile up the hill. Some guy raising bison trying to ride the buffalo burger craze. You've gotten used to seeing them from your evening perch on the back steps. Come sunset the behemoths stand silhouetted on the ridge like the back of an old nickel.

God's creatures alright. Almost too beautiful to believe . . . the world we live in. Nothing to do but look, listen and feel. This is how you come back to life.

turning me
into one of them
a thousand starlings

Ace in the Hole

It takes a bit of visual slaloming to look deep into the woods over the moose marsh between the trees to find a clear path through pine boughs past birch bark sloughing off onto masses of scrub brush to see the bright green of a sunlit clearing's tall grass that blankets the inland meadow not impossible but difficult to reach a kind of heaven I can remember and then like a built-in element of suspense when I have aged beyond recognition I might catch a similar glimpse of green and *behold* . . .

three crows
four pine treetops
my place in the world

The Usher

“Good Morning,” he bellows once the elevator doors slide closed and we ascend. Despite a jacket two sizes too big, there is a fullness about him. His tone is exuberant.

summer's end

Heads bowed, I and a few other passengers rouse from our assumed positions of indifference. Most of us are visitors preoccupied with our own reasons for being in a hospital. We stammer out our delayed greetings: “Morning.” “Hello.” “How’s it goin’?” He shakes his bald head, tries again. “Thought I’d break the silence . . . I mean, here we are, right?”

the tallest one in line

He owns the force behind his drawn cheeks. Something intact. It’s as if he were rallying a team of strangers to give it all they’ve got: *C’mon peo-ple. I gotta fight this cancer and carry the conversation? Couldn’t we just extend a little courtesy?* I take his meaning: You have to fill the space you’re given.

at the ice cream truck

The doors slide apart like curtains. The man extends his arm as if introducing me to the world.

Joy

pops up where you might not expect, unbidden. Take a slow walk on a summer day. Down a dirt road scattered with puddles from last night's downpours. Let the sun make its comeback. Thoreau himself might have sauntered down this same path. Who knows? Frost could've written a poem around here without even trying. Suddenly, a small cloud of blue butterflies startles up from their cooling drink of rainwater. How willing they are to land on anything that lets them.

relationship advice
from a firefly
on again

The Ascension

He woke on his last day with the palpable feeling of being an astronaut at lift-off.

Under an esplanade of leaves all moving at once through the nearly invisible hospital sheers he recognized the slow brilliance, a warmth pulsing in complete command of the sun.

heat wave

The curtains rose slowly as if the world was breathing life into the room.

the train cars too fast

A blast of long-stored fuel rushing up through a maze of chambers.

A gush of adrenaline flooding the vessels of his brain.

A flock of pigeons flapping wildly *whoosh* past the window.

to read their graffiti

Carousel

Vince says we're all on the same carousel. Sometimes you're riding a lion, sometimes a giraffe. We're here to be humbled. You never know what animal's gonna be open when you climb aboard. Maybe it is a horse. But it could just as easily be a turtle. Either way, we're all getting there.

mentioning
her recent loss
the cashier hands me my change

Owl Elegy

The wing was the only salvageable piece from the road kill he had inadvertently caused. It being too beautiful to let the rain ruin. To leave for the crows to undo. Their irreverent plucking and tearing was unthinkable. The feathers were an elegy unto themselves. A pledge to stealth.

old orchard

As a retired pilot the man knew what it was like being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He also knew it was wrong not to tend to the body. He buried it right there along the road as a small gesture. A nod to survival. A moment of silence for the hunter and the hunted. What other way to honor the fallen among us.

where a tree once stood

Once home, he laid the wing across the hearth as if it were some sort of offering. He was an atheist. But there was an almost innate pull toward ceremony. Let the fire cure this wing, he thought, forgiving himself. These late gifts, always unexpected, he valued the most. A fact he kept to himself.

ashes for the sapling

No Patriot

Online my father bought a light to illuminate the flag on top of his new flagpole. It looks like a little flying saucer about the size of a dinner plate. The circular array of LEDs are a little bright I say testing it before I install the thing up there for everyone to see. They'll get used to it he says speaking of his busy-body neighbors. I attach the light by slipping the stem of the gold ball through the hole in the center of the plastic saucer locking the spaceship in place. The battery that keeps the solar strips alive lasts up to 18 months my father says reading aloud the instructions from China. Figures he says probably longer than I will. Together we look up just at the moment his little UFO pops to life. I have no way to gauge my father's pride. I am no veteran. I have never fired a gun. Together we say nothing and that amounts to something. A sort of pledge of allegiance neither of us have the words to share.

so much respect
after the fact
tomb of the unknown

Bluethroat

A friend I admire is an avid birder. Certain migratory species will draw her out into “the field” for days. I don’t know how she finds the time to spend so many hours peering through tiny binoculars happy at day’s end to have captured a glimpse.

relearning
the notes of its song
mocker

Maybe this whole birder thing is about unplugging, honing one’s observational skills. A kind of professional development. It could be about that or just being quiet I suppose, like I am now pecking away at the keyboard.

always the outlier
a conversation
among crows

I have noticed how the Baltimore Oriole’s song twines the air into the most intricate melodic knots you could imagine. I have, stopped in traffic, rolled down my window to listen to its ornate message. A love note sung in calligraphy.

cold front
the chickadee
in its black cap

With all those hours of quiet song in one's head there is no doubt a lot of time to think. About who we are. What we are. Where we are. The birds, I suspect, can just about tell us everything we need to know.

each of us
with one thing that's ours
bluethroat

To a Friend Who Hasn't Written in Months

Writing is a kind of wealth. I mean the act of doing it. How rich we feel in the throes of it. How carefree and unbothered by our day-to-day drudgeries when we are racing atop a slew of ideas that have finally broken free under their own weight carrying us along on the ride of a lifetime. Or so it seems for a little while. Until we come to a stop. And the landscape is back to its still life existence.

 painted turtles in full sun logging in

Sometimes, I wait at the window for a homecoming of even the fewest words strung together like a souvenir from another world. There is no other reward really. But the unexpected gift. Saying what only you can say. What no one else can say—even if they wanted to. No wonder writing always feels like a kind of singing. A celebration. Good writing I mean finds that flow and sweeps us up in it. We are picked up here and put down over there. Now that's transportation. You'll know when it's time to get moving.

 rebuilt boardwalk every step a new view of debris

Tokens

It fits perfectly in the palm of my hand. The marble-sized planet she needled from blue and green felt. Something she does as a pastime while watching the news, waiting for dinner to finish in the oven. It calms her nerves when she can shape the coastline of Africa just so.

I gave her a plastic polar bear figurine she might stick on her dashboard. Someone waiting at a red light in the hot sun might keep the arctic giants in mind and remember what has gone missing from the world.

We hadn't seen each other in many years. There was nothing either of us needed. Having reached the stage of life when we were getting rid of things, we had few wants.

I gave her hope. She gave me the world. Smaller hand-held versions to keep up with the times.

library book
the person before me
the person after

Elba

Dog packs prowl the streets scavenging whatever they can after everyone's in bed. It's not safe to sleep out in the open a local tells me. Climb a tree if you have to. So I do locking one strap of my backpack around a sturdy branch a good ten feet up. Mid-autumn. Enough leaves to hide me. Block the wind off the beaches. All these years exiled from that moment. Lost to the thrill of being surrounded by everything new and unknown. Wide-eyed, in-tune, alert to every movement. Circled by a survival instinct I had just begun to scratch the surface of.

sunlight flashing between boxcars old loves

Cold Comfort

The deer are motionless under the low-hanging pines, easily mistaken for the trees themselves. Their sapling legs thin trunks losing sunlight. I only know to look a few hundred yards past our back fence because they've come here before. For the past few nights they have bedded down under what little canopy young pines provide at the edge of the woods. One deer reaches up to nibble a loose piece of bark. How could this ever be enough? Forecasters say single digits. The neighborhood is quiet. Everyone's inside standing over their stoves. Through bird binoculars I can see one deer fold in on itself, front legs first as if kissing the earth. Then the hind. It's like watching the closing scene of a play. No music. No dialogue. All slow, intentional action. The central character coming to terms with the gradual dark.

tracking their every up and down ridgeline coyotes

Contemplation

older
than I think
first firefly

The topography of the human brain is hills and valleys. Not the Big Sky sprawling landscape of the northern plains. More like a snow globe's heft of compact scenery. A woodland place with old-growth hemlocks whose offspring embrace the mossy banks of a stream. A stream that waterfalls its way into a series of graduated pools. Closer still, branching off on its own, a tiny tributary continues its steady drip of thoughts, half-thoughts, glimpses of things.

all day rain
the window seat
where I grew up

Interior Landscaping

Looking through the original glass window panes, you get that little wobble, like looking at an Impressionist landscape of trees and the mountains beyond. To live in a century-old house, you have to accept a bit of distortion. Anything exposed to the elements this long is bound to show wear and tear. Still, the chamfered edges of the door moldings match throughout. The fluted newel post is solid oak and seems to know how to hold itself upright. The banister spindles show a craftsman's discipline, standing in alignment like soldiers on review. Thankfully, the paneled woodwork remains unpainted, displaying an almost flame-like grain. The tongue-and-groove floors sit solid and level. No complaints. Inside one closet, a scrap of original wallpaper reveals a woodland scene with a folded deer under a tree. A child's room.

life expectancy
a cicada climbs out
of itself

As Fate Would Have It

I know enough to keep quiet
while the dog slides down the slope of the hill
like an otter might a muddy riverbank.
At the bottom she runs right back up
as if life were a ride to do again and again.
I know and I don't know.
The hillside. The dog in her prime.
The wildflowers that greet me here
most every weekend. I know to be still
as the dog shows me again
how to let gravity take you
for as long and as far as possible.
This is how you relax your body
to flow like the grass flows
on a sunny hillside through patches
of tiny orange flowers.

sidewalk penny
as if luck
could be carried off

Passages

I've been reading from an inherited library of poetry volumes and spiritual writings that belonged to an old friend. He lived a decidedly monastic lower-case life. A one cup, one bowl, one spoon kind of guy. His death, while not untimely, was unexpected—perhaps even by him. He left neither spouse, child nor will, so his belongings fell to his only sibling, who was somewhat estranged. She relied upon a few of her brother's friends to help clear out his sparsely furnished apartment, which we did over two somber weekends of relative strangeness.

owl
oak oval
portal

In reading his books I discover something new about my friend: how earnest (one might say obsessive) he was in his reading practice. He marked up the margins of his books, circled words, and underlined whole paragraphs. Sometimes in different color micro felt-tip markers. The kind that bleed a bit if you hold the nib against the page a moment too long. My eyes track through the words toggling between the typed text and his scribbles. For a while we are having a conversation.

an open door
for the wind's company
old habits

Nature Narration

The oak has exhaled its last long breath of the night
tripping the cricket switch.

They sing as if they know their time is near.

If only I had a prayer for the yard trees
surrendering everything.

A chant to give back to the insects.

A way of letting the world know I am listening.

Grateful for these nights before the first hard freeze.

Like the surge in energy my mother gave us
not long before she died. Her old self sitting up
carrying on. Eyelids heavy as if someone
had forgotten to wind the clock key.

The world neither changed nor falling apart.

All of us back to old routines. Just like we were told
growing up—tomorrow is another day.

And now is no time to hang all your hopes.

the sky in my voice
a morning greeting
to a passer-by

The Undiscovered Language of Stars

Some astronomy expert on the radio the other day says the Big Dipper is coming apart at the seams. I am not prepared for this type of news. Mass killings, tragic earthquakes, tsunami I can handle. But the stars. The very heavens coming unhinged.

a skip in the record

Apparently the seven stars that pin The Big Dipper together are moving in different directions. In a thousand years or so the handle of the ladle will most likely come loose spilling its eternity of darkness—a flood no one but a learned few will notice.

exactly where

In the meantime, what to do with this stumbled-upon factoid. This inevitable doom. I tuck it away like a magpie that has found a loose strand of Christmas tinsel. I keep it and turn it over trying it on for size. Ultimately I add it to my otherwise cluttered life of keepsakes. Striped stones, stray feathers, a perfect specimen of acorn with its checkered cap. Each is an ingredient to some secret recipe. Each is a word in a language I have either forgotten or never learned. A language that comes to me in pieces.

I remember

Ghost Caller

There is a phone booth in Japan where the living go to speak with the dead. It was not long after the tsunami's waves snatched her from his grip sweeping her away. Seated in the closed space of the phone booth he whispers so that only his wife can hear, the pores of the receiver pressed to his lips.

safe inside
the sound of rain
on a metal roof

Word reached others in similar despair. The phone booth was trending, went viral. Strangers began to arrive at the garden gate. They wanted to sit quietly alone in the man's wife's garden and speak to their own loved ones. The man called his wife and asked what she thought of this idea.

teacups hovering
a hummingbird
joins the party

The man laid a moonstone path out near the cliff's edge that afforded a safe and beautiful view of the Pacific. The sun continues to come and go. Rain visits often in the spring. The man's world he once thought was cut in half has doubled in size. His wife told him that one day his grief and his love would become one.

lichen blooms
every season
on her gravestone

Victory Dashboard Road

I have passed the old orchard a hundred times before. The farmhouse right up at the road stands long-abandoned like a hitchhiker who has given up on getting there. Out back, the grass is waist-high between the trees. Unpruned branches block the way like construction barricades.

crosshatching

The surrounding woods have advanced, the flank of apple trees outnumbered and infiltrated with wild volunteers. A few branches snapped from the last kid or maybe a black bear that tried to climb into the tree's not-so-high canopy. Feasted on, nibbled at, lived in by squirrel, deer, fox, bear, rabbit, what have you. Bluebirds and flickers have filled the cavities that have opened up over time.

heart pine floorboards

There is a healing going on here. A return to what is wild. I stand witness, an actor moving from mark to mark with no lines to deliver. My only connection to this sacred ground is whatever loneliness I keep root-cellaried inside. My need to tap into it every now and again. This place, the people who farmed here have all changed a long time ago into something else. And here I am no different, only somewhere else in the process.

autumn sunlight

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the editors and publishers of the following publications in which present or earlier versions of these haibun previously appeared:

Contemporary Haibun Online, *Frogpond*, *Haibun Today*, and *Modern Haiku*.

“Nature Narration” received the Modern Haiku Award for Haibun, *Modern Haiku* 52.2, Summer 2021.

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