

The human soul

1.

The human soul calls me from a pay phone
outside the Cleveland Greyhound station in 1988.

He tries to disguise his voice by speaking through a napkin
but I can hear the bus driver announce the location

and nobody else would call me from Cleveland.
“Time traveling again?” I ask. The human soul is not

a good listener. “No wonder you felt so alone,” he begins.
He often speaks without giving proper context.

“I wasn’t with you back then. Your first glimpse of a Great
Lake, too.” The human soul favors the metric system

over the Imperial System, as in, “They say a monster
dwells there—64 meters is deeper than bad dreams.

But the average water residence time’s so brief how could
any beast endure? Are you still there? Hello? Hello?”

An announcement about departures cuts him off.
I dream of shipwrecks and shifting sediment.

As a body reaches out with memory, the water
reaches beyond its wrecks and tides with early

spring snowstorms, the lake effect. Moonlight on the body
of water. A knee-high drift of snow like frozen foam.

2.

The human soul is showing off his new ride.
It’s got massive wheels the height of seven men

and the tire tread is in figures of the original language,
which none can read but which could leave their mark

all over anyone who fell beneath its path. “The rims
are awesome and the color of polished beryl,” he says

from somewhere above the tires. In the milky gleaming
of the overcast morning, thousands of eyes look out

from the rims. "They are the spirits of living things,"
says the human soul. "Where they move I move.

When I rise they rise." Inside the wheels are more wheels
heading in every possible direction. On one of the spokes

a 1977 Mickey Rivers New York Yankees baseball card
is clipped with a clothespin. "Hey," I say, "I didn't give you

permission to take this." The wheels begin to turn inside
of wheels. The eyes roll. The great vehicle moves without

veering. Mick the Quick thwap-thwaps against the spokes.
As if from a center field deep in the Bronx of my imagination,

the human soul heaves a newspaper onto my porch.

3.

The human soul will not stop asking me to check my weather app.
He is fascinated with how things constantly change. Even with two

wings covering each eye, he somehow sees my screen while hovering
three feet above the ground. "The snow destined to fall

at eleven tonight with a 50% likelihood will now descend
two hours later with just a 40% likelihood." He beckons my phone

and it floats a few inches from his face, which because it is
eternal has no features. It's like looking at a horizon too far

away to focus on. But you can tell something is staring.
"Did you ever think of all the suffering being visited

on all manner of sentient beings this very moment?" I ask.
"The moment can never inconvenience the eternal plan,"

the human soul says. "Do you have any more of that wine left?"
He drifts into the kitchen. The bottle is empty so he drifts

back to when it was full and pours a glass.
A glass-half-full type is a glass-half-

empty type to the human soul. Always equal amounts
of everything wherever and whenever he is.

4.

I am waiting for the human soul outside of the BP station.
I count six quarters into the tire pump to inflate the soul's

ride's tires while he wanders in the purgatory of processed
food, carbonated drinks, and flavored energy water.

As I check the pressure, the spirits of living things begin to speak
to me. The barred owl wants out. The blue jay asks me if

I could just slice a nick in the sidewall so a few of them could
slip out and into the open sky. "You don't know what it's

like in here," says a star-nosed mole. The starlings are
pecking on the inside of the tread and composing haiku

in the original language. Do you know how many starling
spirits can fit on the head of a pin? A lot. "How much

do you know about this human soul?" asks a rat snake.
"He only moves because we move. He only rises because

we rise." The bell above the door rings and the human soul
steps out, flummoxed by a soda can. He rips open the bag

of Bugles and a hundred small horns fly through the air,
summoning thousands of angels. They're carrying vats

of hot oil and pestilence, ready to destroy the world.
"Hey, false alarm," says the human soul. "My bad."

If he sees the pocketknife in my hand, he doesn't mention it.
"What's with all the birds in the tree?" he asks. "You'd think

it was spring already." A pickup pulling in to the station
swerves to avoid a mole near the gas pump

and smashes into the human soul's ride, the air
filling with feathers and country music.

5.
I'm driving the human soul to the pharmacy.
His ride is at the mechanic, and there's a problem

with his insurance claim. They've never seen
an infernal engine before. "I told them if they just had faith

they could fix anything," he says. "But they don't
know what code to use on the repair form. Also,

the polished beryl parts are hard to source. It's
frustrating to them, I know." We park. The human soul

is suddenly outside the car. "You could have just opened
the door," I say. He leans down, his head coming in

through the window. "I got this," he says. "You don't have
to come in." His head slips back through the closed

window and he glides inside. Twenty minutes later
he comes back with a small bag he tucks into a wing.

He looks at me with his faceless stare.
"Do you know what it's like to be all ages at once?"

he says. From inside his wings, the human
soul's new smartphone vibrates. He looks at it.

"Uh oh. Identity theft." The human soul is put on hold.
He transforms the hold music to the *Avengers* theme,

drums his fingers in time, searches for beryl auto parts
online, texts friends. Notices me smiling. "What?"

he says in a way that I can almost see his face. "You
think this is trouble for me if they can't get it fixed,

wait'll you see what it does to you."

6.

"I used to have a tree house up there," says the human soul,
pointing into the thick branches of the maple tree. We're

in a dream of my grandmother's house in Lincoln, RI,
standing by the massive trunk in the front yard, the lower

branches the right size for a twelve-year-old boy to swing
up and hook a leg to the next branch, pull himself

into the hidden canopy of purple and green light.
I clamber up just before a sixteen-year-old me passes

with the lawn mower. "This is my favorite tree,"
I tell him. "Even when I was old enough to cut the grass

I'd still sneak up here to take a break. Did you build the house
for me and not tell me until now?" The human soul holds

his breath then approximates a sigh. "Well, I built it for someone.
I don't get here often but if I get here once, I'm always here.

Like how once you start inscribing the number eight, you never stop."
A few summer leaves fall like soft laughter from above.

For a moment I see the knotted rope ladder leading up.
For a moment I see bare legs and cut-off shorts. I smell a river

so familiar that I know I've never been there. He has,
which is why I know it. It's dark. My younger self has gone in

to have tea with my grandmother. The human soul swings his legs idly from a branch just above me. "There are silences for every sound,"

he says. "The silence after the lawn mower is done, when your hands are still vibrating from the engine beneath the cuff. The silence

inside a tree's branches after the wind passes. In the space between numbers dialed on a rotary phone. After a window's

pushed open for fresh air, the silence comes in like a field." I'm not letting the human soul change the subject. "So

you built a tree house. In my favorite tree. For someone else." Now I get the silence after the human soul is asked a question.

"Was it another me? A past life? What did you do for all eternity before 1965?" The human soul stretches his great wings,

which turn green and black and fade like a camouflage and then there's just a boy sitting there, grass

stains on the cuffs of his jeans. White t-shirt. No face. Autumn gold flows from feathers to leaves and the tree

is empty, the lights out in the house. I don't recognize the car in the driveway. Or the lives being led inside.

I climb the old maple toward waking.

7.

The human soul and I decide we are not on speaking terms. "At least you know I exist now," he says. Since it

would count as me speaking to him, I do not respond. The days pass through us like wind through a screen

door. Open or shut, they pass through the same.