

Like Machines

James Potter

Beyond the cracked sidewalk, and the telephone pole with layers of flyers in a rainbow of colors, and the patch of dry brown grass there stood a ten-foot high concrete block wall, caked with dozens of coats of paint. There was a small shrine at the foot of it, with burnt out candles and dead flowers and a few soggy teddy bears. One word of graffiti filled the wall, red letters on a gold background: Rejoice!

I passed the spot almost daily—on the way to the music studio, out to drinks with my girlfriend Hannah. Sometimes at night, clearing my head of the day's session, I'd find myself walking towards the shrine as if my feet somehow knew I would get a charge from the mural. Though I could no longer see the original, it was there, hidden like some secret document beneath all the grime and salt erosion, the graffiti and stickers, the collective iconography of a diverse Baltimore community who felt compelled to say that Chavez was their hero, their native son.

Today as I drove past the shrine I was mad that some evangelical with a spray can got to make the latest revision. In the moments before the twenty-seven year-old songwriter, beatboxer, vert skater, and graphic novelist known as Chavez took his life, I doubt he was rejoicing over the kingdom of heaven. The letter he had written before hanging himself from the rafters of his green house and studio in Hampden had been addressed to his dog.

Of all the millions who knew and loved him—A-list movie stars, liberal politicians espousing some sort of campaign direction based on one of his many emotive lines—he had written his death letter to his dog,

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a half-blind beagle named Tupelo. I'll never forget the last lines of the letter leaked a week after his suicide via a Tumblr blog: You were made by laughter, treats, the smell of chain-link parks where the sun hovers all afternoon warming the backs of drug dealers and saints. Same as me.

I remember when I first heard the news. Hannah and our roommate Bugs and I were all sitting in a patch of sunlight outside the Hampden Coffee Collective, a former warehouse turned overpriced but delicious coffee emporium and deli. You get a real weird mix of people at the HCC. A new tech giant is putting their offices in down the street, so you see a lot of those Bluetooth earphone wiz kids walking around, brandishing their cold brew coffees and bags of avocado toast like mental ammunition. I can't tell you how many Teslas I've seen in one month. And it was from the lips of one of these tech wizards that I overheard the news.

Hannah had reached her weekly boiling point with Bugs' inability to clean anything in the apartment. Without any warning, she reached over and wiped a long smear of vegetable cream cheese across his beard. That was when the guy in the table next to us held up his phone to his friend's face and blurted out:

“Holy shit, man! Chavez is dead! No...not drugs. Dude hung himself. Can you believe that? He just did SNL like...what? A week ago? He and Aubrey Plaza were Russian tourists watching Trump and Putin bodysurf. Craaaaazy. I mean he was just on SNL...”

I turned to Hannah. Her finger still hovered in the air thick with cream cheese. But I knew she had heard. She ripped open her purse and dug around until she found her phone. A few seconds later her eyes went wide and wet like the time she told me about the things she had to endure in high school, all those mind games played by pathological Upper West side Catholic school girls. She dropped the phone and covered her face while Bugs—who had just returned from cleaning his beard using one of the deli's windows—assumed that Hannah was really losing her mind

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over his apartment hygiene. He started pouring out apologies. I cast him one silencing look then got up and went over to Hannah and threw my arms around her. I could feel her tears run warm down my back all the way to the base of my spine.

“What the hell, Eric,” she sobbed, her voice muffled in a mesh of hair and t-shirt. “You just saw him last week...did he...I mean...why didn’t he reach out to you? Did he say anything in the studio? What was so horrible that he had to hang himself?”

I didn’t know what to say. All I could do was feel numb all over and hold her while she shook like a broken radiator. My mind felt dry. I kept staring at the tech guys across the table. The news was a blip, a footnote to their workday. Maybe they had heard a few songs off of Chavez’s classic *Gutter Garden* on a HBO movie special. But neither one of them had spent the past month working on Chavez’s return to the East Coast record, still unfinished and untitled. I had been there for every moment, every paroxysm of joy and outburst of dysfunction. And I can remember getting the call from him, the one that would take me to a cabin in the middle of nowhere where I would learn where songs really come from, all the backdoors and jagged holes in the chain-link fences you have to worm your way through in order to speak the truth and warmth of the sun that touches all things.

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I grew up in a small rural town in southwestern Vermont called Pawlett. My graduating class had a total of thirteen students. There wasn’t a lot you could hide from anyone. I had a band called *PizzaSalad* that sounded about as good as its name. But in all my fumbblings to try to write songs like Tom Petty or Townes van Zandt I learned I had a hidden second talent, one for recording and arranging music—sometimes my own, but mostly area bands that needed high quality demos to send off to annoy

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the slush piles of already eroding indie labels.

There was a girl I fell in love with who I thought was in love with me. Her family was from Manchester. We met at a summer festival between our junior and senior years where we both did mushrooms for the first time. To this day she's the only girl I've ever met named Echo that's not just a handle or stage name. It was right there on the birth certificate. She slapped it down in front of me on the kitchen table at Thanksgiving later that year when I was invited to meet her hippie parents and her twin sister dubbed the equally unorthodox "Elwaina" from a character in a fantasy book they all assured me like cult followers was better than Lord of the Rings. I read it. It wasn't. But I never told Echo or Elwaina. I guess I really was that much in love.

That holiday Echo slipped me a burned copy of MP3s from a MySpace page called "Chavez Sings." That was my first brush with what would later get gathered together to form Chavez's debut record *Gutter Garden*, a low-fi masterpiece full of eerie harmonies layered like a Tim Burton love song and slightly out of tune upright piano melodies that jangled like wind chimes strung with silver dollars. The song that stuck with me the most was a half-sung, half-rapped hymn to non-violence. It was told from the perspective of a girlfriend's cheek that had just been punched by her coke-addled boyfriend. I had never heard anything like it before. Even though the production included layer upon layer of intricate beatboxing and raspy vocals, it was all presented with deceptive simplicity:

You dip your wick
& let fly your fist
Then shit a brick
When you can't hit it
Little boy in man
Used to hold her hand
Talkin' Promised Land
Now you twist love

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Break love
Baby just an egg
She a bleeding dove
You crush cheeks
You used to make blush

He played and sang everything on the record—the guitars, the vocals and harmonies, piano, percussion, even something that sounded like a detuned cello—splicing the tape by hand in the old way like the Beatles in “Tomorrow Never Knows.” It was raw, off the cuff, and totally bracing like getting hit with a spice you’ve never tasted before and now can’t stop craving when consuming life’s blander dishes. The descriptions of violence didn’t really make me think about it then. Was that his experience? Did he grow up in that world? How could he have detailed the scene so vividly? It wasn’t a red flag then. It should have been.

* * *

Twelve years later I’m doing a live recording for a swing band at Mobtown Ballroom in Baltimore when I get a call from an unlisted number. I let it go to voicemail. At the end of the night, nursing a beer, I listen to the message. It’s from someone named Sheila who claims she’s Chavez’s agent. She has this fast way of talking and getting down to business without sounding curt or all about the money, which is hard, especially on voicemail. “Why don’t I just pass you to him?” she says at some point in the message. There’s a slight pause. I hear birds screeching in the background and the sound of crashing and receding surf. After some fumbling a man’s voice comes on, just a fraction above a whisper. “Hey, Eric...” A shiver runs the length of my spine. Even from those two words I know it. It’s him. I know the voice because it lived in my car, blasting at epic decibels behind frost-rimmed windows on psychic vision

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quests across the country with Gutter Garden on repeat and its electrified follow-up *Friending the Fire*. It was Chavez.

“Eric, I’m standing on a really crappy beach...I think my toes are getting sunburned. They look like cocktail wieners. Someone just told me that Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young used to come down here in the 60’s. There’s a lot of reggaeton now...I hate reggaeton. Anyway, I’m coming back to Baltimore. I’d like to do some recording with you if you’re down...I got a whole lot of ideas coming. I don’t want to make this record like the last one. It’s gonna be...well...it’s gonna be a bit of a monster, I think. I really like what you did on Gabriella Vossi’s record. It kind of made me start rethinking things. I wanted to track you down and see if you wanted to *Batman and Robin* some shit. Sheila can e-mail you everything if you’re interested...Alright. Sheila’s telling me I need to get off. We have to go meet some guy who wants to license some of my songs for a film about a guy who thinks his wife is food and tries to nibble pieces off her when she’s asleep. Real weird. But I guess that’s a lot of things out here. Well...thanks, man. Talk soon. Bye.” Click.

What do you say to something like that? I checked the clock on my phone: 11:38. Not even nine o’clock on the West Coast. Still a completely reasonable hour of night to reply to a life-changing voicemail, right? I hit the La Jolla area code number not thinking about what he said, about how it’s “gonna be a bit of a monster.” Was the record a monster or was he? I read somewhere in one of the few interviews he gave after *Friending the Fire* that the opening track “Tell Me You Can See the Dark Between Us” took over one hundred and eighty hours to record. What the hell was I getting myself into?

There are a few beeps and then, like a dream, Sheila picks up. I introduce myself. Sheila answers “Oh, hey, Eric,” as if I was her neighbor remembering I’d left my jacket at her dinner party. I don’t tell her about the two other projects I’ve got lined up—the first full length for the Baltimore goth metal collective *Slydoll Parade* and Gabriella Vossi’s

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sophomore project that apparently is supposed to sound like a Brazilian version of Queen's A Night at the Opera...whatever that means. Those projects won't be hard to delay. The mystique surrounding Chavez at the time was so strong that I'm sure Sheila spent most of her time turning down offers from all sorts of people. I tell her I'll do it. Yep, I'll do the record. When do we start? She says she'll e-mail over the label contracts and schedule. "One more thing," she says right before we hang up and I try to slow my pulse which is skyrocketing (BECAUSE I'M DOING A RECORD WITH FREAKIN' CHAVEZ!). "Not to sound like a Nazi or anything, but the sessions need to be super secret. If anything gets leaked, the label..." She pauses and sucks in a deep breath. "Let's just say they can be real...pricks. The single Rick Rubin did with Chavez got leaked and they hit him with all sorts of hellfire. Almost became a lawsuit. And with that happy introduction..." She laughs. "Can't wait to hear what you guys come up with! He's...well, he's Chavez. He'll be back in Baltimore on the 15th. Good luck!"

A little over a week later I'm standing at our kitchen window of our apartment overlooking Falls Road. I watch some crazy driver do a u-turn right in the middle of the road with three cars bearing down on him. It's a near collision, but surprisingly par for the course for that stretch of road. A few minutes later, after some more spirited honking, I watch a silver SUV pull up and a skinny character slink out the back seat.

He's wearing a crushed felt hat propped over shoulder-length dark hair and a jean jacket with all kinds of patches covering it. He holds a small parlor guitar case in one hand, a backpack with fraying sleeves in the other. No entourage, no hanger-oners, no agents. Just him. I yell to Bugs to leave the house and not come back for a while. Like for a long while. I know he's going to say something that will either spook Chavez or make him want to fight him. Bugs has that double gift. He starts to protest, but realizes he doesn't have a leg to stand on since he hasn't paid the last two month's rent. He mopes through the backdoor into the garden and is

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gone a few seconds later right as the doorbell rings. I open the door and find myself staring at an olive-skinned face with crow's feet way more pronounced than their years. All I can think of is some kind of saloon villain from a spaghetti western. This town...she's too small, kid. You best saddle up. Go on. Git.

"Hi, Eric!" a smoker's voice greets me. "Do you know there are seventy-two potholes between BWI and your house? What's happening to this city?" And with that introduction he drops his bag and takes out a small moleskin diary from his pocket. I try not to see them—the rows upon rows of furious ink marks. There are pages of them. They flap open in front of my face as he thumbs his way to the right spot. They make me think of Kevin Spacey's character in the movie *Seven*. But at least those journals were filled with actual words, I think. Chavez's pages are filled with some sort of insane cuneiform. They're not even straight lines, but all over the place like something scrawled on a public bathroom stall. Once he's finished he folds the diary back into his pocket like he's just done a site check for the Maryland DOT. He takes a look around the apartment. The door is still open. The pungent aromas from the Jamaican jerk chicken lady next-door waft through the doorway. I can tell he's absorbing everything: the smells, Hannah's oil and mixed media paintings drying on easels in the living room that doubles as her studio; my framed photos of my grandparents from pre-Nazi Germany; the fishbowl with no fish left alive in it (Bugs). A second later a pair of hazel-brown eyes revolves back towards me as if recognizing I'm still here, that I do indeed exist. Cracked lips widen into a fiendish grin. He nods his chin a couple of times in approval. "I like that it's blue—your living room. That's great. Hey, you want to catch a buzz?"

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A few days into the sessions I realize we're not going to be able to make

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this record. Not at this studio at least. While no sonic material has been leaked—I limited the day to day staff to myself and an assistant engineer, put new padlocks on everything, and made sure the Wi-Fi had C.I.A. level encryption thanks to Bugs’ friend Malcolm who graduated M.I.T. at fourteen—the buzz surrounding Chavez’s return to Baltimore to record at Audible Slices Studio has led to a full-on circus every day. In the afternoon of the second day of demos a girl outside threatens to slit her wrists if Chavez doesn’t take her cat. According to the girl, the cat knows the secret meaning behind Chavez’s song “Amelia,” which despite its clear lyrics being about a seamstress who sows and repairs her musician husband’s stage clothes, is really about how our government is “fashioning us all into wage slaves.” Like a cursed version of the “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” the third day brings us two pet adoption agencies who proceed to get in a fight over the same hashtag for what they call their Baltimore “pet adopt-in” in honor of Chavez, a known SPCA supporter. On the fourth day the police show up because a man has been spotted selling two coolers worth of edibles along with unpermitted, slow-cooked beef brisket. Every night we have to create a diversion, a foil to sneak Chavez out the back that leads through a winding alley few cars bother to traverse because the potholes are the size of kiddie pools. On one of these nights I enlist Bugs and eight of his friends who come up with the idea of running to the studio completely painted head to toe as zombie runners. They announce to the crowd that it’s the finish line of the 2018 Hampden Zombie Stalk 5k! Does it matter that Halloween is over two months away? Nope, not according to Bugs. The trick miraculously works. Chavez escapes in the silver SUV commanded by his Senegalese driver Kenny as the first hailstorm of “zombie guts”—water balloons filled with red food coloring—rain down on an already incensed crowd. Merry Chavez-mas, everybody!

As for the man himself, things have already started to take a weird turn. The day I know we need to switch locations or else lose all hope of

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getting anything worth saving Chavez presents me with what he believes to be the first ever “dope chime” constructed entirely of empty bottles of antidepressants filled with water to exact levels to offer a dynamic range of pitches when struck. A willing acolyte to any mysterious process of creation, I place individual mics around each of the prescription bottles. At his feet he’s setup a bass pedal organ. Behind the smudged glass of the control room I watch as he erupts with child-like glee every time the intestine-rattling bass notes of the organ collide mysteriously with the pitches of his dope chime. “You hear that?” he shouts with his headphones cranked all the way, spoiling any exploratory recording in progress. But that’s not the only thing spoiling the recording: something is blaring outside the studio, breaking through the soundproofing. I get up from my chair at the board and walk out into the hallway, pulling the door behind me. I look out the second story window into the street. A young African-American boy is jumping up and down waving a bullhorn in his hand. It’s about four o’clock in the afternoon. A dozen hardy souls are already camped outside, many of them I recognize as the real core of Chavez followers, the true believers. Sure enough, cat girl is there. She has her prophetic feline who knows the real messages behind Chavez’s songs attached to a leash at her feet. A pair of feathery wings sprouts up from a leather bustier attached to the poor animal’s back. There are simply no words.

The kid got up onto a milk crate and raised his hand. A murmur went through the crowd and then it fell silent, except for a few people shouting words of encouragement at him. The kid acknowledged them with a nod and a shy smile. In the full light of day, he looked less angry and more beautiful. He waited until people stopped shouting. A siren could be heard, maybe five or ten blocks away. The kid raised the bullhorn, pressed the button, and began to speak:

“Ladies and gentlemen...WE ARE DIRECT N’ EFFECT!” At this announcement spinning out from behind a parked car appeared another

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kid about his same age dressed in a heavy Rocca Wear sweatshirt holding pieces of cardboard and a small speaker in his hands. He positions the cardboard carefully on the ground then clicks on the speaker to full blast. Distorted bass and dirty South ride cymbal fill the airways. The kid on the milk crate starts rapping with the bullhorn over the beat while his partner performs backflips, one hand twists and stalls, a barrage of impressive break-dancing moves while the crowd watches completely entranced. I hear the door behind me unlatch and Chavez come to stand at my shoulder. “Man, we should get those kids in here,” he says. I turn and flash him a look like somebody’s mother watching her kid about to put his pinky into an electric socket. “Grab your guitar,” I say. “We’re getting out of here. I know a place we can go where we won’t be bothered.” He looks at me despondently then glances back down at the street just as Direct n’ Effect alternate positions between rapper and break-dancer. “Really?” he says. Then he sees the cat girl. He sighs. “Fine. But I’m bringing my dope chime.”

* * *

After a quick pit stop at Chavez’s condo for clothes and his faithful dog Tupelo, we are speeding along 83 North in Kenny’s SUV that smells like vanilla, sex, and weed all rolled together. Kenny is the happiest person I’ve ever met. But as Chavez’s driver and bodyguard I’m also terrified of him—almost as terrified as I am of Tupelo who never lets his one good eye off me from the front seat, raising his lip periodically in my direction while panting beneath one of Chavez’s arms. As the sun dissolves in a crimson wash behind us Kenny tells me about how his ancestors in Senegal were some of the first African musicians, the first rappers, in fact. Their bodies were buried in baobab trees instead of village ground because they were basically the ancient equivalent of stoners never wanting to contribute to the rigors of village life, just laze about all day

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and play music.

“There are these guys called griots. They don’t work. They just like to sing. All the time they are singing. They are lazy these guys. But the women, the women all want them. You know the Genesis Peter Gabriel? He sings with Youssou N’Dour. This guy Youssou is like a griot who comes back from dead. I don’t think he likes women. He just likes to sing. I think Mr. Chavez is griot, too. Very lazy. Like his dog.” He bursts into laughter so strong it shakes the car. Or maybe that’s just the wind. I really can’t tell.

Chavez comes in and out of the conversation. He turns around and grins at me after hearing the part about Kenny’s griot ancestors being buried inside trees. Then he goes back to making notches in his diary, perhaps noting the amount of telephone poles along the road or the seams in the concrete. I look at the bag of mics at my feet and the suitcase. It’s a surprise. I don’t know how he’ll react. We’ve got nothing usable from the two weeks of demos—the first week at my apartment before the jerk chicken lady had a noise ordinance citation sent our way; and the second week at the studio exploring the dope chime and being mobbed by cat girl, amateur beatboxers, and skate fans who still remember Chavez fighting Tony Hawk and most of the Bones Brigade in a bootlegged skate video from the 1980’s. Inside a latched suitcase on the seat next to me is an Akai GX-77 reel-to-reel recorder, the same machine Chavez used to record Gutter Garden all those many years ago. It’s a long shot...but frankly a better starting point than prescription bottle and foot organ duets.

We’re headed to Hannah’s parents’ cabin. It sits on the world’s greatest sledding hill overlooking a long-defunct 120 acre cattle farm some twenty miles outside York, PA. Ever since we started dating it’s been a mental retreat for us. Hannah commutes four days a week to an art college in Lancaster where she teaches graphic design. There was a time when the spark and court went out of our relationship and we would retreat to the

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cabin to patch things up without any roommates or distractions getting in the way. There is no place like Baltimore. Only New Orleans tops the city in sheer amount of cultural mojo. But the city kind of nibbles at you even when you're asleep, just like that weird movie about the cannibalistic husband Chavez almost had his songs included in. You have to get out now and then and see trees that don't have plastic bags all stuck to them. You have to see stars.

We reach the cabin after dark and I jump out to unlock the gate. We rumble over the old grates installed long ago to keep the cattle from getting out. Tupelo casts me a final look. I see it now clear as day: the path to his master and the record we need to make comes through him and him alone. That's why there's a second bag at my feet stocked to the gills with dog treats. We pass the one light installed in the driveway to keep people like Bugs and his drunken friends from rolling their cars over the side of the fifty foot drop to the valley below. In the passing glow of the orange lamplight Tupelo's eyes lock with mine. You're in my house now, I tell him. Actually, it's not my house...it's my girlfriend's. Actually, it's not even hers. But you get the idea. I hold up the bag and make some seductive crinkles. I feed him a pretzel dog treat that looks exactly like his lipstick he proudly waves at the world every other second. House = not yours, I tell him with my eyes. Treats = endless if you just let me get one song out of him this weekend. Just one song. That's all I want. One song. His snarling upper lip relaxes like a Cold War detente. Okay, I tell myself. We have an agreement.

Sometime in the middle of the first night at the cabin a scream goes through the house. I wake up completely disoriented. Instinctively, I fumble for the light on the side table...but it's not there, because we're not in Baltimore. I zombie walk for a few seconds through the dark towards the doorway framed by a faint rectangle of light coming from the Glade plug-in in the hallway Hannah's mom loves but smells like old lady perfume. The screaming gets louder. Tupelo is barking batshit crazy. I

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start thinking about whether or not the cabin has an emergency medical kit. Or more importantly: do we have any cell reception. A vision of my summer camp CPR class flashes across my mind's eye. I make it up the stairs, tripping on the fourth step and banging my knee so hard that pain knocks the wind out of me. I pull myself up and make it to the landing and run to Chavez's door. The screaming and barking finally stops. I fly into the room to find a scene like something out of a David Lynch movie.

Tupelo sits in the middle of the room completely still, lipstick out as usual. I can see Chavez, but he's all but disappeared like a baby inside Kenny's massive black arms. Kenny's rocking him...rocking the icon of millions like a toddler who has just had a night terror. I don't even think Chavez knows I'm there. In the light of the room's single lamp Kenny stares up at me. He smiles a big gummy smile like everything is perfectly normal, like it's just part of his job. I hover in the doorway for a few moments looking at the bizarre scene—the pill bottles on the table and the various other vials filled with weed tinctures. Feeling out of place, like a voyeur in a peephole of someone else's intimate experience, I retreat and head back down the stairs to my room. I fall back into bed and clutch my bruised knee. What the hell did I just see? I drift back into the folds of sleep as a deep cooing sound—Kenny's voice—ushers the genius upstairs back into some semblance of peace.

The next morning I wake up late and groggy. I find Kenny on the porch speaking loudly in another language. He's perched on the porch railing waving his arms and laughing heartily with an earpiece poking out of one ear. He points to the field out front. I descend the steps gingerly like an old man. The pain in my knee has receded from a 10 to a 7 thanks to some Aleve recovered from Hannah's mother's bathroom. I hobble across the thick, unmowed grass until I find Chavez. He's setup a small card table from the porch and placed it directly on the hillside overlooking the epic sledding drop. Tupelo sits at his feet and raises his

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lip unsurprisingly at me as I walk up. I see a flurry of pages on the table weighed down with rocks. I'm half expecting to see another OCD tapestry of ink scratches. But instead as I come to stand at his shoulder I see a different scene on the page. Gorgeous pen and ink drawings of all sorts of faces and animals wrap around the edges of the paper. In the center of the open page there are words. My heart speeds up a few beats. Lyrics. Oh God, please be lyrics.

"Hey, Eric," Chavez says turning to greet me. His hair is tied back and he looks smaller in his seat at the table. And older, I think. He looks terrible. He reminds me of the drawings in my European History book from high school of the surviving members of Napoleon's army limping home after the failed invasion of Russia. I ask him what he's working on. I can see the guitar case open at his feet and the small parlor guitar—the same one he used to play two songs on SNL last month—wedged out of the case with the capo still on. He's been playing.

He stops drawing for a second. It's a beautiful, detailed face, more detailed than the others. A woman with coal-black hair and full lips stares up from the page with inquiring eyes that hold me in my place for a few seconds. Chavez laughs a little and looks down at his work like a child examining the world he or she has just created out of thin air. "I got a message yesterday on my fake Facebook account," he says. I almost spit out my coffee. Chavez has a fake Facebook account? "Yeah," he continues, picking up the pen again. "Don't you think it's weird that people feel the need to share everything? I mean everything. Last week I got a friend request from some guy in Atlanta who just posts pictures of assault rifles. Oh and the Atlanta Falcons. He's a big Falcons fan." He pauses. He looks up at me with glassy eyes. The smile slips a little. "I'm sorry we haven't come up with anything you can use yet. I'm going to work on some songs today. Tupelo told me to get my ass in gear. He's a real slave driver." That's one word for him, I think. I tell Chavez about the upright piano in the living room. He nods with muted interest then

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goes back to drawing. Then I mention the Akai reel-to-reel recorder and he stops what he's doing like he's just heard aliens have landed at the U.S. Capitol. His entire body language changes. For the next ten minutes he flies through everything there is to know about reel-to-reel recorders. When he's done I want to kick myself for not recording his impromptu TED Talk. I ask him if he wants me to go setup the machine. He says not yet. I start to worry if "Not Yet" is going to be the name of this record. Maybe it's my youthful idolizing kicking back in, but I don't push him. I have to trust that some kind of magic will find him out here parked on the edge of this hill looking down at the bent and storm-wracked barns. I'm hoping it's enough space to swallow up whatever monster makes him wake screaming in the middle of the night.

I leave him and Tupelo to the process. By nightfall I realize that I'm dealing with a different Chavez. We sit in the middle of the dusty living room with the mics all around us. He's requested a change in vibe. Kenny moves the furniture to the sides while I do my best to assemble Hannah's mother's least noxious candles from the bottom drawers of every bathroom cupboard. We are reaching that unplanned, indescribable zone. I can feel it. No full songs yet, just snippets. But it's coming. Chavez sits with his back to me at the keyboard. I play enough guitar to be useful—major seventh and weird minor shapes to augment the melody lines he's pulling from the piano. Every now and then I hit something that works and he smiles back at me and the prematurely old person from earlier that morning on the hillside disappears. In the light of the candles he looks thirteen. I watch in awe at the process. He takes a melody then backs it up, twisting and bending it until it's sweeter, like a clearer, more direct language between new lovers. He still doesn't want anything recorded on the Akai, but he's allowed me to use my laptop to document the session. From the time I left him on the hillside to

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sundown he's assembled pages of lyrics. An old banker's lamp sits on the Knabe upright illuminating his scrawled testimonies. The world's most precarious joint hangs on top of the piano, but just when I think it's going to fall Chavez reaches out and snatches it and puts it in the corner of his mouth. The air is thick. I can see Kenny's white teeth gleaming in a corner of the room untouched by the candlelight. Music fills the wooden walls as Chavez's voice rises and falls from some smoky bellows in his stomach. The words change the architecture of every passing moment. He's singing about a girl with forgiving eyes. A lover? A girlfriend? I realize I know nothing about the man seated at the piano other than the little I've read in interviews. But I know if I close my eyes I can feel the crunch of gravel spilling under me, a moonlit stretch of pines through the Green Mountains rustling past too fast to be substantial, and that voice guiding me like a compass towards some manifest destination, a vague Valhalla that only the hopeful and the insane rush to with fire in their bellies and absolutely no fear of turning back.

Sit back in your chair, Juliet
I'll tell you the lies I've spun
The filament and the net
To keep me warm when you're gone
The red-eyed women
& the lamplighters
Beneath the bridge's bend
To keep me warm when you're gone...

Around 1 a.m. he rakes his hand through his sweaty hair and swivels around. The session is over. The elastic bending of magic time straightens. The only sound now is Kenny snoring from the couch. I wonder how he can sleep through it all. But I have a feeling this is not the first five-hour musical séance he's been privy to in Chavez's company. For a few moments I can't muster words. I reach

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over and click stop on the session on the laptop. Chavez gathers up the lyrics then walks over and hands them to me. He smiles and the sadness that wells in his eyes seems to dissipate a little. “That was pretty rad,” he says. “I haven’t...well...” He smiles and the thirteen year-old from before resurfaces. “Thanks.” I make some stupid remark to cover the emotion garbling up my throat. My hands are shaking. Thankfully, Tupelo farts and cuts the awkward silence in the room. “We’ll hit it again tomorrow,” Chavez says. “Good guitar playing, by the way. I never knew.” Tupelo gets up from under the piano and follows his master to the staircase. Chavez smiles again then disappears up the steps. I sit for a moment in the candlelight holding the lyrics. The page on top has the drawing of the woman’s face with the coal-black hair and searching eyes. He’s written under her face in swooping cursive. My Forever Darling. Forgive Me.

* * *

It’s Sunday morning after the epic creative session and I’m cooking breakfast for everyone. As I pull the bacon out of the oven my phone starts to ring. It’s Hannah. She’s blown a tire halfway between Baltimore and the cabin. Apparently she was on her way to surprise us with some “home baked recording fuel” when she hit the pothole. “Surprise!” she says and lets out a forced laugh. I look at the bacon that’s blackening and disintegrating before my eyes like it’s been placed under a rocket at Cape Canaveral. Man, I suck at cooking. I tell Hannah to stay put. I leave the charred remains of the bacon on the stove to smoke out. I pull the smoke alarm off the wall as I walk through the mud room to the garage. I can’t take Kenny’s car in case another emergency happens while I’m gone. So I turn on the garage light, brush a few cobwebs from my mouth, and pull back the tarp on Hannah’s grandmother’s ancient Mercury. I say a little

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prayer as I turn the cold key in the ignition. Fortunately, the automotive gods are on my side. The engine sputters and coughs then settles to a throaty hum. I let the car warm up and head out to the hillside. I find Chavez sitting on the edge of the hill without his guitar. Tupelo lies spread-eagle on his back, Chavez rubbing his belly while staring blankly out at the drop below. He doesn't even turn at the sound of my feet.

"Hey, man! Good morning!" I say as I walk up. "Hannah was coming up to surprise us and blew out a tire. I gotta go help her get it sorted out. I screwed up the bacon. But there's eggs and toast on the stove if you and Kenny are hungry. I don't think I'll be gone too long. A couple hours, maybe." He nods a little. I ask him if he's okay. He nods again then goes back to scratching Tupelo's belly. I stand there with the wind sweeping up through the valley, the sound of a crow up in one of the pine trees doing its dismissive aat-aat call. I feel brave enough since our musical bonding session to ask him if he's really okay, if he needs me or Kenny to get him something. He summons a smile that looks like he's fighting back tears. It's one of those moments you don't get back, when you never say the right definitive line from the handbook of universal human communication. There are so many pages torn out of that book. You can recover some of them with time, but they get blown out of reach. All you can do is scramble on your hands and knees and reach your hardest, hoping you recover the simplest, most direct line to the heart of the matter when it matters most. He had Kenny as an anchor. And of course he had Tupelo. I wasn't a familiar to his world. I don't believe in sin—not in some kind of impassive equalizer of preceding and semi-permanent doom. But what I do believe is that we should all be familiars to each other when it comes to mental illness. If sin exists it must exist in silence, multiplied and fed like a virus in the spaces between what we are not willing to say.

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I didn't know then it would be the last time I'd see Chavez. Even if I could have had some clairvoyant window into his future plans there was still no timing for what I would have wanted to say. I would have told him that he was surrounded by love on all sides. And, above all, I would have said thank you.

By the time I get back to the cabin it's dusk. Few tire shops along 83 stay open Sundays, so we put the dummy tire on Hannah's car and drive it back to Baltimore to be worked on in the morning. She hands me two packages of chocolate-oatmeal cookies and kisses me at the foot of the steps that lead up to our apartment. She asks me how everything is going. I tell her about last night—about the amazing session and how I could see the beginnings of something really special. "Beginnings?" she says, cracking a smile. But she knows better than to drive home the obvious point: we are way behind schedule. She kisses me again, and I climb back into her grandmother's car. It nearly gives up the ghost when I turn the ignition. Hannah stares down at me from the curb with the expression of someone watching an amateur bomb diffuser vacillate between the red or blue wire. But the car hacks its way into a steady hum and I'm off again. When I'm about a half hour from the cabin I get a call from Sheila. She wants to know how things are going. Is a Christmas release still feasible? I lie through my teeth and assure her it is. Then she lets me know that Chavez has left the cabin and is en route to a benefit in Chicago, but that he'll be back on Tuesday in Baltimore to resume recording. I don't know which is harder to process—the fact that I've been left out of the loop of these plans, or the fact that we are supposed to "resume" recording on Tuesday in a place that seems impossible to get any work done. We end the conversation on a note of false promise that does not correspond at all with the image I have in my mind of the semi-catatonic man from earlier that morning sitting on a hillside rubbing his dog's belly.

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I reach the cabin and open the front door. The smell of burnt bacon still hangs in the air. I hold the two bags of cookies in my hand like someone arriving for an abandoned housewarming party. Behind me the last auburn and orange rays of the sun filter in through a crack in one of the lace curtains. It's then that I notice that the Akai reel-to-reel has been moved across the room.

* * *

A few days before Chavez's funeral Sheila calls me. For the first minute of the conversation we do a broken dance around our mutual confusion and sadness. I've never met Sheila, but she's started to feel familiar, like a cousin you knew growing up but rarely see since they moved to the opposite coast. After we share our respective ways of getting by since the news broke, she drops the bombshell. "He has a will," she says, getting choked up. "It looks... well, it looks like he made it before the sessions started." I feel my heart sink to the pit of my stomach. "Eric...I'm sorry. I had no idea he was...well, I had no idea. Everything goes to his wife and son in Oakland." Some viral video I've seen that week flashes across my mind's eye: a woman with coal-black hair and searching eyes standing outside a chain-link fence with a teenage boy wearing a Golden State Warriors jersey slunk behind her in the shadows. His wife and son. "The label is going to put out some kind of tribute record," she continues, sadness now changing to bitterness. "They need everything you have from the sessions." I tell her all I have is the ambient recording of the session in the cabin full of starts and stops, tweaks, not to mention intermittent farts by Tupelo. "They still need it," she presses. "I can't believe they are capitalizing on all this. It's gross. Really gross. Anyway...are you sure that's all there is?" As she says this the fine hairs on my neck start to tingle. "I need

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to call you back,” I say. I hang up the phone. It’s a little after three in the morning on the east coast. I’m sitting in our living room in the darkness broken only by the moon or the light pollution—I can’t tell which. I’m the only one in the apartment who can admit their insomnia by not trying to toss and turn in bed. I look at the Akai reel-to-reel on the floor next to a canvas bag full of Hannah’s paints. It’s been untouched since the return from the cabin. He moved it at the cabin. It was under the chair and he moved it.

I get up and cross the room. I setup the machine and wire it for playback through a speaker on the floor. Hannah’s at my shoulder a few moments after the first words echo through the apartment. We stand there holding each other in the artificial light while we listen to a ghost. “This is called ‘Like Machines,’” a throaty, smoker’s voice says. And then the parlor guitar comes in. It rings out, fingerpicked with delicate intonation and natural reverb, bass and melody in the same hand in the Piedmont style. When he starts to sing I can feel Hannah’s heart beating against the sides of my ribs.

Got a Book of Faces
A thousand friends who say they know me well
Got wires in all the places
Says I’m connected but it’s hard to tell
I’ll update them sometime, say I’m feeling fine
But you know that that’s a lie
‘Cause over and over
The surface it covers
But Sisters and Brothers
There’s a deeper well
Don’t give me a picture of your toes
I wanna feel your hand on my Soul
Tell me where do we go
When we don’t need to tell
Don’t need to tell it to machines?

I turn back to find Bugs’ bearded face looking at me abstracted

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like some ghoul in the weird pink light. “Holy shit,” he says. We listen to the whole track...and then again. And again...It’s a five minute testimony of dissatisfaction with where we’ve come as a people, having infinite access to sharing information but not necessarily any increase in vital human connection. When it’s over there’s a long pause. Then Tupelo barks. There’s nothing else on the reel. Just the one last song. We stand there for a while like loiterers at an unplanned wake. Hannah comes up with the idea. She and Bugs gather up all the materials while I box up the tape from the recording. I tell them I’ll meet them at the spot after I head to the studio for a bit. It’s almost four in the morning now. Outside the city is oddly peaceful—no one honking, no one shouting expletives from their car window. We head our separate ways with our separate tasks that feel as important as prepping a bomb shelter for an imminent blast. I get to the underpass on Falls Road an hour and a half later to find Hannah on a ladder beneath a large mural half obscured by the shadows of the underpass. Bugs stands at attention at Hannah’s side, flashlight in one hand, a can of paint in the other. Hannah gets down from the ladder and holds a paint-caked hand to her forehead surveying her work. The light from Bug’s flashlight and the soft blue light that comes right before dawn faintly illuminate the mural. Bugs tells me that no cops or night creepers pass them the whole time. It’s like an unspoken pact has been reached with the city to let them get their job done in peace.

We stand there until the sun comes up. Hannah’s painted an incredible likeness of him: the crow’s feet and the cracked smile, the black hair with the faint blue you sometimes get in the coats of wild animals. Paint is splattered all over her—her clothes, her cheeks, along the fine bird-like collarbones that peek up from her t-shirt. We collapse back against the hood of Hannah’s car gazing up at the mural while Bugs finally sets down the brushes and paint cans like a

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man who has been released from artillery duty. At the base of the mural I've stacked burned copies of Chavez's last song "Like Machines." They're there for anyone to take and listen—in the old way. That's what I'm hoping at least. I want it to feel like a mixtape someone handed you long ago with the ink still not dry, full of songs from someone else's experience that somehow reflected the light of your own. I'm sure the label is going to crucify me for it. I don't care. We stand there letting ourselves be gutted by the scene, the stamp of it being real, final. Who knew how long the mural would stay up? It didn't matter. Before we leave, Hannah paints some of the lyrics from the song next to the mural. I hold her hand when it's over. I can feel the hollow places left by his passing starting to fill with something. The beginnings of peace, maybe.

Got my sights on Sunday
But Tuesday cuts me right at the knees
Try to rest on Mondays
But there's someone in my brain that just don't sleep
All the beer and all the wine
Can taste like turpentine
When that pick-me-up is just a letdown in time
'Cause over and over
The surface it covers
But Sisters and Brothers
There's a deeper well
Don't want to numb down my Soul
Want to feel the rock and the roll
Hear your voice on my phone
Before you text it
Before you text it like a machine

Some nights when I feel this city nibbling at me I take out my phone and find the voicemail. I walk to the shrine looking up at the telephone lines painted in the moonlight, the way they crisscross the potholed boulevards spreading human connection, or at least they

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used to—before the satellites took over, bouncing our voices up into the dark invisible ether. Hear your voice on my phone before you text it like a machine...I hold the speaker up to my ear. I hear Sheila pass the phone while the gulls screech in the background and the surf crashes and recedes. Then he's there, that wavering smoker's voice and frail laugh on the other line between past and present, life and death. "Hey, Eric," he says. "I'm standing on a really crappy beach. I think my toes are getting sunburned. They look like cocktail wieners..."