Nothing was ever as glamorous or smooth as it sounded. The days were rough and we were rough in them. We were disgruntled and lost, lonely and insecure. We ate too much or not enough, we woke up ugly, we behaved badly. Transient was too kind a word, it was more like the chaos of a mosh pit, which the Quebecois kids called “thrashing.” Only when they said it, it sounds like “trashing.” This worked because it felt that way—we wound up scattered on the streets of the morning like pieces of trash.

I’m speaking for no one. I’m speaking for people I used to know. I want to tell the stories of my friends before they’re forgotten in the hustle of growing old. But then you don’t need to know my motives. You’re as full of time bombs and unforeseen disaster as I am.

I still feel the gruelling crusade of being twenty-something, but now on the other side, I feel it in physical after-affects, the way anxiety kicks in only after the danger has faded. Sabotage was a word I knew and loved. It met me on the streets at night. It called me crazy. But crazy set me apart. It made me real.

I scribbled my own raggedy lyrics like Don’t be a coward on the covers of my drugstore notebooks because it was meant
Ceilidh Michelle

to convey cryptic profundity. I used to fall for lead singers and frontmen. Then I liked guitar players. That meant I was more mature and had better taste. I wore outfits strategically, wanting to catch the eye of the world. I wanted people to ask me about my wisdom. I could convert somebody.

If I’d stayed behind in my maritime town, I would have been stuck as a nurse or a teacher or a teen mother. I went to Montreal instead. In Montreal, I could get a four-dollar beer from a dépanneur. I climbed rickety staircases and went spelunking down graffitied alleyways, combed through record stores smelling of mildewed cardboard. There was room for everyone at the record store: academic jazz virtuosos, clowns, stars, surf, punk, poets…all you had to do was find the right shoe-size, the sound that fit your feet to dance, to rock, to lose your mind or make it up.
Standing on the corner, suitcase in my hand. Some woman on a bike had just been hit by a car and there was a crowd around Guy and Maisonneuve, mostly people standing around. I stood there too, eating an orange with fingers stiff from the cold and wondering what would happen next when a boy waved at me from across the street. I glanced over my shoulder because I knew no one but there was nobody behind me. I waved back slowly, as if under the sea.

He wore purple bell-bottoms and a velvet jacket, his afro like a storm cloud. He came across the street urgently, like I was late to our meeting. When he reached my side, he offered up a silver flask and said his name was Jude.

We talked mildly about the scene on the street. The taxi had fled and the woman sat on the lip of the road with her face in her hands, yelling and smoking, her bike crumpled beside her in the gutter.

“That happens all the time here,” Jude told me.
“What else happens here? I’ve only been in the city a week.”
“Why’s that?”
“Because last week was when I arrived.”
“No,” he said, and jerked his chin toward a side street,
indicating that we should head in its direction. “Why are you here?”

I took a swig of the silver flask and let it burn along my tongue a while before swallowing. The day, already old and overcast, grew darker as we walked along to a rhythm of sirens and honking horns. The cacophony of cursing Frenchmen and jabbering families was as significant as wallpaper because I didn’t yet know the words.

“I came to make music and write songs,” I said.

“Oh, you’re a musician.” Jude pointed to his apartment, a stone building with fire escapes hanging off it like dirty laundry, the front steps cracked down the middle as if they’d been smitten by god.

“Not yet,” I said. “But soon.”

Jude had a yellow bedroom at the top of the stairs. The room had nothing in it except a mattress and a record player. He had five identical cardigan sweaters in the closet. We sat up all night playing records and smoking pot and Jude told me about all the drugs he’d ever done in his life and the different ways they affected his guitar tone. He talked about his band, The Crying Dads. We might have taken something to stay up all night, but I don’t remember now. I only remember the way he talked about composition as if it was beyond everyone else’s understanding but his own.

I told him about my songs, or my ideas for songs, how I could play four chords on an acoustic guitar but wanted to do everything else. I’d heard of an instrument called a theremin, which was really just an instrument for playing the air. Jude’s ideas were in theory and mathematics.

I fell asleep on his bare mattress in the grey seediness of dawn. Jude laid out on the hardwood floor, his hands on his chest like a mummified king. Scowling in his sleep. His hair made a fine enough pillow. When I woke up, mid-morning sun made me squint. My face was pressed against a Grace
Jones record, her face square and bold as a skyscraper. The yellow bedroom full of light, the record player crackling like an old fire.

The Crying Dads jammed in a place near the river, behind the hockey arena. The building used to house Ukrainian immigrants after the war, but now it belonged to the musicians. The lobby was dark and full of mirrors, the carpets filthy. Fake potted ferns protruded from the corners, ratty with cobwebs.

I followed Jude up a flight of stairs, then down a flight, then up another one, around a corner, into a narrow hall under scintillating florescent lights. Unmarked doorways punctuated the walls, each one a lid over screams of weird guitar, smashing violent drums, sometimes a hollering man. The sharp smell of mildewed carpet.

Finally, Jude stopped, went back a few doors. “I always forget which space it is.” He knocked loudly. I shifted from foot to foot. The florescent light winked above our heads, the colour of veins. He’d barely spoken since we’d met up that evening but maybe it was just his way. “Come on,” he hollered, knocking again with an angry fist.

There was a sudden crash from within and a fat freckled kid materialized, grinning and squinting like a stoned cat. “Sorry man. I thought the knocking was in my head.” Jude stalked past him into the space.

“My name’s B.” I stuck out my hand to shake.

He turned his vacant glance on me. “I’m Polka Dot,” he said, shyly ducking his head. “I play the drums.”

I followed him inside, got a whiff of the room, and began breathing through my mouth. A brown couch had been heaved crookedly into the corner. A Pearl drum set, nice in theory but fucked up in reality, sat half-destroyed at the back, pockmarked guitars propped up beside it.
The walls and ceiling, painted black, gave the windowless room a claustrophobic feeling, like being inside a mouth. There were lamps on the floor, here and there, with mottled ceramic bases and cracked, bulb-burned lampshades. The light made everything seem melted. The carpet was covered in indescribable detritus, potato chips ground into the pile with scattered guitar picks, broken strings.

Over the couch hung a tied-dyed head-shop tapestry with a cheap rendering of Bob Marley’s face. Strung along the ceiling were seven teddy bears and grotesque dolls, ratty like they’d been found in a gutter, bloated with puddle water and cigarette smoke.

Polka Dot flopped down on the couch, rediscovered a muddy bong, and gazed off into space, drumming his fingers.

Jude glared at him. “Where the hell is everyone? We said jam at seven, correct?”

The kid startled. “Yeah, that’s right. Guess they’re running late.”

“Clearly.” Jude rolled his eyes at me, as if I shared the burden of his impatience.

I went and sat by Polka Dot. I’d brought a notebook with me and started messing around in it. It was a great place to hide when I ran out of things to say.

After a few minutes of Jude tensely tuning his guitar, the jam space door crashed open and two boys, presumably the late members of the Crying Dads, began trying to shove their way into the dark room simultaneously. A violent wrestling match ensued and was only broken up by Jude smashing his fist into the one of the drum cymbals. The boys removed themselves from the carpet abashedly—one of them came over to Polka Dot and gave him a high-five.

“Fuck the metro, am I right?” he said. A skinny Japanese kid in a striped sweater, he tried to bestow a high-five on Jude as well, but Jude pointedly crossed his arms across his chest and eyed the kid with disdain. The kid ran his hand
Butterflies, Zebras, Moonbeams

through his hair as if he’d meant it to be that way. “Actually, it was A Minor’s fault,” and he nodded over at the long-haired boy he’d been wrestling with moments before. “He tried to hop the metro and got busted. Fine, whatever. But what does he tell the cops his name is? John Smith. John fucking Smith.” He stopped talking when he noticed Jude coming toward him. “Sorry, sorry, sorry. Fuck the metro.” And then he called over at me. “Hi. My name’s Bamboo.” He began fiddling around with a plastic keyboard, attached somehow to a Flying V guitar. “Are you our first groupie?”

“Depends on how good your music is,” I said.

“I can see you’ve met the Pasta Rasta,” the kid named A Minor said to me.

“Who?”

“Jude has an Italian mother who makes an incredible sauce.” A Minor waggled his eyebrows. “And his father is of the Caribbean persuasion? Isn’t that right Jude?”

Jude threw a drumstick at him. “A Minor’s permafried. Tell her about the time you drank the mescaline and saw spiders.” But A Minor busied himself with changing a string on his bass.

“How’d you all meet?” I asked.

“We worked in the kitchen of a steakhouse downtown,” A Minor said. “When I met Jude he always wore this trench coat and only drank tonic water. I thought he must be a serial killer. But then I found out he was just a musician.”

Jude led their jams like a football coach, a sundog guitar slung around his skinny waist. Shouting key changes and song names, telling them when to slow down or speed up, directing and instructing. He captained a set that had sweet spots of melody and dazzling noise. Jude shredded subtle dots of sound, picking and swerving around bass lines.
played by the boy called A Minor, who sang in a voice that sounded like it came from all around him.

I went to every one of their jams after that. When I heard them play, I got the urge to run home and pick up my own guitar. But I knew it wouldn’t sound the same. After band rehearsals, we headed up the road to a little basement bar and crowded around a table in the corner. We weren’t the only musicians there. The bartender was in a band, the barmaids were in bands, whoever cleaned the toilets was probably in a band.

Bamboo told me the ideas he had for his Casio keyboards. He wanted to turn his guitars into a massive synth, a big cyborg of sound. He waved his fingers frantically. He spilled his beer twice. While he spoke, I saw Jude watching me the whole time, noticed the sharp sparks of his eyes.

Polka Dot, A Minor, and Bamboo left in a blur, the shadows of the loamy cave bar reeling. They went off stumbling into the night, arms over each other’s shoulders, singing *Atlantic City* and crying the crocodile tears of a blackout drunk. Jude sank lower in his chair, leaving little piles of pennies and crumpled receipts in his wake.

The sky was coming back to life when we finally hit the street. Through the empty morning of Montreal, up into the narrow cobbled one-way streets of the Plateau with alleyways you could look down forever, hanging fire-escapes, turrets and looming windows, little shops for incense and djembes and smoked meat sandwiches. Our voices came out in shaky reverberations, bouncing against the building faces, up into the back-and-white sky.
Jude and I were going to make music. He came to my apartment in the evening, carrying a guitar case and a tambourine. I had a tiny place with tiles on the floor—Jude said it reminded him of a hospital. His forehead beaded with sweat from climbing the four flights, he stood there looking around the room as if he’d wound up there by accident.

“You want a beer or something?” I asked him, hovering.

“No. Thanks.” He pulled his flask from his back pocket and flung himself down on the red couch I had dragged up from the street. “Let’s get to it. We’ll put together a set list of five or six songs that you can play live. There’s your first demo.”

I wanted to kick him back out so I could think things over. Instead, I picked up my acoustic guitar which banged a hollow knock on my knee. Conscious of how much space his legs took up when I sat beside him, I went through tunes I had penned since coming to the city, open chord jams about the usual junk.

“Okay,” Jude finally said, running his long fingers through his hair. “I see what you’re trying to do.” Trying to do because I guess I wasn’t doing it yet. He unbuckled his guitar case and brought out his own instrument. “We
gotta fill out the bones.” He began noodling complex riffs, fingers blurring along the strings. Showing me what I could do if I got in ten thousand hours. “…you know, it’s like the Mahavishnu Orchestra. North American sounds are so limited by pop culture. I want to record the vibration of the earth, or go to India and learn new scales. Forget the North American formula.” He was talking about my formula. I wanted to add something to the conversation but it wasn’t a conversation.

We broke down my songs like we were performing an autopsy, exposing the spindly tendons of notes. He took my songs from pencil sketches to sculptures. I wanted to preserve the sounds he made, bottle them in glass jars so I could study them when I was by myself. But when I tried to follow him he said, “No, no, stop.”

“What?” I lit a cigarette and stuck it in the strings of my guitar like I’d seen Bob Dylan do. Jude rolled his eyes at me when I did that.

“Try that verse again, only add this,” and he played something impossible. “You hear that, how the notes go into the Aeolian mode and then resolve?”

I said, “No. I don’t hear that. I don’t even know what that is.”

Sometimes Jude brought me over records that he’d dredged up from the bottom of the vinyl sea. He spent hours digging through milk crates. “Anything you want, anything good, you have to spend hours doing,” he instructed didactically, pacing the floors and punctuating the air with his big hands. “You want good records? You gotta hunt them out. You want to play music? You gotta pick up your guitar.” His favourite thing to ask me was, “What is the foundation to any practice?” as if he were my coach and I was the boxer fucked up in the corner of the ring. “Discipline,” I would answer
in sarcastic monotone. But no answer would have pleased him—it was that displeasure that kept him searching for better sounds.

“Lightnin’ Hopkins!” he yelled one time, bursting into my living room. I sat on the windowsill beside a stack of Salvation Army paperback books, practicing scales and letting the spring night blow clean air into my apartment. He held up a record half-falling out of a split cardboard sleeve. *Lightnin’ Strikes* had a photo of an old man with a cigarette in his mouth, sunglasses, mean-mugging. “People are fools for overlooking this gem.” We were all fools to Jude. Inside his ears were tiny gold gears and screws, turning, clicking, whizzing like an infinite pocket watch. He snapped his fingers everywhere we went. He heard music in the street, coming up from the sidewalk.

He played in four other bands besides the Crying Dads: an acid jazz group with ten university students, a reggae funk band with musicians twice his age, a progressive-rock band that prided themselves on their ability to execute unexpected time signatures, and then, after I’d been playing guitar for about a year or so, he played with me.

Every once in a while you could go down into one of those anonymous jazz clubs with plastic curtains over the door to keep out the cold and you could find Jude onstage with some combo. Hunched over a heavy Les Paul, behind a big fat vocalist whose voice was like the claws of God scratching across your heart. The way Jude played crawled over your flesh—it went into your follicles and made your hairs rise up in an exultant dance. It was crazy. When he played like that, it was easy to forgive his moods and attitudes. He was an obedient vessel, a good little channel. He put in the hours so that the sound emptied itself out of him completely, instead of halfway and half-assed.

Jude told me that he’d grown up in Winnipeg raised by his mother, who was white. He’d never met his father. All
the kids at school called him Nigger and Paki. Like grease splashing from a frying pan, they were words that would scald you if they splattered too close, leaving hard little scars.

He moved to Toronto and tried to play in the clubs. But the old men were purists and never let him get onstage. He wound up homeless. He slept on rooftops and in an empty vending machine he found in alleys. He came to Montreal for the same reasons as me. Trying to escape the little hatreds of little people.