

MICHAEL DOWNS

FOR ANYONE WHO EVER PLAYED A PART

A good barbershop tells you who owns it, and that's so with Blue Spark in Baltimore. Bill's place is plastered with stickers advertising tattoo parlors and breweries and garage bands and the city itself: BALT superimposed over a rat. Skulls are popular, as are likenesses of Edgar Allan Poe. Bill calls Poe the city's first Goth kid.

Bill is forty-ish, thick-chested with formidable arms, each tattooed from wrist to shoulder. It's easy to imagine him swinging drum sticks, which he did years ago in a punk band. Now he's a business owner, husband, and dad, a no-bullshit guy whose punk-past puts him at ease with his younger barbers and their sarcasm, irony, and snark. Those kids take nothing seriously except—sometimes—the shop's music playlists. And hair.

Bill knows me mostly as a writer who lives in the neighborhood, an older guy who doesn't talk much, doesn't keep up with the banter. I don't fit in at Blue Spark, but that's not Bill's fault. He remembers my name, gives my balding head some style. Bill's been cutting my hair for ten years now, but it was just recently—when I feared I was boring him—that I mentioned my connections to the band, the Velvet Underground.

He stopped scissoring. "You babysat Moe Tucker's kids?"

At least once. Maybe twice. Bill started fan-boy talking about the ridiculous consistency of her drumming, how it's simple but requires such steely focus.

After I mentioned another time that my childhood intersected with the Velvets, Bill's voice rose an octave.

"You sang for Sterling Morrison?"

I did. In my family's living room when I was about eight years old. With my younger brother and sister. We warbled along to a tune from a VU album. Mom directed us in a little dance too. Sterling, founding guitarist with the band, sat on our couch, long-limbed and with his moddish haircut, listening—maybe enduring. This was a guy who'd ripped distortion out of guitars playing songs about heroin addicts and dealers. I didn't know that, though. I only knew that he was on a record,

which made him famous (like Captain Kangaroo or the President), and that he'd ended up in our living room because my dad's brother's wife's sister had married him.

At the barbershop, I sensed Bill's estimation of me rising. In his vision of the rock 'n' roll empyrean, the Velvets might be a skosh below Led Zeppelin.

So then I dropped the coup de grâce: in high school, I so freaked out after reading *Lord of the Flies* that my parents telephoned Sterling long distance and said, "Please, help." This was about a decade after the band broke up, and Sterling now broke down medieval poetry as a doctoral student in Texas. Nine hundred miles away in Tucson, I was an anxious and pimply ninth-grader, a onetime altar boy who wore sincerity and earnestness like a cassock and surplice. I'd read nearly the whole of William Golding's novel by flashlight in one night, leaving me sleepless and jittery. Fried. Gripped by "tied-down terror" (Golding's apt words, from the book).

At the time, long distance was pricey. Our family didn't have money to spare. A year before, Dad had been without a job long enough that we'd bought groceries with food stamps.

But I was twitchy with existential exhaustion, haunted by the overnight knowledge that boys do evil. Boys kill each other. My parents knew my psyche, how often as a child I'd shaken them awake to complain of vague fears. *Lord of the Flies* could wreck me for weeks. So Mom picked up the phone. Sterling talked me down.

Bill: "Are you kidding me?"

That *Lord of the Flies* anecdote never fails. Bill's reaction shows why that bit is a go-to for me at dinner parties and backyard cookouts. People gasp, titter. Suddenly, I'm not who they think I am. Suddenly, I'm cooler, or, at least, stranger.

That's the end of telling, though, as it was in Bill's chair. "Sterling talked me down." A punchline. A joke. Then someone goes to get a beer.

Bill trimmed my eyebrows.

But that telling is superficial. I've always known that. What Sterling did for me—what our conversation about *Lord of the Flies* meant to me then and what it means now—doesn't end with the incongruity of a onetime altar boy on the phone with the sardonic, ironic coolest of the cool kids, talking literature. For me, that's only how the story starts.

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Oh, we meant to impress, singing along that afternoon to “Who Loves the Sun” while Sterling listened. Step right, step left. Wave toward sunlight shining through the big-paneled window.

Who loves the sun? Who cares that it makes plants grow? Who cares what it does since you broke my heart?

Such a bouncy melody! All pop-art unicorns and rainbows and fairy-bell tinkling. Everything in me focused on lyrics and footwork, what we’d practiced. *Verse. Chorus. Step. Sing.*

The record on Mom’s stereo was *Loaded*, the band’s fourth album. The title was a joke for insiders, a dig at record execs who’d asked the band to deliver an album “loaded” with hits, which the band did not. “Who Loves the Sun,” that happy tra-la-la, in fact burns with sarcasm, lyrics popping with bitterness and cynicism, likely a satire of the Beatles’ “Here Comes the Sun.” But even if I’d known that, I wouldn’t have cared. I was singing, loud and with as much happiness as I could muster.

Sterling was about the same age as my dad, who ran a gas station. Mom loved the soundtrack from *Singing in the Rain*. They watched family-friendly Andy Williams on tv and might not have heard of Andy Warhol, who managed the Velvets in the band’s early days. I was my parents’ first-born, loyal to their example.

Who loves the sun? we sang. Pah-pah-pah-pah! Not everyone.

So much irony, such a small living room.

I wonder now how Sterling reacted, this guy whose band took its name from the title of a book about the sado-masochism scene, who once described himself as having grown up “a suburban brat.” I can’t remember. If his response had meant something to me, had startled or puffed me up, I’d remember. So, no. Expert ironist that he was, what Sterling showed outwardly, what he revealed—not much. Years later, I can’t even guess what he might have said to his wife on their drive away, if he mentioned our singing at all. Maybe he was embarrassed. Maybe he laughed about us for days.

I appreciate, though, that in the moment, he protected my tender feelings.

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Because I first wore eyeglasses at age ten, I don't remember what it is to see clearly without them. My naked-eyed world has for decades been only rags of color and crystals of light. Even now, each morning my first task is to find my eyeglasses with my hands. Once during an argument outside my high-school gym, a guy punched me, knocked my glasses off into the night. I dove in their direction and slapped the concrete walk, groping for my vision. It didn't matter that he could have stomped me silly in my helplessness. Sight, before all else.

"Jus' blurs, that's all," says Piggy, the lone boy in *Lord of the Flies* who wears glasses. "Hardly see my hand." When other boys take his "specs" from him so they can start a fire with the lenses, he howls in panic.

When I read the novel as a ninth-grader, Piggy's vulnerability awakened my own. My parents would tell you I was a fearful child, how as a toddler I fled indoors when a plane roared overhead. I remember changing the tv channel when the Count arrived on Sesame Street to threaten me with numbers and vampiric laughter. That fear's origin lay in anticipation and imagination. Predictable pain never troubled me. I climbed tall trees so long as I felt the wind and gripped the limbs and saw the grass below. Vaccines? No problem. What bothered me were the unpredictable dangers: God's judgment, neighborhood bullies, punishments promised when Dad got home. Then my imagination seized control and showed me in vivid detail all the worst that could happen.

I was a slight boy, not athletic. Easily picked on. Myopia—that indefinite, vague island—sharpened my inborn unease.

Take away my glasses? Inside, I howled.

If you've read *Lord of the Flies*, you know the situation: British boys, a couple dozen, marooned on an island. Two are Alpha males: Jack and Ralph. They're the oldest, but otherwise at odds. Jack's a punk, brat, and bully. Ralph, the son of a naval commander, is sensible and sincere. He's a kid adults would like, who finishes his homework and tries to do what's right, mostly. To follow rules.

As I did. Rules: my bulwark against airplanes and Muppets, parental punishments, and God's capricious smittings. I followed the Cub Scout promise and the Law of the Pack. I could recite all Ten Commandments, especially the Shalt Nots. If a sign read "Do Not Enter" I did not enter.

Rule-breaking became my phobia. If Dad chose a shortcut the wrong way down a one-way road? My heart drummed like a rabbit's. If a catechism lesson concerned venal and mortal sins, thoughts of hellfire made me bite my fingernails. Safety and security depended on knowing and following rules. To break them was to invite dangers unseen.

Jack Merridew, in *Lord of the Flies*, first appears with a group of boys garbed in cloaks, each wearing a black cap and silver badge. Together, the cloak-and-cap boys once sang as a choir. Jack's gold badge distinguishes him. In this band, he's the front man.

Jack scared me because he flouts rules. He doesn't care about shelters or organizing meetings. Instead, he masks himself with paint and dirt. He leads his choir boys in a pretend game of Island Savage. He hunts a feral pig for fun and knifes open its throat as it screams, then conducts his "tribe" in dark rituals with blood and sharp sticks.

When Ralph holds meetings to organize and assign tasks, Jack smirks at Ralph's sincerity. He mimics and teases.

"You're breaking the rules," Ralph tells him, and Jack retorts, "Who cares?"

I recognized Jack. I saw him in the kids at Santa Rita High who masked themselves with eye liner and black lipstick, who dressed in dark hues and huddled in shaded places, who dyed their hair unnatural colors and who giggled at secret understandings. Their t-shirts touted bands I'd never heard of. They skipped class, snickered into each other's necks. They seemed—to borrow from Golding in *Lord of the Flies*—to be kids who know "all the answers and won't tell."

It's not like Sterling and I were close. He never took us kids out for soft serve or spent an afternoon with us playing *Candyland*. He didn't ask lots of questions about school or friends or why I liked Captain Marvel more than Captain America. What could I have answered that would be interesting to *him*? But he spent enough time in our family's life that once, when I came across the word *lanky* and asked Mom what it meant, she said, "It's a body type. Sterling is lanky."

Never in my memory does Sterling sit straight. He's leaning forward, elbows on a table. Angled left or right on a couch. Or head back

on a cushion, his whole body poured forward, legs bent at the knees or locked, sticks shaken loose from a bundle. Watching, taking in the scene at a slant.

One year, from Christmas into the New Year, we crowded my uncle and aunt's two-bedroom apartment in Tucson, ten of us, for about two weeks. This was the tail end of the 1970s recession, and my father had been out of work. Encouraged by my uncle, our family had just moved from Vermont to Tucson, where there were jobs. Sterling, his wife, and their young daughter came from Texas for the holidays. The space got more crowded after someone stole my uncle's motorcycle and Dad started parking his Honda CB200 in the living room each night, next to the sad fir tree that dropped needles we could hear hit, like rain.

That Christmas in Tucson, I was twelve. To that age, whenever I received a gift from a relative, I gave the gift-giver a thank-you peck on the lips. They expected this, all those aunts and uncles and especially the great-aunts and -uncles. It's what I'd been taught to do. As a pre-teen, though, the practice had begun to unsettle me. Adults, I noticed, didn't do this. But I had no older siblings or cousins to snicker or to call me a dork.

How was I to know when to stop? What were the rules?

Christmas morning, after Sterling and his wife gave me a gift, I stepped around the sad fir tree to where Sterling sat. I leaned into his angle, kissed him on the mouth and said, "Thank you."

The look he gave me—startled, perplexed, even indignant—ended my childhood.

In *Lord of the Flies*, three boys die.

The first, never named, vanishes in a jungle fire.

The second, Simon, is among those allied with Ralph and Piggy, who are vulnerable and who find assurance in rules. He suffers faints and seizures and perceives the world in a hallucinogenic way. When alone in the jungle, he comes upon the black-blood skull of Jack's pig impaled on a sharp stick, the nearby gutpile is a "blob of flies that buzzed like a saw," and the head grins. The head speaks to him of evil and fear (as it also spoke to me). "You are a silly little boy," it tells Simon (it also meant me), "just an ignorant, silly, little boy."

A short while later, Simon stumbles to the beach and into a night-

marish frolic that Jack orchestrated: boys dancing, wielding sharpened sticks, and chanting “*Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!*” Thinking Simon some creature from the jungle, the choir boys stab and stab and stab at him. The tide sweeps Simon’s body away.

Piggy, he with the specs, dies next.

I read all this while lying on my stomach in bed, the house quiet, a flashlight under the sheets so Mom or Dad wouldn’t notice. I set my glasses on a bedside table and brought the secret reading less than an inch from my face, making the words gigantic, mythic, and real, until I was no longer reading but instead panicked during a nighttime raid when Jack’s band steals Piggy’s glasses—now my glasses—to start the fires that fuel their revels. Pages later, with Piggy and me both “expressionless behind the luminous wall” of our myopia, we confront Jack’s tribe. A boy frees a boulder from a cliff, and it tumbles, striking Piggy, striking me. We tumble onto rocks below. Our heads open. Stuff comes out. Water boils “white and pink over the rock.” When it retreats, we are gone.

Some two decades and a few lives after I’d perished with Piggy, I was among a group of graduate students who met the Irish writer John McGahern. This was 1997 or 1998, in Arkansas. McGahern was spending several days with us in classes and at parties and such. A small man, farmer, as well as writer, McGahern wore a frayed sweater that would suit either role. Generous and gentle, he sported tufts of hair over his ears and very little atop his head. I remember learning that he wrote each morning for a couple hours, then spent the rest of the day tending goats or sheep or whatever his farm required. I loved him for that.

What I remember most clearly, though, what I’ve never forgotten, is this one thing he said. In his whispery brogue, the sort that makes you lean in to hear, he told us: “There is nothing more subversive than a person alone in a room, reading a book.”

He spoke those words, and I traveled to that night with *Lord of the Flies* and a flashlight, and what came for me: a massive upheaval, a turning over, a subversion. By morning, sun blued the Tucson sky, and cinnamon Pop-Tarts awaited in our kitchen. But how could I eat pastry? Rules were not what I thought; boys were not; I was not. How, then, would I survive?

Moreover, this knowledge came from a book. By the time I read *Lord of the Flies*, I'd already decided that books would be my life. I'd grow up, have a house on a few acres of forest, and two Irish setters, and I'd work as an author. This fantasy promised safety and stability, based as it was on my bookshelf—Bible stories for children, adventure tales, superhero comics, biographies—books that offered assurances about how goodness and fairness were rewarded. I would live solidly on such hard-cover foundations.

My grandparents backed me up on this fantasy. They knew I scribbled stories in notebooks, so when, as a boy, I watched *The Waltons* on their tv, they'd say "You're like John-Boy," referring to the earnest young writer and eldest son of that fictional Appalachian family. They said it as encouragement; I heard it as a promise.

But John-Boy could never have written *Lord of the Flies*. Having met Piggy and Jack, I still wanted to be an author, but I didn't know anymore what that meant. For the first time, I'd undergone a violent overthrow of self because I'd read a book.

When I sang "Who Loves the Sun" for Sterling, The Velvet Underground had a devoted following but wasn't widely known. That's a fair description ever after, even though the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inducted the band in 1996, citing it as a progenitor of punk, influencing the Sex Pistols, David Bowie, Henry Rollins, and Patti Smith, among others.

Smith herself gave the band's induction speech, saying that they combined avant-garde experimentation with rock 'n' roll to open "wounds worth opening—with brutal innocence, without apology."

Sterling didn't live to hear those words. He had died about five months earlier, at age fifty-three, from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I hadn't seen him for years. My uncle and aunt had divorced, and the connections naturally fell away. Once, during a cross-country drive I took after graduating college, I visited with Sterling's wife and their kids in Austin. That's where Sterling eventually earned that doctorate in medieval studies with a dissertation called "Historiographical Perspectives in the Signed Poems of Cynewulf," a close reading of the Old English poet's work, with particular interest in Cynewulf's artistry and in how the poems revealed Christian medieval views of history. Sterling also worked as a tugboat captain, and when his wife put me up

for a night, he was on the Gulf Coast amid the diesel fumes and salt air, so I missed him.

Which means the last time we spoke was when we talked about *Lord of the Flies*.

I wish I remembered details from the conversation. But that day blurs from terror and sleeplessness, the contours of reality shifting into unreality. The safe island I'd fashioned for myself out of rules and books now burned, fire crowning in the trees, and my glasses were lost.

Sterling and I talked for about an hour, which was strange. We weren't close. Maybe, at last, here was something interesting to discuss with that kid he sort of knew, so he gave his time. I feel that generosity still. I remember his voice, patient, with his native Long Island accent, a little nasal, steady, unrushed. I listened intently, earnestly. The ivory phone cord stretched from the wall to the kitchen counter where I sat on a stool, body bunched into smallness, biting my fingernails despite the wire braces on my teeth. My mother's ashtray nearby smelled of stale cigarettes. The rest of the family kept quiet in the next room, television on, volume low.

When you've lost what matters, you look for it. You glimpse—or imagine that you glimpse—that familiar face, that missing shape. Because all I have is the fact of my conversation with Sterling, it returns again and again, a murmur in my ear. Curious, I hold my breath and listen. Because I've forgotten specifics, I seek them. Over and over, I play *Loaded*. I reread Golding's novel. I tell Bill the barber the ditty with its punchline: *Sterling talked me down*. I ask questions I might not have had words for that day, a boy on the phone to Texas: How did you get me to confront what scared me? What did you tell me about art—the real stuff—and subversion? What did you say to save my life? Not my physical life, but the inner one, making it more expansive than I'd yet to envision?

More than forty years later—and, yes, a writer after all—I'm still talking with Sterling about *Lord of the Flies*.

Where our discussion leads years after we hung up the telephone:

The music he and the band made; the books I've written; *Paradise Lost*; artifice and masks; our mutual friend, Ed "Snake" Duncan (PhD, medievalist); experienced meaning in art; academic bullshit; cyni-

cism; meanness; my rereading of *Lord of the Flies*; Jack Merridew, that pig killer; college football, especially at Texas and Arkansas (our grad school alma maters); ironic distance; “Sweet Jane,” the song; everything that is uncertain and unexplained, fearful and beautiful, and how to look—really look—at it.

All of which matters, but only some of which is pertinent.

Me: I listen to it, I do, the band’s stuff. I wish I loved it all. It feels like I owe that to you. But I don’t love it all. I get the effort, the avant-garde risk-taking, the experimentation. What’s awful can also be great. But sometimes awful is just awful. Like those poem recitations in “The Murder Mystery.” They’re so pretentious.

Sterling: So. I haven’t read your books.

In rereading *Lord of the Flies*, I tell Sterling, I noticed something about murderous Jack Merridew that surprised me, that he and I maybe didn’t talk about back when. It starts midway through the novel when Jack challenges Ralph and loses an election for chief. He cries and pouts, a brat when he says, “I’m not going to play any longer.” His word choice surprised me. He said “play.”

Sterling: It’s strange, that’s true. There’s Jack saying that what Ralph’s up to is a game, not strategies to maximize their survival. Like, survival’s a game, life’s a game, everything’s a game, even what’s most real and frightening. Maybe especially what’s most real and frightening. Then Jack goes off and creates this elaborate new amusement with face-painting and pig-killing and the rest. People might say that’s the play-acting, but it gets all mixed up in Jack.

Me: He’s like a method actor or cosplayer, erasing and then remaking himself. But it’s not intentional or planned. He’s just reacting to his environment.

Sterling: The island’s his stage, the savage his role, because, you know, the role is his life, and he’s trying to save himself. Ralph’s got his own way of staying alive. But, Jack, he’s rock ‘n’ roll. Get loud, burn down the whole world. That’s his talent, even if he doesn’t realize it. It’s an old story. How many kids have saved their own selves by cranking the amp so loud it shatters the humdrum?

Me: And once he starts, he can't stop, not even when other boys get killed. He's committed. Like an actor playing Macbeth, who can't stop Macbeth from killing Duncan, can't keep Macbeth from getting his own head cut off.

Sterling: "We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are, / painted on a pole..." Such a great line.

Me: Jack scared the snot out of me. But now I think: choir boy, thespian, painter of self, director of play. Brat. He's got that brutal innocence and something to say. Jack's a kind of artist, isn't he?

Sterling: Our rarer monsters! Ha. Yeah, he could have been with the band.

That Jack pursues his art—wholeheartedly if unintentionally—isn't a fresh revelation, it turns out. In fact, a Tumblr full of *Lord of the Flies* memes includes the following exchange, reimagining the book's end when a British naval officer arrives to rescue the boys even as fire engulfs the island's jungle.

Naval officer: Why is this island burning?

Jack: I set it on fire.

Naval officer: Why?

Jack: Aesthetic.

The Tumblr was created by someone under the nom de plume "its-merridew-bitch." The content is very ironic, très cool. If twelve-year-old Jack read it, he'd smirk. That's the rule for cynics: smirk when you recognize that odd pain others call sincerity.

Sterling: Sometimes, that's a pain so potent there's nothing to do but mask it.

It makes sense that Sterling would understand artifice and role-playing. Consider how he quit the band. It was mid-tour at an airport gate in Texas, a suitcase in his hand, though he'd already decided to stay for graduate school and had left his clothes in his hotel room closet. None of the other Velvets suspected, he'd masked his intentions so well.

And when he applied for a teaching assistantship at UT-Austin, he didn't mention the Velvets, applying under his given name as "Holmes S. Morrison," disguising that rock 'n' roll part of himself.

So, yeah.

Me: What *did* you think of the three of us doing an Osmond-Family-type take on “Who Loves the Sun”?

Sterling: Well, you know, you should have tried “The Murder Mystery.”

When I moved out of my parents’ house, I took their copy of *Loaded*. I think I asked, but maybe not.

For years, I played the record on my turntable. When the world went digital, I bought a cd copy. Now the album is on my phone.

I’ve listened again and again to all the winking irony, the lyrics that skewer. I’ve listened so many times that “Who Loves the Sun” and its bitter bubble-gum weather bores me. But the song that follows it, track two, side one? That sardonic, cool-riffed comment about the lives of bankers and clerks? “Sweet Jane” I stick with.

And what I’ve heard in that song helps me more than anything to understand how Sterling and our *Lord of the Flies* conversation led me from the John-Boy/writer fiction to something richer, more textured and complicated. That’s because “Sweet Jane” helps me understand Sterling, how he could be a guy who’d spend a phone-hour with very sensitive and responsible me, helping me grapple with certain cosmic questions, while also being the VU guitarist who, in an interview not long after, said of folk singers:

[They were] very sensitive and responsible young people suddenly attuned to certain cosmic questions that beckon us all...expressing these concerns through acoustic guitars and lilting harmonies and pale melodies. I hate these people.

(Sterling, that same interview: “I never sit down and listen to lyrics, because rock ’n’ roll is not sit-down-and-listen-to-lyrics music!...If you wanna listen to lyrics, then read *The New York Times*.”)

OK. So that’s a pose, right? We all see that. The Velvet Underground put poems in their songs. Sterling studied Cynewulf. Of course, lyrics matter. Which is why, without apology, I turn now to “Sweet Jane” and its lyrics.

The song begins with the singer describing Jack (not Merridew) and Jane, who once were edgy cool kids but got old and now come home

from boring jobs to sit by the fire and listen to classical music. “The March of the Wooden Soldiers,” no less. Stiffs.

For the record, at this point in the song, I am with the stiffs and feel aggrieved.

Now comes the third verse, and the song subverts all that disdain. The singer puts Jack and Jane aside, muses instead about life. He sings, “Some people, they like to go out dancing, and other peoples they have to work. (Just watch me now.)”¹ He tells you: he’s about to start working. What he’s up to isn’t just playing in a band. It’s a job, serious labor, as sincere as filling potholes or welding pipes.

Then comes the big turn. The singer warns against “evil mothers” who will “tell you that everything is just dirt...and that life is just to die.” Beware cynicism and nihilism, he says, beware snickering and smirking—all set against a sound so cool it’s diffident, uncaring. The bubble-gum melody of “Who Loves the Sun” disguises a cynical voice; “Sweet Jane’s” sound—clean and dangerous as a knife edge rasping against a whetstone—belies sincerity.

The song’s crescendo comes with the whole band singing in a raucous, unified *cri du coeur*:

But anyone who ever had a heart:

Oh! They wouldn’t turn around and break it!

And anyone who ever played a part:

Oh! They wouldn’t turn around and hate it!

“Sweet Jane”—with its sincere use of irony to seek meaning—is generous and open. It’s rock ’n’ roll that embraces contradictions. It is vast, with space enough for the pose and for what’s genuine, for all the roles, for all that we are and hope to be. Forget “Who Loves the Sun” and its narrow cynicism that at eight years old I couldn’t grasp. Forget the lyrics I sang that day and which melody I followed. I wasn’t singing “Who Loves the Sun,” not how it was meant to be sung. What came out of me was closer in spirit to “Sweet Jane”—full-throated, sincere.

I like to think Sterling heard it that way too.

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1. Lyrics from “Sweet Jane” as transcribed by music writer Herb Bowie; I recommend his explication of the song and its lyrics, which informed my understanding and can be found online: https://www.reasonatorock.com/tracks/sweet_jane.html.

The teenager Sterling Morrison spoke with about *Lord of the Flies* drew his own comic books, sprawled across scratchy carpet in his bedroom. He wrote longhand what he imagined were novels, filling notebooks with ruled pages. He rose early each morning to pedal his bicycle through darkness and deliver newspapers, but first he read the headlines. He'd read everything in front of him, even nutritional labels on cereal boxes.

He believed in certainties. He believed that what people wrote in books was real and true.

He was wrong, but he was also right.

At the end of *Lord of the Flies*, as the island burns, our last view of Jack is from a Naval officer's point of view, who sees "a little boy who wore the remains of an extraordinary black cap on his red hair and who carried the remains of a pair of spectacles at his waist."

Jack's problem was not that he was evil. It was that he was a frightened little boy, as afraid as I was. And like me, he turned to his talent to save him. I followed rules and limited my world and self. Jack broke rules with his play and harmed others. But what do children know of the consequences that obtain to their tendencies? Maybe, in another time and place, Jack would have been only a suburban brat who, like Sterling Morrison, could take years to fool around with sarcasm and irony and art until he got it right.

Sterling: That's not so. I worked hard, in fact, not to get it right. I worked hard to do only what I wanted or needed to do. Getting it right has nothing to do with anything.

Of course, he'd say that, or something like it. But he did get it right, a lot of it. He refused convention and wore different masks. He played guitar both fierce and elegant and studied Christian medieval poetry and sang loudly that "anyone who ever played a part / wouldn't turn around and hate it."

"A very unsensitive young person," as Sterling once described himself, "who played very unsensitive, uncaring music" became other someones, took on other roles. Among them: a voice long-distance, able to explain to a scared, earnest, sleep-deprived kid how we can be Piggy and Ralph and Jack all at once; about the beginnings of cruelty and the merits of vulnerability; about rules and the need to break them, bravely. He calmed that scared boy, calms me still. His voice so many years away, floating to me as across water with a message, "It's all right,

really. Forget about the rules. They won't make the world safer. But here's music, here's literature. Here's how our art rescues us from the islands where we're marooned."