The thought is a haunting one. It comes to me at odd times, unpredictable moments. I might be playing my guitar, or reading, or just driving along in the car. And suddenly I'm thinking about a fellow named Orange Band. I never met him, and I never will.

His name resulted from a small strip of plastic around his leg. I used to think he deserved a better handle. In Latin, he was *Ammodramus nigrescens*, but that seemed too coldly scientific and species-like, in the same way I am *Homo sapiens*. What was needed, I thought, was a name that captured in a word or two his unique place in the scheme of things. Something that identified him as being the very last of his kind, that succinctly conveyed the isolation of his existence. A name that somehow reflected the infinite loneliness that must accompany a state of undiluted unity. For he was perfectly and unalterably alone.

But, in the end, I decided that Orange Band was a good name for him. He was plain, and he was gritty, and it suited him well. Besides, the simplicity of such a name is more than fitting if you are the only remaining dusky seaside sparrow and there is no one left to call it out. If I were the last of *Homo sapiens*, I think I would take such a name. And, I would sit with my back against a granite ledge, near a river in a distant twilight-colored blue, and say, “I am Orange Band,” listening to the words come back to me through the trees and along the grass.

How do we measure loneliness? If the counting bears any relationship to the number of your species still around, then Orange Band was lonely. It had not always been so. The duskies were common once in the marshes of Merritt Island, Florida. They were six inches long, blackish above, with a yellow patch near the eye, streaked in black and white lower down, and sang a buzzy song resembling that of a red-winged blackbird.

That was before we slowly pitched our faces skyward and murmured, “Space.” Along with the mathematics of flight and the hardware to take us there, we had to deal with the nasty problem of mosquitoes that plagued the Kennedy Space Center. For reasons known only to people who conjure up such things, flooding the Merritt Island marshlands nearby seemed to be the answer to the mosquito problem. The water rose and took with it the nests of the dusky seaside sparrows. There was one other place, just one, where the duskies lived. Propelled by conservationist pressures, the federal government lurched into action and spent something over $2 million to purchase 6,250 acres along the St. John’s River. There were two thousand of the little songbirds living there. Ah, but highways came. Always, the highways come. They come to bring more people who will need more highways that will bring more people who will need more highways. The marshes were drained for road construction, and fire swept through the dry grass of the nesting grounds. Pesticides did the rest.

By 1979, only six dusky seaside sparrows could be found along the river. Five of them were captured. None was female. The last female had been sighted in 1975.

The *New York Times* duly noted the problem in the August 31, 1983, edition under a headline that read: “Five Sparrows, All Male, Sing for a Female to Save Species.” And just below the *Times* article, in one of those ethereal juxtapositions that sometimes occur in newspaper layouts, was an advertisement for a chi-chi clothing store called “Breakaway.”

The copy above a photo of a smartly turned-out woman went like this:

- You strive for spontaneity
- To take life as it comes
- The perfect complement to your dynamic lifestyle
- Our natural silver fox jacket
- Now during our Labor Day celebration save $1,000.00 off the original price
  - Originally $3,990.00
  - Now $2,990.00

In the swamps of Florida, spontaneity was on hold. So were dynamic lifestyles. The five male duskies were brought to Disney World’s Discovery Island, were pensioned off and made comfortable. Orange Band was about
eight years old.

So it was, not far from the place where we launch for other worlds, that a different kind of countdown began. By 1985, there were three of the little males left. Then, one died in September of that year. On March 31, 1986, a second one died. That left Orange Band, by himself.

Now and then, I would think of Orange Band alone in his cage. The last member of the rarest species known to us. He became blind in one eye, became old for a sparrow, and yet he persisted, as if he knew his sole task was to sustain the bloodline as long as possible. I wondered if he wondered, if he felt sorrow or excruciating panic at the thought of his oneness. Surely, he felt loneliness.

Charles Cook, curator of the zoo, issued periodic bulletins: "As far as we can tell, for a little bird like that, he seems to be doing fine."

Still, it was inevitable. On June 18, 1987, a Washington Post headline said: "Goodbye, Dusky Seaside Sparrow." Orange Band, blind in one eye, old and alone, was gone. He died by himself on June 17, with no one, either human or bird, around.

But the day Orange Band died there was a faint sound out there in the universe. Hardly noticeable unless you were expecting it and listening. It was a small cry, the last one, that arched upward from a cage in Florida, ricocheted along galactic highways and skimmed past the scorched parts of an old moon rocket still in orbit. If you were listening closely, though, you could hear it... "I am zero."

Extinct. The sound of the word is like the single blow of a hammer on cold steel. And, each day, the hammer falls again as another species becomes extinct due to human activity. This is about four hundred times the rate of natural extinction.

In open defiance of the International Whaling Commission, Japan and Iceland continue to slaughter whales under the guise of "research." The real reason, however, is to supply the inexhaustible Japanese appetite for whale flesh. The great California condors are all in cages now. Less than twenty of the black-footed ferrets remain. The number of mountain gorillas has declined to under 450. The black duck is in serious trouble; nobody knows just how much trouble for sure. Over six million dolphins have been killed accidentally by the Pacific tuna fleet in the last thirty years. And have you noticed the decline of songbirds in Iowa?

The count rises, year after year. Roughly eleven hundred plants and animals specifically are identified on the endangered and threatened species list at the present time, but nobody really knows for sure how long the list should be. The reason is that science has not yet determined exactly how many species exist, and the job of identification is a long way from completion. With the clear-cutting of the tropical rain forests throughout the world, the numbers could be astronomical. For example, Brazil is losing forest at a rate of five thousand square miles per year, and some estimates of species yet unknown in the tropical forests range as high as one million.

But we press on. With highways and toxic waste and all-terrain vehicles and acid rain and pesticides and the straightening of pretty creeks to gain an extra acre or two on which to grow surplus crops. In the name of progress and something called "development," we press on, though we seem reluctant to define exactly what it is we seek. That definition, you see, likely is too frightening to contemplate, for the answer along our present course might be nothing other than "more."

More of what? Nothing in particular. Just more. We must have more, always more, for if we stopped, we would have less of that nothing in particular.

So the citizens buzz over blood and money around the boxing rings of Atlantic City and worry, ludicrously, about holding wine glasses properly and titter in a breathless way over Cher's ruthlessly libidinous gown at the Academy Award ceremonies. And each day, the hammer falls again. And, each day, another small cry arches upward; slowly and forever, it arches upward. And sometimes I sit with my back against a granite ledge, near a river in a distant twilight-colored "blue, and say, "I am Orange Band," and the words come back alone through the trees and along the grass.