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 sor­
row 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 up­
ward from a cage in Florida, ricocheted
along galactic highways and skinned
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 trou­
ble; 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 frighten­
ing to contemplate, for the answer along
our present course might be nothing
other than "more."

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 Atlan­
tic 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 blur,
and say, "I am Orange Band," and the
words come back alone through the trees
and along the grass.