

No One with Whom You Can Sing

Excerpted from "Monsters"

By Derrick Jensen, American author and poet-philosopher of the ecological movement

You're tired. Really tired. You can't wait to get home. You know that's a cliché, but right now you're too tired to think in much other than clichés. You hurt all over. You're hungry. You want to sleep. You've been through so much. The only thing keeping you going is that you don't have much farther to go now.

And you're lonely. You've heard stories that there used to be thousands of you, and then hundreds, and even a few years ago you remember there were a couple of dozen. Last year there were five. This year three started the trip, and now there's only you. The trip has been full of disappointments. It seems every trip your entire life has been full of disappointments. Things changing in ways you don't like. That's one reason you're so tired and hungry. You've heard stories that generations ago the trips used to be fun, an annual adventure, a sort of vacation. Travel a little, stop and rest and play around, sample the local foods, and then after you've slept off your full belly, get the travel bug again and head on up the coast. That's not to say it wasn't tiring, even back then. But everyone knows that traveling is always tiring, even when it's fun.

And the parties along the way! Seeing old friends you haven't seen since, well, sometimes it seems like forever even though it was only last year. And catching up on the gossip! Oh, the gossip! She did what? That little rascal. I can't believe it. And who else did what with whom? And look at how your children have grown! I remember when they were only this big. Chatter chatter chatter. Even more memorable than the chatter were the songs. Between the lovers of the day and the night owls, someone or another was always singing as though their heart would burst.

These are stories you've been told about how it used to be. In your lifetime the get-togethers have never been so joyous. Rather they're occasion for an accounting of the dead. You hate to admit it, but you resent those who came before. How did they have it so good? It's unfair that you never got to experience any of those days. Sure, you've had your share of gossip. And it's still been nice to see old friends. But the ache for those who've gone never goes away.

The first sound you heard in your life, long before you broke through your egg, long before you felt the sun or the wind or anything else, long before you knew there was color, long before you knew there was anything in the world but a long ceaseless dreaming, was the sound of singing. It was the most beautiful thing you could imagine. That sound, the soft inviting sound of your mother's voice, gave you all the courage it took when it came time to break the shell and find out that the world was larger than your curled up body. You think often of the last thing your mother said to you before your first migration, something that her mother said to her, and her mother to her, for as long as your family can remember, which was that the journey of a hundred days begins with a single beat of your wings. With that she leapt into the air and was

off. Of course you joined her, as did the rest of your family. What she didn't emphasize—and this was undoubtedly wise on her part, or you might have been too scared to take that first beat on the long journey—is that after the first wing beat there is another, and then another, and then another, until there are too many to count, and that there are times when the only thing you know is fatigue. There are, you have learned, many flavors of fatigue. There is the delicious fatigue at the end of a long day, when your muscles and bones and brain and heart seep into sleep the moment your feet find a branch. And there is the dry and deadened taste of fatigue at the end of the whole hundred day journey, when every part of you aches and the only things that keep you going are the knowledge that you can do one more wing beat, and then one more, and then one more, but you don't know after that; and the knowledge that soon you will be sitting on the branch you love so much in the tree you love so much in the place you love so much, the place you first felt the sun and felt a breeze on your face. That's the fatigue you feel now.

One more wing beat, you tell yourself, and then one more. Something is wrong. You can tell long before you get there. Last spring when you arrived the place was still beautiful, still home. Sure, it was a lot noisier than before ... Actually, noisier might be the wrong word. The place used to be filled with so many songs and so many voices that sometimes you'd have to sing your very loudest to be heard over everyone else. But these noises were different. Not songs. Not language. Not voices. Not chatter. Noise. Unbearably loud, unbearably constant, unbearably unnatural. Deep metallic roars. And that's what you hear now. Only louder.

You're not sure you can make it there anyway. But you know you can do one more wing beat, and then one more after that, and one more after that. Beyond that you don't know. And with these sounds, if you hadn't already come this far, you might just quit. But you can do one more wing beat. And then one more. You can, as it ends up, do a few more than that. You get closer and closer to your home. The noises get louder and louder. And it looks less and less like it used to. In fact you don't recognize anything at all. None of the trees are there. They've all been replaced by those flat wide paths you see all over, those paths with big noisy machines moving on them faster than you can fly. And big boxes made of dead trees. At first you are confused. You can't find the tree where you first felt the sun, first felt the wind, first knew your mother and father. You are so tired. You land on one of the big boxes made of dead trees. Did you fly to the wrong place? Then you are no longer confused. The problem is not that you are lost. The problem is that the tree is gone. So are all the others. You are tired. You don't know where to go, what to do. Maybe you'll wait to see if any other families show up. Then you can all decide together. No one else shows up. No other members of your family. No other families. No one with whom you can gossip. No one with whom you can sing.