

# Songs of the Dead

Derrick Jensen



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*one*

*the cannibal sickness*

Each night, I walk the line that wends between unconsciousness and terror, between forgetting and remembering, between present and past. Each night I do not fall asleep but instead stumble through time, falling into deep impressions—like five-pointed handprints on soft clay—of past on present, living in house after house after house of imagination, each one an edifice of events uncompleted. Does the land dream so, too, carrying with it the weight of thousands of years of nights on nights, remembering salmon that were and are not, caressing them in the infancy of their evolution and caring for them in their absence? Does the land mourn these losses as I mourn my own, and does she—it, he, pieces of moist soil between my fingertips, the orange bellies of ponderosa pine four arm lengths around—dream as well of times unwounded, and of woundings? Does time wind and unwind for her—for I know now it is her—each night as she sleeps beneath snow, stars, cold wind, trees sighing sadly or giving up their own ghosts before meeting what we have become, beneath a moon that night after night sees all, yet keeps remembering?

I know now that there is and always has been a heart that beats beyond the grasping of our mechanical fingers, unfound in the claws of our braced backhoes, slipping away in the face of our too-coarse bulldozers. The past resides in the soil, and though we believe it blows away and is lost, that is not true. It is there all the time, though we do not see it.

Our dreams carry with them the perfume of this soil, and will not without a fight let go of that which beneath it all makes each of us who we are. So each night I walk that fine line, and sometimes awaken to freeze before all that has happened to me, to her, to each of us, and to wish that things could be different than they are.

He touches the still-warm skin of her belly with the first three fingers of his left hand. Almost on their own, his fingers trace

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tiny circles toward the tented skin over her pelvis. Her skin is soft, pale. Her scent fills the room.

He stands between her legs, leans over slightly, then more. He touches the scalpel in his right hand to the skin just below her navel, and draws a line to her pubic hair, pink of skin, thin white layer of subcutaneous fat, light brown layer—so thin—of muscle, then the yellow wall of the abdominal cavity itself. The geology of skin. Which layer came first?

He remembers how she was a short time ago, still breathing, gasping, clinging tight to whatever she could grasp. Her clawed fingers opening and closing, wrists twisting beneath metal holding her to the table, skin tearing, and beneath the skin muscles tightening, rising up, trying to leave her body.

Dying, she'd terrorized him more than ever before. Again and again he'd asked her the one simple question he always asked, and again and again she'd pretended not to know. She'd kept up that feigned ignorance to the end, when with her last words—more a sigh, really, a gurgle, a retch, than any sort of sentence—she'd been able to convince him her ignorance might be real. "Nothing, nothing. Not at all." That's what she had said.

The scalpel. So small. Sharp. Bright. He breaks into the peritoneum. The first time he had done that he'd been surprised there was no stench. Some animals stink when you open them up. Most people don't. He sees the intestines, long tubes sheathed in fat, lifts them up and sees the bladder. It's also white. So much white. The size of a fist. Beneath that, what he's looking for. Pale pink, white, another fist. He slices at the ligaments, then pulls at the uterus. It doesn't come out easily. It never does. He reaches behind and beneath to sever the attachments, and finally the organ is liberated. He brings with it the ovaries.

His fingers are red. Cherry. Burgundy. Darker. Almost black. He looks at his watch. It's late. He puts down the scalpel.

This time he burns the body. He puts it in the back of his pickup and takes it south of town. It rides wrapped in blue plastic

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beneath the shell. The ride is smooth until near the end, when he drives across railroad tracks, up a slope, around a corner, and into a small quarry. Fractured rock on three sides, and trees on the other. Good cover. Here he can watch, just a little. He wants to see the fire. He's never done that before.

He stops the truck, hears the click of his door opening and the soft catch as he slowly shuts it. Walking to the back of the truck, he hears the gravel grind beneath his feet. He opens the shell and rear gate, then reaches for the tail of the blue tarp and pulls it toward him. The tarp is heavy, but not so heavy that he isn't able to carry it.

Then the unwrapping. He rolls the body free of the tarp, but doesn't look at it until he returns from the truck with the gasoline. Now he looks at her. Dark blonde hair, soft, tangled. Pockmarks on her face. Missing a tooth. That wasn't his doing. It was already gone.

She was not a pretty woman, he thinks, not very pretty at all. But at one time she had been. She'd had a picture in her wallet of a younger woman, standing next to a man. The woman was beautiful: slender, long blonde hair, smooth skin. He had asked her who that was, and she'd said it was her. "What happened?" he'd asked.

She hadn't answered, but she hadn't needed to. He'd known the answer. He'd seen the tracks on her arms when he first picked her up. Scabby, scarred, bruised. Abuse, drugs, alcohol, and sunlight had all worked together to harden the muscles of her face until she could no longer remove the mask of impassivity that protected her from customers, and from everyone. Or almost everyone.

He pours the gasoline, sets the near-empty gas can a safe distance away, lights a match, then uses it to ignite a twisted piece of newspaper. The flame describes a soft arc toward the body, then flashes outward in a concussive wave he feels in his belly. For a short time the flames seem to hold themselves above the body, but as he watches the skin begins to darken, then split away from the muscles tightening and becoming dark themselves, braiding to look like

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nothing so much as jerked meat. He follows the smoke up and realizes he needs to leave. Too much smoke, more than he anticipated. Someone could see. Still not too worried, though, he watches a few more moments before retreating to the truck, and afterwards driving back to the highway, back to the town.

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*two*

*p o s s e s s i o n*

For the past few years, I've been working on a book called *Possession*. It is, like all of my other books, an attempt to provide at least preliminary answers to what I perceive are some pressing questions. *A Language Older Than Words*, for example, is, among other things, an attempt to explore the relationships between silencing and atrocity, and between remembering and healing. In *The Culture of Make Believe* I wanted to ask and attempt to answer questions like, What is hate? What are the relationships between hatred, perceived entitlement, objectification, and atrocity? What are the logical endpoints of this culture's way of perceiving and being in the world? And *Endgame* was centered around the questions, Do you believe this culture will undergo a voluntary transformation to a sane and sustainable way of living? If not (and almost no one I ever talk to believes it will) what does that mean for your strategy and tactics to defend the places you love?

It's always easier to articulate the questions that drive a book long after that book is done. During the writing itself, it often seems as though I'm slowly feeling my way forward in the dark, arms outstretched in front of me to warn of obstacles, as I attempt to follow some almost entirely unseen path toward some entirely unseen goal. Often this goal is not only unseen, but literally unimagined—that is, after all, one of the points of writing a book: to imagine and articulate that which before, you could not put words to or sometimes even conceptualize—but it feels like *Possession* is yet another attempt to understand the incomprehensible destructiveness of this culture. We can talk all we want about silencing, perceived entitlement, and all that, but none of it could ever be sufficient to explain how any group of people, no matter how stupid or arrogant, could kill the planet they live on so that they can make money. *Possession* is about more than that, though. It's also about our relationships to various parts of the world about us. And this is where *Possession* veers slightly away from the other books; in this book, far more than in the others, I ask about our relationships—sometimes beneficial, sometimes

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harmful, sometimes neither, sometimes both—not only with those others we can see and feel and hear, like trees and dogs and cats and rivers, stars, mountains, and so on, but even moreso with those we can't: muses, fates, the dead, and so many others. Asking these questions is then leading me, shuffling as always and sometimes stumbling, toward questions concerning free will, or put more straight, toward questions about how I make decisions, or put straighter still, toward the question: when I do make a decision, who is making that decision? Who's in charge? And further, who—chance, physics, fates, God, the gods, or any (and maybe all) of a myriad of others—determines the results of that decision?



On November 8, 1939, Georg Elser tried to kill Hitler. Elser knew that each year on that date, the Nazis commemorated their failed putsch of 1923 with speeches and a dinner. For several months prior to the 1939 gathering, Elser was able to spend the night unnoticed in the Löwenbräu restaurant in Munich, where the meeting would be held.

Elser's plans were meticulous. He had long-since taken a job in a quarry for the express purpose of stealing explosives. Task accomplished, for thirty-five nights he carved a hidden chamber into a concrete post next to which Hitler was to give his speech. A pair of timers would trigger the explosion not long before Hitler reached his crescendo.

I've often wondered how many times over the next six years—the last of his life, all spent in a concentration camp, perhaps noticing day-by-day his bones jut more from his skin, perhaps watching the white marks of malnutrition march down his fingernails—Elser must have asked himself why he chose to set the timers late and not early in Hitler's speech. Was he worried that Hitler would not be prompt, or that preliminary festivities—the playing of the Badenweiler march and the saluting of the Blood Banner—might take longer than anticipated? Or

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was there no good reason for the timing? Do you think that in the long years afterward he ever considered how many lives were lost because of that one simple and virtually meaningless—by itself—decision? Perhaps more to the point, do you think there was ever an hour in which he did not consider the unfortunate effects of his choice?

I don't ask this to blame Elser for his timing. At least he made the effort. And there was no way for him to know that fog—nothing more substantial than fine droplets of water hanging suspended in air, so unpredictable, an act of God—would save Hitler's life.

The assassination attempt nearly did not come off. Because Hitler had already brought the country to war, that year's service was to be abbreviated, with Rudolph Hess delivering the speech instead of Hitler. But on November 7, Hitler changed his mind and decided to fly down from Berlin to participate in the ceremonies.

Each year the speech began at 8:30, and lasted until 10:00. But this year was different. Because November in Munich frequently brings with it fog, Hitler faced a decision: should he spend the night in Munich, should he chance flying back and risk being delayed in the fog, or should he return by train? Hitler would have to finish early so he could catch his train at 9:31. Georg Elser did not know this.

By six o'clock that night, the hall was packed with the cream—such as it was—of Nazi society: Himmler, Rosenberg, Frank, Goebbels, Ribbentrop. A band played the Badenweiler march while the Blood Banner was brought in. Hitler arrived to massive applause, and began his speech at precisely 8:00.

His speech ended at 9:07, and he was out of the building by ten after. The bomb exploded at 9:20, causing the roof to collapse and killing nine people. Elser was later arrested trying

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to escape into Switzerland. He was sent to a concentration camp, and was murdered by the SS on April 5, 1945.



*three*

*places we do not see*

A couple of years ago I had a dream that wasn't so much a dream as it was a visitation, a conjuration of the sort I'd somehow thought only happened in books and movies, in which you speak some demon's name and the demon appears. I've since come to understand that these visitations—of demons and many others—are a part of life no more unusual, and normally no better perceived, than the stones on the ground, and the speaking of these stones.

In this dream that was and continues to be even more than a dream, I was fighting with rebels against corporations, against the forces I fight in waking reality, only this time I was using guns instead of words. In this dream we were losing horribly, just as we are in waking reality. We were, and the parallels continue, drastically outnumbered by the military and the police. Many on our side were being shot. I lay flat on my belly behind a lip of concrete. It was small cover, but with bullets ricocheting around me, it was far better than nothing. The firing of guns—mainly theirs, but a few of ours—merged into a constant roar. Then the roar lost its continuity, first to tiny gaps not yet filled with silence but still carrying echoes of the explosions, and then with silence in which I could hear my own gasping breaths. The firing became more and more sporadic, then stopped altogether.

I glanced to my right, to one of my fellow rebels, and I saw that the reason he no longer fired back was that he was dying. In this dream that is even more than a dream, that is a visitation or a conjuration, I saw a vampire fastened to the man's neck sucking out his blood and his guts. The vampire dropped the husk, looked, found someone else, attached himself. Then I looked at the enemy and I saw that there was not one vampire, or even a hundred, but thousands, and more than thousands. I saw, in this dream that is more than a dream, that these vampires were killing every human they could find. They were sucking out their blood and their guts. They were having a feed. The vampires—or demons, or whatever other name we may wish to put on these others whose real name I don't

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know—were neither angry nor evil nor in any way malevolent. They were famished, and they were eating. They began to chase me, as they were chasing everyone else. I evaded them, at least temporarily. I stopped. I looked through a glass window in a steel door. Thin metal mesh reinforced the window. Beyond the mesh, beyond the glass, beyond the steel, I saw a vampire who was not chasing, not feeding. He was standing. He was watching. He had pale skin, smooth scalp, grotesquely long fingers and a just as grotesquely long, curved nose. In this dream I knew he was the director. I did not and do not know what this means.

I woke up. I tried to convince myself that this dream was and is “no more” than a dream, and that these vampires represent those forces we are fighting against, that they represent those who are killing the planet, that they represent this culture as a whole, this culture of napalm, toxic wastes, deforestation, rape. No. I tried to convince myself that they represent something much more specific: the biotechnology industry, for example, and its creation of monsters. No. The dream, which really was and is even more than a dream, would not allow those interpretations. The vampires are vampires. And they’re hungry. And they’re waiting to be released, waiting to feed on humans.

There’s a fire somewhere. I can smell more than see it, but my eyes trick me, with a slight sting, into pretending that I see the smoke. I don’t, of course, except when I do, and even then, like all of us, I’m never sure if what I see is what I see.

There *is* a haze in the distance, but it’s just the sky settling back to earth at the end of the day. It’s July, and it’s hot. I’m sweaty, wet beneath my arms, on my lower back where my shirt touches my skin, and under the elastic band of my underwear.

I’m in Hangman Valley, in the western part of Spokane. I’m walking, as I often do, near Hangman Creek, which used to be Latah Creek before any of this began, and certainly long before any of it began with me.

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Or maybe not. That's one of the things I often have difficulty with. Before. During. After. Sometimes I don't understand what any of it means.

But it's hot. I understand that. It's hot enough that the leaves on the trees hang limp, except when a hot breeze makes the air quake with their paper rattling. Edges of these leaves are turning brown, and the grasses beneath have long since died or gone dormant, used up for and by the summer, and dry as tinder. Even the needles of the pine trees seem to have lost their strength and their shine.

It's cooler by the creek, though not as much cooler as I'm sure it once was, back when the creek was a creek, deeper, wider, stronger. I go there often. It's a reasonably long walk from my home—probably a couple of hours—and a longer walk back since I have to go so much uphill.

I sit by the creek, take off my shoes and socks, roll up my pants, and put my feet in. I lean forward to search for tiny fish. None. I close my eyes, then open them again quickly, just to see if this will make the salmon appear. I know that's not how it works, but it's never stopped me from hoping. And sometimes I do see them. They haven't been here since the Grand Coulee Dam was built back in the thirties, but sometimes I still do see them.

Every fire has a life of its own. I've known this as long as I can remember, since long before any of this began. The flames speak, not so much to me as to each other. Sometimes they do speak to me, although I never can be sure what they are saying. But I do know that each flame is alive, individual, as much as any other being.

There is a woman. She takes a shortcut through an alley. She is thinking, or not thinking, but seeing inside of her what she saw that morning, which was a puppy she gave her son for his birthday four days before. When the puppy wagged his tail he did not so much wag his tail as wag his whole body when he squirmed toward

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her son, who in turn did not smile so much with his lips and teeth as he, too, smiled with his whole body. This is what she is seeing when she hears the sound that is not a sound but the movement of a sound throughout her whole body, the sharp cracking of lightning as it strikes inside her brain, but does not stop after the bolt has gone; it keeps expanding outward until there is nothing left of her skull and of what was inside her skull, and she is flying, having been struck, and there is nothing but the sound that keeps expanding, and no longer can she see the puppy or her son or anything but the sound that is no longer a sound, but everything she knows.

That is what I hear. When I walk where the car struck her, that is what I hear.

Not every time. But often. And if the truth is that while I see salmon not nearly often enough, this I see far too often.

I haven't always seen like this, and even now I often do not. I used to not see anything more than anyone else, or maybe I should say not more than any of my neighbors, or maybe I should be even more precise and say not more than any of my human neighbors. I think nonhumans—and some humans—see this all the time.

For example, just a few days ago a huge submarine earthquake caused a tsunami that rocked parts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia, and India, killing more than a hundred thousand humans. Just today I read a news report saying, "Wildlife officials in Sri Lanka expressed surprise Wednesday that they found no evidence of large-scale animal deaths from the weekend's massive tsunami—indicating that animals may have sensed the wave coming and fled to higher ground. An Associated Press photographer who flew over Sri Lanka's Yala National Park in an air force helicopter saw abundant wildlife, including elephants, buffalo, deer, and not a single animal corpse." The response by one person was, "Maybe what we think is true, that animals have a sixth sense."

I'm not saying I have a sixth sense. Sometimes I'm not even sure about the other five, and my girlfriend Allison will tell you I

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sure don't have much of the common one. But I see things, and hear things. No, I see places, and I hear places. Places where I'm standing. Places where I'm sitting. Places where I'm sleeping. Sometimes I hear what the place says to me.

It's not something I can force, by any means. It just happens. It used to scare me more than it does now, but even now I do not understand it, and even now sometimes it terrifies me.

The first time was in a forest. It was a couple of years ago. I was driving our old yellow pickup, and Allison was in the passenger seat. We were going to collect firewood from slash piles in clearcuts left over from logging in the national forest. We did this often. I wasn't particularly tired, but somehow with no discernable transition I fell asleep behind the wheel. I've done that a few times driving late at night, only to jerk awake as I slip onto the shoulder, but this time there was no sliding onto the shoulder, and no jerking awake. This time I didn't even close my eyes. But I was asleep, and I began to dream with my eyes open. I saw a logging truck come down the road toward us, and I pulled over slightly to let it pass. I saw Allison shift and start to ask something, but then stop. I saw my hands turn the wheel to the right to maneuver around a corner, and then bring themselves back to ten and two o'clock for the straightaway. Another logging truck, and again I pulled slightly over. Again Allison shifted, and this time she asked, "Are you all right?"

"I think so."

"Why are you swerving?"

"What?"

"Swerving."

"The trucks."

I looked at Allison, and beyond her to the beauty strip, and to the old clearcut on the other side. I remembered that clearcut because we had been there a couple of years before to pull wood from those slash piles, and we had stopped in our work to make love. In the time since, that's become part of our woodgathering ritual, but

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that time had been the first. I felt my foot ease off the gas pedal and onto the brake. I felt my other foot push in the clutch, and my hand slide the gearshift into neutral. “Allison.”

She looked at me.

I heard the crunch of tires on rock. “Look at the forest.”

She turned to look outside. “I know,” she said. “I hate those fuckers who do this.”

“No,” I said. “The clearcut. It’s gone.” It was. There was no thin beauty strip of trees masking a clearcut. There was nothing but a thick forest quickly turning dark from shade and crisscrossed branches and leaves and trunks.

She looked back at me. “Derrick,” she said.

“I don’t understand.” I felt the car roll to a stop, felt my foot leave the clutch, felt my other foot stay on the brake. I saw Allison looking at me.

Do you want to know why I love Allison so very much? She did not tell me I was wrong or crazy—I was thinking both of these things quite well on my own. She did not tell me that the forest was gone. She said, “Tell me what you see.”

I’m awake, but my eyes are closed. I don’t know how long I’ve been lying here. I used to sleep with the drapes shut, but not anymore: I don’t know many feelings more delicious than drifting with the morning sun on my shoulders. I hear footfalls, that seem to be more from the dream side than the waking side, then a voice, definitely from the waking side. It’s Allison.

“Good morning.”

I smile and open my eyes. “How’s the painting?”

She smiles—like the puppy, like the little boy—with her whole body. “It is *so* good. I’m doing the dagger. I’ll finish today.”

It’s my favorite painting of hers. Perhaps I was wrong when I said I love Allison so much because of what she said to me. Perhaps it’s because of paintings like this one. It’s a stroke for stroke reproduction of Peter Paul Rubens’ *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*,

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with one small change. And as is so often the case, one small change changes everything. Instead of the two women being defenseless, they're fighting back: the first is raking her attacker with her fingernails, and the second is about to plunge a small dagger into the breast of the other man. Her new title: "The Attempted Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus."

"Your timing was perfect," I say. "I was just about to get up."

She smiles slyly, "This isn't the first time I checked."

"Can I see it?"

"In a while." She stands near the edge of the bed. I know she wants to sit, but is wearing her workclothes. I notice her breasts beneath her shirt, the way they move slightly with every breath. I notice the sun on her hair and her hair falling over her shoulders. I notice her hands, long slender fingers smudged with paint. I move up to her face, and let my eyes follow the smooth line of her cheek down to the slight square of her jaw, and then up to her lips. She's still smiling.

"You have the face of an angel," I say.

Her smile broadens. I can see it in her shoulders, and in her hips. "Would you like to see god?" she says.

"Of course," I say. "And you?"

"Always."

"Look at me."

"I want to come home."

Allison says again, "Look at me."

"I'm scared."

She grasps my hand, places it in the middle of her chest. "Look. Feel. I'm right here."

I'm still dreaming, and my eyes are still open. I shake my head, stare at her eyes. My head clears for just a moment. I see the clearcut behind her, and know where I am. But then I begin to slide back into the dream. The forest rematerializes. I see it. I do not see the clearcut. I still see the inside of the truck. I still see Allison. But

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everything beyond has changed. Again I shake my head, stare at Allison. Again I return. Again I slide back into the dream.

I hear a voice—not Allison’s—say, “Don’t fight it.” But I do, shaking my head.

I take my hand from Allison’s chest, and slap my own face to wake up. No, that’s not true. I focus on my hand, will it to move itself from her chest, will it to recoil and strike. It complies, slowly at first, and then with force. I don’t wake up, and suddenly Allison is holding my hand between her own.

I hear the voice again, still not Allison’s. I don’t know whose it is or where it comes from. “Don’t fight it.”

I hear my voice say, “I’m slipping.”

I hear Allison’s voice, saying to no one I know, “Let’s get you to ground.” She squeezes a hand at the end of an arm I see coming from a shoulder at the edge of my vision, then lets go. She opens her door, walks around the front of the truck. I will my eyes to follow her. She opens my door, leans across to unfasten the seatbelt, grabs the keys, takes a hand I think is mine. I am watching this dream, this movie of a dream, as a left foot that looks like mine comes into view. It reaches for the ground. A right foot follows. I seem to stand. She shuts the door. She leads, and I see my feet take step after step following her.

“Here,” she says. “Sit down. Lean against this.” She lays her palm flat against the gray trunk of a big cedar.

She helps my body sit. I feel the texture of the bark through my shirt against my back. I stare straight ahead, away from the road, into the forest.

I am neither so stupid nor so arrogant as to believe that what we see is all there is, nor that the world is so simple as we insist on pretending.

To pretend, for example, that trees don’t want to heal; or to pretend trees don’t feel angry, scared, joyful, grateful; or to pretend salmon do not speak, or to pretend they do not feel all these things,

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is to be willfully unaware.

To pretend there are not places we do not see, unseen folds in the fabric of what we call reality, hideaways and homes into which plants and animals slip as surely and secretly as they slide into holes in ancient snags, to pretend there are not places these plants and animals go to get away from us, places they go anyway, places that are as much their homes as are the forests, rivers, mountains, deserts that we normally see, is to suspect them of living in only a tiny portion of their habitat. It is to confine ourselves to a tiny portion of our own habitat.

