

ear worm

Why cannot we earworms live in peace, instead of perpetually chasing one another out of our cozy burrows? Nothing matters to us as much as our warm resonant caves, and there are enough to go around, so why this compulsion to make others miserable by ruining their domiciles? I know from sad experience how this works.

Only last week I was settling down contentedly in a perfect spot. Pink, round, full of quirky echoes and the right amount of that malleable yellow stuff, enough to shift into good acoustic shapes but not so much that it blocked the sound. I warmed up a little and then sat down to a good repetitive tune. Just a few bars then looping back cleverly to the beginning so that I could dance round and round the cave, appreciating its perfect roundness. When I got really into my stride I could produce the tune, sometimes bellowing sometimes humming, for an uninterrupted half hour. There was a good chance that some beautiful homeless earmaid would pick up the vibe and join me. Then we could alternate and duet in the hope of baby earsprogs who would pass their infancy absorbing our tunes and eventually leave the nest to spread them to further caves. In she would come, I dreamed, attracted both by my singing and by the way it made the cave shake and twist, so together we would make eggs that

the shaking twisting cave would hatch. And my dream was coming true: the whole cave began to twist and shake as if it wanted to force me out. But this has happened before and I know how to resist it, so I just held on and continued to sing.

But my hopeful fantasies were not to be. I had got no further than the 20th repetition when a fat pink stick was inserted through the mouth of my cave, and riding it, between the soft part of the cylinder and its harder and dirtier solid ending, was a fresh-faced adolescent earworm already humming a hateful barely melodic tune. He came right up to me, so close that the tune enveloped me, and breathed it all over me. I had no choice but to crawl up to the mouth of the cave and look for somewhere else to live. As I was leaving I could feel the shaking subside. So at least I had the satisfaction of knowing that he was not producing the results we all aim at. At least not at first. A few hours later, when I had found another cave, not nearly as nice but not too far away. I saw the mouth of my earlier perfect cave begin to tremble again. And then I saw another enormous pink stick insert itself in the cave so that the interloper was himself outerloped by yet another young hummer, making him scramble out and look for another home. I bade my time — bade, bode, bided, woo, woo woowoo I can feel another tune coming on — and made my way back into the good old cave, forcing out the interloper's interloper.

This made me think. All three of us had been made unhappy. None of us would sing our best, perhaps for hours. And there are enough caves to go around, though this is a particularly nice one. So if we all agreed never to chase another earworm out of its cave, we would all be happier. But how to get this agreement? No earworm likes the presence of another earworm. They sing when you want to sing, and they always seem somehow, well, out of tune. You learn this when you are just a little vermiculino. So getting them all in one place would be a recipe for dissension and perhaps violence. I hummed out my thoughts to myself.

I could just stand outside and call them all to a meeting. But that would have the opposite effect. We hate one another's songs, so most of them would retreat to the recesses of their own caves, humming their own tunes. A few might come to my cave and try to force me out, if they thought it was better than theirs.

An earworm learns its tune originally from its mother. But it does change after that, when the mother is no longer around to keep it true. In particular, the tune picks up features from anything else the earworm hears, in spite of its efforts to block the mouth of its cave when rival melodies are around. We are not as pure as we like to think. This gave me my plan. I wrapped myself up for

a trip to the hostile outer world, put on a thick helmet for protection against anyone else's singing, and set forth.

I stood at the mouth of my cave and I bellowed. The Ode to Joy: all earworms will be brothers, and join in everyone's celebration. I added a few lines about proximity and goodwill not being needed for a social contract. I sang it out to its full length, and then repeated little two bar fragments until they were tunes in themselves. Slowly, it worked. The others came to the mouths of their caves and bellowed back at me, with their own personal tunes. I just kept singing, and gradually, one by one, parts of my song were incorporated into theirs. I kept at it, tugging my helmet firmly down so that the influence was all from me to them and not in the other direction. Eventually we were all in unison, or some sort of peculiar round at any rate. To test the result, I wiggled away from my cave, and watched carefully to see if anyone would try to steal it. No one did. I had succeeded: we could now hope for enough peace to perfect our songs.

A time of peace and creativity ensued. Our songs got longer and more complex. This seemed fine. Until a consequence that I still do not understand. The caves stopped rumbling and shaking and twisting when we sang. Our eggs would not hatch. It would be the end of the earworm race. So we all stopped

and went back to chasing one another out of our cozy cylindrical refuges with annoying circular songs.

Why should peace have this effect? Why are we in these caves anyway? Who are we singing for? What are these long pink logs? These are the words I hear now when I hum my short but endless tunes.