PART FOUR

THE PLACE OF THE ANIMAL
The [great auk’s] last stronghold was known as the Geirfulasker for the ‘geirfugl’ or great auks that nested there. This rocky stack off the Iceland coast was a fuming volcano. In 1830 the Geirfulasker, in a paroxysm of activity, sank beneath the waves. The few surviving birds had just one refuge left, the nearby island of Eldey. There, on 3 June 1844, a party of sailors landed, having been sent by a collector to check if any great auks remained. They spotted a pair, standing head and shoulders above the masses of smaller seabirds. Legend has it that the female was brooding an egg, a last hope for the future of the magnificent birds. The great auks made a desperate attempt to reach the safety of the water, but one was trapped between some rocks, while the other was seized just a few metres from the edge of the sea. Both were clubbed to death. The egg, it is believed, was crushed beneath a sailor’s boot. Some eighty skins and seventy-five eggs held in museum collections of the world are all that remain of the great auk today.

—Tim Flannery and Peter Schouten, *A Gap in Nature*

The last thylacine to walk the earth was a female kept in Beaumaris Zoo near Hobart. Personnel problems developed at the zoo during 1935–36, which meant that the animals were neglected during the winter. The thylacine was “left exposed both night and day in the open, wire-topped cage, with no access to its sheltered den.” September brought extreme and unseasonal weather to Hobart. Night-time temperatures dropped to below zero at the beginning of the month, while a little later they soared above 38 degrees celsius. On the night of 7 September the stress became too much for the last thylacine and, unattended by her keepers, she closed her eyes on the world for the last time.

—Tim Flannery and Peter Schouten, *A Gap in Nature*

Our current notions of extinction are shaped both by the knowledge that more than 99 percent of all known animal and plant species are now extinct, and that we are currently living in a time of mass extinction argued to have commenced with the spreading out of humans from the African continent 50,000 years ago (Leakey and Lewin 1996, 31). Since the end of the Ice Age, Europe and Asia have lost a third of their land animal species, North and South America have lost three-quarters