Prologue

When I visit remote places in the heart of Tasmania’s wilderness, I am impressed by the visual unity of the landscape and by its timeless and ethereal qualities. The earth, rocks, soil, roots, leaves, bones, dung, wind, sun and rain appear to be conscious of each other and their interactive roles seem to have been negotiated over a longer period of time than I can imagine. This ongoing state creates an impression of a landscape that is self-knowing, ordered, balanced and harmonious, nurturing and generative.

Recently, I spent a week bush-walking, surrounded by the natural arrangements of plants, waterways, hills and gullies. During my return journey back to town, I was taken aback by the sight of a long, well-kept hedge. The visual impression of the hedge, consisting of a single plant species, was a surprise and I was perplexed by my reaction. I had seen similar hedges in the past, and none had generated this kind of response. I wondered if the hedge would have appeared as remarkable had I not spent the previous week in the bush where my visual system had adapted to the arrangement of plants in the natural environment.

I tried to understand the reasons for my reaction to that hedge. In natural environments, monocultures are rare but they do exist. One difference between the hedge and the wilderness is the distribution of the plants. In natural environments, plants are randomly located; whereas the spaces between the plants in the hedge were regular intervals and the plants were in a straight and precise single file.

I was perplexed by my reaction to the hedge, particularly given my knowledge on the virtues of hedges; they can form effective barriers against noise and create walls of privacy and they denote an established and cultivated residence. Yet, despite this knowledge and my prior admiration of hedges, this hedge, seen after a week in the bush, created a visual shock.
During the next few weeks in the city, my visual system adapted to numerous instances of the straight, monotonous, blank, urban surfaces in the built environment. Indeed there are pleasing spaces, surfaces and forms in the urban environment, however, many walls of buildings and fences that border roads are unattractive, stark and at times oppressive. As time passed, I realised that I was becoming more accustomed to the repetitive, and often harsh, surfaces in the built environment. I imagined that the sight of the hedge would be less confronting following the readjustment of my visual system to the sights of the city. Nevertheless, and despite my readjustment, I did not feel any pleasure in discovering that my surroundings were less obtrusive. Instead I felt an oppressive sense of disquiet.

I wondered whether my lived experience has been impoverished by being continually surrounded by constructed spaces, in contrast to the diversity and harmony of natural spaces. I wondered if people create living spaces that privilege financial concerns, expediency, or tradition over a recognition of the value of the diversity and harmony apparent in the natural environment.

I also considered what else I had not attended to in the natural environment and how this inattention might result in a more impoverished existence. I recognised that plants and animals are being lost due to extinction and that this reduces the diversity and the harmony that I admired in the wilderness. The extinction of life forms eliminates the potential for relationships between plants, animals, the landscape and people and it points to a future which could be as barren and unpleasant as my experience of the hedge.

As a person living in this developed country, I consider that the land use practices, and the desire for economic gain, are generally privileged over concern for the ecosystem. In what seems to be a human haste for wealth and an affluent lifestyle, there has, I feel, been a disregard for the consequences of neglect of the environment. People have, in my view, unintentionally reduced the level of natural diversity, creating what I judge to be a lesser place and a more barren future. This disturbs me.