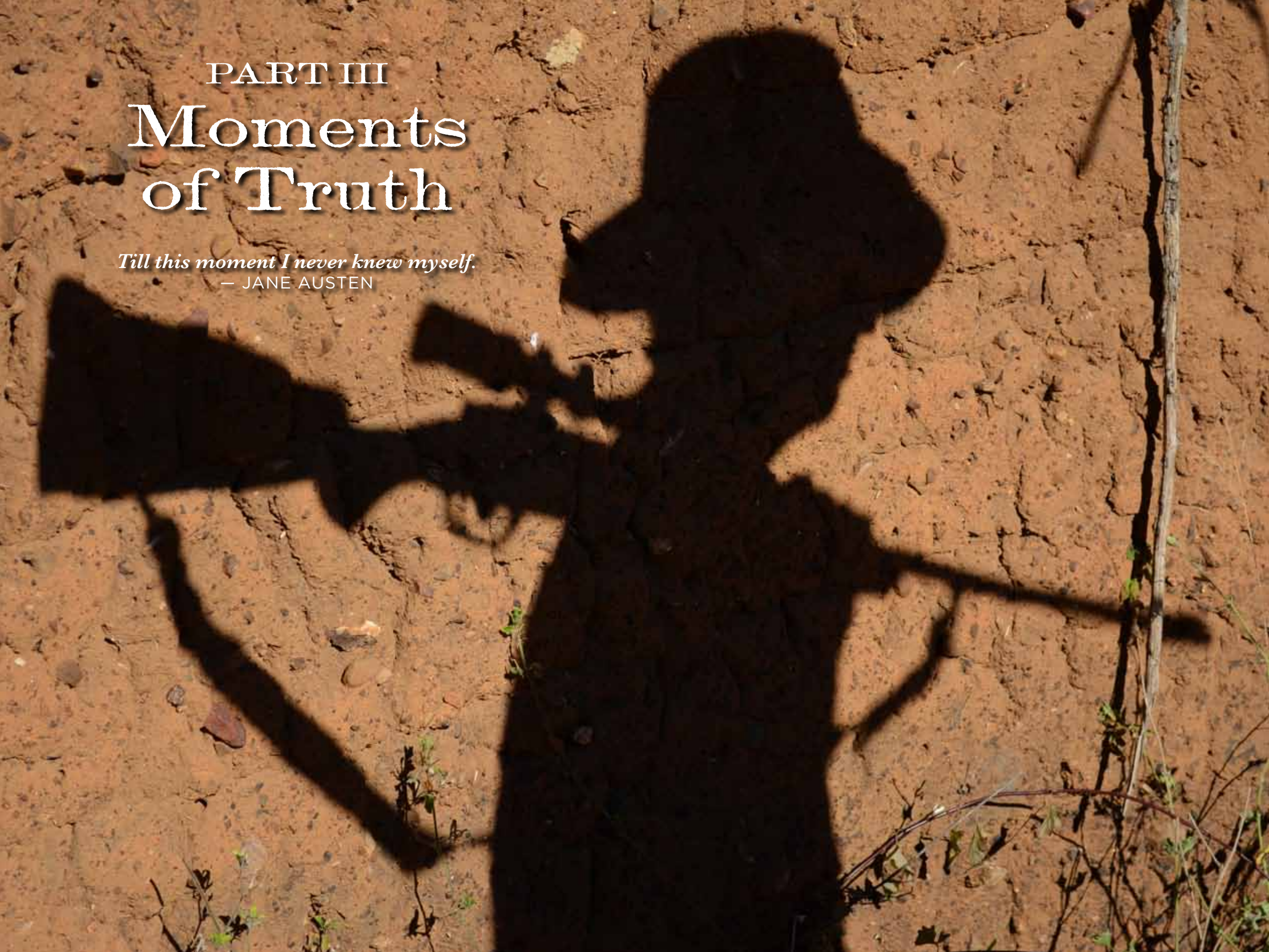


PART III
Moments
of Truth

Till this moment I never knew myself.
— JANE AUSTEN



Judgement Day

A joint effort with my old mate Roger Pinckney, originally written for Gray's Sporting Journal.

Roger Pinckney

Daufuskie Island, South Carolina, October 5, 2016

We knew there was trouble when the tide did not go out, when the redfish made a big run at the spartina flats, when they boiled and tailed and splashed and the evening sun caught the splashes in mid-air and turned them to gold. Way out here, a sore thumb against the sea, we knew there was trouble when mallards pitched into salt water on a rising wind. We could smell it, too, an unseasonably cool breeze, some strange electric crinkling at the end of your nose. If you came up around here you'd know what I mean. Don't matter what the TV says. They said it would miss us, but we knew it wouldn't.

The storm blew ashore about midnight and it got flat biblical. A great howling in the heavens, a heaving of the sea and a thundering in the firmament, the crash of falling trees, laid like jackstraws upon one another, wrapped in a hateful snarl of power lines. The surge turned the docks to kindling, sank boats and blew others way up into the pinewoods, wedged so tight amongst the trees Archimedes himself couldn't get them loose.

We never saw any of it, but we heard it all as we lay trembling, quilts over our faces to save our eyes from shattering glass. I'd gathered all the shotguns, the lovely little Parker 20, the Sterlingworth Fox duck gun, the Ithaca, the L. C. Smith, all four of them, doped them heavy with WD-40, ran a rope through the trigger guards, tied them to a crab pot float, so they might be easier to find in the debris field. Utterly terrified, we imagined what we could not see. It's a damn shame to waste a perfectly good hurricane on the dark.

The governor told us to go, and from Hilton Head to Myrtle Beach a half-million lit out for higher ground with predictable pandemonium, no fuel, no food, no room at the inn, random gunfights when rival crack-head street gangs found themselves in the same no-tell crossroad motel. But here

on Daufuskie we were like trees planted by the water. We would not be moved. They called us the Daufuskie One Hundred. The papers picked up the chatter and ran stories: 'Island Residents Defy the Governor', 'Daufuskie Residents Say Send Liquor and Rolling Papers'.

The governor was not amused. The cops went door-to-door, inquiring as to our next-of-kin. When that had little effect, she called a special news conference and addressed us directly. 'You are all going to die. Your island will be covered by 8 feet of water.' She ordered up one last ferry run, mobilised the guard to fly us out in helicopters. But she must have known that would not work, either. The ferry held only 40 and by then it was blowing too hard for the choppers to fly.

The roar, the howl and heave were replaced by the clatter of generators and the whine of chainsaws. In two days, the roads were cleared and we counted noses. Five houses lost to the surge, one to a pole-axe pine that hit the roof peak and did not stop until it hit the footings. Flesh and blood survived, and the only injury was to a mixed-breed coon hound with a sprained leg. Not counting Raya, who evacuated to Atlanta and broke her arm at a roller-rink.

I untied the shotguns and put them back on the rack. I emailed a full report to the governor, but she did not respond. Not yet, anyway.

I was safe, my family was safe, the 90-pound yellow duck dog stretched full-length between us in the bed during the whole ordeal was safe. I stroked his soft ears through the worst of it, ran my thumbs between the pads of his great web-footed paws, bless him. His service that night was far greater than any birds ever brought to hand.

But oh the woods, my beloved swamp-ground hardwood timber, my church, my Nôtre Dame of vaulting green, 500 acres, the magnolia, hickory, sweet gum and soft maple, the lovely bell-bottomed water trees, 100, 150 years old, blasted, tipped, twisted, ruined, gone. Oh, my heart!

I have a friend, a man I speak with sometimes daily, Pete Ryan of New Zealand, on the absolute opposite side of the world. I call him 'Matey' and he calls me 'Captain', 'Cap' for short. We collaborate and commiserate, and when I shared my grief, he said, 'Don't worry, Cap, it always comes back.'

I did not believe him at first.



Pete Ryan**Christchurch, New Zealand, 12.51pm, February 22, 2011**

‘The afternoon knows what the morning never suspected’ said Robert Frost, and he was right, damn it. These things always start in the mundane; in this case, waiting in a barber shop reading a newspaper. With a flood or a drought or maybe even a fire you get some notice, a few seconds — just enough to do your sums and cut a deal with whatever powers you might believe in. Not this time.

With a sudden jolt the room began to pitch violently from side to side. Along the street glass shattered as buildings heaved and buckled. The women who ran the shop huddled beneath me and another customer. There was no sound but the roar of buildings above and sobs below. It lasted just half a minute.

Whole office buildings had tramped in the ground, some settling on the upward stroke, marks around their foundations like a tide line. None of us knew then that in the handful of streets around us more than a hundred people were already dead or dying, and that in those few short moments Christchurch, the biggest city on New Zealand’s South Island, had changed forever.

Sirens and alarms wailed across the landscape, the shrill, pulsing voice of modern apocalypse. Most faces were dazed, and many were in tears. A dust cloud a dozen storeys high drifted by, the ghost of a building walking in broad daylight.

For a while many around the country stepped outside the plane of everyday life. Older-generation Brits compared it to the spirit of the Blitz. Maybe everyone should see this alchemy just once in their lives. Maybe.

You can guess the rest. Sorrow, confusion, politics. Prince William came and told us that ‘grief is the price we pay for love’, and no matter what my mad Irish cousins might mutter over a whiskey, he’s a man qualified to say that. By the time the long aftershock sequence settled down, locals could rightly claim to know what 10,000 earthquakes feel like. The pundits got it as wrong: there was no population flight, only a small percentage left, now back and more. Ask me why and all I can tell you is that love of country is strong stuff.

For months the inner city was locked up behind a military cordon. Those of us with access saw things up close: broken buildings and buses bulldozed to the curb, silent and empty. Still-life images at every turn — *CLEAR* hastily spray-painted on flattened cars, a wine glass still sitting on a coffee-shop table, a set of dusty bifocals abandoned on a newspaper. In the east, out by the sea, whole suburbs would be demolished, thousands of homes vanished from the face of the Earth.



It began without anybody realising what was happening. Dormant seeds sent up shoots, reaching through overgrown lawns for the sun. Wildflowers flung themselves across rubble, pigeons nested in upper-storey floors. Rabbits were seen on one of the busiest downtown streets. Big brown trout reappeared in the Avon River, flowing through the middle of the inner city. In some places the ground level had dropped by a foot and a half, turning low land into true swamp. After that first spring, geese and ducks hauled themselves out of the water to sun on what had been driveways the year before, began nesting in a wilderness that had been yards. Life after people.

We’re fools to believe that we command the natural world — it simply waits like a patient grandparent for us to finish our babbling, then tells us how things must be. But with destruction comes the certainty of renewal, and that knowledge is our sea-wall against sorrow. In it lies our freedom and redemption.

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Downtown is almost rebuilt now, and suburbs have sprung up elsewhere. But the vast, empty zone left by the earthquakes can be seen from satellite photos. It may go down as the first wetland to be created in the heart of a metropolitan city, for sure it is the only one built in half a minute. Bitterns — the bird known to Māori as matuku, and the origin of the streamer flies known as matuka — stalk the reeds for the first time in years. A little blue penguin, smallest species in the clan, came in from the sea to feed.

It’s coming back. There is no violence great enough to stop it.



A few years later there was another quake, this time further north. A 7.8 at Kaikōura, enough to tear vast pieces off mountains, create new lakes and lift the sea floor out of the ocean to the height of a man. Forty-dollar crayfish died among suddenly sun-blasted kelp and abalone. Hills appeared on creek flats, the bottom fell out of ravines that had never existed before — all this in

two minutes. No man is ever quite the same once he is disabused of the most certain fact of his life, that the Earth beneath his feet is immovable and eternal.

Civil Defence took me north again. I asked a farmer what he thought of his new-look property, and he just smiled. 'Mate, all these hills, all these rivers, that's the reason they're here. It's done this a thousand times before. It'll bounce back.' Up in the high country, beyond the farmhouse, the first red deer calves of spring had just dropped, heedless of the NH-90 choppers running relays high overhead, and the stags were growing velvet. In a few months they will roar their ancient challenges across those quake-torn valleys as though nothing had ever happened.



Roger Pinckney
Daufuskie Island, South Carolina, October 2016

Fifteen inches of rain on the island in 15 hours, standing water everywhere and more skeeters than anybody ever remembers. We don't have malaria anymore, but we have West Nile, sleeping sickness and maybe Zika. Don't matter, the Feds won't let the skeeter-plane fly when the eagles are nesting, and they were. Or they were trying to after the blow.

The spray truck did the best it could until the chemicals ran out and there were no more to be had. The deer feasted three days on the tender blow-down branches and the hailstorm of windfall acorns, and then the skeeters drove them from the woods out into the salt marsh.

Island deer, they run in mud thick as Grandma's chocolate pudding, they swim tidal washes hard enough to throw a wake. I first saw them easing out into the salt meadow on the falling water, before the rut, two spikes and a forkhorn in tight company. I reached for the glasses as they faded into tall cane — and what's this? A doe and half-grown twins. I kept the glasses moving, a dozen deer in all, taking their bug-free ease in the amber afternoon.

And then a flock of ibis pitched in among them, wheeling overhead and coming in against the wind like the opening scene in some Russian angel ballet. The rifle was a fine one and close to hand. I knew the range and there was a post to steady it on. The freezer was empty and my tag was good. But I let the rifle lay. Some things are just too sacred to disturb.

Pete was right. It's coming back.



The Borrowed Gun

IN THE HEART OF NEW ZEALAND'S MOUNTAINS lies a deep valley hung with beech and the occasional wilding pine. Close by some dark timber stands a small hut. It's busy during the brief autumn muster, but for most of the year is held in silence. Just a few metres away a stream rushes as clear as air over clean stone. That water has tumbled its way down from the high peaks; it is soft and cold and sweet. If you stand still for a moment there is no sound but the little river whispering to itself..