**Hunting Your Own Dinner**

By Bill Heavey

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As the buck rises from its bed in the underbrush 40 yards away, every cell in my body decides to attempt a jailbreak. I’m in my hunting stand, 24 feet up a tulip poplar, where I’ve been concealed for four hours waiting for a deer to pass. And this one has been right in front of me the whole time. I would like to come to my feet, but my legs are shaking too hard. This is my third autumn spent trying to kill a deer with a bow and arrow, and this is the closest I’ve come. At 40 yards, I see the nap of its hair lying in one direction along its back, the opposite along its shoulder. The buck, a five-pointer, standing now, drops its antlered head almost to the ground and stretches its entire body. And then it freezes. It becomes a lawn statue. A minute later, when it reanimates and ambles out of sight, I’m devastated**. But in hunting, you don’t move without a good reason, and a broken heart doesn’t qualify.**

What I love about hunting, despite my lack of success, is “how it makes everything matter in a way it didn’t before.” Wind — to which I was indifferent — becomes a matter of life and death. A deer downwind of you will scent you — “bust you” is the hunter’s term — and be gone before you ever see it. Conversely, if the deer is upwind, you’re still in business. Unless, of course, the wind shifts.

Likewise, every sound matters. The woods are a spider web, and you enter as a fly hitting that web. The animals — seen and unseen — register and alert one another to your arrival. All you can do is sit quiet and still. Do this, and within 15 or 20 minutes the woods will absorb you. Sit still enough and a goldfinch, mistaking you for a tree, will light on your chest, fluff itself for a few seconds and fly off.

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Sitting motionless but present, alert to the wind on your skin and the intermittent patter of acorns falling, you may hear a sudden uptick in chatter among the birds and squirrels. Another fly has hit the web. Now you are among the animals alerted. It could be anything, including a deer.

You enter a state of relaxed but heightened awareness, a kind of active meditation. But entry into this world comes at a price. You have to be hunting — I do, anyway.

My legs, although still shaking hard, are once again taking requests from my brain. I stand and take my bow in hand. Fifteen minutes later, I hear footfalls in the leaves behind me. A doe walks calmly right beneath my stand. Right under the doe’s raised tail is a buck, following its nose.

The doe makes a wide circle, the buck dogging her every step. They are all of eight yards away. I draw and aim, noting the burrs in the buck’s coat just below where I want my arrow to go. I release the arrow. The doe shudders reflexively at the sound but doesn’t alter stride. The buck, his nose still right under her tail, shows no reaction. They exit stage left. I can’t have missed. It’s impossible. But there’s no other explanation.

It’s growing dark by the time I lower my bow on a rope and quietly climb down. I find my arrow sticking out of the dirt at precisely the angle I shot, as if having penetrated nothing more solid than air. But when I pull it, I find that the shaft is slick with blood. A few feet away there is a dark medallion of blood in the leaves. Then another. Then, 15 yards from where I shot it, the downed buck. My arrow passed right through him. He never even knew he’d been shot. It’s as clean a kill as you can hope to make.

I start to cry out, “Yes!” but my voice instantly sounds wrong here, a transgression, and I swallow the word before it escapes my lips. I had wondered and worried how it would feel to kill an animal, and now I know. It feels — in both the modern and archaic senses — awesome. I’m flooded, overwhelmed, seized by interlocking feelings of euphoria and contrition, pride and humility, reverence and, yes, fear. The act of killing an innocent being feels — and will always feel — neither wholly wrong nor wholly right. I stroke the buck’s flank. I apologize for taking its life. I murmur, “Thank you.”

That night I broil the buck’s tenderloin. It’s fantastic, wild rather than gamy. What ran in the woods now sits on my plate, without the benefit of an inspector’s stamp or the supermarket’s sanctifying fluorescence. What I’ve done feels subversive, almost illicit. I have stolen food. And it is good.