

The Boar Hunter

by Travis Lau

It takes a certain kind of man to kill another animal, to look into its eyes, without attachment, and with the slightest movement of a finger to watch it bleed to death in front of you. The thing is, you never really know how you're going to feel until that moment before the kill, when the adrenaline courses through your veins, your heart beating fast, breath and time slowing. This is what I prepared myself for as I ventured from the comfort of Orange County suburbia, along the Golden State Freeway, through the industrial reaches of Los Angeles, and up into the gritty landscape of California's elbow. Was I that kind of man? It took mental preparation, hours of practice, the right guide, and a weekend in March hunting wild California boar to find out.

It's late, nearly 11 p.m., and we're a little over halfway through our 270-mile journey up to our hunting grounds, a private 9,000-acre ranch in the middle of California. At this hour, the highway is nearly empty, save the occasional beam of headlights whizzing past, cutting through the darkness, and illuminating the vast nothingness around us. In the driver's seat is Brock Hill, my friend, and now my guide. At only five-foot-six, he is unhesitant in his command of the beast of a truck we are in, a lifted GMC Yukon with mud tires bearing treads so deep you could stick half your finger in them. The exhaust produces the guzzling sound of an M-1 Abrams. If a regular car hums, then this one most certainly roars. It's the only real sign of life for miles. On the dashboard lies a neatly folded American flag fastened with masking tape, an outward symbol of Brock's perception of himself as the quintessential American: a patriot, a soon-to-be Marine, the president of the College Republicans, an NRA member (confirmed by a sticker on the back windshield), a fraternity gentleman (another sticker), a fan of the metal band Slayer (yes, another sticker), and, of course, a hunter. There is no sticker for that.

As the night wears on and the road becomes emptier, we know we are getting closer to the ranch, which is situated somewhere between King City and Coalinga. It is encased in mountain ranges and filled with ridges, giving it weather patterns that are unique to this region. We exit and head west. Fifteen miles ahead is Harris Ranch, one of the largest slaughterhouses in the state, a place that bears the distinct and isolated smell of raw manure that those familiar with Highway 5 know well. It's the place where you close your vents, roll up your windows, and hold your breath as you pass by hundreds and possibly thousands of cows and their dung, festering in the sun. But we don't get this far, and we don't smell anything, not this trip.

At this point the road becomes empty. There are no streetlights. The only light comes from the blaring beams of our truck. Around us is nothing but a grid of barren fields and eerie roads. We charge on for a little bit, through a small town, and finally wind up surrounded by a string of oilfields, populated by an army of derricks, and still more emptiness. Brock cruises through as if it were a matter of habit. The route has been programmed in his memory by weekend trips and summers spent at the ranch as a boy. To a stranger, however, the dark vastness of the land is intimidating and disquieting. It

takes a concerted effort to remember that we are still in California because, by the looks alone, we could easily be in the back country of Texas or Oklahoma.

Our trudge through the monotonous land ends abruptly as we reach a small, narrow road at the northeast corner of the grid. It's called Old Coalinga Road, and it barely looks drivable. Up to this point the terrain has been rather flat, but standing right before us is the entrance to a steep mountain pass. As we head upward, leaving the last remnants of familiarity behind, I am now completely out of my element.

We make our way through miles of uphill road, following the twists and turns of a large creek that flows with the mountains. Blanketed by thick tree lines on each side of us, we slow down only to take on the deep trenches and dips in our path where the creek and road intersect, an improvised culvert for heavy rains. With the wrong weather, the water level makes it almost impossible to get through these points in the road. I find it hard to believe that anything less than a truck could make it up. "My little sister always pukes right here," Brock blurts out as he mashes the gas.

We arrive at the gate, a large and impressive mix of cemented river rock and metal. Above it, flanked by two American flags on each side, is a sign for "Rancho La Cuesta," which Brock tells me is slang for, "Ranch of the Hills," a double entendre combining his family name and an apt description of the terrain.

Past the gate, and now on his property, we make our way further uphill to the ranch house itself, a sentinel structure that sits about a mile ahead on a high peak overlooking part of the territory. We climb 1,200 feet up to the top and from it, in the daytime, you can see below the runway that Brock and his father built years ago to accommodate their small fleet of single-engine planes that they occasionally use to travel to and from their home in Northern California. This is the place where Brock, as a boy, watched his father--an ex-stunt pilot--take off and land, the place where he first decided he wanted to fly for the Marines. As he tells me this he motions to the darkness with a hand full of blisters and scars, souvenirs from long, grueling summers spent at marine officer boot camp.

When we finally get to the top, I realize that the ranch house that I saw from a mile away, and the place where we will sleep for the next few hours, is a prefabricated mobile home. Although from the outside the tan-and-brown structure doesn't look like much, once you get inside you can easily notice the years of work spent fixing it up into something quite nice and relaxing, something with character.

We quickly put our things down and after Brock gives me a tour, we wind up in the family room where there are three large gun safes. Of the three safes, he picks the green one and pulls out a Remington 7-millimeter mag, wood stock, bolt-action rifle for me, and a Remington .243 for himself. He won't show me what's in the other safes. "You don't want to know what's inside those," he says. "It's better that way."

It's now close to 1 a.m. and we place our guns by the door, as we try to get in a few hours of sleep before waking up at 4 to beat sunrise. Tonight's only been part of the journey; tomorrow morning we are going for boar.

The wild boar, or hog, is known by various names, but in California it is officially termed the “feral pig.” Wild boars are not native to the state. The modern-day California wild boar is a descendant of the better-known domestic swine that was brought here during the Homestead era by settling farmers. Over time they were allowed to roam freely throughout the land and eventually established their own breeding patterns in the wild. Generations of living under these conditions made for a long evolution into the animals we know today, which look much longer and rangier than regular farm-raised pigs, and have elongated, straightened snouts, larger shoulders, and straighter ears and tails. The boar is one ugly animal. It looks like a big snout with four legs jutting out from it. Its black hair, originally used in older times for toothbrush bristles, is coarse and uncomfortable to the touch. A mature boar, usually between 5 and 10 years old, has long, jagged tusks stemming from its mouth and up through the sides of its snout. It’s a mean animal that will defend itself aggressively if provoked, which means that if you’re going to try to kill one, you better make sure that you succeed. Chasing an angry, wounded boar into the brush comes with damaging consequences.

At 4 a.m. on the ranch the sun has not yet risen. It’s freezing outside and the ground, thick and unusually resilient to the cold, is still a little muddy from the rain a few weeks back, clinging to our boots and squishing under our steps. We scramble to gear up and head out under the cover of darkness to make it into the field before “shooting light.” Hunting is illegal before dawn and after dusk because that is when most animals are out roaming. Violation of this offense is considered poaching. Our goal, however, is to “spotlight” a good group of boar, stalk them, and be ready to shoot by sunrise, or at least that’s how my hunt is supposed to go. We grab our guns and head for five large steel sheds that are equipped with everything we’ll need for our expedition. While Brock gasses up our World War II-looking Jeep, I fumble to put on the full camouflage jumpsuit that he’s tossed at my feet. The material is rough and stained with the blood and dirt of previous hunts. As I zip myself up, I think about the purpose of the camouflage. It’s like spots to a cheetah or stripes to a tiger; the goal is still the same, to make it easier for me to kill my prey. I look at myself and realize that I arrived here only hours ago, a city boy wearing expensive jeans and bearing no real idea of what this was going to feel like.

When ready, we charge down the hill and onto the field that contains the airstrip below the house. We do this because Brock thinks that this is where we are most likely to spot boar loitering around the small pond at the end of the runway. Also, in years past, this is where Brock and his father have planted barley, a food source irresistible to boar and elk, in order to draw them out from the shrubbery where they conceal themselves.

During the warmer seasons, boar tend to gather mostly in thick, treacherous brush, keeping cool in the shade and out of the open. It’s still winter though so we might be able to catch a break because the cool weather draws them out longer than normal. Regardless of the weather, the mature, full-bodied boar with large tusks is the rarest and most difficult to hunt, because with age they become more nocturnal and stay virtually invisible in the daytime. These are the trophy boars that seasoned hunters actively seek out as a testament to their skill and savvy. The downside, though, is that the larger boar’s

meat is sinewy and hard to eat, which is why they are often given the name “sausage pigs.” The smaller and younger boar, however, are less cautious when moving about and often make mistakes, weaving in and out of the brush, allowing windows of opportunity to be caught with a hunter’s scope. This meat is more tender and tastier, too, so pigs of this size are said to be “eating-size pigs.” Brock tells me that this is the kind of boar we are hear for. No trophies.

About an hour and a half later, and by now nearly seven miles away from the ranch house, we park ourselves in a small field dotted with cows and large clusters of willow trees. The early hour and time spent “glassing,” or searching with binoculars, fields upon fields of tall green grass and waves of thick oak trees has given way to boredom. There’s still no boar in sight. Spotting dozens of squirrels criss-crossing the field in front of us, Brock, with a crooked smile, suggests that I make my first kill. I should see how it feels, tame my emotions, and prepare for inevitability killing something much larger. I raise my rifle for the first time today. Each time I get a squirrel in my sights, I remember the practice that I had one afternoon in a small industrial-looking shooting range in Orange County. But that was only paper targets. Breathe slow, clear my thoughts, pull softly, and don’t rush. That’s all I have to do. With each squeeze of my finger the squirrels explode into an unrecognizable pile of blood, guts, and hair.

The sun has started to come up as we continue slaughtering squirrel after squirrel, to the point where it has become more recreational than educational. I find it to be rather twisted but still slightly fascinating—thrilling, mesmerizing—at the same time. I remedy whatever guilt I have with the fact that these, I was told, were ground squirrels that if left to populate to heavily, they would eventually burrow in and collapse the dams that regulate the water level of the lake in the middle of the property. My fascination was short lived, though, and soon became too much for my conscience (and my stomach) to bear when I realized that the bloody landscape in front of us looked less like hunting and more like the aftermath of one of Quentin Tarantino’s gratuitous gore scenes.

At this point we decided that we’ve had enough and head further north up to Buck’s peak. At 4,200 feet, it is the highest point on the ranch, and on a clear day, you could easily see all the way to the Sierras on one side and all the way out to the ocean from the other. It’s as if someone had crumpled up a piece of paper and then opened it back up again.

Brock takes me to his favorite place. We descend to another set of mountain ridges called “Brock’s Bowl,” named by his father because of the formation of the landscape. We take one of the ridges back, heading toward the house again, determined that the day not end until there is a freezer full of meat.

We are making the drive down Perimeter Road though another field dusted with oak trees and more grass, when Brock finally spots them on one of the hillsides. In the distance over one of the ridges we can faintly see a small group of black dots nestled in some heavy brush about 250 yards away from where we are positioned. The Jeep comes to an abrupt halt as Brock pulls us over and shuts down the engine. The sun is now at its peak

and we grab our binoculars and weapons and begin walking along the tree lines toward the direction of our targets.

We do more glassing and collapse into a slow crouch.

We are able to get within about 100 yards from where they are and glass one more time before raising our rifles to make the kill. What are we looking for is one with testicles, Brock tells me. The females are called “sows” and its just plain immoral to shoot something that’s going to ensure repopulation. A male, though, they can do without. It takes a few minutes to scan the group of five to ten boar gathered around another thickly spotted area of brush. By now we are completely on our bellies as we both peer through our binoculars in complete silence, examining each one that we see. They weave in and out, turning in different directions, completely oblivious to our presence. Once we spot the one we want, a healthy-looking younger boar, about three-and-a-half feet long, and close to 150 pounds (perfect “eating size”), we wait for it to turn sideways so that it maximizes the surface area of the head, which is where we want to shoot it. Shooting it in the head avoids internal bleeding into the good meat, which would render it unusable.

Still on the ground, I draw the rifle in front of me and kick out the bipod, two metal legs that support the barrel, and rest the stock comfortably against my shoulder. The weight of the gun feels good in my hands. The smoky-colored metal is cool and worn from years of use. I grip the bolt with my right hand to push the bullet into the chamber and lock it down in place. Brock readies his rifle, too, just in case I miss the shot and the boar needs to be put down before it can run away, which would force us to chase after it. We keep waiting patiently for it to turn, hoping that it doesn’t go back into the brush. I slow my breath and can feel my heart beating as my finger stays ready on the trigger.

As I wait, I think about what is about to happen. Am I ready? Can I kill this creature? On the one hand, I feel the same excitement and fascination that I initially had when shooting the squirrels, but with more intensity. Not only is this a much larger beast, its what I’ve been waiting for. On the other hand, I feel saddened that it is about to die, to know that in the next few seconds, that something was once alive, that was free and wild, will die because of me. By this time my body is full of adrenaline, which gives me the anxiety that I imagine a cliff diver must feel right before taking the plunge. I vacillate between the two feelings and realize what I already knew: It’s too late to turn back. This is my mission. This is my hunt.

And then it turns.

With the slightest squeeze of my index finger, I pull the trigger back a fraction of an inch. The weight of the gun is thrown into my shoulder by the blast, which resounds throughout the valley. The hot bullet casing falls to the ground next to me. In an instant, the beast falls, too. I continue to breathe, slow and deep, as a feeling of relief comes over me. Hours of practice, a long journey through the night, and almost a full day of searching through acres of open land have led to this one moment. I feel the sadness

from only minutes ago slowly disappear, replaced by an overwhelming sense of accomplishment. I think to myself, "So this is why they do it."

As we rush over, the rest of herd, frightened by the sound of the shot, scatter away. We come up to our boar and see the wound steaming as the warmth of the flesh meets with the cold air.

Killing it turns out to be the easiest part of the hunt. Now it's time to gut it. Brock throws me the knife and repeats to me what he told me the night before, "It's the hunter's code: you kill it, you gut it." He instructs me as I insert the tip of the knife right below the genital region and creates a seam from one end to the other, exposing a mess of blood and flesh. Next, I force myself to reach inside with both hands and pull out what seems to be a big bag containing all the organs and entrails. It's warm and gooey. As I sit there taking this pig apart, divorcing its vital organs from its lifeless body, I'm reminded of my high school biology class, where we spent a week dissecting a fetal pig. Barely the size of a loaf of bread, eyes closed, cold to the touch, smelling of formaldehyde, and never having had breath in its life, the fetus allowed me to stay detached. But the dead beast in front of me is different. I can't help but feel a little sorry for it.

Brock goes to fetch the Jeep as I continue extracting whatever's left inside, piling it all into a mound that we will leave for the coyotes to feed on later tonight. When Brock returns, the boar, now lighter, is heaved into the backseat, still dripping blood everywhere as we hurry to drive back to the house.

Not too many things in life make me queasy, but skinning an animal that was alive only an hour before is one of them. The boar, now a little colder, is fastened to two metal clamps through slits made at the "heel" of its hind legs, and is hoisted up in the air over a tall oak tree in front of the house. We begin, each taking a side, and remove the skin with a knife, making small incisions that separate it from the flesh, as we pull, and pull some more. By the time all the skin is off the body of the carcass, it flaps over the neck of the boar looking like a woman's red dress, hiding the head beneath it. The final step is to remove the head from the body, which in turn will take the skin with it.

I can't do it. I think about all I've done today, slaughtering the squirrels, shooting the boar in the head, cutting it open, removing all the organs with my bare hands. And now, with the final step, removing the head from the bloody mess hanging in front of me, I think I've had enough. This is not what I signed up for.

Brock laughs as he reaches underneath the flap of skin around the head and pulls out the windpipe with his hands so that it doesn't contaminate the good meat. With a knife and a few vigorous twists, the severed head of the boar comes loose and falls to the ground. What remains other than the outline of the legs is an unrecognizable mass of red and white. Brock takes the head and tosses it over the fence, providing another meal for the animals that will devour it in the night. With the carcass no longer bleeding, we hose it down and place a white, cotton bag over it, ready to be sent to the butcher whose job is to continue the process of turning an animal into meat.

It'll take weeks and a couple hundred dollars for the butcher to turn our carcass into something palatable. As a substitute, I'm reduced to a few frozen sausages, remnants of a boar hunted a month ago, that Brock has broken out of the freezer. It's a disappointing reality, but it's all I have to work with. It may not be my boar, but boar meat is boar meat.

We get a fire going on a shabby grill in front of the house, and pile on the sausages as the body of the boar from today's hunt, still in its white bag, hangs in the background. We crack open a few beers, put our feet up, and finally relax. I mull over the day's events in my head and take myself through our journey once again, from spotting my prey in the distance to hoisting it up on that tree. Cleaned up and out of my camouflage jumpsuit, I still don't feel the return yet to the city boy that I came here as. I've just killed an animal, and now, indirectly, I'm going to eat it.

By this time the smell of our meal has permeated the air and our sausages are now seared and plump. Without hesitation, I dive into one with my knife and fork as it erupts with a surge of juice and bits of melted provolone cheese. The taste, salty and not unlike a pork chop, is elemental. I savor each bite with a warrior-like feeling of conquest, enjoying the fruits of my accomplishment. As I'm eating, I have to remind myself that what I am chewing at this moment is what's hanging on that tree beside me. I am not eating just a sausage, as I may have only considered it to be in the past, but an animal.

There's something rather savage and reductive about it. It's a visceral thing to kill another creature, watch it die, and then eat its body. Most people never consider this when they grill on their George Foreman.

And with that, I wipe my mouth and go for another bite.

Reprinted from *KIOSK* Fall 2007
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