Diamond Dealer Tom Shane • Tempting Holiday Treats

# WEST

## WHY
### DO PEOPLE SHOOT DEER?

# THE Deer HUNTER

## Confessions of a love-hate relationship.

***When I was younger I hunted and killed many living things. I remember all of them. I especially remember the deer.***

***The hunting of animals is an emotional subject, and that's particularly true of deer—a creature not exceptionally difficult to hunt, but in a way so hard to kill. It is the embodiment of grace and loveliness; the most mortifying target and the most exhilarating; strong and fast beyond any human, but utterly vulnerable.***

***Maybe you're not particularly offended by the act of deer-hunting. But if you are, step back if you can, and slide open that partition of dislike. I just ask you to consider this story, this confession—and to look inward, to see if the hunter in me is also hidden in some deep part of you.***

**AS A BOY IN MONTANA,** with the rifle a comfort and burden in my hands, and the killed thing before me, my face probably didn't reveal much. But the mix of emotions accompanying the killing was powerful, immensely so, like 150 grains of gunpowder jammed into a brass casing the size of your little finger. It always felt like too much—certainly far too much to sort out the *why*.

But there were two distinctly recognizable elements . . . two spices, let's say, that managed to flavor every emotion.

One was that I hated it.

The other, that I very much liked it.

When I graduated from high school, I moved away from Montana, which is famous for its bountiful hunting, and in the process I left the family and friends to whose lives hunting was integral. I stopped hunting. As time passed, my affection for animals grew, my attitude toward them became increasingly anthropomorphic, and my associations with hunting less and less pleasant.

But I never forgot that feeling, that quickening of the sense and spirit that comes with deadly pursuit, that . . . pleasure. The climax of the hunt always reminded me of a bird dog's *point*—it's a moment of intense, frozen clarity. At the immediate prospect of prey, said the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, "the hunter's soul leaps out, spreads over the hunting ground like a net, anchored here and there with the fingernails of his attention."

I've long wanted to confront this hunter's soul—to finally reach into the memories and subconscious and yank it into the open to examine it. Maybe this would tell me if I could go on abiding it.

So this fall I decided to go hunting again. Of course, that was only half a decision. I asked myself what I would do if I actually was faced with the prospect of a kill after all this time, after all these changes. For that, I didn't have an answer.

**AS IN ALL HUNTING SOCIETIES, THE MODERN HUNTER HAS RITUALS TO PERFORM.** Equipment must be gathered, maps examined, food bought and packed, vehicle prepared, and rifle . . . most important of all, the rifle. It must be reintroduced to one's self, the strangeness of it overcome like that of a once-intimate person who's been long absent. It must be hefted, studied, its mechanism worked. It must be oiled, cleaned, then "sighted in"—tested to assure that its scope or open sights are properly adjusted so that the target is struck exactly where the shooter intends.

An acquaintance at work lent me his rifle for this trip. As a teen I had usually hunted with an open-sighted .30-06, which in the arcane, blunt parlance of hunters has a lot of "stopping power." What I ended up with this time, though, was smaller, a Savage .243. It was a lovely thing, actually—the relatively simple dynamic of trigger to firing pin to primer to powder to bullet an efficient testament to the human's ingenuity.

The .243-caliber rifle—so called because the diameter of its bore interior measures 243 hundredths of an inch—has less stopping power than the larger .30-06, but with a proportionately greater ratio of impulsion to bullet weight, it's popular

BY LARRY SLONAKER

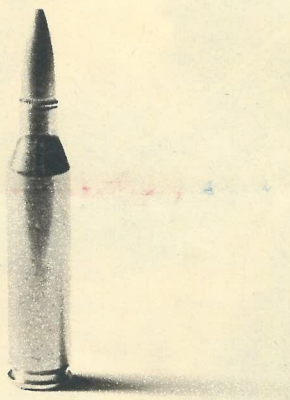
**THE AUTHOR GREW UP** in the hunting culture of Montana. Years later, in a far different cultural climate, he tried to understand the hunter's soul.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM VAN DYKE

**SOMEWHERE IN** the last 100 years, in between the slaughter of millions of bison and the umpteenth re-release of *Bambi*, attitudes shifted.

*"Especially in educated, cultured circles, hunters are often seen as callous boors who drink too much, take an atavistic pleasure in the suffering of helpless animals, and seek to repair sexual failings by a fascination with guns and displays of ostentatious 'masculinity.'*

*'A lot of hunters are motivated by wanting to feel sovereign over their lives, or over nature,' says Steven Zak, an animal rights activist, writer and Los Angeles lawyer. 'These are guys who probably have no power over their lives, so they feel a sense of command on Saturday [while hunting] they don't feel Monday through Friday.'"*



as a deer rifle for its faster, flatter trajectory.

The Sunday before opening day, my hunting partner Vincent and I sighted in our rifles at a firing range in San Jose. It took me a few rounds to get reacquainted with firing a high-powered rifle. (I hadn't shot anything bigger than a .22 for at least 15 years.) But eventually I consistently hit the black bull's-eye on a target at 100 yards, and I figured that distance is the maximum I'd ever shoot on this trip. If I shot at all. But if I was going to do it, I didn't want a bad shot —a bad shot meant a wounded animal, an arduous period of trailing while it suffered, and maybe even ultimate failure to find it. A good hunter's greatest horror is a bad shot.

Vincent, an excellent shot and an experienced hunter, discounted this. Of the pocked target, he said: "Anything there is a kill."

**PEOPLE DON'T HUNT THAT MUCH ANYMORE.** Not in California—really, not anywhere in the States, not compared to how much they used to. Somewhere in this country's last 100 years or so, in between the indifferent slaughter of millions of bison and the umpteenth re-release of Walt Disney's *Bambi*, attitudes have shifted. Especially in educated, cultured circles, hunters are often seen as callous boors who drink too much, take an atavistic pleasure in the suffering of helpless animals, and seek to repair sexual failings by a fascination with guns and displays of ostentatious "masculinity."

"A lot of hunters are motivated by wanting to feel sovereign over their lives, or over nature," says Steven Zak, an animal rights activist, writer and Los Angeles lawyer. "These are guys who probably have no power over their lives, so they feel a sense of command on Saturday [while hunting] they don't feel Monday through Friday."

In the face of the growing animosity of the non-hunting majority and attrition within their ranks (see box, page 18), the reason for the remainder to hunt must be pretty compelling. Hunters demonstrate just how compelling through their zealous lobbying and political influence. For instance, hunters essentially steer the policies of such governmental bodies as the state Fish and Game Department, the agency the oversees the state's wildlife. It is funded partly through hunting fees, and is managed by hunters.

Says Cleveland Amory, writer and founder of Fund for Animals, a New York-based animal rights group: "More than anything else, I'm opposed to the fact that between 8 and 10 percent of the population—in other words, the hunters—controls the entire machinery of managing the woods where the hunted animal is."

"Our mandate," says Ken Mayer, California Fish and Game's deer program coordinator, "is to maintain and enhance the deer resource in the state" —"deer resource" being hunterspeak for huntable animals.

What compels hunters so? "I hunt because I enjoy the outdoors," says avid hunter John Skrabo, a member of the tightly knit, earnest fraternity of writers for hunting journals. "Hunting is a challenge, and I love challenges. . . . My friends hunt, the people I work with hunt, my relatives hunt. It's a good excuse to get together."

In a study called "Attitudes and Characteristics of Hunters and Antihunters," Yale Professor Stephen Kellert found that hunters give three main reasons for hunting: for contact with nature, for food, and for sport. When one talks to hunters, they often give a fourth reason: to manage the population, so that a given herd doesn't exceed the ability of its range to feed it.

The last is probably the easiest to discount, because usually hunting is restricted to bucks. "Buck-only hunting does not really affect the population size," says Richard Callas, Fish and Game wildlife biologist. Whatever the number of kills made, "There's an adequate number of bucks left over to breed does. The ability of the population to recover each year is essentially unchanged by harvesting bucks only."

In addition, there have been numerous studies indicating that deer, if left to their own devices, can control their own population. Research by Detroit College Professor David Favre pointed to indications that under poor eating conditions, the rate of deer reproduction will considerably diminish. Also, when a herd's number increases, so does the number

of natural predators.

The rationale of contact with nature also is dubious. Many, myself included, were introduced to the outdoors through hunting. But as a reason to hunt it seems, well, peculiar, since contact with nature obviously is not contingent on seeking out and killing the denizens of a natural environment. "I don't see why they can't go out and enjoy the woods and enjoy the animal without killing it," Amory says.

The hunting-for-meat rationale seems more solid. It's hard to argue with a hunter when he points out that the leather jacket on your back, the shoes on your feet and the food on your table came from an animal whose killing you at least tacitly condone by using its carcass. Plus, venison is tasty, less fatty and much healthier than beef.

But the practice of hunting for meat seems to be less and less a factor for most hunters, since usually the amount of money invested in going hunting far exceeds the value of any meat that's obtained. (And that's if the hunt is even successful, which it usually isn't—Mayer of Fish and Game estimates the success rate in the state's larger hunting zones at 15 or 20 percent.)

Beyond that, there are two big differences between the food you get at the supermarket and venison. First, the meat from the market has, at least presumably, been killed quickly and humanely. At Middle Livestock Processing in San Martin, for instance, they simply shoot the doomed beast in the brain and it dies very quickly.

Of all the deer kills I've made, witnessed and heard about, I've rarely encountered one in which the kill was instantaneous. Accepted hunting wisdom is that the optimum shot is within a rectangle whose lower right corner is the front foreleg—this space encompasses the heart, lungs and a portion of the spine, thus allowing a wide margin of error. But it also minimizes the chance of an instantaneous kill. Shooting a deer is a most unscientific proposition, and as a result—there's no getting around it—the animal often lingers. Sometimes it's just for seconds or minutes; sometimes, if it's a bad shot, for hours or (depending on the skill and luck of the hunter) days.

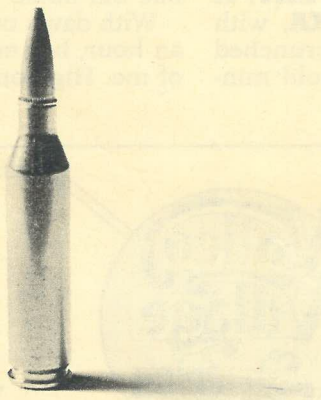
In that period, does it suffer? "You

# NOT MANY HUNTERS take pleasure in the suffering of an animal, but all of them must be willing to accept its possibility.

*"The hunter, unlike the assembly-line butcher,* enjoys *the kill. Of all the reasons Yale Professor Stephen Kellert found in his study of hunters, this is the most compelling.*

*When early man evolved out of the jungles and into the savannah, he became, as anthropologist Robert Ardrey has said, forever and irrevocably a hunter. He would either survive by hunting or not survive at all. 'Hunting is innate in man,' says hunting writer John Skrabo. 'It's part of human nature.'*

*So perhaps the burden does not lie solely on the hunter—perhaps it also lies upon the non-hunter, to explain why he does* not *hunt."*



have to consider the shock factor," says Richard Spotts, a lobbyist for the Sacramento-based Defenders of Wildlife. "I don't know if anyone knows [if the animal suffers], because no one has able been able to interview it."

Not many hunters take pleasure in the suffering of an animal, but all of them must be willing to accept its possibility. To consider this attitude leads to the second difference between the food you get at the supermarket and venison. The hunter, unlike the assembly-line butcher, *enjoys* the kill. Of all the reasons Kellert found in his study, this is the most compelling.

When early man evolved out of the jungles and into the savannah, he became, as anthropologist Robert Ardrey has said, forever and irrevocably a hunter. He would either survive by hunting or not survive at all. "Hunting is innate in man," says hunting writer Skrabo. "It's part of human nature."

So perhaps the burden does not lie solely on the hunter—perhaps it also lies upon the non-hunter, to explain why he does *not* hunt.

Why, why not? For the most part, it is a matter of what we admit about ourselves, and what we deny. A question of what we think we are.

**I FIRST KILLED A DEER WHEN I WAS 14.** It is a scene that shimmers in my memory. My dad and I are in low hills thatched with the skeletons of birch trees. It is snowing. The flakes are huge and very thick—a gauze over our eyes and under our feet. We have been walking the hills, the snow getting thicker in the air and deeper on the ground. It is silent like nothing else is silent; it is silent like nothing. We come into a little clearing, and standing not 50 yards away, as though it has been conjured, is a mule deer. It is looking at us; I can see the surprise in its face. It has that tense deer look—head twisted nearly perpendicular to its motionless body, the ears taut and erect, the eyes alert, brilliant. It looks like I feel.

I raise the rifle, an ancient heavy thing that I hate for its weight and bitter recoil. When I fire, the snow and trees muffle the sound into an abrupt *thwack!* I've missed, but as is sometimes the case with mule deer, it doesn't even move —just looks at us. Again. *Thwack!* Nothing. The surprise is frozen on its face.

My dad urgently whispers: "Shoot a little lower."

I come down on it maybe two inches. *Thwu-ump!*

I had never imagined that you could actually hear the slug hit the flesh.

As we rush to the stricken creature, its back broken, I am flooded with feelings. How could it just stand there? I am exultant, horrified, choked with adrenaline, stunned.

"Well, you got your first deer, Lar," my dad says.

"It's a good feeling," I mumble.

There were a thousand feelings; "good" was in the mix somewhere among them, somewhere far down, but it came to my tongue because it was the one that I most readily recognized.

**CONSIDER THIS STATEMENT BY FISH AND GAME OFFICIAL (AND HUNTER) MAYER:** "We're in the second year of a drought . . . which makes it tougher for a guy to harvest a deer." It's a common and telling word—*harvest.* Hunters often use the word to describe how they see the deer—that is, equivalent to a crop, which is to be planted and reaped on a predictable seasonal basis.

It's a utilitarian view that is ancient, and which probably had its classical philosophical articulation in the 17th century by Descartes. He held that animals are "machines," and therefore—possessing no thought, desire, care, or any emotion—could be treated by people as such. In Cartesian language, *They do not think—therefore, they aren't.*

Today an active and outspoken element of society says animals not only feel, but also have rights. Sweden recently enacted a rights program for farm animals, governing their living conditions. Cattle were given grazing rights, pigs separate bedding and feeding places, chickens freedom from cramped cages.

In this country, according to wildlife activist Zak, the concept of animal rights was nurtured by Thoreau and John Muir, who held that animals have value "not because they are useful, but of their own sake."

Having this value, and having these rights, the thinking goes, the animals also have the right not to be terrified by

# I SEE THE BUCK, and he sees us. He and the does stare, trying to assimilate the sight of two bipeds on the side of the mountain.

*"I feel it again: that old quickening; the hunt; the* point. *Ahead of me is the prey, reddish gold in his naked beauty.*

*Vincent squeezes off a shot. It misses. Two of the does bound off, but the buck and at least one doe just stand there."*

the chase of the predatory hunter, and the right not to have to undergo pain for what is nothing more than sport. For this reason, bow-hunting particularly has become controversial, because a struck animal almost never drops—rather, it will run a distance, then lie down and (if the arrow was well-aimed) bleed to death.

The hunter, obviously, leans more toward the Cartesian attitude. "It's a tough question," says hunting writer Skrabo. "It's hard to tell what an animal is feeling as far as pain goes." But "after giving it a lot of thought lately," he has concluded that the deer feels little or no pain.

**AT 4:30 A.M. ON OPENING DAY, A FEW MILES WEST OF YREKA,** with Mars shining in my face, I am scrunched on the ground, counting the cold minutes until daylight. The blackness in front of me eventually will melt off to reveal a deep draw, which is clothed in manzanita, early pines, skeletal poles from a 20-year-old fire, and a tangle of deer trails and tracks. An hour passes; two. Nearly the entire time is consumed by my mental tussle: If I'm presented with the opportunity of a good shot, what will I do?

Will. Won't. Is. Isn't. Can. Can't. Jesus, I don't need to shoot this creature; and if I do it to derive pleasure from it, what does that say about me?

"Aw, you're going to see a buck," Vincent said in camp, "and when you do, it'll be *no questions asked.* It'll be just like old home week."

With dawn comes a fusillade for about an hour, but not much happens in front of me. High on the facing mountainside

is a doe half-heartedly browsing. For lack of anything better to do, I study her through the binoculars and anthropomorphize. *She's scared; she hears the shots; she's afraid to move; one of her companions has been shot, and she's desolate. She wants me to go away.*

When the sun gets a little higher, I oblige. After I meet up with Vincent, whose morning was equally unprolific, we trudge down to the spot where our car and several others are parked. Already hanging in a tree are two bucks being dressed out.

Hunters like to talk about their success.

"After I got to him," says this tale's hero, "I reached down to cut his throat. I thought he was dead." (The hunting-and-fishing magazines, in their stern, folksy humor, like to refer to this statement as *famous last words.*) "And he got up! So I was kind of wrestling with him, you know, and I grabbed him by the horns and we went rolling down the hill! And my partner said, 'Let go so I can shoot him!' And I said, 'No way! I'm not letting go so *you* can shoot him.' "

(I doubt he had the presence of mind, let alone the wind, to make this pronouncement, but maybe he was *thinking* it.)

"Finally we tumbled down and I let go and shot him with my pistol."

Vincent later told me he saw most of this, although it was too dark to tell exactly what the hell was going on. He also said the *coup de grace* required several, maybe half a dozen, pistol shots.

As I said—killing a deer is an unscientific proposition.

That afternoon we head back into the mountains, this time going higher. A hunter near our campsite has gotten a buck, and Vincent is getting increasingly excited.

We work our way up to the highest point for miles, a peak on which a ranger lookout once stood. Nothing is left but the foundation, a thick slab of concrete that probably will sit there forever. We assess the lay of the land, select our separate vantage points for the afternoon, and begin a slow descent together.

Almost immediately after our paths fork, I hear him behind me, earnestly whistling air. I turn and immediately see from the intensity in his face that he sees a buck. I carefully work toward him, trying not to stir the chips of rock on my path. Finally, I'm close enough to follow his line of sight. Deer, maybe half a dozen. They're down the slope, 60 yards or so. One looks like a buck, but I'm not certain. Vincent has his scope on them.

"Do you see him!?" he hisses. "It's a buck! God, Larry, three points. Do you see him?"

I see him, and he sees us. He and the does stare, trying to assimilate this incongruous sight of two bipeds on the side of the mountain. And I feel it again: that old quickening; the hunt; the *point.* Ahead of me is the prey, reddish gold in his naked beauty.

Vincent squeezes off a shot. It misses. Two of the does bound off, but the buck and at least one doe just stand there. They are blacktails, normally skittish, but not this time. Vincent shoots again; again he misses; and again, they just stand there. A weird helpless feeling creeps through me, as though I'm actually watching something out of my own past. Vincent aims again, and this time I watch as carefully as I can to detect why he's missing. And with this shot, I see. Although he's just a few yards from me, a cropping of boulder down below and to my right is screening most of the deer from him. He has only the top of the neck for a target. His shot kicks up debris off the very top of the boulder.

"You're low," I harshly whisper. The deer just stand there looking at us. I am as immobile as they.

But a sound penetrates: Vincent fiddling with the clip on his rifle. A casing has jammed and won't eject. I hear him quietly, urgently cursing.

The buck breaks his own spell, and takes a couple of tentative steps. If he

walks much further he'll be behind the rock that screened Vincent. I can still hear Vincent working with his clip.

There is no more thought to it. I ram a shell into the chamber of the .243, and raise it to my shoulder. The buck has turned toward me, so the angle is about 11 o'clock. I put the bead just behind his foreleg.

And I squeeze the trigger.

**THE ISSUE OF HUNTING AND NON-HUNTING IS INFLAMMATORY,** because so many non-hunters are actively against the practice.

It's not usually a different-strokes-for-different-folks attitude. There is a growing number of anti-hunting organizations, such as Amory's Fund for Animals, The Committee to Abolish Sport Hunting, Defenders of Wildlife, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, International Society for Animal Rights, etc.

"People in this society are anti-cruelty," says Amory. "If you kick a dog or a cat, people think it's horrible—you shouldn't do it. Now the definition of cruelty is being extended to other animals, like deer."

But Skrabo, the hunting publication writer who specializes in Northern California issues, doesn't think the movement will ever get so far as to threaten the hunting of deer. "There are too many people who deer-hunt every year," he said.

"There'll always be deer-hunting in California."

The boundaries are clearly defined, but some people find no comfort in either camp. Ortega y Gasset, in his book *Meditations on Hunting*, summed up the conundrum: "Do not forget that man was once a beast. His carnivore's fangs and canine teeth are unimpeachable evidence of this. Of course he was also a vegetarian . . . as his molars attest. Man, in fact, combines the two extreme conditions of the mammal, and therefore he goes through life vacillating between being a sheep and being a tiger."

**MY SHOT HIT THE DEER, BUT GIVEN THE ANGLE, IT WAS NOT WELL-PLACED—TOO FAR BACK.** With the shock of the impact, he lurched forward out of my sight behind the boulder. By this time Vincent had cleared his clip, and with a clear shot, he put a slug from his .30-06 into the buck's heart. Prodigious strength and will carried the buck a ways down the hill; we found him some time later dead under a tree, the once-brilliant eyes as opaque as milk.

Vincent was triumphant. I tried to share that. The mix of emotions swirling inside me was as difficult to sort out now as it had been 20 years ago when I shot that first deer. It washed around me





## BREEDERS REFERRAL GUIDE

Consult a professional for information on pups, kittens and breeding services

**ALL BREEDS**
Puppy Training
Call Televet (408) 224-6500

Placements/For All Breeds; Show, Pet & Work Quality. Save $ (707) 996-6805
Referrals/All Breeds (707) 996-6805

**ABYSSINIAN**
Ultimate Kittens, CFA (415) 726-2004

**BRIARDS**
Briards Show & Pewt Pups (503) 357-8850

**CHINESE SHAR PEI**
Pups, Ch. Stud. Sve.. (415) 594-1374

**GERMAN SHEPHERDS**
Solitaire—Pups, Ch. Stud (408) 247-1272
Von Felt's (408) 720-1009 or 258-8872
Nee Rose Haus (408) 866-1729
Von Raysor's—Stud, Pups (408) 287-0391

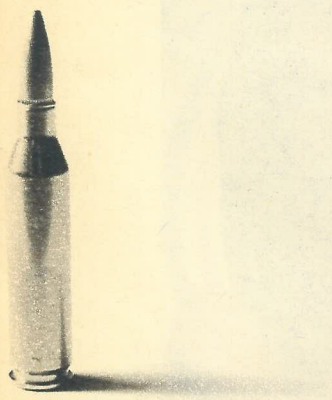
**HIMALAYANS**
Kittens, Adults. Ch. Stud. 252-3270

**IRISH SETTERS**
Ch. Show & Field Pups (408) 353-4109

*If you don't find the breed you're looking for, be sure to check the MERCURY NEWS Classified.*

List your breed in this weekly column to reach 639,000 readers. Call Diane Johnson 408/920-5686.

*"Looking down the slope, at the doe and the killing field, I recognized that this buck was not a bad kill. He didn't suffer long. But that was not a consolation. I felt an impulse to ask forgiveness of him, and of the doe."*



like a stream around a rock. Compounding all this was the doe who had stood there and witnessed the kill. She never did run off, but just drifted a couple hundred yards away and lay down. Maybe she was smart enough to know any danger for her was over; maybe she was just too dumb to run away; maybe—more anthropomorphizing—maybe she was waiting for the buck.

Well, there wasn't time now to fool with all the swirling stuff. We had to get our kill down the mountain and back to camp, and it was a race with the dissipating light. Vincent would do the work, dragging the carcass down the mountain; I would hike back to the top with the two rifles, and drive back down to meet him on the road.

The slope, particularly where the buck had staggered off to die, was quite steep, and it took me a while to work back up to the top. When I got there, damp and out of breath, I stopped to rest.

The doe still lay out there, bedded in some grass. Beneath me were the little ridge we'd walked down, the rocks we'd stood on, the boulder. I stood there panting. Spread in front of me in the dying light was my killing field, and it was overwhelming.

In Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, there's a scene in which Santiago recalls hooking one of a pair of marlin. The whole time he fought the fish, its mate stayed by it, until at last, when Santiago dragged it aboard, its mate jumped high by the boat to see where it was; and then dived deep back into the ocean. Santiago says sorrowfully, "We begged her pardon and butchered her promptly."

Looking down the slope, at the doe and the killing field, I recognized that this buck was not a bad kill. He didn't suffer long. But that was not a consolation. I felt an impulse to ask forgiveness of him, and of the doe.

In church or on the mountain, absolution is not for the benefit of the one who hears the confession, but for the one who makes it. To kill something, and then pray forgiveness—it did not make sense. But how else could it be? It does not make sense, either, that within us we simultaneously carry the sheep and the tiger. It does not make sense that the tiger is there ephemerally, for the joyful engorgement of the kill; and that the sheep is there forever, for the horror and the remorse. W

---

*LARRY SLONAKER, a* Mercury News *columnist and editor, last wrote for* West *about the airlines after deregulation.*

West *welcomes your comments on this story—and others in this issue. Write:* West Letters, West Magazine, 750 Ridder Park Drive, San Jose, CA 95190