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Van Gogh's Irises
and Other Things to Read
for the ESL Student

Thomas Griffin

December, 1983

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

This project by Thomas Griffin is accepted in its present form.

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Project Advisor Michael Jerald

Project Reader John J. Hardy Jr.

Abstract

"Van Gogh's Irises" is a collection of twenty, original short texts, all under 900 words. Included are eight fictional pieces, six "journalistic essays" in which an opinion on a given issue is expressed, and six "descriptive essays" in which the author aims at pure description of an object, event or place. The pieces are followed by "Suggestions for Using the Texts in the ESL Classroom," a compilation of ideas for activities to encourage comprehension and discussion of the texts and, eventually, composition by the students themselves.

The subjects of the texts are all common, inspired by experiences in everyday life. They range from looking for a job to looking at a painting. Most of the topics are suitable for all ages, although the audience the author usually had in mind when writing them was adult.

ERIC Descriptors:
1. Expository Writing 2. Creative Writing 3. Teaching materials 4. English (Second Language) 5. Second Language

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Introduction

"Van Gogh's Irises" is intended to provide teachers and learners of English as a second language with twenty examples of contemporary creative writing, including fiction, descriptive essay and journalistic essay forms. The texts are short (all are under 900 words), complete (none are excerpted or abridged in any way) and unrestricted in terms of complexity of vocabulary or syntax. Conscious of my ESL audience, I have tried to write clearly and concisely about common experiences and issues.

Although there is no overt attempt in any of the texts to explicitly describe "American Life," I recognize that I am American and thus the experience I describe and the way in which I describe it must have an American cultural bias. Consequently, the texts can be seen as illustrations of American tendencies and pecularities. Likewise, my style of writing follows American conventional patterns and as such will differ from ESL students' native literary conventions. Notwithstanding these considerations, I believe and hope that the texts deal with human, as opposed to strictly American, issues, problems and situations and that the emotions, aspirations, values and beliefs found in the stories and essays are no more "American" than they are "Egyptian," "French" or "Russian."

Finally, I warn the reader that I have used the masculine form of the third person pronoun throughout the texts. The reason for my choice is neither ideological nor political. I am simply more comfortable using the masculine form.

Marriage

Andrew and Liza had been seeing each other for four years. They shared the same interests - jazz music, movies, good food, outdoor sports - and therefore enjoyed each other's company. Their friends recognized Andrew and Liza's compatability and couldn't think of one without the other; they belonged together. Indeed, Andrew and Liza moved into an apartment shortly after falling in love and had now lived together for over three years.

Among those same friends, it was a matter of some speculation as to when the couple would get married. Marriage, however, was rarely discussed between the two lovers. It was one subject that they did not agree on; whenever marriage was brought up, a tension that was almost visible arose between the two. Andrew always started to fidget uncomfortably and this, in turn, made Liza uncomfortable. The easy thing to do was to let the subject drop. Nevertheless, the "big M," as one of their friends had once called it, was increasingly on their minds; it was a topic that seemed to become more important as time went by.

To Liza, marriage represented a natural step in the evolution of their relationship. It was both a way to confirm and strengthen the bond which already existed between them and a public expression of the love and commitment they felt for each other. Liza had no doubt that she wished to spend the rest of her life with Andrew.

Andrew, on the other hand, was afraid of marriage. Though

he too believed in the permanence of his love for Liza, the idea of holy matrimony conjured up images of entrapment and even imprisonment for him. Where did these negative reactions come from? Andrew's parents had been married for over thirty years, never once threatening to separate; Liza's parents were equally stable and had been in wedlock for almost as long. He could not say where his feelings originated and this lack of knowledge about himself disturbed Andrew.

Liza was frustrated that marriage worried Andrew so much when in other ways he demonstrated such a sincere commitment to her. She knew even less than Andrew the reasons why he shied away from the subject and she was becoming increasingly impatient to find them out. After talking with a close friend, who told her not to be deterred by Andrew's uneasiness, Liza decided to get some answers over dinner. They were eating spaghetti when she asked: "why is it so difficult for us to talk about marriage?" Andrew reddened and began to play with the noodles on his plate, swishing squiggly pasta shapes in the tomato sauce. Liza persisted by fixing her gaze on Andrew, silently demanding an answer.

"It's difficult for me because I'm afraid of marriage and I don't know why." This confession to Liza took considerable courage but, once spoken, it relieved Andrew immensely; he felt as though he had been carrying a heavy weight for many miles and was finally able to put it down.

"Is it me that scares you? I wonder if you really love me as much as I love you, or as much as you say you love me."

Andrew saw that Liza was in tears. He left his chair and hugged her, simultaneously realizing that his fear of marriage paled in comparison to this new fear of hurting Liza.

Abortion

If you are firmly convinced of the rightness of your opinion on a controversial issue, then it is difficult to see the opposite point of view and give it justice. Abortion is an issue which provokes that kind of personal conviction and mutual misunderstanding.

At the two poles of the abortion debate are those calling themselves "pro-life" and, at the other extreme, those who are "pro-choice." The pro-lifers are opposed to abortion under any circumstances, and they generally cite moral and religious reasons to explain their position. They believe the fetus in the womb is a human being, a creation of God; to abort a fetus, they say, is as morally wrong as killing a person already born. The pro-choice people argue for the woman's "right" to terminate an unwanted pregnancy in a safe, legal way. They claim a woman should have control over her own body and that the immature fetus is not a person similar to you or me.

Most of us hold opinions on abortion which are not as extreme as the two mentioned above. There are many people, for example, who believe that abortion is essentially wrong, but who also believe that in certain cases abortion is the lesser of two evils. One such case might be a pregnancy which endangers the woman's health, another might be a pregnancy caused by rape. Then there are women who express opinions in favor of individual choice concerning abortion, yet who add that they would never have one themselves. They seem to advocate personal

choice as a matter of public policy while expressing personal revulsion at the idea of abortion.

Anyone who has an opinion about abortion must answer certain questions to himself or herserlf, among them: Is abortion a private or public concern? Is the unborn child a member of society and thus entitled to society's protection? If so, when does the unborn child or fetus become a member of society? When does life begin? Is there a "higher law" (i.e. God's) which should govern our actions in this matter? These questions do not call for factual answers. The responses are determined by emotional and spiritual views as much as by scientific evidence. This means that my opinion on abortion cannot be proven wrong and neither can yours. The best we can hope for is a mutual willingness to understand each other's point of view. To accomplish this, we must be willing to put aside our personal convictions for a moment, to look at the questions and pay attention to another's answers.

The Demonstration

From the air, the moving mass of people appears as a serpent, winding its way through the center of the city. It is colorful, thousands of separate hues blend into a chaotic, bright pattern which contrasts with the silver and dark tones of the buildings that line the serpent's path. It has height; posters, banners and puppets shoot up from the body. They bob up and down in syncopation with its movement. Wind wrinkles the cloth of the banners and tousles the puppets garments. It is long; the head and the tail of the serpent are separated by many city blocks, perhaps a full mile. The two ends are ignorant of each other. They cannot see each other. When the head turns right onto another street, the rest of the body still moves straight ahead. Neither speed nor rhythm is the same for all parts of the creature. While one section moves briskly along another seems not to move at all.

On ground level, the individuals are more apparent than the mass. There are thousands and thousands of people: young, old, female, male, fat, thin, tall, short, bearded, bespectacled, handicapped, healthy, on crutches, in wheelchairs, on stilts, on foot, carrying placards, posters, flags, banners, babies, holding hands, wearing custumes, eating sandwiches, talking, laughing, shouting, smiling, chanting, singing . . .

There is music. Men and women in groups and separately clap hands and beat drums, strum guitars and banjos, blow through brass horns and harmonicas, flutes and recorders,

kazoos and penny-whistles. Everyone, it seems, sings or chants, often in unison and directed by an unseen person's voice. The overall sound is steady but not loud or dissonant. There are times when it is even quiet enough to hear footsteps on the pavement.

Police line the route. They stand, lean against their squad cars, sit on horses and motorcycles. They all wear blue uniforms and silver badges; some have helmets, some wear sunglasses, all have holsters that carry guns, bullets and clubs, none of which are needed at this demonstration. The traffic police use their whistles to stop and redirect vehicles away from the crowd's path. The march continues forward, unhindered.

The head of the serpent reaches the park and splits apart, as do the body and tail which follow it. The destination reached, the serpent is no longer necessary. In wide, disorganized fashion, the colors spread over the green meadow, the posters and banners and puppets collapse, the length of the animal dissolves. Its parts stream towards a stage, set up at one end of the meadow. Soon, the entire field is filled and the congregation takes on its oblong shape.

On the stage, music groups and speakers perform, one after the other. Their songs and messages are transmitted to the people by loudspeakers which are supported by scaffolding in several locations on the field. The demonstrators sing together, dance with one another, respond to the performers on stage and applaud. Several hours pass this way until the sun begins to set and the activities on stage end. There is a last

thunderous ovation. People pick up their belongings and the crowd disperses towards the subways, busses, cars and trains which brought it together.

The Job Hunter

The first place she tried she had found through the yellow pages.* The landscaping company was located in a large, brick warehouse, where it rented office space and a storage area for tools and materials. The woman who met her sat at a desk to the right of the door and gave her a job application to fill out. This woman seemed very well dressed for landscaping work and the job hunter wondered if she would have to wear a skirt while planting trees. After she had completed the application the woman told her Mr. Fink would see her in a moment. Soon he appeared; although Mr. Fink wore khakis, a blue workshirt and workboots, his clothes were not dirty and the color of his skin suggested that he hadn't been outside too much. He picked up her application from the well-dressed woman's desk and told the job hunter to come into his office.

After glancing briefly at the form, Mr. Fink said, "so you have never worked for a landscaper before."

"No sir," said the job hunter, "but I've done a lot of gardening and yard work around my parent's house." Mr. Fink looked a little skeptical.

"You realize," he said, "that we do a lot of heavy work: hauling trees, building retaining walls and stone walls, shoveling topsoil and manure, wheeling heavy wheelbarrows, digging, laying sod, bricks . . ."

"I think I can handle it, sir." Mr. Fink eyed her carefully, sizing her up. She was small but healthy looking; still,

she was a girl.

"Well. I'll give you a call if I need you. Right now, my crew is complete. Thanks for coming by."

"Could I ask a question?" Mr. Fink nodded. I noticed that the woman in the front office is wearing a skirt and nice shoes. Would I have to dress nicely to work here?" Mr. Fink found this question very funny and he snickered before he answered it.

"That's my secretary. She's in the office all day. She's no landscaper." He chuckled some more.

The job hunter left the office feeling as though she hadn't been taken seriously. She didn't like Mr. Fink and wasn't sure she wanted to work for him anyway. She went quickly to the next landscaper on her list.

By midafternoon, the job hunter had visited three landscapers, none of whom offered her a job. At each place she had filled out an application and talked briefly with a man, and at each place she had felt that being a woman worked against her. It irked her that the landscapers wouldn't give her credit for being able to do rigorous work just because she was female. It was untrue; the job hunter wanted a chance to prove herself. There was one more place on her list and she was tempted to scratch it out without even going there. Then she thought, "why not go? The worst that can happen is more of the same."

Upon entering the landscaper's grounds, the job hunter's spirits were raised. The place looked like somebody's home. It had a shed and a yard in which there were piles of compost,

topsoil, manure and bark mulch, railroad ties and bricks, a shady area where shrubs and trees, whose roots were balled in burlap, were kept and lots of trees and plants planted in the lawn. Many blossoms of different colors, emitting different scents, mingled with one another; along with the various piles, they created an atmosphere of happy chaos. There was a woman in dirty overalls spraying the balled up trees and shrubs with a hose and the job hunter went up to her. She asked the woman whom she could talk to about applying for a job.

"Me. I'm the boss. Listen, before we talk, do you know what hand pruners look like?" The job hunter nodded. "There are some on the right just when you enter the shed, hanging on the wall. Would you grab them for me?" She found the hand pruners and brought them to the woman. "Thanks. So, why do you want to be a landscaper?" The job hunter told her while the woman pruned unwanted branches and threw them on the compost pile. They talked for awhile, the woman in the overalls doing odd jobs as she asked questions, the job hunter following her and helping her when she could. Finally, the woman stopped and offered a dirty hand; the job hunter shook it. "My name's Joanne. What's yours?"

"Susan."

"Well, Susan, I might have a job for you. Why don't you write down your phone number and I'll give you a call in a couple of days." Susan gave her number and thanked Joanne for considering her for the job. As she left the yard, she realized that she had been called by her first name for the first time

all day. Her hands were dirty. She knew that, whether she had the job or not, Joanne would call her.

*Yellow Pages: A section of the phonebook containing lists of businesses.

Nuclear Arms

To think about a war in which nuclear weapons are used is to contemplate catastrophe. The fact is no one really knows what the magnitude of death and destruction would be in such a war. To date, the United States is the only nation to have used nuclear weapons against an enemy; it dropped two atomic bombs, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, at the end of the Second World War. Those cities were more or less completely destroyed, thousands of people were killed and many more suffered severe burns and other injuries from the blasts. Even today, the effects of those bombs are still being felt - from increased rates of cancer among the survivors to birth defects inherited by their children.

Compared to the nuclear warheads produced today, the "A-bombs" dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were small. Their destructive power was but a fraction of the destructive power contained in today's nuclear weapons. The use of a Trident missile today (to name a contemporary nuclear weapon) would affect a considerably wider area than that affected by the Hiroshima bomb and the human casualties would be that much greater as well. If the destruction of life and environment inflicted by the A-bomb in 1945 had been unthinkable, how much more unthinkable is the potential destruction inflicted by a Trident missile? Indeed, there is a saying which reflects many people's thoughts on the conceivable results of a modern, nuclear war: "the living would envy the dead."

One wonders how the world arrived at such a perilous stage. Given the assumption that survival is one of man's most basic instincts, how did he permit the creation of the nuclear monster and, more inexplicable still, allow it to grow? Despite some treacherously naive and plain stupid remarks uttered by several politicians, it is generally known that there would be no "winner" in a nuclear war. To launch a nuclear missile at your enemy is to insure that your enemy will launch one at you. The idea that somehow your side could invent newer, more sophisticated nuclear arms faster than the other side (and hence be in a more secure position) is as absurd as thinking you could win a nuclear conflict. Yet that is just the kind of thinking the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, are guilty of. It is as though the leaders of those two nations have forgotten that they are dealing with the most destructive, horrifying, life-threatening things ever created, and, instead, see the arms as poker chips in a card game. A poker game is not a question of survival; win or lose, the player comes out of it alive. The nuclear arms race, however, is a question of survival, because the greater the number of nuclear arms and the more sophisticated the technology, the greater is the chance of the unimaginable: nuclear war. Have the politicians of nuclear-armed nations fooled themselves into thinking they are discussing poker chips, when in fact they are talking about the earth's survival?

Sailing

The wind from the southwest comes in gusts, which make the small sailboat heel while they propel its hull through the dark water. Displaced water froths and gurgles quietly away from the bow and a wake spreads a swath of smooth water behind the stern. The boat is made of wood; with each new puff its timber creaks and its lines squeak as they tighten in their fittings. There are two sails, a mainsail and a jib, each one filled and bent by the wind to its aerodynamic, curved shape. Angled against the dark sky, the sails are white blades slicing through the night.

There are four of us on board, three sitting on the windward side, backs leaning into the wind, and one on the leeward side, considerably lower than his mates, at sea-level. I am the middle man on the windward side; next to me is the helmsman holding the tiller and forward from me is our lightest sailor. Through him I can see the bow pointing into the wind, at a small house on the shore. My eyes turn to the mast, painted white, and follow it into the black air out at sea, where a flashing red light lets the mariner know an island sits. There is no moon and it is cloudy, and the helmsman must ask us, particularly the one farthest forward, to help him navigate. A harbor on such a night can be a dangerous place, as rocks, boats, buoys and driftwood are not always immediately visible. Despite this concern, we are all relaxed, rocked gently by the regular rhythm of the boat carving through the water. It is a

hot night but the southwesterly wind, cooled by the ocean water, refreshes us and we are in no hurry to return to shore.

The Line

"I always pick the wrong line," Peter complained to himself. He stood behind two people: a short, bald man at the teller's window and a tall woman whose hair was pulled into a bun. The man had already taken a considerable amount of time and Peter wondered what was taking so long. The teller vanished behind two sets of locked doors.

There were other windows open, in front of which were lines as long as Peter's. To his eyes, those lines were going much faster, yet he didn't dare switch. He feared that once he changed lines, his previous one would be faster and he would have to wait still longer. Besides, Peter had already earned third place in his current line; the bald man couldn't need much more time. "But where is the teller?" he asked himself.

The woman with the bun must have been thinking the same thing. She turned to Peter and muttered, "are we ever to see our teller again?" Peter discreetly motioned to the bald man.

"Maybe she took off with all his money."

The woman smiled. She wore a gray tweed vest over a white ruffled blouse and a skirt to match the vest. High-heeled shoes gave her more than her natural height. A gold necklace graced her throat and gold earrings danced from her earlobes. Dark brown eyes, highlighted by mascara and long eyelashes and under thin, painted eyebrows, matched the color of her hair. To escape from her gaze, Peter made sure his deposit slip was

filled out correctly.

"Do you find that you always pick the wrong line?" Her voice was deep, as precise in its tone as her makeup.

"Yes, I do." Peter responded as though he were under a spell.

"And do you detest waiting in lines?"

The same response.

"And do you consider changing lines, but usually stay in the same one, for fear of losing your place?"

Peter nodded.

The teller delivered a small, black box to the bald man and a key for its lock. He took it under his arm and in quick, small steps walked across the lobby to the door.

"In that box are two large diamonds resting on crimson velvet. They are at least as big as your eyes when you look at me." The woman's red lips curled into another smile. She turned to the teller and withdrew a sizeable amount of cash; Peter couldn't tell how much. Then she left, leaving Peter with his paycheck and deposit slip and an impatient teller asking him to hurry up.

Ice Cream

Once upon a time someone mixed together sugar, cream and eggs and churned the mixture in a bucket sunk in ice. When the mixture became too hard to churn, he or she had what is known today as ice cream. A whole universe of ice cream parlors, flavors, brands, styles, makers and eaters has evolved from that experiment. Today there is "soft" ice cream as well as the traditional hard stuff; you can buy a cone, a dish, a stick, a pie and a sandwich of it. If ice cream alone doesn't satisfy your sweet tooth, you can add an array of sauces and toppings and create a sundae, a banana split, a boat and other concoctions which would probably make the first ice cream maker's stomach turn. You like your ice cream liquified? Try a frappe, a shake, a float or an ice cream soda.

There are as many ways to eat ice cream as there are eaters. Children seem to prefer ice cream cones, licking the scoops as they melt in their hands. Older, daintier eaters never order anything but a dish, one scoop, and eat their portions by the half spoonful. The purist eats his ice cream plain, perhaps tasting an occasional hot fudge sundae or ice cream soda. Others try every flavor and combination, employing every nut, bit, bar, jimmie and sprinkle that leaves the purist so cold. Everyone likes ice cream with birthday cake and not many people will refuse apple pie a la mode.*

As the "do-it-yourself" movement reached the ice cream

world, people acquired ice cream freezers, complete with manual crank and wooden bucket, so that they could make true, home-made ice cream. The process of making ice cream is rather long. First, you must mix the ingredients and chill them for a prescribed amount of time. After that, you pour the mixture into your ice cream freezer, place the freezer in the bucket, and then crank and crank and crank until the mixture hardens - all the while making sure there is enough ice and rock salt* to keep the freezer cold. As the cranking can be both tiring and tiresome, it is desirable to have several strong, patient arms around. Next, you need to transfer the ice cream from the freezer to containers before the crankers have eaten it all. Finally, someone has to do the very anticlimatic chore of cleaning up the mess.

Despite the increased popularity of homemade ice cream, the great majority of ice cream is bought at the parlor or market. In a curious turning of the phrase, some ice cream parlors advertise "homemade ice cream;" that really means: "ice cream made on the premises." There is also "all natural" ice cream, "honey-sweetened" ice cream, "original" ice cream and more. In the final analysis, the only way to know whether a particular parlor or manufacturer's ice cream is any good is to try it. The same is true for flavors. A warning, though: you could spend the rest of your life trying different flavors of ice cream. In this eater's opinion, it is better to find a few you really like and stick to them.

*<u>a la mode</u>: with ice cream - commonly used in connection with

pies (i.e. apple pie a la mode)

*rock salt: with rock salt added to the ice, the freezer is kept colder longer than it would be without the salt. The rock salt actually becomes colder than the ice, thus preserving the ice for a longer period of time.

At The Shore

Waves slap the granite then retreat, leaving beards of barnacles and exposed seaweed. The water foams and hisses, gathers itself in another breaker to hit the boulders again and spray shoots up from the contact. On one large rock that is separated from the rest of the shore, white and gray seagulls mingle with black cormorants, their beaks pointing into the wind, stick legs planted on the white-splotched island. Occasionally one of the gulls cries or takes off in a frenzy of flapping, or a cormorant swoops from his perch and flies close to the water's surface, the tips of its wings sometimes touching the water.

The low gurgle of an engine cuts through the crash of water and gull-cries and a smell of diesel exhaust is carried by the salt air. The boat is white, stubby and high at the bow, flat, low and wide behind the glassed in wheel house.* A man in a plaid shirt and yellow overalls steers the boat toward a series of striped buoys. Alongside each one, the boat idles as the man hauls the buoy, then the line and finally the lobster pot out of the water. He rests the trap on the boat's gunnel* and cleans it out, paying no attention to the cloud of flapping, screeching gulls that hover above the stern. The man chucks a fish caught in the trap overboard and half of the gulls dive after it, their beaks poking into the water and their wings beating and splashing. They are left behind temporarily by the boat and the other gulls that continue on to the next buoy.

The dance is repeated, accompanied by the put-put of the motor and the gulls' calls, until the man has finished his rounds. Then he opens up his engine, the gurgle becomes a throaty roar and the stubby bow rears up as the boat plows through the water. The gulls increase their speed and follow. They stay just behind and above the stern wherever the boat goes, as though an unseen line connects them to it.

*Wheel House: An enclosed area on the deck of a boat from which the boat is steered.

*Gunnel: The upper edge of a boat's side (also called "gunwhale").

The Gardener

It is late in the day and the slanting light illuminates only half of the flower garden, an enormous beech tree blocks the sun from the other half. The reds, oranges, pinks, yellows, greens, blues, purples, violets and whites of the blossoms are paler in the sunlit half, darker under the beech tree's shade. Though the garden is in the city, it is set back from the street and quiet, save for an occasional bird call, the hissing of cicadas and the industrious buzzing of bees. No person is visible.

Wait. In a bed of tall red zinnias and yellow marigolds there is some movement. Among the fat, lit-up blossoms are shoots of yellow-gray hair, growing from a head bowed toward the earth.

The gardener stands up and mops the glistening furrows of his forehead with a plaid handkerchief. In his free hand is a muddy trowel and at his feet is a watering pot. He stands still for a moment and looks over his garden, for once not thinking of the dead geranium blossoms that should be picked, the boxwood hedge that needs pruning, the dahlias which need staking, the watering, hoeing, mowing and weeding, the work . . . No. Instead, as though he'd never looked at it at quite this time of day and in quite this way, in all his years in this place, he simply takes in the garden's splendor; the different shades of color the light and shadow produce, the preciseness of the markings on every petal on every flower on every plant in every

bed, the burrowing of a black and yellow bee into a bright red snapdragon, the stillness and peace.

Then his gaze rests on himself: from his workboots, to his soiled, blue, baggy trousers, to his matching blue work-shirt, unbuttoned halfway down because of the heat. He looks at his hand with its deep lines etched through the callous, fingers crooked from years of pulling weeds and holding wooden-handled tools, and long fingernails for snipping dead blossoms, underneath which is the soil he has worked for so long. The gardener notices the gray tangle of hair on his chest and stomach and puts his palm flat against it.

The feet of hand over bellybutton snaps him out of his brief, rare introspection and inwardly he scolds himself. He looks around to make sure no one has been watching; across two rows of purple fountain grass and African daisies, the gardener's shadow stretches. He chuckles and a fanciful idea strikes him. He places the watering pot so that its shadow creates a dark stripe which separates the row of fountain grass from the row of daisies. He jumps over the pot and watches his shadow traverse the purple feathers of one row and the red, spike-like petals of the other. He laughs out loud and continues to jump back and forth, watching the colors lighten and darken, according to his shadow's movement.

"Harry. What on earth are you doing?" It is Mrs. Snodgrass from the church. The gardener, in his play, forgot that she was coming to pick up flowers for that Sunday's service. His jumping comes to a halt. Slowly, he wipes his brow with

his handkerchief, picks up the watering pot, grabs the trowel and walks over to the astonished Mrs. Snodgrass.

"Jus' testin' out something'." he explains. I'll go get her flowers; they're all ready."

Moving

The idea of moving from an apartment in a city by a lake to another in a city by the ocean intrigued us. The distance between the two places was over 200 miles but, in another sense, it was far greater than that. We had lived in the city by the lake for a number of years, knew it well and had a lot of friends. We also had jobs there. There, we were secure. Yet, we longed for a change; we believed that we had to leave our city if we were to experience new things and expand our awareness of the world. At the same time, we were nervous about leaving our familiar home to venture into strange territory. The new city represented both an opportunity for growth and a potential for hurt.

We packed our belongings into our small car and a rented trailer and left the city by the lake. Several friends waved goodbye to us, promising to come visit once we were settled. As we drove through the city toward the freeway that would lead us to our destination, we saw the buildings, streets and parks that we had come to know so well and even had taken for granted. Leaving them behind was almost as hard as leaving our friends.

The city by the ocean was as new to us as the city by the lake was familiar. Even with a map to find our way, we still missed turns and were confused by directions. The buildings were strange, the streets and parks had names we didn't recognize, there was an unknown smell in the air. The city by the

ocean was large and not a single person in it would know us, save for the man who had rented the apartment to us. He had met us once.

Our new apartment was empty. Carrying everything from the car and trailer up the flight of stairs to it was a struggle. Then we needed to arrange furniture, make a desk and bookcase, put our bed together and decorate the walls. We sanded, painted, nailed, glued, tacked and cleaned. The work to make a home out of the apartment exhausted us yet satisfied us. It gave us at least one familiar place.

We found that we had no identity in this city: no telephone, no bank checks with our name printed on them, the wrong driver's license and the wrong plates on the car, no job, no friends. The work to establish our identity was as difficult as and more taxing than the work of establishing our home. It involved waiting in lines and filling out forms, explaining ourselves to clerks who had never seen us before and probably never would again. Our lack of employment seemed to make people suspicious. When we told them we were new in town, however, a smile usually appeared along with a willingness to help. Strangers need friends.

We had had enough of forms and work and we drove to a beach not far from the city. It was sunny and windy. Seagulls flapped their wings into the wind then gave up and glided with it. We felt warm sand at our feet as we walked, looking for colorful shells and stones and smooth glass. Out to sea, our

eyes followed the deep blue water until it met the bright sky, forming a perfectly straight line that was interrupted only by an occasional sailboat or lobster boat. We ran into the waves and dove, then hurried out. Long after the wind had dried us, leaving salt streaks on our skin, we could feel the chill of the ocean, renewing us.

Food Shopping at a Co-op*

A food cooperative is unlike a grocery store, a market or a supermarket in a number of ways. It offers an alternative to more conventional food stores in terms of philosophy, environment and finance. To begin with, a co-op is a non-profit organization; it is not owned by one person or corporation that hires employees and hopes for a good return on its investment. Rather, a food co-op is owned by its members, people who work there and shop there. To be a member of a co-op is to be a part-time worker there as well; it is possible to shop at a co-op and not work there, but in that case the shopper is not a part of the cooperative and hence does not enjoy the same low prices for the co-op's products as do the members. Some co-ops ask that its members work a certain number of hours, others coordinate members' work time with the amount of food they buy (i.e. three hours of work per $250 spent on food). Whatever the system, it is essential for a co-op's operation that all of its members help out. This "free" labor, in conjunction with a certain number of paid stuff, is what keeps the prices of the products down.

Someone used to shopping at a "regular" food store will notice immediately upon entering a food co-op a great difference between the two types of stores. Whereas the former displays aisle after aisle and shelf upon shelf of pre-packaged food, the latter has bins and buckets and jars on wooden shelves, and provides scoops, bags and scales for the shopper to help

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himself. For liquid items such as honey, oil and syrup, the co-op shopper brings his own containers. Except for a few items, such as cheese and canned goods, which are impractical to sell in bulk, the shopper does all his own packaging.

The work of scooping, pouring and weighing goods requires that a shopper spend more time at a co-op than other food stores and helps to create the particular atmosphere of a food co-op. It is not uncommon for a member to ask a worker to restock a shelf or a bin to help him with a stubborn spigot to a keg of honey. By necessity as well as by commonality, shoppers at a co-op talk to and help each other; by virtue of their time spent working and shopping there, they get to know the place well: its products, its staff and its members. Going to the co-op is, therefore, a social experience.

Another difference between the conventional market and the food co-op is the kind of food provided. Co-ops have long been characterized as alternative food stores; in other words, they provide food that is not available at the regular market. "Alternative foods" include whole grains and products made from whole grains (i.e. buckwheat flour, whole wheat spaghetti), exotic cereals such as cous-cous, unrefined honeys, organic produce (produce which is grown without the use of pesticides), a great variety of herbs and spices and other uncommon foods. Co-ops carry "normal" foods as well, although many still do not stock meat products. Co-ops should not be confused with health food stores; whereas the latter sell food and vitamin

pills which the proprietor deems "good for you," the co-op sells that which the membership desires.

Finally, a food co-op is not just a food store. It is a political and educational organization as well. This is reflected in its rejection of the market economy's way of buying and selling food, its provision of many different kinds of food and its numerous posters, notices and messages concerning health care and political activism. The food co-operative is an example of alternative thinking as much as it is a store of alternative food, a concept which is expressed in its popular motto: "Food for people, not for profit."

*"Co-op" is a shortened form of "cooperative," which means: "an enterprise that is collectively owned and operated for mutual benefit" (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language). Both terms are used in this text.

The Bar

Danny's was the bar my friends and I went to. A jazz band named "Krazy" almost always played there; being regulars, we came to know the group and their music well. We also knew the waitresses, bartenders and other regulars. For awhile, we felt as though we owned the place, partly because Danny, the owner, liked us so much and bought us drinks often.

The best thing about Danny's was the friendly atmosphere. I could count on seeing nice people there, people who would ask me about my job, my apartment, my love life. If I was short on money, they didn't charge me for a beer; when Krazy saw me in the crowd, they'd dedicate a song to me. Usually it was a bluesy number with lots of piano, because they knew I loved piano music, and Slim, the piano player, could really hammer out those chords. Most of all, however, it was being with friends that made Danny's special. There were four of us: Harold, a tall, skinny guy with buck teeth and a smile you could fit a drumstick into; Murph, an Irish bulldog with freckles everywhere, even in his eyes, it seemed; Karl, six feet four, 250 pounds and gentle as the sax solo on "Bluette" and me, Charlie. I guess the most distinguishing thing about me is that I have one leg. My friends called me "Hop-a-long" but that didn't bother me because we understood each other; Slim, the piano player, even wrote a song called "Hop-a-long's Waltz," in my honor.

Four or five nights a week for almost two years we met at

Danny's. It was a ritual. Harold was always the first one there and I was always the last. When they ribbed me for being late, I said, "if you had only one leg, you'd take twice as long to get here too." We always sat at the same table, slightly to the left of the stage and behind the dance floor. The waitress always brought us a pitcher of beer when she saw us at the table; she didn't need to ask how much. We smoked cigarettes, drank beer, shot the breeze and listened to Krazy.

We were the first to hear that Danny was selling the bar. I think Danny was a little ashamed to tell us, as though he thought he was betraying our friendship. I still remember him coming to our table, asking if he could join us and not looking us in the eye. Krazy was playing and, sitting across the table from him, I couldn't hear what he was saying. Danny had to repeat the news three times, each time a little louder. The third time he waved the cigarette smoke away from the air in front of him, as if it were blocking his words. It must have been hard for him.

After that night, we went twice more. The last time was a big party with Danny buying drinks and Krazy playing past the curfew. Despite all the fanfare, it was a bad party because everyone knew it was the last. I went by Danny's a few days later to have one more look. There was a big white poster with the words: "Computerland Coming Soon;" it was taped to the window and hid the name, "Danny's." I made the mistake of going inside. Everything was the same: our table hadn't been moved and the stage looked ready for Krazy. It was strange,

though. There wasn't any music, any smoke in the air, any talking, any action at the bar. I'd spent thousands of hours in this place and I felt as though I'd never seen it before. Then I realized that I hadn't seen it before like this, empty, in the daylight. Something within me told me to get out of there fast. I was seeing something not meant to be seen. You had to climb two steps to get to the door and, in my hurry, I stumbled. It was funny: the only time I ever fell on those steps was in broad daylight, not having drunk a thing. I picked up my cane and hobbled out.

Television

Television's impact on modern society cannot be overstated. It has affected the thinking and habits of millions of people, thereby influencing sociological patterns, interpersonal relations and intellectual, moral and political behavior. Slogans from TV advertisements become widely used expressions; TV characters move into our daily lives; TV news brings us war, celebration and catastrophe from the four corners of the world. It seems there is nowhere a TV camera cannot go these days, from a football team's locker room to a spaceship on the moon. The TV viewer can see the wedding of a royal couple and the funeral of an archbishop, a speech of a political leader and an interview with the man on the street. One second he can be in London, England, the next in Hollywood, California; another flick of the wrist and he is at The Great Wall of China. TV has made the world small and accessible to anyone with a set.

This leads to a question to which there is no single answer: Is TV good or bad? A parent who has been working all day and needs to cook dinner for several children, without having time to tend to them, counts the "electronic babysitter" as a blessing. Yet those same children may be adversely affected by the amount and content of TV they watch. TV's quick pace may hinder their development of an attention span longer than a few seconds. Without the required concentration, how can they learn to read and write? Furthermore, the violence they see on

their favorite TV show could fool them into thinking that a punch in the nose is alright or that a knock on the head doesn't really hurt. Perhaps a violent scene on TV will suggest to the children an acceptable activity in the real world. Don't laugh; a few years ago a boy pleaded innocent to murder, blaming a TV show for giving him the idea to commit it.

Children aren't the only casualties of television. The regular adult viewer is a passive target as well. He sits in front of a TV every weekend, watching sporting events instead of getting exercise. His imagination is assaulted by "prime time" TV shows that numb him with insulting jokes and absurd story lines. He is told what to laugh at, what to be concerned about, how to dress, what to drink, where to go, when to sleep, how to live. No credit is given to him for his individuality. He need not use his mind. Neglected, it withers.

There are redeeming features to television. Some stations do not air commercial advertisements and attempt to broadcast educational, cultural, artistic and musical programs. Commercial TV occasionally airs thought-provoking news specials or documentaries. Important political, athletic and social events (i.e. the inauguration of a president, the Olympics, an enormous peace demonstration) are transmitted to a large segment of the world. At its best, TV uses the immediacy and power of its visual images to inform, educate and even enlighten. The camera does not lie. It has transmitted truths about dishonest politicians, unjust wars, natural catastrophes, the sufferings and successes of people all over the globe more

effectively than any other media - and to a much larger audience. It can be argued that as a result of TV broadcasts and the awareness they have given to millions of viewers, much beneficial social change and progress has resulted. If a viewer is selective, he may be able to sift through the everyday fare and watch a few quality productions; if he is lucky, he may stumble across a program that is profoundly valuable to him and his understanding of the world.

The Mall

Cars jammed the street: parked, double-parked, stopped, starting, passing, from the south end to the north. Pedestrians crossing the street interrupted the flow of traffic, exacerbating the already crowded road conditions. At rush hours, cars idled bumper to bumper and their drivers became impatient. To vent their frustration, they honked their horns and maneuvered their vehicles to get ahead, cutting off the paths of other cars and further slowing the circulation. The air on the street was intolerable at these times and pedestrians hurried from store to store to avoid breathing it too long. The street, the main retail district in the city, was unhealthy, crowded and noisy.

The city decided to construct a pedestrian mall to replace the busy street. Bulldozers, backhoes and workmen wielding jackhammers and pickaxes ripped up the street. They stripped away the pavement and sidewalks until there was nothing but dirt outside the stores and restaurants. Plywood boards served as sidewalks; the earth movers and jackhammers made conversation impossible; dust swirled everywhere. The destruction of the street drove people away; shoppers stopped coming and several stores went out of business.

The building of the mall finally began. Gravel then sand was spread over the dirt. Section by section, bricklayers laid granite curbs and rectangular patterns of orange, red, purple and brown bricks. Landscapers planted locust trees in

rows and petunias in big, round flower pots and placed several, giant boulders here and there on the bricks. Glass awnings and arching streetlights that ran the length of either side of the street were constructed. Artists and artisans put the finishing touches on the mall: fountain-shaped waste-baskets, wooden benches, sculptures, welded hoops for bicycle racks, phone stands, cylindrical information booths and brightly colored banners which criss-crossed above the mall, waving in the wind.

People came in droves. Cafes and shops multiplied. Vendors sold their wares from carts and performers played music, gave puppet shows, juggled and did magic tricks. Children climbed on the boulders and through the bicycle racks; bicyclists hitched their bikes to the hoops; shoppers streamed in and out of stores; couples strolled aimlessly; teenagers smoked cigarettes and flirted; drunks slept on the benches. A person quietly sat at a table in an outdoor cafe, sipping a drink and observing the mall and the people passing by. The mall was as busy as the street had ever been, but instead of honking there was talking, instead of engines idling there was walking and instead of exhaust there was the smell of food.

The Dream

The highly respected professor lectured from his podium. His voice boomed with authority and his manner suggested that he wasn't often corrected. He was articulate, witty, completely knowledgeable of his subject. Row upon row of metal, fold-up chairs were filled with men, women, even children of every race, nationality and religious persuasion. They wrote down almost every word in their notebooks, careful not to miss one significant utterance. Their faces glowed with reverence for this man whose words were so precious to them. They would go home, read and reread the notes which they now took, so that they could continue to learn from him. The professor ended his speech and thanked the audience for its attention. There was a moment of absolute silence - without a jostled chair, a complaining child, or a faint whisper - that seemed to last an eternity. First one set of hands started to clap, then several others and soon the entire hall rang with applause as the crowd stood in unison to cheer their hero. Then the highly respected professor woke up.

The alarm clock was ringing and his father stood over the bed, clapping his hands loudly. "You're awake. Hallelujah. That alarm has been ringing a good five minutes. Get up. Get up or you'll miss the bus." His father charged out of the room.

He turned the alarm off and sat up, wiping the sleep from his eyes. The floor was cold. From downstairs came the sound of his mother fixing breakfast; he heard the sizzle of a frying

pan and smelled bacon and coffee. His father's energetic strides from bedroom to bathroom to bedroom, then down the stairs to the kitchen, made the whole house shake. From below came the man's booming voice: "Are you awake up there?"

He was now. He walked to the mirrow and saw a fourteen year-old, pale white, skinny boy with a crewcut and a bony chest. He stroked his smooth face, cleared his throat and, in a small, cracking voice, pronounced this day Monday, October third. Then the highly respected professor searched for some underwear, wondering how he would explain his unfinished math assignment to Mrs. Murphy.

Hitchhiking

Hitchhiking is not fun. I came to this conclusion on several separate occasions, having waited at some desolate place for several hours, having walked miles on hot pavement with a heavy pack, having breathed in diesel exhaust from trucks whose wheels kicked sand in my eyes and whose noise threatened me with premature deafness. There is a certain allure to the wide open highway and to the sense of adventure which travelling by thumb gives. There is no cheaper way of getting from one place to another. A hitchhiker may meet a kind stranger who will offer to buy him dinner or let him use his shower. He may meet a fascinating person or ride in a great car. Over the long haul, however, hitchhiking amounts to anxiety more than adventure, to loneliness more than good company, to frustration more than luck, and to sore feet more than plush bucket seats.

Having been a hitchhiker myself, I sympathize with those who must use their thumb to travel. That does not mean, however, that I always pick them up. Such is the difference in perspective from opposite sides of the steering wheel. Due to a variety of reasons: fear, laziness, dislike, indifference - to name a few - most drivers won't pick up hitchhikers. Some won't even acknowledge the presence of hitchhikers by the side of the road. They will stare straight ahead or pretent to be searching for something in the front seat as they drive by. Others will look angrily at the hitchhiker, as though they were

condemning him for cluttering up the highway. Still others are simply curious, seeing the hitchhiker as a kind of exotic creature. "Why would anyone do that?" They seem to be asking. Occasionally there are mean drivers who not only won't pick up the hitchhiker but will scare him as well, either by swerving the car towards him, sending him an obscene gesture or yelling at him.

The veteran hitchhiker prides himself on his ability to predict which cars will stop. Generally speaking, beat-up vans, rusty pick-ups, old, imported cars and oddly painted school busses are a better bet than other vehicles. The kind of driver also has a lot to do with the hitchhiker's luck. Single women, mothers with children, anyone in a new, expensive car and elderly couples will almost certainly not stop for a hitchhiker. People who have hitchhiked in the past but now have "wheels" are unpredictable - sometimes they will, sometimes they won't. I fall into this last category myself.

A number of considerations affect my decision to pick up or drive by the hitchhiker. Some have nothing to do with the hitchhiker himself: my mood, the amount of room in the car, the haste with which I am trying to get to where I am going, my familiarity (or lack of it) with the road, for example. Other considerations have everything to do with the hitchhiker: his appearance, choice of location and thumbing style, for example. Assuming that my personal considerations are taken care of, that I am ready and willing to pick up a hitchhiker, here are a few rules a hitchhiker should follow to get me to

stop for him. He should present his thumb clearly and robustly and well before the car nears him. He should face the driver (I will not stop for someone whose back is turned to me and whose thumb sticks out from his hip). If at all possible, he should pick a hitchhiking spot with a wide breakdown lane or parking area and with a clear view of traffic. Also, the hitchhiker should remain stationary - it's hard to stop for a moving target. Finally, his appearance is of great importance. I am more likely to stop for someone who looks clean and organized than for someone who looks like the last hobo. That means a hitchhiker's shirt should be tucked in, his shoelaces tied and his hat on straight. The worth of a cardboard sign indicating the place to which the hitchhiker wants to go is debateable. If he uses one, a "please" or a smile on it can only help. Hitchhikers should never travel in great numbers. Solo thumbers and couples (a male and a female) have the best luck.

I once vowed that were I ever to own an automobile, I would pick up every hitchhiker I saw. That was an unrealistic promise. In fact, I doubt any driver would make it. The best the hitchhiker can hope for is to be at the right place at the right time. Once there, he controls his own destiny.

Man's Best Friend

My friend Charlie had a three-legged dog. He called her, "Gloria." Gloria wasn't a pretty animal. She was a short haired mutt, with a little of about ten breeds in her. Her ears were pointy and too short for her head, her face a starved wolf's face, long and bony. To look at you, Gloria had to turn her head to one side because only the green eye could see. The other eye was a beautiful, light blue but was as useless as her little stump of a tail. Her fur was dry and wiry and to pat her was like running a hand through dry crabgrass. Of course the first thing you noticed about Gloria was her missing hind leg. She walked and even ran alright without it, but her gait was crooked and she couldn't go in a straight line. Another disadvantage was that she couldn't reach certain parts of her right side with a paw, so Charlie had to scratch behind her right ear and along that side for her. People couldn't understand why Charlie would keep a dog like that, much less scratch its fleabites.

Charlie was a misfit himself. He was normal enough: whole, sane, intelligent, but he gave you the feeling that he didn't much like people. He and I were on the same landscaping crew and became a team, mostly because I was the only one who didn't try to get him to talk or kid him about his dog. We spent whole days alone together, planting trees, building retaining walls, putting in lawns, often not saying more than was absolutely necessary to do the job. Charlie would say more

to Gloria, who always came to work with him, than to me. At first, I was insulted by this treatment. I thought Charlie was strange and his relationship with this ugly dog unnatural. But after being with them for a few days, I saw that Charlie was a hard, honest worker and that Gloria was a well trained, obedient dog who never got in the way. Charlie wasn't weird and Gloria wasn't ugly.

I never knew how old Gloria was and I'm not sure Charlie did either. All he told me about her was that she was a stray and the first dog he had ever liked. Charlie lived alone in the woods and Gloria was his only companion. I see now that that dog was the best possible companion for Charlie, even better than a human. She was loyal, faithful and true to him, always by his side and never complaining. She protected his cabin and gave him someone to spend his nights with. A good dog is an intimate friend who makes no unnecessary demands on that friendship. How many people have that quality?

One morning they didn't show up for work. We had a big job and Charlie was never late, so I asked the foreman if I could drive out to Charlie's house to see what the problem was. When I arrived, I didn't see or hear anyone. I called their names, knocked on the door, looked in the back where the woodpile was and got no response. Then, just as I had given up finding them, I heard the sound of a spade shoved into dirt, coming from the woods beyond the woodpile. I followed a narrow path to a small clearing. There was Charlie, in his work clothes, digging a hole in the ground. Gloria was lying

next to the hole.

"Charlie, Gloria, I've been looking for you," I said. Then he looked at me. His eyes were red and wet and his lips trembled. He looked down at Gloria and I knew what the problem was. We hugged each other, arms used to hefting oak trees nearly squeezing the life out of one another. Then I went to the truck to get another spade and helped Charlie dig a nice grave in the soft, damp ground.

Van Gogh's Irises

Green stalks stuffed into the pitcher's mouth bend from the weight of the unruly blossoms. Several flowers are mostly brown, some are still enclosed in fat buds, most, however, are huge, rich, dark and bright explosions of blue. Their color seeps into everything that surrounds them: the thin, stalk-green rectangular table on which the pitcher rests, the square, dingy white wall behind them, the white pitcher, tinged with green as well, and the stalks. Dark blue lines individuate every object, separating white wall from green table, pitcher from background, iris blade from iris blade, blossom from blossom, creating shapes. The pitcher is composed of curves, its handle a sinuous "S," its body a round belly. From it, stalks thrust in strong, straight lines that become lost in the squiggly confusion of flowers or reappear in bent blades whose soft points fade into the wall. Yellow tips of blades identify a source of light which slants into the pitcher from one side. The light brightens the center of the pitcher's belly, highlights yellow streaks in the green table, and turns exposed petals light blue. It strikes an edge of the pitcher's handle, bleaching away the iris colors along that one, narrow plane.

The painter's presence is as large as the subject. His brushstrokes are obvious evidence of the act of creation. They are long sweeps, short stabs, wide and thin, moving in every direction. In places, the artist has used so much paint that the stroke makes a ridge, rising from the canvas as though it

was sculpted. The still life vibrates with the exhuberance of its creator. The pitcher, wall and table are as full of movement as the irises. The irises rise and tumble from the pitcher of the artist, alive, unborn and dead.

In The Mountains

His legs worked in a regular rhythm, kicking the skis forward in short glides, shifting his weight from one ski to the other, propelling him up to the narrow gulch. His arms worked in conjunction with his legs, left arm moving with right leg, right arm with left leg, planting pole tips for balance and power. Short breaths produced small clouds of steam, sweat dampened his hair. He wore a green chamois shirt, blue corduroy knickers and red knicker socks. Red suspenders held up his pants. The kicking and gliding flashed these colors against the bright snow of the slope.

The chugging came to a stop at the top of a rise. The skier ran a chamois sleeve over his wet forehead then reached back to dry the back of his neck, where he felt little icicles in his hair. He unstrapped the poles from his hands, slid the backpack off his shoulders and found a plastic canteen. The ice cold water hurt his teeth. He rolled up his sleeves, unbuttoned the second and third buttons of his shirt, put the canteen back in his pack and lifted the pack onto his shoulders, slid his mittens on and looped the pole straps over them. He looked back at his tracks: they were two parallel lines punctuated by pole holes, winding, rising and falling with the contours of the gulch, the only break in the smooth, white powder. He took a long, deep breath, fixed his eyes to the crotch of the gulch, and pushed a ski forward.

The snow became finer and drier the higher he climbed and

his skis collected clumps of snow. He took his skis off and sank to his knees, then scraped the new snow and old wax off the ski bottoms. He applied a harder wax and rubbed it into the dark wood with the heel of his hand and, when he tried to wash his hands with snow, the scrubbing melted the crystals without taking away the stickiness. His hands were red with cold. He cupped them and blew into them, then blew into his mittens. While the insides of the mittens still held hot breath, he shoved his hands into them.

At the pass, for the first time all day, he encountered wind. It dried the sweat from his face and neck and froze his damp hair before he could find his wool hat. It came from the canyon on the other side of the pass. The canyon was large, gently sloped and full of trees. Below the skier's perch it spread out in a wide bowl, its forests a dark green carpet. Looking up, the skier flew over the tree tops to the great pink mountains on the horizon, as far as he could see. He sailed over ridges that jutted into the light blue sky, over frozen lakes and rivers, snowfields, rock outcroppings, whole, immense ranges painted orange and pink by the late afternoon sun. He came full circle and spotted the road that led to the foot of the gulch he had climbed. The road was as thick as his finger. The cars on it were noiseless dots and the few houses along it were fragile, at the mercy of the mountains. The skier lived down there.

His feet were cold. He kicked the snow off of his ski boots and wiggled his toes. His face was burnt from the wind

and his earlobes ached from the whistling cold. He slid off his perch and schussed carefully toward the gulch.

Suggestions for Using the Texts in the ESL Classroom

1. Comprehension

Identification of plot/theme, characters, issues and situations - the "whos," "whats," and "wheres" of the text are obviously a prerequisite for further analysis and discussion. Therefore, a good place to start is by asking the students basic questions, i.e. how many characters are there in the story? Who is the main character? Where is the story taking place? What is the issue in the text? What is being described?

Once it is clear everyone has reached a basic understanding of a text, certain activities can be used to promote and demonstrate fuller comprehension. Three activities:

A. Miming: Students volunteer to act out a paragraph or section of the text using only gestures.

1) student(s) go to front of room (where they can be seen by everyone) - class may decide whether to have one mime at a time or several at once

2) As teacher reads text, student(s) portray the action with gestures

3) spectators compare different "performances"

B. Drama: Students draw pictures depicting physical setting, events or characters in the text.

1) students draw pictures from a specific text

2) students split into pairs and explain their pictures to one another

3) back in large group, volunteers show pictures and explain them to class

-Many variations are possible here. For instance, the class could try to guess what the drawing illustrates and then hear the drawer explain it. Another possibility

would be the teacher telling the class to focus on one character, event or place and then to compare their drawings of the same subject.

2. Discussion

a) The class members relate the text to their own lives in a class discussion, in small groups or in individual writing assignments. Some questions to get them started:

-Do you relate to/like/dislike the main character in the story? Have you ever been in a situation similar to the one described in the text? What thoughts or emotions does the text evoke in you? Do you have an opinion on the subject discussed in the essay? What part of the text affects you the most? Why? Do the people and ideas and values in this piece really matter? Do they add anything to our information about life? If you were to make this piece more meaningful (or less meaningful) how would you change it?

b) The class investigates the author's style.

1) Students circle parts of speech (i.e. verbs, adjectives, pronouns), grammatical functions (i.e. clauses, conjunctions, punctuation) singled out by teacher.

2) class discussed quality and quantity of circled words and phrases. Some questions to ask: Does the author repeat certain parts of speech/ grammatical functions often? To what effect? Why does he use a lot of adjectives in one text and hardly any at all in another? Does the author string a lot of long sentences together or does he mix short ones in with the long? Is there a discernible rhythm to his writing?

Other questions for discussion or written assignment:

-Does the title prepare the reader for what is to come?

-Is it a summation/main idea of the text?

-Does the first sentence grab you? Is it important that the author attract your attention immediately?

-Is the ending satisfactory? Satisfying?

-How evident is the author's presence? Does he ever speak to the reader directly or does he let the text "speak" for itself?

-Are there aspects of the text which give away the author's culture? Is the text culturally specific?

-Is the text better read aloud or silently? Why?

3. Composition

Students write themselves. Five activities:

A. Students finish texts

1) teacher reads text aloud but stops a sentence or two before the end.

2) teacher instructs students to write the ending to the text.

3) students break into pairs and discuss endings, giving a rationale for them.

4) back in large group, students volunteer to read their endings.

5) teacher reads author's ending.

B. Pair or group writing

1) teacher assigns pairs/groups a story or essay, addressing concerns similar to those in the texts.

2) pairs/groups write own piece.

3) pairs/groups trade pieces, comment on each other's.

4) pairs/groups revise own pieces, hand them in to teacher.

5) teacher corrects pieces, discusses them with group.

C. Chain writing

1) class decides whether it will write fiction, descriptive or journalistic essay.

2) class comes up with a title.

3) piece of blank paper starts around room, with individual students or pairs writing one sentence each. Time limit established by teacher.

4) paper goes through class.

5) teacher writes entire text on blackboard or dittoes it.

6) teacher and class go over text for corrections.

D. Free writing

1) teacher tells students to choose a word, a phrase or an