

The Sierra Wave

Joe's home was high up on a hill.
He and Steve sat outside and looked out
over Los Angeles. Joe told him about
hang-gliding in the *Sierras*¹ - catching
5 the Sierra Wave, a *thermal*² that could
take you up so high you had to carry an
oxygen bottle. He showed Steve a picture
of himself with the tops of the mountains
far below him. The moment Steve saw
10 the picture, he knew he had to learn.

Joe gave Steve lessons on the
beach. Steve ran down a *dune*³, holding
the glider. As in his dreams, his steps got
15 longer and longer until he left the ground.
At first the feeling frightened him; but he
learned to enjoy it. Of course it was
dangerous. But in danger, you learned
something about yourself.

Joe decided it was time for Steve to
fly solo. So early one Sunday morning
they put the hang-glider into Joe's pickup
and drove to the beach. Along the top of
25 the cliff there was a rolling cylinder of
air. If you stayed in it, you could fly a
mile or two down the beach.

Steve lifted the glider and *hooked*⁴
30 in. Then he ran forward until his feet left
the ground. He moved his body to the left
and turned slowly to the south.

Now he was flying along the coast.
35 He was beginning to lose his fear. He
watched his shadow move along over
rooftops, streets, telephone lines. Steve
felt sorry for the people on the ground.
They were all kept in their ordered paths,
40 like the cars following the streets.

On the way back, a sea bird flew
beside him for a time. Then he saw Joe's
pickup and his heart began to beat faster
again. Landing was the most difficult
45 part. He came down to the ground, hitting
so hard he fell to his knees.

"How long was I up?" he asked.

"Six minutes."

50 It had seemed much longer.

In June, Joe started talking about
taking a trip up north, so Steve could do
something really exciting. They drove



55 north in Joe's pickup until they reached the
Sierras.

The wind woke Steve early. He stood
and looked at the mountains, feeling today
60 would be the day he had been waiting for.

The mountain top was a dry world of
*rock*⁵ and bright sunlight.
"Maybe you'd better not try for a thermal yet,"
65 Joe said. "Just take a flight along the beach."

"All right," Steve said.

"Then you won't need the oxygen bottle. Do
you want the *parachute*⁶?"

"No, I won't need the parachute."

70 Steve hooked into the glider. Then he felt
the warm air on his face. When it caught the
glider he *lifted off*⁷ into space. A mile ahead,
he could see several gliders, and flew towards
75 them. It was a thermal. He knew it the moment
he felt it push him up. Forgetting everything,
he gave himself to it completely.

When the cold began to bite Steve pulled
80 the control *bar*⁸ into his *stomach*⁹. But the
glider did not *respond*¹⁰. The thermal was too
strong. He tried everything, but the glider
continued climbing. He looked down. He was
higher than the highest mountains now. He
85 could see down all along the valley. But
something was wrong. He saw things as if
through the wrong end of a telescope. In great
detail, far away, in a circle of black. He had
flown so high he no longer had enough
90 oxygen. He was losing *consciousness*¹¹. But
he could see so far, so much, that he felt a joy
stronger than he had ever known.

Hanging in the sun, he felt tears running
95 down his face, and knew only that he was
flying ...

by William Hauptman

Words and what they mean

1 <i>Sierras</i>	<i>also called Sierra Nevada:</i> a high mountain range in California
2 <i>thermal</i>	a large column of hot air rising from the ground
3 <i>dune</i>	a small hill of sand beside a beach or in a desert
4 <i>to hook in</i>	to fasten something with a hook
5 <i>rock</i>	a large piece of stone
6 <i>parachute</i>	equipment made of a large piece of special cloth which is used by someone who jumps from a plane, in order to make them fall slowly and safely to the ground
7 <i>to lift off</i>	to leave the ground
8 <i>bar</i>	a straight stick often made of metal
9 <i>stomach</i>	part of the body where the food goes first
10 <i>to respond</i>	<i>here:</i> to react to something that has been done before
11 <i>consciousness</i>	awake, thinking and knowing of what is happening around you

Task

1. What did Joe tell his friend Steve one day?
2. What did Steve feel when he saw the pictures Joe had taken?
3. Where did Steve make his first gliding experience?
4. What were Steve's thoughts when he was flying along the coast?
5. What did Steve know when the wind woke him that morning in the Sierras?
6. What happened to Steve when he followed the other gliders?
7. How did Steve feel when he was rising in the thermal?

Notes

Additional assignments

1. Is it clear to you how the story ends? Say what you think happens next.
2. What mistakes does Steve make when he goes hang-gliding in the Sierras?
3. Comment on what Steve does in the end. (How does he feel? Try to explain why.)