i was talking to a moth
the other evening
he was trying to break into
an electric light bulb

and fry himself on the wires

why do you fellows
pull this stunt i asked him
because it is the conventional\(^1\) thing for moths or why

if that had been an uncovered
candle instead of an electric
light bulb you would
now be a small unsightly cinder\(^2\)
have you no sense

plenty of it he answered
but at times we get tired
of using it
we get bored with the routine

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1. **conventional**: customary; usual; accepted.
2. **cinder**: a piece of burned material.
and crave beauty
and excitement
fire is beautiful
and we know that if we get
too close it will kill us
but what does that matter
it is better to be happy
for a moment
and be burned up with beauty
than to live a long time
and be bored all the while
so we wad all our life up
into one little roll
and then we shoot the roll
that is what life is for
it is better to be a part of beauty
for one instant and then to cease to
exist than to exist forever
and never be a part of beauty
our attitude toward life
is to come easy go easy
we are like human beings
used to be before they became
too civilized to enjoy themselves

and before i could argue him
out of his philosophy
he went and immolated\(^3\) himself
on a patent\(^4\) cigar lighter
i do not agree with him
myself i would rather have
half the happiness and twice
the longevity\(^5\)

but at the same time i wish
there was something i wanted
as badly as he wanted to fry himself

—archy

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3. **immolated** (im′ə-lāt′); killed as a sacrifice.
4. **patent** (pāt′nt); patented; covered by a lawful grant that gives the inventor the exclusive right to manufacture an item for a certain time period.
5. **longevity** (lōn′jē-vŏt′ē); length of life.
Let them be as flowers,
always watered, fed, guarded, admired,
but harnessed to a pot of dirt.

I’d rather be a tall, ugly weed,
cling on cliffs, like an eagle
wind-wavering above high, jagged rocks.

To have broken through the surface of stone
to live, to feel exposed to the madness
of the vast, eternal sky.

To be swayed by the breezes of an ancient sea,
carrying my soul, my seed beyond the mountains
of time
or into the abyss1 of the bizarre.

I’d rather be unseen, and if,
then shunned2 by everyone
than to be a pleasant-smelling flower,
growing in clusters in the fertile valley
where they’re praised, handled, and plucked
by greedy, human hands.

I’d rather smell of musty, green stench
than of sweet, fragrant lilac.
If I could stand alone, strong and free,
I’d rather be a tall, ugly weed.

1. abyss: a seemingly bottomless space.
2. shunned: deliberately avoided; shut out.
Comprehension

1. Recall According to “the lesson of the moth,” why do moths fly toward light?

2. Represent Create a sketch that shows the differences between the flower and the weed described in “Identity.” Make sure your sketch reflects at least two specific details from the poem.

Text Analysis

3. Make Inferences What does the speaker learn about himself in “the lesson of the moth”? Support your response with evidence from the poem.

4. Examine Stanza In “the lesson of the moth,” how does the poet use stanzas to help you follow the conversation between the cockroach and the moth?

5. Analyze Metaphor What kind of person does the speaker in “Identity” want to be? What kind of person does he not want to be?

6. Clarify Meaning Refer to the charts you created as you read. For each poem, tell whether the line breaks, the stanzas, or the punctuation did the most to help you understand the poem’s meaning. Explain what and how that element helped you understand.

7. Compare and Contrast Views In “the lesson of the moth,” what is the moth’s attitude about the price of beauty? In “Identity,” what is the speaker’s attitude about the price of beauty? Explain whether you think their views are more similar or more different.

8. Evaluate Free Verse Use a chart like the one shown to list examples of rhyme, repetition, or other sound devices, such as alliteration (the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words). What images or ideas do these devices emphasize?

Extension and Challenge

9. SCIENCE CONNECTION How do the qualities of real cockroaches and moths correspond to the poetic creations Don Marquis presents in “the lesson of the moth”? Research to find out about each creature’s habits and life span. Display your findings in a poster, and be ready to explain how the poem does—or does not—relate to reality.

Does BEAUTY matter?
How has reading these poems influenced your thoughts about beauty?