

POETRY



Michael Cleary

Burning Dreams on the Sun (1992)

LONG BEACH, Calif. (AP)—A truck driver with 45 weather balloons rigged to a lawn chair took a 45 minute ride ... up to 16,000 feet before he got cold, shot some balloons with a BB gun and crashed into a power line.

Were there too many turnaround loads,
distance measured by all-night diners,
hours yawning through too much coffee,
kidneys throbbing again at 3 a.m.?
Were there too many nights on your hands 5
that hung like chains from the wheel,
monotonous, humdrum motion
droning away the sound of your dream?
And did the darkness ever whisper,
it might not work, it might not, 10
nearly grounding you in mortal shame,
too foolish ever to dream again?
Icarus, too, must have felt like you,
restless with impudent wonder.
No labyrinth could hold him; 15
he flew on wings of feathers and wax
until he burned his dreams on the sun.
But no matter. For a time,
you dared to leave the darkful land,
rising high in wacky flight 20
like an uncouth god, purified by light.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What stereotypes are associated with truck drivers?
2. How does Cleary's poem refute those stereotypes?

WRITING TOPIC

Literary works often use allusions, meaning the author refers to characters and/or events from other works of literature for reasons of drawing comparisons and/or promoting assumptions between his or her work and the one mentioned. In this poem, the author does just that with his mention of Icarus, a character from Greek mythology. If you are unfamiliar with Icarus, research the character. After you understand the basic storyline of Icarus, consider the following: What is the poet's implied **claim** of value about Icarus's and the truck driver's flights? Are you convinced? Please explain.

Countee Cullen

Incident (1925)

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

5 Now I was eight and very small,
 And he was no whit bigger,
 And so I smiled, but he poked out
 His tongue and called me, "Nigger."

10 I saw the whole of Baltimore
 From May until December:
 Of all the things that happened there
 That's all that I remember.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTION

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." This playground jingle suggests that name-calling is harmless, at least physically. But is it? What happens when we label certain individuals, as for example, "enviros," "right-wing Bible-thumpers," "illegal aliens"? To what degree, if any, are such labels harmful?

WRITING TOPIC

Sometimes an incident carries with it such emotional force that it blocks any positive experiences that might have been enjoyed. Intellectually, you might argue that it is best to ignore the negative and focus on the positive,