

## Forgive My Guilt

Robert P. Tristram Coffin

Not always sure what things called sins may be,  
I am sure of one sin I have done.  
It was years ago, and I was a boy,  
I lay in the frostflowers with a gun,  
5 The air ran blue as the flowers, I held my breath,  
Two birds on golden legs slim as dream things  
Ran like quicksilver on the golden sand,  
My gun went off, they ran with broken wings  
Into the sea, I ran to fetch them in,  
10 But they swam with their heads high out to sea,  
They cried like two sorrowful high flutes,  
With jagged ivory bones where wings should be.

For days I heard them when I walked that headland  
Crying out to their kind in the blue,  
15 The other plovers were going over south  
On silver wings leaving these broken two.  
The cries went out one day; but I still hear them  
Over all the sounds of sorrow in war or peace  
I ever have heard, time cannot drown them,  
20 Those slender flutes of sorrow never cease.  
Two airy things forever denied the air!  
I never knew how their lives at last were spilt,  
But I have hoped for years all that is wild,  
Airy, and beautiful will forgive my guilt.






## Reading Check

1. What is the story's **setting**—that is, when and where does the story take place?
2. Who is Miss Lottie? Describe the children's daytime confrontation with her.
3. What does Lizabeth discover about her parents when she overhears their conversation?
4. What does Lizabeth do to Miss Lottie's flowers just before dawn?

## Thinking Critically

5. Left on her own, Lizabeth faces **internal conflicts**. What personal monsters are troubling her?
6. Lizabeth felt ashamed after she led the first attack against Miss Lottie. Why doesn't her sense of shame prevent her from destroying the garden at the end of the story? How is her **motivation** for this destructive act different from her motivation for taunting Miss Lottie earlier? 
7. The narrator doesn't tell us much about the effect on Miss Lottie of the **external conflict** over the marigolds. Using the details the narrator *does* provide, explain how you think Miss Lottie was affected.
8. Lizabeth says that destroying the marigolds was her last act of childhood. After that incident, why does she think of herself as standing on her own as an adult?
9. What does Lizabeth mean at the end of the story when she says that she too has planted marigolds? What do you think the marigolds have come to mean in the story? To

answer, consider the feelings that the characters have had about the marigolds throughout the story:


- Miss Lottie loves and cares for them.
  - The children do not understand why they are there.
  - Lizabeth wants to destroy them.
10. Lizabeth's parents are **subordinate characters**, but their late-night conversation has a big impact on her. "The world had lost its boundary lines," she says in reaction to their conversation. What does she mean? What situations might make a child feel that boundaries have been lost?

## Extending and Evaluating

11. Compare Lizabeth's feelings at the end of the story with those of the speaker of "Forgive My Guilt" (see the **Connection** on page 150). What did both children discover? In both cases, did you find it credible that a single act could cause a child to make such an important discovery? Explain your answer.

## WRITING

### Turning Points

Write an **autobiographical narrative** about a turning point in your life, an incident—whether minor or major, happy or sad—that made you grow up a little. What fears or conflicts did you face? What was the outcome of the incident? Include a reflection telling how the event brought you a little closer to being an adult. (Be sure to check your Quickwrite notes.) 

► Use "Writing an Autobiographical Narrative," pages 78–85, for help with this assignment.

### SKILLS FOCUS

#### Literary Skills

Analyze internal and external conflicts.

#### Reading Skills

Make inferences about character motivation.

#### Writing Skills

Write an autobiographical narrative.