

Marigolds

Eugenia Collier

When I think of the home town of my youth, all that I seem to remember is dust—the brown, crumbly dust of late summer—arid, sterile dust that gets into the eyes and makes them water, gets into the throat and between the toes of bare brown feet. I don't know why I should remember only the dust. Surely there must have been lush green lawns and paved streets under leafy shade trees somewhere in town; but memory is an abstract painting—it does not present things as they are, but rather as they *feel*. And so, when I think of that time and that place, I remember only the dry September of the dirt roads and grassless yards of the shanty-town where I lived. And one other thing I

10 remember, another incongruity of memory—a brilliant splash of sunny yellow against the dust—Miss Lottie's marigolds. **A**

Whenever the memory of those marigolds flashes across my mind, a strange **nostalgia** comes with it and remains long after the picture has faded. I feel again the chaotic emotions of adolescence, illusive as smoke, yet as real as the potted geranium before me now. Joy and rage and wild animal gladness and shame become tangled together in the multicolored skein of 14-going-on-15 as I recall that devastating moment when I was suddenly more woman than child, years ago in Miss Lottie's yard. I think of those marigolds at the strangest times; I remember them vividly now as I desperately pass away the time

20 waiting for you, who will not come.

I suppose that **futile** waiting was the sorrowful background music of our impoverished little community when I was young. The Depression that gripped the nation was no new thing to us, for the black workers of rural Maryland had always been depressed. I don't know what it was that we were waiting for; certainly not for the prosperity that was “just around the corner,” for those were white folks' words, which we never believed. Nor did we wait for hard work and thrift to pay off in shining success as the American Dream¹ promised, for we knew better than that, too. Perhaps we waited for a miracle,

Analyze Visuals ▶

How would you describe the **mood** created by this painting?

A THEME AND SETTING

Identify details that help you visualize the setting. What contrasts are presented?

nostalgia (nŏ-stāl'jə) *n.*
bittersweet longing for things from the past

futile (fyōōt'l) *adj.* having no useful result

1. **American Dream:** the belief that through hard work one will achieve a comfortable and prosperous life.



amorphous in concept but necessary if one were to have the grit to rise before
30 dawn each day and labor in the white man's vineyard until after dark, or to
wander about in the September dust, offering one's sweat in return for some
meager share of bread. But God was chary² with miracles in those days, and so
we waited—and waited.

We children, of course, were only vaguely aware of the extent of our poverty.
Having no radios, few newspapers, and no magazines, we were somewhat
unaware of the world outside our community. Nowadays we would be called
“culturally deprived” and people would write books and hold conferences
about us. In those days everybody we knew was just as hungry and ill-clad as
we were. Poverty was the cage in which we all were trapped, and our hatred
40 of it was still the vague, undirected restlessness of the zoo-bred flamingo who
knows that nature created him to fly free. **B**

As I think of those days I feel most **poignantly** the tag-end of summer, the
bright dry times when we began to have a sense of shortening days and the
imminence of the cold.

By the time I was 14 my brother Joey and I were the only children left at our
house, the older ones having left home for early marriage or the lure of the city,
and the two babies having been sent to relatives who might care for them better
than we. Joey was three years younger than I, and a boy, and therefore vastly
inferior. Each morning our mother and father trudged wearily down the dirt
50 road and around the bend, she to her domestic job, he to his daily unsuccessful
quest for work. After our few chores around the tumbledown shanty, Joey and I
were free to run wild in the sun with other children similarly situated.

For the most part, those days are ill-defined in my memory, running
together and combining like a fresh water-color painting left out in the rain.
I remember squatting in the road drawing a picture in the dust, a picture that
Joey gleefully erased with one sweep of his dirty foot. I remember fishing for
minnows in a muddy creek and watching sadly as they eluded my cupped
hands, while Joey laughed uproariously. And I remember, that year, a strange
restlessness of body and of spirit, a feeling that something old and familiar was
60 ending, and something unknown and therefore terrifying was beginning. **C**

One day returns to me with special clarity for some reason, perhaps because
it was the beginning of the experience that in some inexplicable way marked
the end of innocence. I was loafing under the great oak tree in our yard, deep
in some reverie which I have now forgotten except that it involved some secret,
secret thoughts of one of the Harris boys across the yard. Joey and a bunch of
kids were bored now with the old tire suspended from an oak limb which had
kept them entertained for a while.

“Hey, Lizabeth,” Joey yelled. He never talked when he could yell. “Hey,
Lizabeth, let's us go somewhere.”

B DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Based on what you've
read so far, what
conclusions can you draw
about the narrator's life?
Cite details to support
your answer.

poignantly
(poin'yent-lē) *adv.*
in a profoundly
moving manner

C DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 58–60.
Lizabeth, the narrator,
is almost 15 at this point
in the story. What
changes are taking place
in her life?

2. **chary** (châr'ē): sparing or stingy.

70 I came reluctantly from my private world. “Where you want to go?
What you want to do?”

The truth was that we were becoming tired of the formlessness of our summer days. The idleness whose prospect had seemed so beautiful during the busy days of spring now had degenerated to an almost desperate effort to fill up the empty midday hours.

“Let’s go see can we find some locusts on the hill,” someone suggested.

Joey was scornful. “Ain’t no more locusts there. Y’all got ’em all while they was still green.”

The argument that followed was brief and not really worth the effort.

80 Hunting locust trees wasn’t fun any more by now.

“Tell you what,” said Joey finally, his eyes sparkling. “Let’s go over to Miss Lottie’s.”

The idea caught on at once, for annoying Miss Lottie was always fun. I was still child enough to scamper along with the group over rickety fences and through bushes that tore our already raggedy clothes, back to where Miss Lottie lived. I think now that we must have made a tragicomic spectacle, five or six kids of different ages, each of us clad in only one garment—the girls in faded dresses that were too long or too short, the boys in patchy pants, their sweaty brown chests gleaming in the hot sun. A little cloud of dust followed

90 our thin legs and bare feet as we tramped over the barren land.

When Miss Lottie’s house came into view we stopped, **ostensibly** to plan our strategy, but actually to reinforce our courage. Miss Lottie’s house was the most ramshackle of all our ramshackle homes. The sun and rain had long since faded its rickety frame siding from white to a sullen gray. The boards themselves seemed to remain upright not from being nailed together but rather from leaning together like a house that a child might have constructed from cards. A brisk wind might have blown it down, and the fact that it was still standing implied a kind of enchantment that was stronger than the elements. There it stood, and as far as I know is standing yet—a gray rotting thing with

100 no porch, no shutters, no steps, set on a cramped lot with no grass, not even any weeds—a monument to decay. **D**

In front of the house in a squeaky rocking chair sat Miss Lottie’s son, John Burke, completing the impression of decay. John Burke was what was known as “queer-headed.” Black and ageless, he sat, rocking day in and day out in a mindless stupor, lulled by the monotonous squeak-squawk of the chair. A battered hat atop his shaggy head shaded him from the sun. Usually John Burke was totally unaware of everything outside his quiet dream world. But if you disturbed him, if you intruded upon his fantasies, he would become enraged, strike out at you, and curse at you in some strange enchanted

110 language which only he could understand. We children made a game of thinking of ways to disturb John Burke and then to elude his violent

retribution.

COMMON CORE L 4b

Language Coach

Derivations Words that are formed from another word or base are **derivations**. The word *generate*, meaning “bring into existence,” has many derivations, including *generation* and *regenerate*. Reread lines 73–75 to find another derivation of *generate*. Guess the word’s meaning.

ostensibly (ŏ-stĕn’sə-blĕ) *adv.* seemingly; to all outward appearances

D DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 91–101. What does this description of Miss Lottie’s home add to your understanding of her and her social and financial standing?

retribution (rĕt’rə-byŏō’shen) *n.* something given in repayment, usually as a punishment

But our real fun and our real fear lay in Miss Lottie herself. Miss Lottie seemed to be at least a hundred years old. Her big frame still held traces of the tall, powerful woman she must have been in youth, although it was now bent and drawn. Her smooth skin was a dark reddish-brown, and her face had Indian-like features and the stern **stoicism** that one associates with Indian faces. Miss Lottie didn't like intruders either, especially children. She never left her yard, and nobody ever visited her. We never knew how she managed those necessities that depend on human interaction—how she ate, for example, or even whether she ate. When we were tiny children, we thought Miss Lottie was a witch and we made up tales, that we half believed ourselves, about her exploits. We were far too sophisticated now, of course, to believe the witch-nonsense. But old fears have a way of clinging like cobwebs, and so when we sighted the tumble-down shack, we had to stop to reinforce our nerves.

stoicism (stō'ī-sīz'əm) *n.*
indifference to pleasure or pain; a lack of visible emotion

120 “Look, there she is,” I whispered, forgetting that Miss Lottie could not possibly have heard me from that distance. “She’s fooling with them crazy flowers.”

“Yeh, look at ’er.”

Miss Lottie’s marigolds were perhaps the strangest part of the picture. 130 Certainly they did not fit in with the crumbling decay of the rest of her yard. Beyond the dusty brown yard, in front of the sorry gray house, rose suddenly and shockingly a dazzling strip of bright blossoms, clumped together in enormous mounds, warm and passionate and sun-golden. The old black witch-woman worked on them all summer, every summer, down on her creaky knees, weeding and cultivating and arranging, while the house crumbled and John Burke rocked. For some **perverse** reason, we children hated those marigolds. They interfered with the perfect ugliness of the place; they were too beautiful; they said too much that we could not understand; they did not make sense. There was something in the vigor with which the old woman destroyed 140 the weeds that intimidated us. It should have been a comical sight—the old woman with the man’s hat on her cropped white head, leaning over the bright mounds, her big backside in the air—but it wasn’t comical, it was something we could not name. We had to annoy her by whizzing a pebble into her flowers or by yelling a dirty word, then dancing away from her rage, reveling in our youth and mocking her age. Actually, I think it was the flowers we wanted to destroy, but nobody had the nerve to try it, not even Joey, who was usually fool enough to try anything. **E**

perverse (pər-vûrs') *adj.*
stubbornly contrary; wrong; harmful

150 “Y’all git some stones,” commanded Joey now, and was met with instant giggling obedience as everyone except me began to gather pebbles from the dusty ground. “Come on, Lizabeth.”

I just stood there peering through the bushes, torn between wanting to join the fun and feeling that it was all a bit silly.

“You scared, Lizabeth?”

I cursed and spat on the ground—my favorite gesture of phony **bravado**. “Y’all children get the stones; I’ll show you how to use ’em.”

E THEME AND SETTING
What do the marigolds represent to Miss Lottie? to the children?

bravado (brə-vă'dō) *n.*
a false show of courage or defiance



Field of Hope, Charly Palmer. Mixed media collage on canvas, 24" × 18". © Charly Palmer.

◀ Analyze Visuals

How does this image compare with the narrator's description of the setting and Miss Lottie?

I said before that we children were not consciously aware of how thick were the bars of our cage. I wonder now, though, whether we were not more aware of it than I thought. Perhaps we had some dim notion of what we were, and how little chance we had of being anything else. Otherwise, why would we
 160 have been so preoccupied with destruction? Anyway, the pebbles were collected quickly, and everybody looked at me to begin the fun. **F**
 "Come on, y'all."

We crept to the edge of the bushes that bordered the narrow road in front of Miss Lottie's place. She was working placidly, kneeling over the flowers, her

F THEME AND SETTING

What connection is made between poverty—described metaphorically as a cage—and destruction in lines 156–161?

dark hand plunged into the golden mound. Suddenly “zing”—an expertly-aimed stone cut the head off one of the blossoms.

“Who out there?” Miss Lottie’s backside came down and her head came up as her sharp eyes searched the bushes. “You better git!”

We had crouched down out of sight in the bushes, where we stifled the
170 giggles that insisted on coming. Miss Lottie gazed warily across the road for a moment, then cautiously returned to her weeding. “Zing”—Joey sent a pebble into the blooms, and another marigold was beheaded.

Miss Lottie was enraged now. She began struggling to her feet, leaning on a rickety cane and shouting, “Y’all git! Go on home!” Then the rest of the kids let loose with their pebbles, storming the flowers and laughing wildly and senselessly at Miss Lottie’s **impotent** rage. She shook her stick at us and started shakily toward the road crying, “Git ’long! John Burke! John Burke, come help!”

Then I lost my head entirely, mad with the power of inciting such rage,
180 and ran out of the bushes in the storm of pebbles, straight toward Miss Lottie chanting madly, “Old witch, fell in a ditch, picked up a penny and thought she was rich!” The children screamed with delight, dropped their pebbles and joined the crazy dance, swarming around Miss Lottie like bees and chanting, “Old lady witch!” while she screamed curses at us. The madness lasted only a moment, for John Burke, startled at last, lurched out of his chair, and we dashed for the bushes just as Miss Lottie’s cane went whizzing at my head.

I did not join the merriment when the kids gathered again under the oak in our bare yard. Suddenly I was ashamed, and I did not like being ashamed. The child in me sulked and said it was all in fun, but the woman in me flinched
190 at the thought of the malicious attack that I had led. The mood lasted all afternoon. When we ate the beans and rice that was supper that night, I did not notice my father’s silence, for he was always silent these days, nor did I notice my mother’s absence, for she always worked until well into evening. Joey and I had a particularly bitter argument after supper; his **exuberance** got on my nerves. Finally I stretched out upon the palette in the room we shared and fell into a fitful doze. **G**

When I awoke, somewhere in the middle of the night, my mother had returned, and I vaguely listened to the conversation that was audible through the thin walls that separated our rooms. At first I heard no words, only voices.
200 My mother’s voice was like a cool, dark room in summer—peaceful, soothing, quiet. I loved to listen to it; it made things seem all right somehow. But my father’s voice cut through hers, shattering the peace.

“Twenty-two years, Maybelle, twenty-two years,” he was saying, “and I got nothing for you, nothing, nothing.”

“It’s all right, honey, you’ll get something. Everybody’s out of work now, you know that.”

“It ain’t right. Ain’t no man ought to eat his woman’s food year in and year out, and see his children running wild. Ain’t nothing right about that.”

impotent (im’pə-tent)
adj. powerless; lacking strength or vigor

COMMON CORE L 4c

Language Coach

Etymology The Latin word *malus* means “bad.” Words that come from *malus* include the verbs *malfunction* (“fail to work properly”) and *malign* (“speak badly of”). What adjective in line 190 shares this **etymology**, or origin? What other words can you think of that might come from *malus*? Check a dictionary to see how many you have identified correctly.

exuberance
(ĭg-zōō’bər-əns)
n. condition of unrestrained joy

G DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 187–196. Why is the narrator torn between conflicting feelings?

“Honey, you took good care of us when you had it. Ain’t nobody got
210 nothing nowadays.”

“I ain’t talking about nobody else, I’m talking about me. God knows I try.”
My mother said something I could not hear, and my father cried out louder,
“What must a man do, tell me that?” **H**

“Look, we ain’t starving. I git paid every week, and Mrs. Ellis is real nice
about giving me things. She gonna let me have Mr. Ellis’ old coat for you
this winter—”

“Damn Mr. Ellis’ coat! And damn his money! You think I want white folks’
leavings? Damn, Maybelle”—and suddenly he sobbed, loudly and painfully,
and cried helplessly and hopelessly in the dark night. I had never heard a man
220 cry before. I did not know men ever cried. I covered my ears with my hands
but could not cut off the sound of my father’s harsh, painful, despairing sobs.
My father was a strong man who would whisk a child upon his shoulders and
go singing through the house. My father whittled toys for us and laughed so
loud that the great oak seemed to laugh with him, and taught us how to fish
and hunt rabbits. How could it be that my father was crying? But the sobs
went on, unstifled, finally quieting until I could hear my mother’s voice, deep
and rich, humming softly as she used to hum to a frightened child.

The world had lost its boundary lines. My mother, who was small and soft,
was now the strength of the family; my father, who was the rock on which
230 the family had been built, was sobbing like the tiniest child. Everything
was suddenly out of tune, like a broken accordion. Where did I fit into this
crazy picture? I do not now remember my thoughts, only a feeling of great
bewilderment and fear. **I**

Long after the sobbing and the humming had stopped, I lay on the palette,
still as stone with my hands over my ears, wishing that I too could cry and
be comforted. The night was silent now except for the sound of the crickets
and of Joey’s soft breathing. But the room was too crowded with fear to allow
me to sleep, and finally, feeling the terrible aloneness of 4 A.M., I decided to
awaken Joey.

240 “Ouch! What’s the matter with you? What you want?” he demanded
disagreeably when I had pinched and slapped him awake.

“Come on, wake up.”

“What for? Go ’way.”

I was lost for a reasonable reply. I could not say, “I’m scared, and I don’t want
to be alone,” so I merely said, “I’m going out. If you want to come, come on.”

The promise of adventure awoke him. “Going out now? Where to,
Lizabeth? What you going to do?”

I was pulling my dress over my head. Until now I had not thought of going
out. “Just come on,” I replied tersely.

250 I was out the window and halfway down the road before Joey caught
up with me.

H DRAW CONCLUSIONS

From the dialogue in lines
203–213, what can you
conclude is bothering
Lizabeth’s father?

I THEME AND SETTING

How does the
conversation between
Lizabeth’s parents affect
her? Cite details to
support your answer.



New Dreams (2002), Ernest Crichlow. Lithograph (Edition 150), 24 $\frac{3}{4}$ " \times 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Photo by Maureen Turci, Mojo Portfolio. Courtesy of the Ernest Crichlow Estate.

"Wait, Lizabeth, where you going?"

I was running as if the Furies³ were after me, as perhaps they were—running silently and furiously until I came to where I had half-known I was headed: to Miss Lottie's yard.

The half-dawn light was more eerie than complete darkness, and in it the old house was like the ruin that my world had become—foul and crumbling, a grotesque caricature.⁴ It looked haunted, but I was not afraid because I was haunted too.

260 "Lizabeth, you lost your mind?" panted Joey.

I had indeed lost my mind, for all the smoldering emotions of that summer swelled in me and burst—the great need for my mother who was never there, the hopelessness of our poverty and **degradation**, the bewilderment of being neither child nor woman and yet both at once, the fear unleashed by my father's tears. And these feelings combined in one great impulse toward destruction. **1**

degradation

(dĕg'rĕ-dā'shən) *n.*
condition of being
brought to a lower level;
humiliation

1 THEME AND SETTING

Reread lines 261–265.
Why do the narrator's
emotions produce an
urge to destroy?

3. **Furies:** In Greek and Roman mythology, the Furies were three goddesses of vengeance, or revenge.

4. **a grotesque caricature** (grō-tĕsk' kār'ī-kə-chōōr'): a bizarre and absurdly exaggerated representation of something.

“Lizabeth!”


I leaped furiously into the mounds of marigolds and pulled madly, trampling and pulling and destroying the perfect yellow blooms. The fresh smell of early morning and of dew-soaked marigolds spurred me on as I went
 270 tearing and mangling and sobbing while Joey tugged my dress or my waist crying, “Lizabeth stop, please stop!”

And then I was sitting in the ruined little garden among the uprooted and ruined flowers, crying and crying, and it was too late to undo what I had done. Joey was sitting beside me, silent and frightened, not knowing what to say. Then, “Lizabeth, look.”

I opened my swollen eyes and saw in front of me a pair of large calloused feet; my gaze lifted to the swollen legs, the age-distorted body clad in a tight cotton night dress, and then the shadowed Indian face surrounded by stubby white hair. And there was no rage in the face now, now that the garden was
 280 destroyed and there was nothing any longer to be protected.

“M-miss Lottie!” I scrambled to my feet and just stood there and stared at her, and that was the moment when childhood faded and womanhood began. That violent, crazy act was the last act of childhood. For as I gazed at the immobile face with the sad, weary eyes, I gazed upon a kind of reality that is hidden to childhood. The witch was no longer a witch but only a broken old woman who had dared to create beauty in the midst of ugliness and sterility. She had been born in **squalor** and lived in it all her life. Now at the end of that life she had nothing except a falling-down hut, a wrecked body, and John Burke, the mindless son of her passion. Whatever verve there was left in her,
 290 whatever was of love and beauty and joy that had not been squeezed out by life, had been there in the marigolds she had so tenderly cared for. **K**

Of course I could not express the things that I knew about Miss Lottie as I stood there awkward and ashamed. The years have put words to the things I knew in that moment, and as I look back upon it, I know that that moment marked the end of innocence. People think of the loss of innocence as meaning the loss of virginity, but this is far from true. Innocence involves an unseeing acceptance of things at face value, an ignorance of the area below the surface. In that humiliating moment I looked beyond myself and into the depths of another person. This was the beginning of compassion, and one cannot have
 300 both compassion and innocence. **L**

The years have taken me worlds away from that time and that place, from the dust and squalor of our lives and from the bright thing that I destroyed in a blind childish striking out at God-knows-what. Miss Lottie died long ago and many years have passed since I last saw her hut, completely barren at last, for despite my wild contrition she never planted marigolds again. Yet, there are times when the image of those passionate yellow mounds returns with a painful poignancy. For one does not have to be ignorant and poor to find that one’s life is barren as the dusty yards of one’s town. And I too have planted marigolds. 

squalor (skwŏl’ər) *n.*
 a filthy, shabby, and
 wretched condition, as
 from poverty

COMMON CORE RL.4

K DRAW CONCLUSIONS

The narrator uses fairy-tale metaphors to describe Miss Lottie throughout the story, repeatedly calling her a witch and referring to “enchantment” surrounding her home. Reread lines 285–291, in which a change takes place in Lizabeth. Why is she suddenly able to see Miss Lottie as she really is?

L PARAPHRASE

Paraphrase the narrator’s thoughts about innocence and compassion in lines 295–300.