

The Scarlet Ibis

James Hurst

It was in the clove of seasons,¹ summer was dead but autumn had not yet been born, that the ibis lit in the bleeding tree. The flower garden was stained with rotting brown magnolia petals and ironweeds grew rank amid the purple phlox. The five o'clocks by the chimney still marked time, but the oriole nest in the elm was untenanted and rocked back and forth like an empty cradle. The last graveyard flowers were blooming, and their smell drifted across the cotton field and through every room of our house, speaking softly the names of our dead. **A**

It's strange that all this is still so clear to me, now that that summer has long since fled and time has had its way. A grindstone stands where the bleeding
10 tree stood, just outside the kitchen door, and now if an oriole sings in the elm, its song seems to die up in the leaves, a silvery dust. The flower garden is prim, the house a gleaming white, and the pale fence across the yard stands straight and spruce. But sometimes (like right now), as I sit in the cool, green-draped parlor, the grindstone begins to turn, and time with all its changes is ground away—and I remember Doodle.

Doodle was just about the craziest brother a boy ever had. Of course, he wasn't a crazy crazy like old Miss Leedie, who was in love with President Wilson and wrote him a letter every day, but was a nice crazy, like someone you meet in your dreams. He was born when I was six and was, from the
20 outset, a disappointment. He seemed all head, with a tiny body which was red and shriveled like an old man's. Everybody thought he was going to die—everybody except Aunt Nicey, who had delivered him. She said he would live because he was born in a caul,² and cauls were made from Jesus' nightgown. Daddy had Mr. Heath, the carpenter, build a little mahogany coffin for him. But he didn't die, and when he was three months old, Mama and Daddy decided they might as well name him. They named him William Armstrong, which was like tying a big tail on a small kite. Such a name sounds good only on a tombstone. **B**

A MOOD

What words or images contribute to the mood of sadness and longing in lines 1–7?

Analyze Visuals ►

What qualities does the boy in the painting seem to have? Point to details of color, line, shape, and texture to support your answer.

B MAKE INFERENCES

What inferences can you make about Doodle from the **details** offered in this paragraph? Explain your thought process.

1. **the clove of seasons:** a time between two seasons, in this case, summer and autumn.

2. **born in a caul:** born with a thin membrane covering the head.

Richard at Age Five (1944), Alice Neel. Oil on canvas, 26" × 14". © Estate of Alice Neel. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.