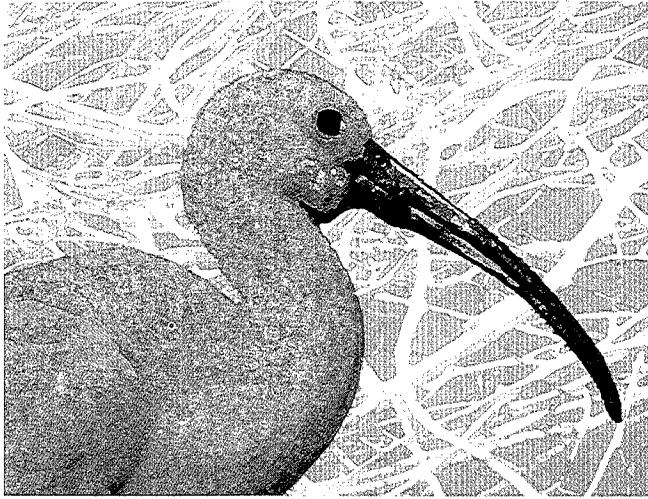




# *The* **Scarlet Ibis**

James Hurst



It was in the clove<sup>1</sup> of seasons, 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<sup>2</sup> 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.

---

1. clove: a separation or split.

2. rank: growing wildly and vigorously.

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 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 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,<sup>3</sup> 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.

I thought myself pretty smart at many things, like holding my breath, running, jumping, or climbing the vines in Old Woman Swamp, and I wanted more than anything else someone to race to Horsehead Landing, someone to box with, and someone to perch

with in the top fork of the great pine behind the barn, where across the fields and swamps you could see the sea. I wanted a brother. But Mama, crying, told me that even if William Armstrong lived, he would never do these things with me. He might not, she sobbed, even be "all there." He might, as long as he lived, lie on the rubber sheet in the center of the bed in the front bedroom where the white marquisette curtains billowed out in the afternoon sea breeze, rustling like palmetto fronds.<sup>4</sup>

It was bad enough having an invalid brother, but having one who possibly was not all there was unbearable, so I began to make plans to kill him by smothering him with a pillow. However, one afternoon as I watched him, my head poked between the iron posts of the foot of the bed, he looked straight at me and grinned. I skipped through the rooms, down the echoing halls, shouting, "Mama, he smiled. He's all there! He's all there!" and he was.

When he was two, if you laid him on his stomach, he began to move himself, straining terribly. The doctor said that with his weak heart this strain would probably kill him, but it didn't. Trembling, he'd push himself up, turning first red, then a soft purple, and finally collapse back onto the bed like an old worn-out doll. I can still see Mama watching him, her hand pressed tight across her mouth, her eyes wide and unblinking. But he learned to crawl (it was his third winter), and we brought him out of the front bedroom, putting him on the rug before the fireplace. For the first time he became one of us.

3. **caul** (kôl): a thin membrane that covers the head of some babies at birth.

4. **palmetto fronds**: the fanlike leaves of a kind of palm tree.

As long as he lay all the time in bed, we called him William Armstrong, even though it was formal and sounded as if we were referring to one of our ancestors, but with his creeping around on the deerskin rug and beginning to talk, something had to be done about his name. It was I who renamed him. When he crawled, he crawled backward, as if he were in reverse and couldn't change gears. If you called him, he'd turn around as if he were going in the other direction, then he'd back right up to you to be picked up.

Crawling backward made him look like a doodlebug, so I began to call him Doodle, and in time even Mama and Daddy thought it was a better name than William Armstrong. Only Aunt Nicey disagreed. She said caul babies should be treated with special respect since they might turn out to be saints. Renaming my brother was perhaps the kindest thing I ever did for him, because nobody expects much from someone called Doodle.

Although Doodle learned to crawl, he showed no signs of walking, but he wasn't idle. He talked so much that we all quit listening to what he said. It was about this time that Daddy built him a go-cart and I had to pull him around. At first I just paraded him up and down the piazza,<sup>5</sup> but then he started crying to be taken out into the yard, and it ended up by my having to lug him wherever I went. If I so much as picked up my cap, he'd start crying to go with me, and Mama would call from wherever she was, "Take Doodle with you."

He was a burden in many ways. The doctor had said that he mustn't get too excited, too hot, too cold, or too tired and that he must always be treated gently. A long list of don'ts went with him, all of which I ignored once we got out of the house. To discourage his coming with me, I'd run with him across the ends of the cotton rows and

careen him around corners on two wheels. Sometimes I accidentally turned him over, but he never told Mama. His skin was very sensitive, and he had to wear a big straw hat whenever he went out.

When the going got rough and he had to cling to the sides of the go-cart, the hat slipped all the way down over his ears. He was a sight. Finally, I could see I was licked.

Doodle was my brother and he was going to cling to me forever, no matter what I did, so I dragged him across the burning cotton field to share with him the only beauty I knew, Old Woman Swamp. I pulled the

go-cart through the sawtooth fern, down into the green dimness where the palmetto fronds whispered by the stream. I lifted him out and set him down in the soft rubber grass beside a tall pine. His eyes were round with wonder as he gazed about him, and his little hands began to stroke the rubber grass. Then he began to cry.

"For heaven's sake, what's the matter?" I asked, annoyed.

## ACTIVE READING

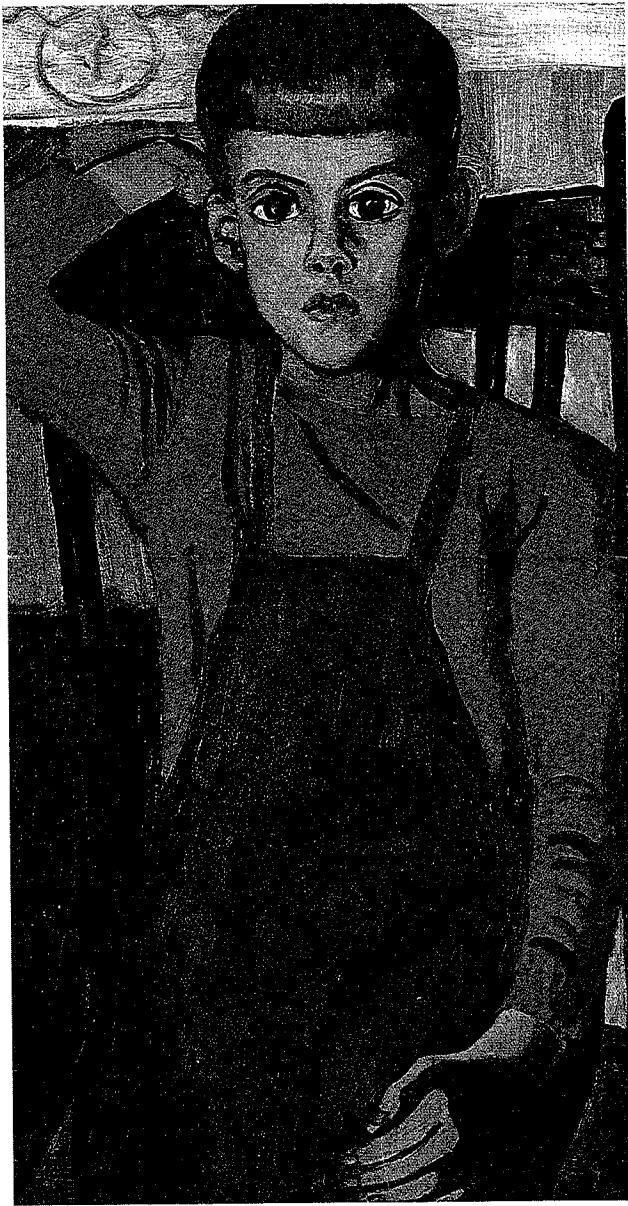
**CONNECT** As a child, how would you have felt about having to take a brother like Doodle with you everywhere?

**...nobody  
expects  
much from  
someone  
called  
Doodle.**

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**careen** (kə-rēn') v. to rush carelessly

5. piazza (pē-āz'ə): a large covered porch.



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

"It's so pretty," he said. "So pretty, pretty, pretty."

After that day Doodle and I often went down into Old Woman Swamp. I would gather wildflowers, wild violets, honeysuckle, yellow jasmine, snakeflowers, and water lilies, and with wire grass we'd weave them into necklaces and crowns. We'd bedeck ourselves with our handiwork and loll about thus beautified,

beyond the touch of the everyday world. Then when the slanted rays of the sun burned orange in the tops of the pines, we'd drop our jewels into the stream and watch them float away toward the sea.

There is within me (and with sadness I have watched it in others) a knot of cruelty borne by the stream of love, much as our blood sometimes bears the seed of our destruction, and at times I was mean to Doodle. One day I took him up to the barn loft and showed him his casket, telling him how we all had believed he would die. It was covered with a film of Paris green<sup>6</sup> sprinkled to kill the rats, and screech owls had built a nest inside it.

Doodle studied the mahogany box for a long time, then said, "It's not mine."

"It is," I said. "And before I'll help you down from the loft, you're going to have to touch it."

"I won't touch it," he said sullenly.

"Then I'll leave you here by yourself," I threatened, and made as if I were going down.

Doodle was frightened of being left. "Don't go leave me, Brother," he cried, and he leaned toward the coffin. His hand, trembling, reached out, and when he touched the casket he screamed. A screech owl flapped out of the box into our faces, scaring us and covering us with Paris green.<sup>6</sup> Doodle was paralyzed, so I put him on my shoulder and carried him down the ladder, and even when we were outside in the bright sunshine, he clung to me, crying, "Don't leave me. Don't leave me."

When Doodle was five years old, I was embarrassed at having a brother of that age who couldn't walk, so I set out to teach him. We were down in Old Woman Swamp and it was spring and the sick-sweet smell of bay flowers hung everywhere like a mournful song. "I'm going to teach you to walk, Doodle," I said.

6. Paris green: a poisonous green powder used to kill pests.

He was sitting comfortably on the soft grass, leaning back against the pine. "Why?" he asked.

I hadn't expected such an answer. "So I won't have to haul you around all the time."

"I can't walk, Brother," he said.

"Who says so?" I demanded.

"Mama, the doctor—everybody."

"Oh, you can walk," I said, and I took him by the arms and stood him up. He collapsed onto the grass like a half-empty flour sack. It was as if he had no bones in his little legs.

"Don't hurt me, Brother," he warned.

"Shut up. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm going to teach you to walk." I heaved him up again, and again he collapsed.

This time he did not lift his face up out of the rubber grass. "I just can't do it. Let's make honeysuckle wreaths."

"Oh yes you can, Doodle," I said. "All you got to do is try. Now come on," and I hauled him up once more.

#### ACTIVE READING

**PREDICT** Do you think Doodle will be able to walk?

It seemed so hopeless from the beginning that it's a miracle I didn't give up. But all of us must have something or someone to be proud of, and Doodle had become mine. I did not know then that pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a seed that bears two vines, life and death. Every day that summer we went to the pine beside the stream of Old Woman Swamp, and I put him on his feet at least a hundred times each afternoon. Occasionally I too became discouraged because it didn't seem as if he was trying, and I would say, "Doodle, don't you *want* to learn to walk?"

He'd nod his head, and I'd say, "Well, if you don't keep trying, you'll never learn." Then I'd paint for him a picture of us as old men, white-haired, him with a long white beard and me still pulling him around in the go-cart. This never failed to make him try again.

Finally one day, after many weeks of

practicing, he stood alone for a few seconds. When he fell, I grabbed him in my arms and hugged him, our laughter pealing through the swamp like a ringing bell. Now we knew it could be done. Hope no longer hid in the dark palmetto thicket but perched like a cardinal in the lacy toothbrush tree, brilliantly visible.

"Yes, yes," I cried, and he cried it too, and the grass beneath us was soft and the smell of the swamp was sweet.

**W**ith success so imminent, we decided not to tell anyone until he could actually walk. Each day, barring rain, we sneaked into Old Woman Swamp, and by cotton-picking time Doodle was ready to show what he could do. He still wasn't able to walk far, but we could wait no longer. Keeping a nice secret is very hard to do, like holding your breath. We chose to reveal all on October eighth, Doodle's sixth birthday, and for weeks ahead we mooned around the house, promising everybody a most spectacular surprise. Aunt Nicey said that, after so much talk, if we produced anything less tremendous than the Resurrection,<sup>7</sup> she was going to be disappointed.

At breakfast on our chosen day, when Mama, Daddy, and Aunt Nicey were in the dining room, I brought Doodle to the door in the go-cart just as usual and had them turn their backs, making them cross their hearts and hope to die if they peeked. I helped Doodle up, and when he was standing alone I let them look. There wasn't a sound as Doodle walked slowly across the room and sat down at his place at the table. Then Mama began to cry and ran over to him, hugging him and kissing him. Daddy hugged him too, so I went to Aunt Nicey, who was thanks praying in

7. the Resurrection: the rising of Jesus Christ from the dead after his burial.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**imminent** (ĩm'e-nent) *adj.* about to occur



the doorway, and began to waltz her around. We danced together quite well until she came down on my big toe with her brogans,<sup>8</sup> hurting me so badly I thought I was crippled for life.

Doodle told them it was I who had taught him to walk, so everyone wanted to hug me, and I began to cry.

"What are you crying for?" asked Daddy, but I couldn't answer. They did not know that I did it for myself; that pride, whose slave I was, spoke to me louder than all their voices, and that Doodle walked only because I was

### ACTIVE READING

#### DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Notice how the narrator's expectations of Doodle are tied to his own feelings. Do you judge the narrator for his pride as much as he judges himself?

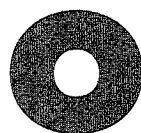
ashamed of having a crippled brother.

Within a few months Doodle had learned to walk well and his go-cart was put up in the barn loft (it's still there) beside his little mahogany coffin. Now, when we roamed off

together, resting often, we never turned back until our destination had been reached, and to help pass the time, we took up lying.<sup>9</sup> From the beginning Doodle was a terrible liar and he got me in the habit. Had anyone stopped to listen to us, we would have been sent off to Dix Hill.

My lies were scary, involved, and usually pointless, but Doodle's were twice as crazy. People in his stories all had wings and flew wherever they wanted to go. His favorite lie was about a boy named Peter who had a pet peacock with a ten-foot tail. Peter wore a golden robe that glittered so brightly that when he walked through the sunflowers they turned away from the sun to face him. When Peter was ready to go to sleep, the peacock spread his magnificent tail, enfolding the boy gently like a closing go-to-sleep flower, burying him in the gloriously iridescent, rustling vortex.<sup>10</sup> Yes, I must admit it. Doodle could beat me lying.

Doodle and I spent lots of time thinking about our future. We decided that when we were grown we'd live in Old Woman Swamp and pick dog-tongue for a living. Beside the stream, he planned, we'd build us a house of whispering leaves and the swamp birds would be our chickens. All day long (when we weren't gathering dog-tongue) we'd swing through the cypresses on the rope vines, and if it rained we'd huddle beneath an umbrella tree and play stickfrog. Mama and Daddy could come and live with us if they wanted to. He even came up with the idea that he could marry Mama and I could marry Daddy. Of course, I was old enough to know this wouldn't work out, but the picture he painted was so beautiful and serene that all I could do was whisper Yes, yes.



Once I had succeeded in teaching Doodle to walk, I began to believe in my own infallibility, and I prepared a terrific development program for him, unknown to Mama and Daddy, of course. I would teach him to run, to swim, to climb trees, and to fight. He, too, now believed in my infallibility, so we set the deadline for these accomplishments less than a year away, when, it had been decided, Doodle could start to school.

That winter we didn't make much progress, for I was in school and Doodle suffered from one bad cold after another. But when spring came, rich and warm, we raised our sights again. Success lay at the end of summer like a pot of gold, and our campaign got off to a good start. On hot days, Doodle and I went down to Horsehead Landing, and I gave him swimming lessons or showed him how to row a boat.

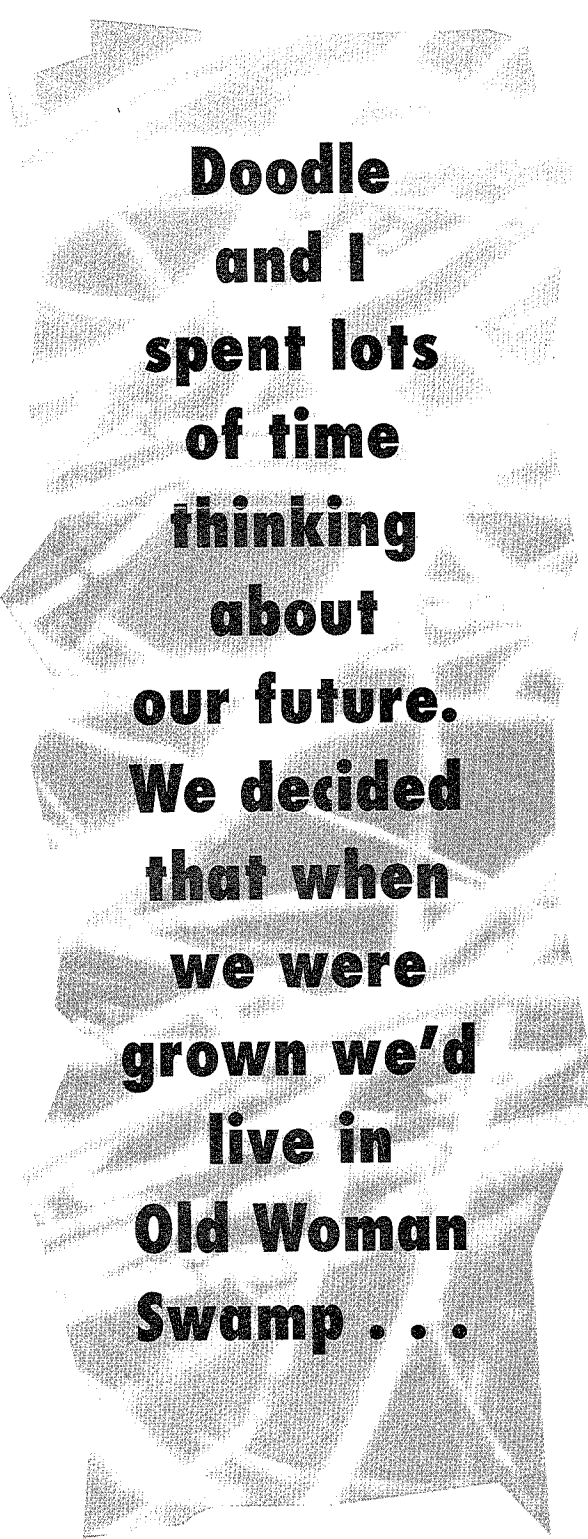
8. **brogans** (brō'gənz): heavy, ankle-high work shoes.

9. **lying**: here used to refer to the telling of tall tales, not untruths intended to deceive.

10. **vortex**: a whirlpool or whirlwind; here, a reference to the funnel-shaped covering of feathers.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**iridescent** (īr'ī-dēs'ənt) *adj.* shining with shifting rainbow colors  
**infallibility** (īn-fāl'ē-bīl'ī-tē) *n.* an inability to make errors



**Doodle  
and I  
spent lots  
of time  
thinking  
about  
our future.  
We decided  
that when  
we were  
grown we'd  
live in  
Old Woman  
Swamp . . .**

Sometimes we descended into the cool green-ness of Old Woman Swamp and climbed the rope vines or boxed scientifically beneath the pine where he had learned to walk. Promise hung about us like the leaves, and wherever we looked, ferns unfurled and birds broke into song.

That summer, the summer of 1918, was blighted. In May and June there was no rain and the crops withered, curled up, then died under the thirsty sun. One morning in July a hurricane came out of the east, tipping over the oaks in the yard and splitting the limbs of the elm trees. That afternoon it roared back out of the west, blew the fallen oaks around, snapping their roots and tearing them out of the earth like a hawk at the entrails<sup>11</sup> of a chicken. Cotton bolls were wrenched from the stalks and lay like green walnuts in the valleys between the rows, while the cornfield leaned over uniformly so that the tassels touched the ground. Doodle and I followed Daddy out into the cotton field, where he stood, shoulders sagging, surveying the ruin. When his chin sank down onto his chest, we were frightened, and Doodle slipped his hand into mine. Suddenly Daddy straightened his shoulders, raised a giant knuckly fist, and with a voice that seemed to rumble out of the earth itself began cursing heaven, hell, the weather, and the Republican Party.<sup>12</sup> Doodle and I, prodding each other and giggling, went back to the house, knowing that everything would be all right.

And during that summer, strange names were heard through the house: Château-Thierry, Amiens, Soissons, and in her blessing at the supper table, Mama once said, "And bless the Pearsons, whose boy Joe was lost at Belleau Wood."<sup>13</sup>

---

11. entrails: internal organs.

12. Republican Party: In 1918, most Southerners were Democrats.

13. Château-Thierry (shă-tō-tyě-rě'), Amiens (ă-myă'n'), Soissons (swă-sôn') . . . Belleau (bě-lô') Wood: places in France where famous battles were fought near the end of World War I.



So we came to that clove of seasons. School was only a few weeks away, and Doodle was far behind schedule. He could barely clear the ground when climbing up the rope vines, and his swimming was certainly not passable. We decided to double our efforts, to make that last drive and reach our pot of gold. I made him swim until he turned blue and row until he couldn't lift an oar. Wherever we went, I purposely walked fast, and although he kept up, his face turned red and his eyes became glazed. Once, he could go no further, so he collapsed on the ground and began to cry.

"Aw, come on, Doodle," I urged. "You can do it. Do you want to be different from everybody else when you start school?"

"Does it make any difference?"

"It certainly does," I said. "Now, come on," and I helped him up.

As we slipped through dog days,<sup>14</sup> Doodle began to look feverish, and Mama felt his forehead, asking him if he felt ill. At night he didn't sleep well, and sometimes he had nightmares, crying out until I touched him and said, "Wake up, Doodle. Wake up."

It was Saturday noon, just a few days before school was to start. I should have already

#### ACTIVE READING

**CLARIFY** Why can't the two boys give up their program?

we kept on with a tired doggedness. It was too late to turn back, for we had both wandered too far into a net of expectations and had left no crumbs behind.

Daddy, Mama, Doodle, and I were seated at the dining-room table having lunch. It was a hot day, with all the windows and doors open in case a breeze should come. In the kitchen Aunt Nicey was humming softly. After a long silence,

Daddy spoke. "It's so calm, I wouldn't be surprised if we had a storm this afternoon."

"I haven't heard a rain frog," said Mama, who believed in signs, as she served the bread around the table.

"I did," declared Doodle. "Down in the swamp."

"He didn't," I said contrarily.

"You did, eh?" said Daddy, ignoring my denial.

"I certainly did," Doodle reiterated, scowling at me over the top of his iced-tea glass, and we were quiet again.

Suddenly, from out in the yard, came a strange croaking noise. Doodle stopped eating, with a piece of bread poised ready for his mouth, his eyes popped round like two blue buttons. "What's that?" he whispered.

I jumped up, knocking over my chair, and had reached the door when Mama called, "Pick up the chair, sit down again, and say excuse me."

By the time I had done this, Doodle had excused himself and had slipped out into the yard. He was looking up into the bleeding tree. "It's a great big red bird!" he called.

The bird croaked loudly again, and Mama and Daddy came out into the yard. We shaded our eyes with our hands against the hazy glare of the sun and peered up through the still leaves. On the topmost branch a bird the size of a chicken, with scarlet feathers and long legs, was perched precariously. Its wings hung down loosely, and as we watched, a feather dropped away and floated slowly down through the green leaves.

"It's not even frightened of us," Mama said.

14. **dog days**: the hot, uncomfortable days between early July and early September (named after the Dog Star, Sirius, which rises and sets with the sun at that time).

WORDS **doggedness** (dō'gĭd-nĭs) *n.* persistence; stubbornness  
TO **reiterate** (rē-ĭt'ē-rāt') *v.* to repeat  
KNOW **precariously** (prĭ-kār'ē-es-lē) *adv.* insecurely; in a dangerous way

*Down Home* (1992), Tony Couch. Watercolor, 22" × 30", private collection. Copyright © Tony Couch, from *Tony Couch's Keys to Successful Painting*, published by North Light Books, 1992.

"It looks tired," Daddy added. "Or maybe sick."

Doodle's hands were clasped at his throat, and I had never seen him stand still so long. "What is it?" he asked.

Daddy shook his head. "I don't know, maybe it's—"

At that moment the bird began to flutter, but the wings were uncoordinated, and amid much flapping and a spray of flying feathers, it tumbled down, bumping through the limbs of the bleeding tree and landing at our feet with a thud. Its long, graceful neck jerked twice into an S, then straightened out, and the bird was still. A white veil came over the eyes and the long white beak unhinged. Its legs were crossed and its clawlike feet were delicately curved at rest. Even death did not mar its grace, for it lay on the earth like a broken vase of red flowers, and we stood around it, awed by its exotic beauty.

"It's dead," Mama said.

"What is it?" Doodle repeated.

"Go bring me the bird book," said Daddy.

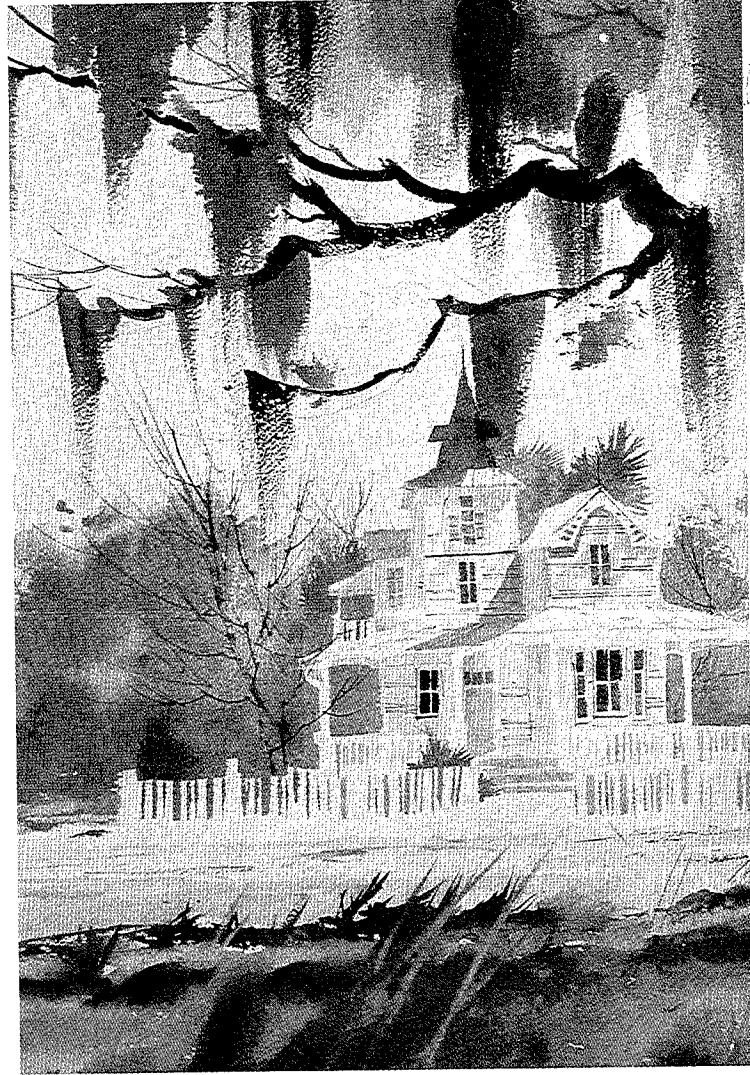
I ran into the house and brought back the bird book. As we watched, Daddy thumbed through its pages. "It's a scarlet ibis," he said, pointing to a picture. "It lives in the tropics—South America to Florida. A storm must have brought it here."

Sadly, we all looked back at the bird. A scarlet ibis! How many miles it had traveled to die like this, in *our* yard, beneath the bleeding tree.

"Let's finish lunch," Mama said, nudging us back toward the dining room.

"I'm not hungry," said Doodle, and he knelt down beside the ibis.

"We've got peach cobbler for dessert,"



Mama tempted from the doorway.

Doodle remained kneeling. "I'm going to bury him."

"Don't you dare touch him," Mama warned. "There's no telling what disease he might have had."

"All right," said Doodle. "I won't."

Daddy, Mama, and I went back to the dining-room table, but we watched Doodle through the open door. He took out a piece of string from his pocket and, without touching the ibis, looped one end around its neck. Slowly, while singing softly "Shall We Gather at the River," he carried the bird around to the front yard and dug a hole in the flower garden,

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**exotic** (ĭg-zŏt'ĭk) *adj.* excitingly strange



next to the petunia bed. Now we were watching him through the front window, but he didn't know it. His awkwardness at digging the hole

#### ACTIVE READING

**QUESTION** Why do you think Doodle is so moved by the scarlet ibis?

When Doodle came into the dining room, he found us seriously eating our cobbler. He was pale and lingered just inside the screen door. "Did you get the scarlet ibis buried?" asked Daddy.

Doodle didn't speak but nodded his head.

with a shovel whose handle was twice as long as he was made us laugh, and we covered our mouths with our hands so he wouldn't hear.

"Go wash your hands, and then you can have some peach cobbler," said Mama.

"I'm not hungry," he said.

"Dead birds is bad luck," said Aunt Nicey, poking her head from the kitchen door. "Specially *red* dead birds!"

As soon as I had finished eating, Doodle and I hurried off to Horsehead Landing. Time was short, and Doodle still had a long way to go if he was going to keep up with the other boys when he started school. The sun, gilded with the yellow cast of autumn, still burned fiercely, but the dark green woods through which we passed were shady and cool. When we reached the landing, Doodle said he was too tired to swim, so we got into a skiff and floated down the creek with the tide. Far off in the marsh a rail was scolding, and over on the beach locusts were singing in the myrtle trees. Doodle did not speak and kept his head turned away, letting one hand trail limply in the water.

**A**fter we had drifted a long way, I put the oars in place and made Doodle row back against the tide. Black clouds began to gather in the southwest, and he kept watching them, trying to pull the oars a little faster. When we reached Horsehead Landing, lightning was playing across half the sky and thunder roared out, hiding even the sound of the sea. The sun disappeared and darkness descended, almost like night. Flocks of marsh crows flew by, heading inland to their roosting trees; and two egrets, squawking, arose from the oyster-rock shallows and careened away.

Doodle was both tired and frightened, and when he stepped from the skiff he collapsed onto the mud, sending an armada of fiddler crabs rustling off into the marsh grass. I helped him up, and as he wiped the mud off his trousers, he smiled at me ashamedly. He had

failed and we both knew it, so we started back home, racing the storm. We never spoke (What are the words that can solder<sup>15</sup> cracked pride?), but I knew he was watching me, watching for a sign of mercy. The lightning was near now, and from fear he walked so close behind me he kept stepping on my heels. The faster I walked, the faster he walked, so I began to run. The rain was coming, roaring through the pines, and then, like a bursting Roman candle, a gum tree ahead of us was shattered by a bolt of lightning. When the deafening peal of thunder had died, and in the moment before the rain arrived, I heard Doodle, who had fallen behind, cry out, "Brother, Brother, don't leave me! Don't leave me!"

The knowledge that Doodle's and my plans had come to naught<sup>16</sup> was bitter, and that streak of cruelty within me awakened. I ran as fast as I could, leaving him far behind with a wall of rain dividing us. The drops stung my face like nettles,<sup>17</sup> and the wind flared the wet glistening leaves of the bordering trees. Soon I could hear his voice no more.

I hadn't run too far before I became tired, and the flood of childish spite evanesced<sup>18</sup> as well. I stopped and waited for Doodle. The sound of rain was everywhere, but the wind had died and it fell straight down in parallel paths like ropes hanging from the sky. As I waited, I peered through the downpour, but no one came. Finally I went back and found him huddled beneath a red nightshade bush beside the road. He was sitting on the ground, his face buried in his arms, which were resting on his drawn-up knees. "Let's go, Doodle," I said.

He didn't answer, so I placed my hand on his forehead and lifted his head. Limply, he fell backward onto the earth. He had been bleeding from the mouth, and his neck and the front of his shirt were stained a brilliant red.

"Doodle! Doodle!" I cried, shaking him, but

there was no answer but the ropy rain. He lay very awkwardly, with his head thrown far back, making his vermilion<sup>19</sup> neck appear unusually long and slim. His little legs, bent sharply at the knees, had never before seemed so fragile, so thin.

I began to weep, and the tear-blurred vision in red before me looked very familiar. "Doodle!" I screamed above the pounding storm and threw my body to the earth above his. For a long long time, it seemed forever, I lay there crying, sheltering my fallen scarlet ibis from the heresy of rain. ♦

15. solder (sɒd'ər): to join or bond together.

16. naught: nothing.

17. nettles: weeds covered with stinging hairs.

18. evanesced (ɛv'ə-nĕst'): disappeared; vanished.

19. vermilion (vər-mīl'yən): bright red or scarlet.

## LITERARY LINK

### Woman with Flower Naomi Long Madgett

I wouldn't coax the plant if I were you.  
Such watchful nurturing may do it harm.  
Let the soil rest from so much digging  
And wait until it's dry before you water it.  
5 The leaf's inclined to find its own direction;  
Give it a chance to seek the sunlight  
for itself.

Much growth is stunted by too careful  
prodding,

10 Too eager tenderness.

The things we love we have to learn to  
leave alone.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**heresy** (hĕr'ĭ-sē) *n.* an action or opinion contrary to what is generally thought of as right

## Connect to the Literature

### 1. What Do You Think?

What was your reaction to the narrator's treatment of Doodle at the end of the story? Share your thoughts.

### Comprehension Check

- How is Doodle different from other children?
- How does the narrator try to help Doodle?
- What are the narrator's motives for working with Doodle?

## Think Critically

### 2. ACTIVE READING DRAWING CONCLUSIONS ABOUT NARRATOR

Look back at what you jotted down in your



**READER'S NOTEBOOK.** What **inferences** or **conclusions** can you draw about the **narrator's** state of mind as it changes during the course of the story?

### 3. What is your judgment of the narrator's treatment of Doodle?

THINK ABOUT

- which of his actions seem cruel
- the reasons he gives for his actions
- the effect of his actions on Doodle

### 4. What is your opinion of Doodle's **character**?

THINK ABOUT

- his strengths and weaknesses
- why his brother has such a powerful influence on him
- what his "lies" may reveal about him

### 5. As you look back at the story, what hints or clues do you see that **foreshadow** what eventually happens?

## Extend Interpretations

### 6. Critic's Corner

In his biography on page 607, Hurst comments that the **setting** of this story is one of the **characters**. What do you think he means?

### 7. Comparing Texts

What advice does the poem "Woman with Flower" on page 604 seem to offer the narrator of "The Scarlet Ibis"? What is your opinion of the message of this poem?

### 8. Connect to Life

The narrator says, "There is within me . . . a knot of cruelty borne by the stream of love." Think about your relationships with people you love, especially in your family. Can love and cruelty exist at the same time? Why or why not?

## Literary Analysis

**THEME** The **theme** of a story may not be stated, but it is a central insight about life or human nature that the story illustrates. Different readers may find different themes in the same story. Here are some ways to look for a theme in a story:


- Review what happens to the main **character**. Does he or she change during the story? What does he or she learn about life?
- Skim the story for key phrases and sentences that say something about life or people in general.
- Think about the **title** of the story. Does it have a meaning that could lead you to a major theme?
- Remember that a story may have more than one theme.

**Paired Activity** Make a chart like the one shown. With a partner, go back through the story and list whatever statements you can find under the three headings. Remember that a theme should be expressed as a complete sentence, and that you may find more than one theme.

What Narrator Learns	Key Passages	Importance of Title

**REVIEW SYMBOL** A **symbol** is a person, an animal, a place, an activity, or an object that stands for something beyond itself. For example, a flag is a colored piece of cloth, but it also symbolizes a nation. Symbols can communicate complicated, emotionally rich ideas. Look for an obvious symbol in "The Scarlet Ibis." What does it have in common with what it symbolizes? How might this help suggest the **theme**?

## Writing Options

1. **Response to Narrator** Write a letter to the narrator of the story, describing your feelings about the day of Doodle's death. Offer insights to the narrator about how he may come to feel in the future, based on your own perspective. Place your letter in your **Working Portfolio**. 

2. **Official Interview** Analyze the narrator's relationship with Doodle from another character's point of view. Write up your analysis as an interview between your character and a police officer investigating the case.

3. **Interpretive Essay** Write an interpretation of Doodle's favorite lie, the one about the boy named Peter. Explain what you think it means.

## Activities & Explorations

1. **Thoughtful Soliloquy** Imagine that at the end of the story Doodle is only unconscious and that he later recovers. How might this affect the narrator, and what might he think to do next? Present his thoughts in a soliloquy, a speech in which a character reveals his or her thoughts when alone.

~ **SPEAKING AND LISTENING**

2. **Homestead Map** Use the descriptions in the story to create a map of Doodle's small world, with the house in the center and roads and paths leading away from it. Show where you imagine Horsehead Landing and the creek, Old Woman Swamp, the garden, the corn and cotton fields, the barn, and the bleeding tree to be located. Compare your map with those of your classmates. ~ **ART**

## Inquiry & Research

**Odd Birds** Use Internet databases to do some research on ibises, which are little known in the United States outside of Florida. What are the basic characteristics of these birds? What kinds of ibises are there? How do they differ from one another?



**More Online: Research Starter**  
[www.mcdougallittell.com](http://www.mcdougallittell.com)

## Art Connection

The portrait of a five-year-old boy on page 597 is one of several



portraits Alice Neel (1900–1984) made of children. This boy, Richard, is posed naturally. What qualities of Doodle do you find reflected in Neel's painting?

## Vocabulary in Action

**EXERCISE A: ASSESSMENT PRACTICE** For each group of words below, write the letter of the word that is an antonym of the boldfaced word.

1. **exotic:** (a) ordinary, (b) frightening, (c) indirect
2. **careen:** (a) crawl, (b) hide, (c) race
3. **heresy:** (a) conflict, (b) conformity, (c) distance
4. **reiterate:** (a) cease, (b) lose, (c) originate
5. **precarioulsly:** (a) firmly, (b) cleverly, (c) thoughtlessly

### Building Vocabulary

For an in-depth lesson on word relationships such as synonyms and antonyms, see page 849.

6. **doggedness:** (a) intelligence, (b) kindness, (c) casualness
7. **invalid:** (a) large, (b) healthy, (c) probable
8. **infallibility:** (a) respectability, (b) inaccuracy, (c) absence
9. **iridescent:** (a) obvious, (b) charming, (c) dull
10. **imminent:** (a) distant, (b) native, (c) unknown

**EXERCISE B** With a small group of classmates, act out five of the vocabulary words, having the rest of the class try to guess the words.