

**BOOTH**

ALSO BY  
KAREN JOY FOWLER

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*Sister Noon*

*Black Glass*

*The Sweetheart Season*

*Sarah Canary*

# **BOOTH**

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**KAREN JOY  
FOWLER**



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*This book is dedicated to three people who, as teachers,  
exemplars, and advocates, changed my life.*

*All three are gone now, but my gratitude  
will last as long as I do.*

*To Chalmers Johnson, Ursula Le Guin,  
and Marian Wood.*

*America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.*

—Frederick Douglass

*We cannot escape history.*

—Abraham Lincoln

## 1822

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The people who live there call it the farm, though it's half trees, woodland merging into dense forest. A two-story, two-room log cabin has been brought from a nearby acreage on rollers greased with pig lard. The walls are whitewashed, the shutters painted red. A kitchen is added on one side, a bedroom and loft on the other. The additions stand off the main room like wings. There is nothing special about this cabin with its low ceilings, meager windows, and canted staircase, and moving it was a costly business, every local ox and man hired for the job. This all left the neighbors with the impression that the new owner was a bit crazy, a thought they never had cause to revise.

The relocation puts the cabin beside Beech Spring, where the water is so clean and clear as to be invisible. But, and the neighbors suspect that this is the real purpose, it's also a secret cabin now, screened from the wind and the road by a dense stand of walnut, oak, tulip, and beech. Still, since everyone in the neighborhood helped move it, everyone in the neighborhood knows it's there.

The nearest neighbors are the Woolseys on one side and the Rogerses on the other. Bel Air, the county seat, is three miles away; the big city of Baltimore some thirty miles of rough coach road to the south and west.

Improvements are made. Orchards of peach, apple, and pear are planted; fields of corn, cane sorghum, barley, and oats; a kitchen garden of radishes, beets, and onions. A cherry tree sprig is set near the front door and carefully tended. A granary, stables, barn, and milking shed are built. Three large, black Newfoundland dogs arrive to patrol the grounds. They are chained during the day and loosed at night. The neighbors describe these dogs as savage.

Zigzag fences are erected or repaired. The mail is delivered on horseback once a week, thrown over the gate by a postboy, who whistles through two fingers as he passes, driving the dogs to a frenzy of howling and rattling chains.

A secret family moves into the secret cabin.

SIXTEEN YEARS PASS. The family grows, shrinks, grows. By 1838, the children number at nine, counting the one about to arrive and the four who are dead. Eventually there will be ten.

These children have:

A famous father, a Shakespearean actor, on tour more often than at home.

A paternal grandfather, skinny as a stork, with white hair worn in a single braid, his clothing also fifty years out of fashion, breech trousers and buckle shoes. He's come from London to help out during their father's long absences. He was once a lawyer, treasonably sympathetic to the American revolutionaries, enthusiastic for all things American. Visitors to his London house were made to bow before a portrait of George Washington. Now

that he lives here, he hates it. He likens the farm to Robinson Crusoe's island, himself a marooned castaway on its desolate shore. He's rarely sober, which makes him less helpful than might have been hoped.

An indulgent mother. A dark-haired beauty with retiring manners, she'd once sold flowers from her family nursery on Drury Lane. She'd first seen their father onstage as King Lear and was astonished, when meeting him, to find that he was young and handsome. He'd had to perform the Howl, howl, howl speech right there in the London street before she'd believe he was the same man. "When will you spend a day with me?" he'd asked within minutes of learning her name. "Tomorrow?" and she'd surprised herself by saying yes.

During their brief courtship, he'd sent her ninety-three love letters, pressing his suit with his ambition, his ardor, the poems of Lord Byron, and the promise of adventure. Soon enough, she'd agreed to run away with him to the island of Madeira, and from there to America.

Perhaps adventure was more implied than promised outright. After they'd left their families in England, after they'd had their first child, after they'd arrived in Maryland and leased the farm on a thousand-year lease, after he'd arranged to move the cabin onto it, only then did he explain that he'd be touring without her nine months of every year. For nine months of every year, she'd be left here with his drunken father.

What else could he do? he asked, leaving no pause in which she might answer; he was a master of timing. He needed to tour if they planned to eat. And clearly, she and the baby couldn't come along. There is nothing worse than an unhappy, complaining shrew for a wife, he'd finished, by way of warning. He didn't plan on having one of those.

So here she's been, on the farm, for sixteen years now. For seventeen years, almost without break, she's been either expecting a baby or nursing one. It will be twenty continuous years before she's done.

Later, she'll tell their children it was Lord Byron's poems that tipped the scales. She'll mean this as a caution but she'll know it won't be taken as such. All her children love a good romance.

None of the children know that they're a secret. It will come as quite a shock. They've no cause for suspicion. Much like the secret cabin, everyone they know knows they're here.



## Lincoln and the Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions

*Is it unreasonable then to expect, that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time, spring up among us? And when such a one does, it will require the people to be united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent, to successfully frustrate his designs.*

—Abraham Lincoln, 1838

In January of 1838, Lincoln delivers, to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, his first major speech. He is one month shy of his twenty-ninth birthday, recently reelected to his third term in the Illinois General Assembly. He's already been a farmer, a clerk, a postmaster, a surveyor, an army captain, and a lawyer.

Two horrific murders, the first of a black man, the second of a white, form the backdrop to this speech. The first was the lynching of twenty-six-year-old Francis McIntosh in St. Louis. McIntosh was tied to a tree and burned alive. A grand jury being convened, the judge instructed them not to blame the mob, but rather those abolitionists who had stirred things up. He called one out by name—the minister and newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy. Lovejoy then fled St. Louis for Alton, Illinois, where the

mob killed him anyway. In *that* trial, the jury chair had been part of the mob and the judge himself was called as a witness for the defense. In neither case was anyone found guilty.

The death of the white man, Lovejoy, has a national impact. This is allegedly the moment John Brown decides to devote his life to the eradication of slavery. But both murders affect Lincoln deeply. In his speech, he warns of two possible threats to the republic. The first is found in the lawless actions of the mob, the second in the inevitable rise someday of an aspiring dictator. The gravest peril will come if the mob and the dictator unite.

# BOOK ONE

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*What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any  
other word would smell as sweet.*

—W. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

# Rosalie

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## i

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### THE LIVING

Rosalie, the oldest daughter, is sitting on the steps that lead down to Beech Spring, watching her baby brother and sister make boats out of leaves. She is thinking of Ophelia, drifting in her sodden gown, her hair spread over the water, her face surrounded by flowers. She is dreaming of what it would be like to be beautiful and dead. The month is March, the year 1838. In July, Rosalie will be fifteen years old. She finds Love Tragic more satisfying to contemplate than Love Triumphant.

Rosalie is neither dead nor beautiful though the first is easier for her to imagine than the second. She resembles her father and her older brother, but in miniature, and with little feminizing of their features. Reclusive, reticent, stocky, she is not witty and graceful like the rest. Nothing is expected of her, except that she be a good girl and a help to her mother. She wants little attention and gets less—the most unremarkable child in this remarkable family.

The long winter is just coming to its end. The blackbirds have

arrived, the robins are expected, and Rosalie feels the turn in her breath, in her bones. She is not quite happy, but surprisingly close to it. She feels light. Perhaps the bad times are over.

The moment she registers the feeling, it slips away. There is a palpable relief whenever Father leaves on tour. Mail day is the exception. By noon, Mother will be reading a letter from Father. The letter will be good or it will be bad. Mother will need her desperately or she won't need her at all.

The sky above the trees is pale and bare and skims in reflection over the flat surface of the water. It's not a warm day, but it's a dry one. Rosalie is wearing her shawl, her bonnet, and a pair of sturdy boots that were bought some years ago for her brother June.

At sixteen, June is the oldest child. He's off in the barley fields this morning, because Father has read an article on some new fertilizing technique and so it must be tried at once. Father is always impatient for the completion of projects in which he has no part. He often berates his own father for lack of industry. Father thinks Grandfather drinks too much.

Grandfather thinks the same of Father. They quarrel about this endlessly whenever Father is home, often from their customary chairs at the Churchville Tavern, where all such arguments can be fueled by the jolly god.

Rosalie doesn't know where her grandfather is just now. Since her little brother Henry Byron died, Grandfather is often hard to find, and mostly they don't look. He comes. He goes. Sometimes he misses a meal, but not often. He used to give the children lessons, but really this was just for Henry; none of the other children are promising enough to interest him. Not June, who is more brawn than brains, a handsome, genial disappointment they once hoped would be a doctor or lawyer. Certainly not Rosalie.

Upslope, Mother appears at the door of the cabin, stands look-

ing across the lawn. Her arms curve around her belly, holding it up like a great globe. She can't put on her shoes now or hook the laces without Rosalie's help.

Her face is in the sun, her eyes closed to better enjoy the warmth. She looks tired, but peaceful. She looks, just for the moment, like a young girl. "Someone is having a busy morning," she says, "swimming about in there." And then, opening her eyes, aging instantly back into her cares and worries, "Don't let Asia play so near the water." She vanishes back into the dark cabin.

As if Rosalie is not watching every move Asia makes.

As if Asia will do anything Rosalie asks! Asia is the youngest, if you don't count the swimmer in Mother's belly. Two years old, but only recently named and Rosalie still isn't used to thinking of her as Asia. Her parents had settled on Ayesha, or maybe Sidney, unable to choose between the two. Then suddenly, a letter from Father. "Let her be called Asia," he wrote, "because God first walked with man on that continent. With Frigga for a middle name since she was born on a Friday." Mother wasn't entirely pleased so they surreptitiously call her Asia Sidney now, and will until she's grown enough to bear the full weight of Frigga.

In point of fact, Asia was born on a Thursday.

Edwin, Rosalie's little brother, is four. Edwin is crying, which he does the way he does all things, quietly. He's been trying to collect pebbles and seed pods to be passengers in his boats, but Asia keeps taking them and throwing them into the spring.

Rosalie comes to kneel beside him, pushes up her sleeve with one hand, and reaches into the cold water with the other. She's distracted momentarily by the magic of her fingers elongating and refracting. Asia cannot throw well. Edwin's pebbles are easily rescued. She hands three back to him, wiping her cold hand on the hem of her skirt.

This makes Asia so angry she can't even speak. She points to the water and sobs. She stamps her feet and screams. Mother comes to the door again. "We're all fine here," Rosalie says, but she speaks so softly that only Asia and Edwin hear her. What she says makes Asia even louder and angrier since it isn't at all true.

All two-year-olds have terrible tempers, Mother says, but the others didn't, not like this. In the face of Asia's fury, Edwin surrenders his boats and his pebbles. Asia has them all now. Her cheeks dry in an instant. Already she has the beauty Rosalie lacks, dark hair, dark, shining eyes.

So does Edwin, who comes to lean against Rosalie, his bony shoulder cutting sharply into her upper arm. He smells like the biscuits they had at breakfast. Mrs. Elijah Rogers, their neighbor, had to teach Mother to make biscuits and corn bread on the kitchen's hearth when she first arrived at the farm. Now she's teaching Rosalie. A childless woman herself, she dotes on the Booths, all of whom call her Auntie. "I don't think your mother had ever cooked before," Auntie Rogers once told Rosalie, either to let her know that Mother was a real lady or else that Mother had been strangely incompetent by Bel Air standards; Rosalie has never been sure which was being conveyed. Mother's biscuits are fine now, but not as good as Auntie Rogers'. Or, to be honest, Rosalie's.

"The frog is sleeping," Edwin says. This doesn't sound like a question, but is. He wants to be told he is right. Edwin only asks questions when he already knows the answers.

"Old Mr. Bullfrog sleeps through the winter," Rosalie says. "He only wakes up when summer comes."

"Old Mr. Bullfrog is very old." Edwin is feeding her her lines.

"Very *very* old."

"A hundred years."

Bullfrogs don't live a hundred years. They are lucky to make

eight. Grandfather says so. And yet Rosalie cannot remember a summer out of earshot of the enormous, bulbous frog. On warm evenings, when the insects are humming and the birds calling and the water rushing and the wind blowing and the trees rustling and the cows bawling, still that deep, booming groan can be heard. Neighbors a mile distant complain of the noise.

“At least a hundred years. He saw the American Revolution with his very own eyes. He drank the tea in the Boston Harbor.” Rosalie feels her voice strangling in her throat. Henry Byron had always been the author of Old Mr. Bullfrog’s rich and consequential past.

Some neighbors once approached Father with a request that the frog be killed in the cause of peace and quiet. Father refused. The farm is a sanctuary for all God’s creatures, even the copperhead snakes. Father doesn’t believe in eating meat and once, Mother says, rose up in a saloon to point his finger at a man enjoying a plate of oysters. “Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!” Father said in the same voice he used to play Macbeth. Sometimes you think Father might be joking, but you never can be sure.

Asia has finished throwing all of Edwin’s boats and stones into the water. She turns in his direction a face shining with triumph, but immediately clouds over with the realization that Edwin hasn’t been watching. She steps towards them and Rosalie shifts Edwin to her other side so he can’t be pushed about. His knees soften until he’s sitting in her lap. Asia comes to do the same, crowding into Rosalie’s arms, taking up as much room as she can. Heat pours off her. Rosalie feels Edwin becoming smaller.

“Do you want to hear about you?” she asks him. He does. It’s his favorite story.

“On the night you were born,” she says, “Father was in New York being Richard III.”

Rosalie remembers it as a terrifying night, but that's not the way she tells it. She skips the difficulties of the birth, Mother's agony, the moment the midwife told June to ride for the doctor. She skips the icy ground and her fear that June was riding too fast and the horse would lose her footing, or not fast enough and the doctor would arrive too late. Mother had had six other children and never needed the doctor before.

Rosalie tells Edwin instead that there was a shower of stars that night, lasting more than an hour. How, just as June was leaving, a great meteor exploded over Baltimore—Rosalie throws open her hands to show the explosion—and June rode on while the sky above him rained down stars.

She says that Edwin is the family's seventh child and that he arrived with his caul still over his face. The caul has been saved in a small box in her mother's cupboard. It has the feel of a well-worn handkerchief. Edwin has been shown this, but he won't be allowed to touch it until he is older.

All these things, Rosalie says—the stars, the caul, the number seven—they mark Edwin as extraordinary. "This child will see ghosts," the midwife had said when the doctor had gone and she was again in charge. "He will never drown. Men everywhere will know his name." She took Edwin and swaddled him more tightly. There was something reverential, ceremonial, in the way she handed him back.

Before, Rosalie has always left out the part about seeing ghosts. Today she forgets. She feels Edwin stiffen at this news. So far, he's shown no evidence of greatness. He's an inactive, fragile, anxious boy.

The ten-year gap between Rosalie and Edwin is where all the dead children are.

**ii**

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## THE DEAD

Frederick was the first to die. He died away from home, off in Boston where Father had gone to try his hand at managing the Tremont Theatre. Mother had joined him there, taking Frederick, who was too little to leave behind. Ann Hall, their farm manager's wife, and Hagar, a servant with no last name that either she or anyone else knew, cared for the rest of the children in their absence.

In November, only a few months past Frederick's first birthday, he died. Rosalie hadn't seen him since the summer. She missed his first words and his first steps. She desperately missed her mother. She was five years old.

The how and why of Frederick's death have never been made clear to Rosalie—an accident, but nobody's fault, is what she gathers, or maybe an illness. Father's experiment at management had lasted only two months and then, when he'd gone off to New York to perform again, Mother had remained in Boston with Frederick for another few weeks, arranging the move back. When Mother finally came home, she came home alone.

Father followed soon after, bringing Frederick, or at least a little coffin and everyone said Frederick was inside. Rosalie remembers how Mother hardly spoke for weeks, how she no longer appeared at bedtime to check the cleanliness of their hands and necks, or to kiss the children she still had. She remembers Mother's grief as peculiarly listless. There were no bouts of uncontrollable weeping, only an endless silent stream of tears. It was

as if Frederick had taken her spirit along with him when he went, leaving only a Mother-shaped husk behind.

Rosalie remembers the exact moment she first understood that she was responsible now for Henry and for Mary Ann. She shared a bed with Mary Ann and one night, as Rosalie was crying quietly to herself, Mary Ann also began to cry. She was only two years old and didn't have the words to tell Rosalie why, except that she said that everyone was always crying.

"I'll stop," Rosalie told her and made an unpersuasive, gulping attempt to do so.

"Mama," Mary Ann said, crying harder than ever. "Mama."

Rosalie understood, or else she imagined, that Mary Ann was crying because there were no more good-night kisses. She rolled Mary Ann towards her and kissed her on the forehead, exactly as Mother used to do, though wetter. Then she got up, moving quickly through the cold room to kiss Henry, too, because apparently this job now fell to her.

She remembers another time, when she was sent outside with Henry and June to play quietly in the winter air and not be underfoot. She'd laid her red mitten on the trunk of the large sycamore, only to have it stick to the iced bark, vivid as a wound there. Her hand slipped out, leaving her staring at her pale, naked fingers. There'd been five of them: June, herself, Henry Byron, Mary Ann, and Frederick, but now there were four. They were no longer a full hand.

She missed Frederick, who was a lovely baby with dimpled elbows and two sharp teeth. When he crawled about the cabin, his little bottom swung merrily from side to side. Rosalie would hear him in the mornings, babbling quietly to himself. He never woke up crying as Edwin and Asia now often did.

But the way Rosalie missed him was not the way Mother and

Father missed him. She was shocked that he could disappear like that, right into the ground. She was more unsettled by the information his absence contained than by the absence itself. If it could happen to Frederick, what was to stop it from happening to her?

A large family graveyard was built around his grave, railed in with wire and planted with althea and jasmine. Even a five-year-old could see that plenty of room had been left for all the rest of them.

Three years later, Elizabeth was born, bringing the number of children back to five. But Elizabeth was never as hearty as Frederick, and it worried Rosalie. Her nose was always running and often scabbed under the nostrils. Rosalie decided not to become too attached.

This turned out to be wise. One dreadful February both Mary Ann and Elizabeth died. Father was off in Richmond performing Hamlet. He told them later that a prankster had taken out the skull usually used for Yorick and substituted a child's skull instead. As soon as his fingers touched the tiny head, Father said, he was nearly felled by a premonition of doom.

Two days later, a messenger arrived at the stage, covered with dust and stammering in his haste. He told Father that Mary Ann was dead of the cholera and that the baby Elizabeth and eleven-year-old June had it, too. Father had run immediately from the theater, still in his costume and stage paint, packing nothing.

Meanwhile, Rosalie watched the household collapse into madness. She was now nine years old. June was ill and Elizabeth deathly ill. Mary Ann was dead and Mother deranged, defiant, suicidal. This was not the quiet defeat that accompanied Frederick's death. This grief was a war against the world.

Aunty Rogers came every day to help Ann and Hagar with the

nursing and consoling, but Mother couldn't be consoled. "Let me die," Rosalie heard her saying, every day, every hour. "Just go away and let me die." Rosalie prayed for Father to come. Mother wouldn't die if Father told her not to.

But Father's arrival improved nothing. Rosalie ran outside to meet him when he came galloping in on his black-and-white pony, still dressed in his tights and cape, thwacking Peacock's sides with the flat of Hamlet's sword. He dismounted, handed the reins to Joe Hall, the farm manager, pushed Rosalie aside without a look, and demanded to see Mary Ann, a week dead now and buried. "Show me," he said. "Show me," he shouted.

It was a bright, sunny, cloudless day. Mother appeared at the door, summoned from Elizabeth's bed by the sound of his voice. She stepped onto the grass. She was still in her nightdress, her hair gone wild. He was caked with make-up and dust, as if his face was melting away. Horrid half-replicas of her mother and father. Rosalie was frightened of them both.

And yet, she was also hopeful. Father would fix things. It was why he'd come racing back. She took Henry's hand, his fingers wet since they'd recently been in his mouth, and they followed Joe Hall, Father, and Mother along the path to the graveyard. Already Father was shouting that he could restore Mary Ann to life and this was a level of fixing things Rosalie hadn't known was possible. Her heart lifted. "Bring me a shovel," Father told Joe.

Joe didn't move.

But the shovel was right there, leaning against the railing. Three steps and Father had it in his hands. "She wouldn't have died if not for me," Father said to Joe.

"God's will," Joe said. "Nobody's fault."

"God's punishment," said Father. "I've fallen from my beliefs, been careless in my habits. And God noticed."

The ground was loose over Mary Ann's coffin, easy to move. He dug and Mother sobbed, begging him to stop; he was breaking her broken heart, she said. And while all this was happening, Ann Hall suddenly arrived to take Rosalie and Henry away. "We don't need to watch this," Ann said, even though Rosalie desperately wanted to. Why couldn't she be there at the moment Mary Ann opened her eyes?

She sat with Henry on the grass in front of the cabin, leaning against Ann's legs, until Father came stumbling up the path with Mary Ann's coffin in his arms. Mother floated behind him in her cloud of insanity.

Ann told Rosalie and little Henry to go upstairs. They ascended slowly until Ann was no longer watching and then they sat together on one of the upper steps. It was smooth and cold and sloped a little in the middle where people put their feet. "It's all right," Rosalie told Henry. "Father is fixing it."

They could hear Father talking to Mary Ann, but they couldn't hear what he was saying. They couldn't hear Mary Ann answering. And then there was a roar as Father's grief consumed the heavens and Rosalie knew Father had failed. She knew then that she'd always known he would, even though only a few minutes before, Father failing at anything had seemed impossible.

The dead child was the only child that mattered. Father refused to leave the coffin, even to go see June or Elizabeth. He refused to have Mary Ann reinterred. Late that night, when no one was watching, he slipped from the cabin with the coffin and the child, hiding her somewhere in the considerable acreage of the farm.

Joe was sent for and he searched through the dark for many fruitless hours until the dogs finally led him right. Neighbors came, their lanterns swinging over the lane in the black

night—Mr. Rogers and Mr. Shook and Mr. Mason. They gave Father drink and then forced him into the bedroom, where he shouted and called them names. They kept him confined while Joe returned Mary Ann to the earth. Ann wasn't there to shield Rosalie. Rosalie saw it all.

JUNE SURVIVED, BUT Elizabeth died and Father's being there didn't stop it. He began a punishing regime of penance, putting stones in his shoes and walking long distances on them. Hagar cooked meal after meal that no one ate, scraping the food from the plates and into the run where the dogs were. Father canceled all his upcoming engagements. He wrote to his closest friend, Tom Flynn, saying he couldn't leave his wife or she would kill herself.

Somewhere, in the midst of this tumult and agony, Edwin was conceived. He was born in November that same year with the stars and the caul, all as Rosalie had said.

When Father returned to his tour, he found that he could now summon the passion he needed only with drink. He played Louisville, where he witnessed firsthand the exuberant slaughter of the passenger pigeons, the same thing that twenty years earlier had so shocked Audubon.

Young as she was, Rosalie had also been through a pigeon year. She knew that you heard them before you saw them, a far-off sound of wings, like a ceaseless thunder, and, inside that, a song like sleigh bells. They passed in one continuous mass overhead, an ocean of birds, blotting out the sun for hours. There was no sky when they flew over, only pigeons above, in ripples of color, blue, gray, purple. Droppings fell like snow.

The farmers had run outside to protect their fields and fill their larders. They simply shot their rifles into the air. There was no need to aim. There was no way to miss. The bird mass coiled into the air and rose like a giant snake when the shots began. The dead plummeted and the living fell on the oat fields, stripping them in minutes. In trade for their crops, the farmers gathered the bodies into bushel baskets, not even bothering to collect them all. A handful of shots resulted in more dead birds than anyone could eat.

But Father hadn't been home, so he was seeing this for the first time. He was greatly affected by the terror of the dying birds, which drowned out even the noise of the guns. They died in inconceivable numbers.

The next day he went to the market and bought whole wagonloads of dead birds. He purchased a coffin and a cemetery plot, and he held a public funeral.

A crowd gathered. "What madness prompts you to such carnage?" Father shouted in anguished tones. "To the sin of killing these admirable creatures, with their fair colors and soft, tunable voices? Oh, you men are made of stone! Where is your mercy?"

The crowd was amused at first. The mood sobered when he compared the innocent birds to Christ on the cross. Then he said that Christ had been crucified for the sin of eating meat—no crucifixion without the loaves and fishes was his reasoning. *Then* he said that the Hindoos had the only true religion. He was arrested on the spot.

"Currently imprisoned for telling the truth to scoundrels," he'd written his father, who'd read the letter aloud to Mother while Rosalie listened unnoticed. "When, when, when," Grandfather asked, "will he tire of these mad freaks?"