
Contents

[*Title Page*](#)
[*Dedication*](#)
[*Prologue*](#)

[Part One](#)

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)

[Part Three](#)

[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)
[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)
[Chapter 42](#)
[Chapter 43](#)
[Chapter 44](#)
[Chapter 45](#)
[Chapter 46](#)
[Chapter 47](#)

[Epilogue](#)
[Notes from the Willow Book](#)
[Author's Note](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)
[The Birth House](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Praise for the Birth House](#)
[Copyright](#)



For my husband, Ian
My heart, my love, my home

prologue

MY HOUSE STANDS at the edge of the earth. Together, the house and I have held strong against the churning tides of Fundy. Two sisters, stubborn in our bones.

My father, Judah Rare, built this farmhouse in 1917. It was my wedding gift. *A strong house for a Rare woman*, he said. I was eighteen. He and his five brothers, shipbuilders by trade, raised her worth from timbers born on my grandfather's land. Oak for stability and certainty, yellow birch for new life and change, spruce for protection from the world outside. Father was an intuitive carpenter, carrying out his work like holy ritual. His callused hands, veined with pride, had a memory for measure and a knowing of what it takes to withstand the sea.

Strength and a sense of knowing, that's what you have to have to live in the Bay. Each morning you set your sights on the tasks ahead and hope that when the day is done you're farther along than when you started. Our little village, perched on the crook of God's finger, has always been ruled by storm and season. The men did whatever they had to do to get by. They joked with one another in fire-warmed kitchens after sunset, smoking their pipes, someone bringing out a fiddle...laughing as they chorused, *no matter how rough, we can take it*. The seasons were reflected in their faces, and in the movement of their bodies. When it was time for the shad, herring and cod to come in, they were fishermen, dark with tiresome wet from the sea. When the deer began to huddle on the back of the mountain, they became hunters and woodsmen. When spring came, they worked the green-scented earth, planting crops that would keep, potatoes, cabbage, carrots, turnips. Summer saw their weathered hands building ships and haying fields, and sunsets that ribboned over the water, daring the skies to turn night. The long days were filled with pride and ceremony as mighty sailing ships were launched from the shore. *The Lauretta, The Reward, The Nordica, The Bluebird, The Huntley*. My father said he'd scour two hundred acres of forest just to find the perfect trees to build a three-masted schooner. Tall yellow birch, gently arched by northwesterly winds, was highly prized. He could spot the keel in a tree's curve and shadow, the return of the tide set in the grain.

Men wagered their lives with the sea for the honour of these vessels. Each morning they watched for the signs. *Red skies in morning, sailors take warning*. Each night they looked to the heavens, spotting starry creatures, or the point of a dragon's tail. They told themselves that these were promises from God, that He would keep the wiry cold fingers of the sea from grabbing at them, from taking their lives. Sometimes men were taken. On those dark days the men who were left behind sat down together and made conversation of every detail, hitching truth to wives' tales while mending their nets.

As the men bargained with the elements, the women tended to matters at home. They bartered with each other to fill their pantries and clothe their children. Grandmothers, aunts and sisters taught one

another to stitch and cook and spin. On Sunday mornings mothers bent their knees between the stalwart pews at the Union Church, praying they would have enough. With hymnals clutched against their breasts, they told the Lord they would be ever faithful if their husbands were spared.

When husbands, fathers and sons were kept out in the fog longer than was safe, the women stood at their windows, holding their lamps, a chorus of lady moons beckoning their lovers back to shore. Waiting, they hushed their children to sleep and listened for the voice of the moon in the crashing waves. In the secret of the night, mothers whispered to their daughters that only the moon could force the waters to submit. It was the moon's voice that called the men home, her voice that turned the tide of womanhood, her voice that pulled their babies into the light of birth.

My house became the birth house. That's what the women came to call it, knocking on the door, ripe with child, water breaking on the porch. First-time mothers full of questions, young girls in trouble and seasoned women with a brood already at home. (I called those babies "toesies," because they were more than their mamas could count on their fingers.) They all came to the house, wailing and keening their babies into the world. I wiped their feverish necks with cool, moist cloths, spooned porridge and hot tea into their tired bodies, talked them back from outside of themselves.

Ginny, she had two...

Sadie Loomer, she had a girl here.

Precious, she had twins...twice.

Celia had six boys, but she was married to my brother Albert...Rare men always have boys.

Iris Rose, she had Wrennie...

All I ever wanted was to keep them safe.



part one

Around the year 1760, a ship of Scotch immigrants came to be wrecked on the shores of this place. Although the vessel was lost, her passengers and crew managed to find shelter here. They struggled through the winter—many taking ill, the women losing their children, the men making the difficult journey down North Mountain to the valley below, carrying sacks of potatoes and other goods back to their temporary home, now called Scots Bay.

In the spring, when all who had been stranded chose to make their way to more established communities, the daughter of the ship's captain, Annie MacIssac, stayed behind. She had fallen in love with a Mi'kmaq man she called Silent Rare.

On the evening of a full moon in June, Silent went out in his canoe to catch the shad that were spawning around the tip of Cape Split. As the night wore on, Annie began to worry that some ill had befallen her love. She looked across the water for signs of him but found nothing. She walked to the cove where they had first met and began to call out to him, promising her heart, her fidelity and a thousand sons to his name. The moon, seeing Annie's sadness, began to sing, forcing the waves inland strong and fast, bringing Silent safely back to his lover.

Since that time, every child born from the Rare name has been male, and even now, when the moon is full, you can hear her voice, the voice of the moon, singing the sailors home.

A RARE FAMILY HISTORY, 185

1

EVER SINCE I CAN REMEMBER, people have had more than enough to say about me. As the only daughter in five generations of Rares, most figure I was changed by faeries or not my father's child. Mother works and prays too hard to have anyone but those with the cruellest of tongues doubt her devotion to my father. When there's no good explanation for something, people of the Bay find it easier to believe in mermaids and moss babies, to call it witchery and be done with it. Long after the New England Planters' seed wore the Mi'kmaq out of my family's blood, I was born with coal black hair, cinnamon skin and a caul over my face. *A foretelling. A sign. A gift that supposedly allows me to talk to animals, see people's deaths and hear the whisperings of spirits. A charm for protection against drowning.*

When one of Laird Jessup's Highland heifers gave birth to a three-legged albino calf, talk followed and people tried to guess what could have made such a creature. In the end, most people blamed me for it. I had witnessed the cow bawling her calf onto the ground. I had been the one who ran to the Jessups' to tell the young farmer about the strange thing that had happened. *Dora talked to ghosts, Dora ate bat soup, Dora slit the Devil's throat and flew over the chicken coop.* My classmates chanted that verse between the slats of the garden gate, along with all the other words their parents taught them not to say. Of course, there are plenty of schoolyard stories about Miss B. too, most of them ending with, *if your cat or your baby goes missing, you'll know where to find the bones.* It's talk like that that's made us such good friends. Miss B. says she's glad for gossip. "It keep folks from comin' to places they don't belong."

Most days I wake up and say a prayer. *I want, I wish, I wait for something to happen to me.* While I thank God for all good things, I don't say this verse to Him, or to Jesus or even to Mary. They are far too busy to be worrying about the affairs and wishes of my heart. No, I say my prayer more to the air than anything else, hoping it might catch on the wind and find its way to anything, to something that's mine. Mother says, *a young lady should take care with what she wishes for.* I'm beginning to think she's right.

Yesterday was fair for a Saturday in October—warm, with no wind and clear skies—what most people call *fool's blue.* It's the kind of sky that begs you to sit and look at it all day. Once it's got you, you'll soon forget whatever chores need to be done, and before you know it, the day's gone and you've forgotten the luck that's to be lost when you don't get your laundry and yourself in out of the cold. Mother must not have noticed it...before breakfast was over, she'd already washed and hung two baskets of laundry and gotten a bushel of turnips ready for Charlie and me to take to Aunt Fran's. On the way home, I spotted a buggy tearing up the road. Before the thing could run us over, the driver pulled the horses to a stop, kicking up rocks and dust all over the place. Tom Ketch was driving, and

Miss Babineau sat in the seat next to him. She called out to me, "Goin' out to Deer Glen to catch a baby and I needs an extra pair of hands. Come on, Dora."

Even though I'd been visiting her since I was a little girl (stopping by to talk to her while she gardened, or bringing her packages up from the post), I was surprised she'd asked me to come along. When my younger brothers were born and Miss B. came to the house, I begged to stay, but my parents sent me to Aunt Fran's instead. Outside of watching farmyard animals and a few litters of pups, I didn't have much experience with birthing. I shook my head and refused. "You should ask someone else. I've never attended a birth..."

She scowled at me. "How old are you now, fifteen, sixteen?"

"Seventeen."

She laughed and reached out her wrinkled hand to me. "Mary-be. I was half your age when I first started helpin' to catch babies. You've been pesterin' me about everything under the sun since you were old enough to talk. You'll do just fine."

Marie Babineau's voice carries the sound of two places: the dancing, Cajun truth of her Louisiana past and the quiet-steady way of talk that comes from always working at something, from living in the Bay. Some say she's a witch, others say she's more of an angel. Either way, most of the girls in the Bay (including me) have the middle initial of *M*, for Marie. She's not a blood relative to anyone here but we've always done our part to help take care of her. My brothers chop her firewood and put it up for the winter while Father makes sure her windows and the roof on her cabin are sound. Whenever we have extra preserves, or a loaf of bread, or a basket of apples, Mother sends me to deliver them to Miss B. "She helped bring all you children into this world, and she saved your life, Dora. Brought you fever down when there was nothing else I could do. Anything we have is hers. Anything she asks, we do."

As I pulled myself up to sit next to her, she turned and shouted to Charlie, "Tell your mama not to worry, I'll have Dora home for supper tomorrow." We sat tight, three across the driver's seat, with a falling-down wagon dragging behind.

Miss B. began to question Tom, her voice calm and steady. "How's your mama sound?"

"Moanin' a lot. Then every once in a while she'll hold her belly and squeal like a stuck pig."

"How long she been that way?"

"It started first thing this morning. She was moonin' around, sayin' she couldn't squat to milk the goat, that it hurt too much. Father made her do it anyways, said she was being lazy...then he made her muck the stalls too."

"Is she bleedin'?"

Tom kept his eyes on the road ahead. "Not sure. All I know is, one minute she was standin' in the kitchen, peelin' potatoes, and then all of a sudden she was doubled right over. Father got angry with her, said he was hungry and she'd better get on with what she was doin'. When she didn't, he shoves her down to the floor. After that, hard as she tried, she couldn't stand on her own, so she just curled up and cried." He gave a sharp whistle to the horses to keep them in the middle of the rutted road, his jaw set hard, like someone waiting to get punched in the gut. "She didn't want me to bother you with it, said she'd be alright, but I never seen her hurtin' so bad before. I came as soon as I could, as soon as he left to go down to my uncle's place."

"Will he stay out long?"

"More'n likely all night. Especially if they gets t'drinkin', which they always do."

Tom's the oldest of the twelve Ketch children. He's fifteen, maybe sixteen, I'd guess. I think about Tom from time to time, when I run out of dreams about the fine gentlemen in Jane Austen's novels.

He's got a kind face, even when it's filthy, and Mother always says she hopes he'll find a way to make something of himself instead of turning out to be like his father, Brady. I can tell she prefers I not mention the Ketches at all. I think it makes her scared that I'll not make something of myself and turn out to be like Tom's mother, Experience.

The Ketch family has always lived in Deer Glen. It's a crooked, narrow hollow, just outside of the Bay, twisting right through the mountain until you can see the red cliffs of Blomidon. No one here would claim it to be anything more than the dip in the road that lets you know you're almost home. The land is too rocky and steep for farming and too far from the shore for making a life as a fisherman or a shipbuilder. Too far for a pleasant walk. The Ketches suffer along, selling homebrew from a still in the woods and making whatever they can from the hunters who come from away, men who hope to kill the white doe that's said to live in the Glen. In deer season they block off the road, Brady at one end, his brother Garrett at the other. They stand, shotguns strapped to their backs, waiting to escort the trophy hunters who come from Halifax, the Annapolis Valley, and faraway places like New York and Boston. The Ketch brothers charge a pretty penny for their services, especially since they're selling lies. It's true, there's been a white doe spotted on North Mountain, but it doesn't live in Deer Glen. It lives in the woods behind Miss B.'s cabin, where she feeds it out of her hand, like a pet. I've never seen it, but I've heard her call to it on occasion, walking through the trees singing, *Lait-Lait, Lune-Lune*. Father said he saw it once, that she's the colour of sweet Guernsey cream, with one corner of her rump faintly speckled. He came home with nothing that day and told Mother, "It would have been wrong to take it." Shortly after, at a Sons of Temperance meeting, the men of the Bay all pledged never to kill it. They all agreed that there's sin in taking the life of something so pure.

It was nearly dark when we got to the Ketch house, its clapboards loose and wanting for paint, the screen door left hanging. The inside wasn't much better. A picked-over loaf of bread, along with pots and pans and empty canning jars were crowded together on the table, all needing to be cleared. Attempts had been made at keeping a proper house, but somehow the efforts had gone wrong, every time. The curtains were bright at the top, still showing white, with a cheerful flowered print. Halfway to the floor, little hands had worn stains into the fabric, and the ends were frayed from the tug and pull of cats' claws. No matter how fresh and clean a start they may have had, the towels in the kitchen, the wallpaper and rugs, even the dress on the little girl who greeted us at the door, all showed the same pattern, their middles stained, their edges worn and dirty. The entire house smelled sour and neglected.

Experience Ketch was hunched over in her bed, clutching her belly. Her oldest daughter, Iris Rose, was standing next to her, dipping a rag in a bucket of water then offering it to her mother. Mrs. Ketch took the worn cloth and clenched it between her teeth, sucking and spitting while she rocked back and forth.

Miss B. sat on the edge of the bed and held Mrs. Ketch's hand. She talked the woman through her pains enough to get her to sit up and drink some tea. The midwife wrapped her wrinkled fingers around Mrs. Ketch's wrist, closed her eyes and counted in French. She pinched the ends of Mrs. Ketch's fingertips and then pulled her eyelids away from her pink, teary eyes. "Your blood's weak." Miss B. pushed the blankets back and pulled up Mrs. Ketch's bloodstained skirts. Her hands kneaded their way around the tired woman's swollen belly, feeling over her stretched skin, making the sign of the cross. After washing her hands several times, she slipped her fingers between Mrs. Ketch's legs and shook her head. "This baby has to come today."

Mrs. Ketch moaned. "It's too soon."

"Your pains is too far gone and I can't turn you back. If you don't birth this child today, all your

other babies don't gonna have a mama."

"I don't want it."

Iris Rose knelt by the bed and pleaded with her mother. "Please, Mama, do what she says."

The girl's much younger than me, twelve at the most, but she's as much mother as she is child. From time to time she'll show up at the schoolhouse, dragging as many of her brothers and sisters behind her as she can. She barks at the boys to take off their hats, scolds the girls as she tugs on their braids, making her voice as big and rough as an old granny's. For all her trying, it always turns out the same. By the time the snow flies, the desks of the Ketch children are empty again.

Mrs. Ketch needs them home, I guess. I've heard that each of the older ones is assigned a little one to bathe, dress, feed and look after, so they don't get lost in the clutter of a house filled with dirty dishes and barn cats. With six brothers of my own, I think I can say there's such a thing as *too many*.

When Mrs. Ketch's wailing went on, Tom and the older boys disappeared out to the barn. With Iris Rose's help, I tucked the rest of the children into an upstairs room. She stood in the doorway with her arms folded across her chest. "Now don't you make another sound, or Daddy'll come running through the hollow and up these stairs with an alder switch!" The room went quiet. Six small greasy heads went to the floor, six bellies breathed shallow and scared.

"Can I watch?" Iris Rose asked.

"If you promise not to say anything."

"I'll be silent. I swear."

I left her on the stairs, peeking through the broken, crooked pickets of the banister.

Miss B. and I turned back the straw mattress and tied sheets to the bedposts. She tugged hard at them. "See now, Mrs. Ketch, you know what's to do...when the time comes, you gots to hold on for dear life and push that baby out." Miss B. motioned for me to steady Mrs. Ketch's shaking knees. "And it's comin' fast and hard as high tide on a full moon. *Pousser!*"

Mrs. Ketch bent her chin to her chest, the veins on her neck throbbing. "Let me die, dear Lord. Please let me die."

Miss B. laughed. "How many times you been through this, thirteen, fourteen? You should know by now, the Lord ain't like most men, He ain't gonna just take you home when you ask for it..."

Just last Sunday Reverend Norton went on and on about the trespasses of Eve, pounding his fist on the pulpit, his face all red and puffed up as he spit to the side between the words *original* and *sin*. While he talked at good length about the evils of temptation and the curse Eve had brought upon all women, he never mentioned the stink of it. I never imagined that "the woman's tithe for the civilized world" would smell so rusted, so bitter.

I kept the fire in the stove going, unpacked clean sheets from Miss B.'s bag, did whatever she told me to do, but no matter how busy I made myself, my stomach ached and my hands felt heavy and useless. I don't think my nervousness came from it being my first birth, or even from seeing such pain and struggle in a woman, but more from hearing the sadness, the wanting, in Mrs. Ketch's cries. Nothing we did seemed to help. She sobbed and cursed, her wailing and Miss B.'s coaxing going on for an hour or more, I'd guess, or at least long enough for Mrs. Ketch to give up on a miracle and have a baby boy.

He was a sad, tiny thing. His flesh was like onion skin; the blue of his veins showed right through. I had looked any harder at his weak little body, I think I might have seen his heart. Miss B. bundled him up in flannel sheets and handed him to Mrs. Ketch. "Hold him, now, put your chest to his so he knows what it's like to be alive." But Experience Ketch didn't want her baby. She didn't want to hold him or look at him or have him anywhere near. "Get that thing away from me. I got twelve more than

can handle anyways.”

I couldn't stand it. I took him from Miss B. and pulled him close. I whispered in his ear, “I'll take you home with me. I'll take you for my own.” Out of the corner of my eye I saw Iris Rose run up the stairs. I turned to Miss B. “He's looking so blue, his arms, his legs, his chest. His breath is barely there.”

“He's born too soon.” She made the sign of the cross on his wrinkled brow. “If he'd been born three or four weeks later, I could spoon alder tea with brandy in his mouth, make a bed for him in the warmin' box of the cookstove and hope he pinked up, but as it is...”

I stopped her from going on. “Tell me what to do. I have to try.”

Miss B. shook her head. “If you can't see him through to the other side, then you should just go on home. Mary and the angels will soon take care of him. I have to see to his mama.”

I sat in the corner and held tight to the dying child.

Miss B. wrapped a blanket around us. “Some babies ain't meant for this world. All you can do is keep him safe until his angel comes.”

“There's nothing else I can do?”

She leaned over and whispered in my ear. “Pray for him, and pray for this house too.”

BETWEEN MY PRAYERS and Miss B.'s spooning porridge into Mrs. Ketch's mouth, the baby died. It was almost dawn when Brady Ketch came home. He stomped through the house, drunk and demanding to be fed. "Experience Ketch, get outta that bed and get me some food." The poor woman tried to get up, as if nothing had troubled her at all, but Miss B. held her down. "You need rest. Lobelia tea and rest, then more tea and more rest. At least three days to get your strength, but a week would be best. If you don't, you gonna bleed 'til you're dead."

Mr. Ketch staggered, reaching for the bundle of blankets I was holding in my arms. "Let me have a look-see there, girl. What'd we get this time, wife? Another boy, I hope. Girls don't eat as much, but they take their toll every-ways else. I don't trust nothin' that can't piss standin' up." He pinned me against the wall, his dark mouth leaving the skunky smell of his breath in my face. "Ain't you pretty. you Judah Rare's girl, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your daddy's got the right idea. How'd he manage to get all boys and just one pretty little thing like you? Bet you come in handy when your mama gets tired. He's one lucky son of a bitch, I'd say."

Mrs. Ketch hissed at her husband. "Leave her be, Brady."

He pulled back the blankets to look at the child. "I'm just lookin' at what's mine."

I stood still while he pinched at the baby's thin, blue cheeks. "Hey there, little critter, ain't you gonna say 'hello' to your—" He stopped and pulled his hand away, his curiosity giving way to confusion and then to anger. He turned and stared at Miss B. "What'd you do to it?" Before she could answer, he grabbed her by her shoulders. "Looks to me like you killed my child and put my wife half dead on her back." Brady Ketch slid his hands around Miss B.'s throat, slipping his fingers through her rosary beads. "What's to keep me from taking you back in the glen and snappin' your wattled old witch's neck?"

An iron skillet lay on the floor by the cookstove. A doorstep shaped like a dog sat in the corner, one ear and the snout of its nose chipped away. I could've killed Brady Ketch and not felt a minute's worth of guilt. "God sees what you do, Mr. Ketch."

He let go of Miss B. and made his way back to me, smiling, leaning into my body and stroking my hair. "Now, don't you worry, little girl, Miss Babineau knows I'd never mean her any real harm. It's just sometimes a woman needs a man to set her right. Says so in the Bible."

Miss B. started packing up her bag. "See that she gets her rest. Three days off her feet, no less." She moved towards the door. "Come on, Dora."

"That won't do." Mr. Ketch stood in front of the door. "She can't just take to bed for days whenever she feels like it. There's things that need to get done around here. You gotta *fix* her. Now."

Miss B. stared at him. "I told you, she needs bedrest. Three days and she'll be good as new."

He crossed his arms in front of his chest. "That Dr. Thomas, down Canning way, he'd know how to make her right. When Tommy snapped his wrist, the doc fixed it up so he could use it right away. Tied it up nice and clean, give him a few pills, and Tom was chopping wood that afternoon."

"And you can afford a fancy doctor always runnin' up the mountain to *fix* your family?"

Brady pretended to hold a rifle in his arms, pointing his finger past Miss B. and out the window. He clucked his tongue in his mouth and moved his hands as if to cock the gun. "Let's just say the doc and I...we have a *gentleman's* agreement when it comes to that sweet white doe everyone's always looking to bag." He grinned as he slowly changed position, now pointing at Miss B.'s heart, squinting one eye to take aim. "And don't think I don't know where to find her."

Miss B. pushed his arm away and started again for the door. "Well, ain't that fine."

Brady opened the door and shoved Miss B. onto the stoop. As I started to hand the child's body to him, Miss B. called out to Mrs. Ketch.

"You send Tom to get me if the bleeding gets any worse."

Mrs. Ketch rolled over, her voice sounding tired and sad. "I can take care of myself...Just get out now, and take the baby with you. I don't want that ugly thing in my house."

Miss B. sang little French prayers to the dead baby boy and wrapped him in one of the lace kerchiefs she's always tatting on her lap. We laid him in a butter box, tucked October's last blossoms from the pot marigolds and asters all around him and nailed the tiny coffin shut. She vanished between the alders in back of her cabin. I walked behind, following the sound of her voice, cradling the box in my arms, trying to make up for his mother not loving him. If only my love had been able to raise him from the dead.

Miss B. whispered. "Shhhh. *Le jardin des morts*, the garden of the dead, the garden of lost souls." In the centre of a mossy grove of spruce was a tall tree stump. The likeness of a woman had been carved into it...the Virgin Mary, standing on a crescent moon, her face, her breasts, her hands, all delicate and sweet. All around her, strings of hollowed-out whelks and moon shells hung with tattered bits of lace from the branches, like the wings of angels.

Grandmothers and old fishermen have long said that the woods of Scots Bay have cold, secret spots, places of foxfire and spirits. "Never chase a shadow in the trees. You can't be sure it's not your own." Charlie must have chased me a thousand times down the old logging road in back of our land, both of us running into the woods behind Miss B.'s place, shouting, *witched away, witched away, today's the day we'll be witched away*. We'd spent hours weaving crowns from alder twigs, feathers, porcupine quills and curled bits of birch bark. We'd imagined faerie houses and gnome caves in the tangled roof of a spruce that had been brought down by the wind. We'd come home, tired and hungry, declaring we'd found the hidden treasure of Amethyst Cove but had lost it (yet again) to a wicked band of thieves. In all our time spent in the forest we never found or imagined anything like this.

Miss B. took off her shoes. "Can't let no outside world touch Mary's ground."

She began to make her way around the grove, tracing crosses in the air, circling closer and closer to the Mary tree. I slipped off my boots and followed. When Miss B. was finished, she knelt at the base of the tree and began to dig at the moss. Beneath the dirt and stones was a thick handle of braided rope. Together we pulled up a heavy wooden door that was covering a deep hole in the ground. "Our Lady will watch over him now." She took the tiny coffin, tied a length of rope around it and lowered it into the dark grave. "Holy Mother, Star of the Sea, take this little soul with thee." She let go of the

rope and took my hands. "You gots to give him a name. Just say it once, so he knows he's been born.

I closed my eyes and whispered "*Darcy*," after Elizabeth Bennett's sweetheart in *Pride and Prejudice*. Because he should have lived; he should have been loved.

I've seen the runt of a litter die. When there are too many kittens or too many piglets, the mother can't keep up with them all. The runt gets shoved out by the others and the mother acts as if she doesn't even know it's there. Maybe Mrs. Ketch knew Darcy wouldn't live from the start, maybe she pushed him away so she wouldn't love him, so she wouldn't hurt.

It's a disgusting mess we come through to be born, the sticky-wet of blood and afterbirth, mother wailing, child crying...the helpless soft spot at the top of its head pulsing, waiting to be kissed. Our parents and teachers say it's a miracle, but it's not. It's going to happen no matter what, there's no choice in the matter. To my mind, a miracle is something that could go one way or another. The fact that something happens, when by all rights it shouldn't, is what makes us take notice, it's what saints are made of, it takes the breath away. How a mother comes to love her child, her caring at all for this thing that's made her heavy, lopsided and slow, this thing that made her wish she were dead...that's the miracle.

sample content of The Birth House: A Novel (P.S.)

- [**read online Paris Stories \(New York Review Books Classics\)**](#)
- [Les portes de la perception book](#)
- [read Parables of Kierkegaard online](#)
- [read The Wooden Shepherdess \(Human Predicament Series, Book 2\)](#)

- <http://aircon.servicessingaporecompany.com/?lib/Achieving-Excellence-in-Preschool-Literacy-Instruction.pdf>
- <http://fitnessfatale.com/freebooks/The-Gourmet-Prescription--High-Flavor-Recipes-for-Lower-Carbohydrate-Diets.pdf>
- <http://aneventshop.com/ebooks/A-David-Suzuki-Collection--A-Lifetime-of-Ideas.pdf>
- <http://www.gateaerospaceforum.com/?library/Essentials-of-Clinical-Supervision.pdf>