

PRAISE FOR *Up from the Blue*
BY SUSAN HENDERSON

“Susan Henderson’s *Up from the Blue* deftly portrays a family with contradictions we can all relate to—it’s beautiful and maddening, hopeful and condemning, simple, yet like a knot that takes a lifetime to untangle. This is a book that you will love completely, even as it hurts you. It is a heartbreaking, rewarding story that still haunts me.”

—Jamie Ford, author of *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*

“A haunting tale of the terrible ways in which we fail each other; of the whys, the what-ifs, and the what nows. This is not a book you’ll soon forget.”

—Sara Gruen, author of *Water for Elephants*

“A rare literary page-turner full of shocking discoveries and twists. Susan Henderson has created a remarkable narrator—as memorable for her feistiness as for her tenderness. *Up from the Blue* is going to be one of this year’s major debuts.”

—Josh Kilmer-Purcell, author of *The Bucolic Plague*
and *I Am Not Myself These Days*

“*Up from the Blue* is a heart-wrenching, tender story with a mystery that kept my pulse racing. What a joy to discover Tillie Harris, the most memorable, charming, and plucky narrator in fiction since Scout Finch.”

—Jessica Anya Blau, author of *The Summer of Naked Swim Parties*

“Susan Henderson masterfully weaves a story where family can both indelibly wound, and yet also redeem. Heartbreaking, compelling—ultimately beautiful.”

—Samantha Dunn, author of *Faith in Carlos Gomez*

“Haunting and unsettling, *Up from the Blue*’s real alchemy is the way it uncovers the stories that alternately save us and keep us from our real truths. Incandescently written, this is a stunning debut with heart.”

—Caroline Leavitt, author of *Girls in Trouble* and *Pictures of You*

“Susan Henderson’s debut novel *Up from the Blue* is elegant and engrossing . . . Tillie Harris is both tender and tough, charming and filled with wonder by the difficulties she must overcome. Henderson is a talent to watch.”

—Danielle Trussoni, author of *Angelology*

“A remarkable debut, not just for the uncanny accuracy and charm of eight-year-old Tillie’s narrative voice, but for the way the characters reveal unexpected angles of themselves that somehow make them realer than real. *Up from the Blue* lingers in the mind. Susan Henderson shows herself to be a writer of great skill and subtlety.”

—Mark Childress, author of *Crazy in Alabama*

“*Up from the Blue* is a beautiful, haunting, spirited debut, charged with secrets and deep longing. A moving portrait of that deep lasting love between mother and daughter.”

—Julianna Baggott, author of *Girl Talk*
and *Which Brings Me to You*

“In *Up from the Blue*, Susan Henderson delivers a compelling, deeply felt tale about the complexities of family life. You’ll fall in love with young Tillie Harris, whose attempts to navigate her parents’ unruly world and portrayed with genuine warmth and tenderness.”

—Michelle Richmond, author of *The Year of Fog*

“Through her gorgeous, perceptive debut, Susan Henderson reveals the truth—a family’s effort to hide its secrets and shame will break a child’s heart. *Up from the Blue* is an unflinching, emotionally honest novel, one of the most insightful stories I’ve ever read.”

—Ronlyn Domingue, author of *The Mercy of Thin Air*

“Henderson shows remarkable compassion in her debut novel, an affecting portrait of depression through a child’s eyes.”

—*Booklist*

“Henderson beautifully portrays this family in crisis through its most voluble and consistent member. Rapturous prose reveals young Tillie’s heart as she yearns for the mother who will make her world better but who can’t seem to mend her own tortured soul. A triumphant debut.”

—*Library Journal*

“Inescapable sadness is threaded through with surprising moments of joy, in an intimate story that dispels the usual notions of victims and oppressors.”

—*Columbus Dispatch*



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SUSAN HENDERSON is a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee and the founder of the literary blog LitPark: Where Writers Come to Play (www.litpark.com). She is the recipient of an Academy of American Poets award and a grant from the Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation. Her work has appeared in *Zoetrope*, the *Pittsburgh Quarterly*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Opium*, *Other Voices*, *Amazon Shorts*, *The Future Dictionary of America* (McSweeney's, 2004), *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* (Houghton Mifflin, 2007), and *Not Quite What I Was Planning* (Harper Paperbacks, 2008). Henderson lives in New York and *Up from the Blue* is her first novel.

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Susan Henderson



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*To David, who knows everything about me,
and he's still here*

Up
FROM THE
Blue



The House with the Blue Door

I WAS BARRED FROM SCHOOL for the day because I'd been biting again. Whenever I pressed my teeth into one of my classmates, my teacher stopped the lesson and called, "Tillie, Tillie." There was always a struggle as she tried to wrestle the hand or arm from my mouth, but I held on—fighting until the last string of spit released—because I liked to leave a mark.

Although I had nowhere to go, I got up early and sat on the front steps in my nightgown, knees together, bare feet arched to keep my legs off the cold concrete. American flags rose up the poles and flapped against the Sandia Mountains, pale gray in the distance, as lights popped on inside the little square houses of our neighborhood, each the same size with their well-mowed lawns and rectangular flower beds under the front windows.

Soon, the men from each home walked tall and purposefully out their doors, one after another, in their crisp blue uniforms or camouflage jumpsuits, all with the same haircuts, the same

pair of glasses. Some, like my father, had more decorations on their uniforms. But from this distance I noticed the sameness.

There was a sense of music to the slamming car doors and starting engines, a distinct sense of order as each man backed out of his driveway. Looking from one open garage to the next, I could see that we all had bikes, silver metal rubbish bins, reel mowers, and rakes. Our home was like all of the others on our street. The only difference was our front door. My mother had painted it turquoise blue.

The children were the next to leave with their lunch boxes and textbooks—girls in plaid and flowered dresses that fell just above the knee, boys in jeans and short-sleeved, checkered button-ups. When I recognized another second grader, her pigtails tied in yarn, I waited for her to see me there with my face decorated in yellow smiley stickers.

At first, she seemed to pass without noticing me, but at the last moment she turned her head over her shoulder and shrieked, “You have rabies!”

I smirked until the stickers pinched my skin. “I get to stay home,” I said.

And then came Mary Beth, wearing a huge Band-Aid with my teeth marks underneath it. During yesterday’s class, while she cried and held her arm, I had to stand in the corner of our classroom with my nose to the wall. I found the exact smudge where I’d put my nose the other times, and I listened to Mary Beth’s whimpering, the whispers of her friends, and the stern voices of teachers. But there were giggles, too, because even with my nose to the wall, I could still turn my feet inward like pigeons’ toes or shake my behind.

“My dad says you should keep your teeth to yourself,” she said, suddenly gripping the hand of the girl in pigtails.

“So what?” I said, standing as they ran together toward the school. “*My dad’s the boss of your dad.*”

Finally, my brother rushed out of the garage door, trying to close his Scooby Doo lunch box without dropping his textbooks. He stopped beside me to see why it wouldn’t latch, opening the lid and shifting the jar of green olives and the two hot dog buns inside.

“You have to slam it,” I said.

He did, and it bent the lid but closed shut.

“Did you check on Momma?” I asked.

Phil shook his head.

Our mother had not left her bedroom in four days. The last time she’d come out was suppertime the night Dad left for his business trip. She said she felt too tired to cook and handed us a box of chocolate donuts before shutting her door. She was so tired these days, I wasn’t surprised when we didn’t see her the next morning. Phil made sure we left for school on time. And when we still hadn’t seen her leave the bedroom by suppertime the next evening, we opened the door just a crack. The room smelled strong and sweet, like rotting flowers, and Phil shut the door again, saying we should wait for Dad.

My brother gripped the handle of his lunch box, sitting too straight, the way Dad taught him, as students continued to stream past our house on their way to school.

I pulled a piece of hair from underneath one of the smiley stickers. “Do you think we should tell someone?”

His head shook slowly back and forth. “Dad will be home tonight,” he said. “We should just wait.” He kept his eye on the passing students, and when he spotted a fifth grader from his class, he jogged to catch up, the jar of olives banging back and forth inside his lunch box.

. . .

My father's business trip came up suddenly, just after the local newspaper did a feature on him. Copies of the paper, with photos of the men who'd flown from Washington to meet him, were posted at the PX and in the lobby where he worked. I understood almost nothing of what he did, only that he designed missiles. When I visited his office at the weapons lab, with its long blackboard full of formulas and diagrams, he always saved an area for me in the right-hand corner, where I was allowed to draw with chalk.

The children had all passed our house and started down the hill to school, my brother walking in a perfect line on the right side of the sidewalk, eyes down in case he found something to put in his pocket. Our side of the street was the last to get sun, and even this close to summer vacation the steps froze the backs of my legs right through my nightgown. When I could no longer see the back of Phil's perfectly combed hair, I went inside, entering the house through the garage. I stepped over dirty dishes, crumpled napkins, empty bread bags, t-shirts, apple cores, and pieces of board games, stopping outside my mother's bedroom.

Some days she sang and twirled through the house in sleeves like angel wings, wearing frosted eye shadow and matching nail polish. I remembered the day I sat on the kitchen floor as she poured a can of mushroom soup over chicken. It was the only meal she cooked. She fried it up, shouting at the oil that popped out of the pan. I laughed and began singing military songs real loud:

*Off we go into the wild blue yonder,
Climbing high into the sun;*

*Here they come zooming to meet our thunder
At 'em boys, give 'er the gun!*

I swung my head back and forth, letting my braids hit the lower cupboards so my ponytail holders went *click click*. Momma banged her spoon against the frying pan, and I thought we sounded like a marching band. Then, just like that, it stopped. I'd seen it happen before, how she could change moods so quickly, how anything could cause it—a plane flying overhead, an oven mitt that was missing right when she needed it, me asking one too many questions. That day, she closed her eyes and squeezed the handle on the pan. “I can’t do this anymore,” she said. “I can’t. I just can’t.” And she left the grease-spattered room, left the chicken soaking in oil and soup.

I pressed my nose and lips against her door, felt the wood dampen with my breath while I gradually turned the handle. The blinds were drawn, the smell overpowering, as I felt my way through the sticky air to her bed. She lay there pale and beautiful, as if drowned and washed back ashore, her face blank. She'd covered the bed in books, five of them spread out across Dad's side. She once told me she liked to read the first chapters and then dream the rest. Perhaps she was dreaming right then.

In the quiet, I heard the gurgle of steam moving through the pipes, and the *swoosh swoosh* of blood in my ears. My fingers touched the sheet, and I considered saying her name, but suddenly feared she'd open her eyes, blue as robins' eggs, the fat black pupil tracking me. And which mother would she be?

Backing out of the room, I slowly pulled the handle until there was a near-silent click, and then continued going back-

ward all the way to the kitchen, where my shoulder slammed into the doorframe.

We'd eaten most of the snack food. Phil tried to cook spaghetti one day, but didn't realize he was supposed to boil the water before he added the spaghetti to the pot. It came out stuck in one large clump, like a tube—too crunchy to eat, and even worse when he tried to recook it. Scouring the counters, refrigerator, and the very backs of the cupboards I could reach, I found Chiclets gum, pickles, and crumbs at the bottom of a Charles Chips tin. I left a trail of crumbs showing the path I took to the living room, and, later, I would pretend this was not on purpose.

I made a game of trying to touch everything in the living room without waking her: fabrics from her sewing kit, pine cones from a basket, every record in the hi-fi.

The front window rattled as a plane roared overhead, and I stopped to listen, remembering how Momma had once thrown a plate against the kitchen cabinet, angry that the noise had interrupted her. Once it passed, I waited to hear if she was awake, but there was only quiet. And bored of touching everything, I climbed onto the sofa and bounced up and down, surprised to see a woman approaching our blue door. Her blond hair stayed perfectly stiff as she walked closer, and behind her a child pushed a baby carriage filled with dolls and carried a shiny red pocketbook.

We rarely had visitors. Usually when the doorbell rang Momma would instruct us to hide in another room, telling us she didn't want to play with the other mommies and she didn't want to buy their products, either.

When the doorbell rang, I stopped jumping and pressed my forehead against the glass, enjoying our staring contest. She

rang the bell again, and I sang “ding-dong” right back at her. When I remembered my face full of stickers, I smiled until I broke into a laugh. “Ding-dong,” I sang again, and she held her daughter close like she knew I was a biter.

I was never able to explain to my teachers how I could be sorry for biting but come right back to school and do it again. The feel of my teeth sinking into something so soft was only part of it. There was something comforting about that first yelp when I went deep, something about the crying, and the teacher shouting my name as she pulled us apart, asking, *Why, Tillie? Why did you do it?* I liked how everything happened the same way each time, right up to me walking home with a note pinned to my shirt that proved the things I thought had happened were the very same things my teacher thought had happened. Everything made sense.

The woman rang the bell again, and after a long wait, she led her daughter and the carriage full of dolls back toward the sidewalk, looking over her shoulder all the way. She didn’t know that I couldn’t have opened our blue door even if I’d wanted to. Momma had painted it shut.

When my brother returned from school, he entered the house through the garage. “What’s with the crowd?”

“What crowd?” I was organizing Momma’s record albums by the ones I liked best, but now I joined him at the window, where nearly a dozen women dressed in Popsicle colors huddled on our lawn, pointing to the blue door.

“Let’s go see what’s happening,” I said.

“You should get dressed. You can’t wear pajamas all day.”

“Momma does.”

He jingled coins together in his pocket. “You should get dressed.”

I grabbed a t-shirt and shorts off the living room floor, and put them on while Phil, in the kitchen, climbed the cluttered counters in search of food. He grabbed two packages of Kool-Aid, while I found the cleanest cups in the sink. We mixed both flavors together and added water but no sugar because I'd eaten what was left of it the night before. Our drinks came out brown and impossibly sour, but we giggled, daring each other to gulp them down.

It was rare to see him laugh like that anymore, and as soon as he noticed, he quickly shut his mouth. Over the winter, he'd crashed on his sled. His front tooth had chipped so badly the dentist covered it with a silver cap. Ever since, he tried to keep it hidden.

We left the house through the garage and took a seat on the front steps. Phil brought his homework and began to study despite the commotion—so serious except for his mouth stained blue brown. I enjoyed the audience—how their eyes followed when I jumped off the steps and spun in the grass. I couldn't stop smiling as I walked over to the bush that was always filled with ladybugs and reached my hand inside. Once Momma had told me to count them and tell her when I knew the exact number. Plucking them from the branches, I set the bugs along my arm—not one of them completely round or completely red.

"Little girl?" A woman wearing an orange minidress crossed the yard as the others looked on. "Is your mother home?"

"Yes. My mother's home," I said. I touched the hem of her dress because I couldn't help myself.

"And where is she?"

Dad had told me that he would answer all questions regarding my mother, and Phil reminded me with a forceful stare to follow the rules.

“That little girl’s Matilda Harris,” said the blonde who’d rung our doorbell.

“Matilda?” the woman in orange continued, and now she knelt down, holding me by the shoulders. I liked the way she smelled of Life Savers. “Can you ask your mother to come out and talk with us?”

I stayed mum, gently tapping the red back of a ladybug, hoping to see its outer case open and the wings unfold.

“See, I told you,” the blonde said mysteriously.

The woman in orange approached Phil next. “How about you, young soldier? Will you help us?”

Phil didn’t say anything, either. He watched the bugs crawl across my arm without expression as I made believe my mother was beside me, saying what the colors reminded her of: pepperoni, cinnamon gum, strawberry jelly.

The curious women had gone to their homes to cook dinner, occasionally peeking at us from their steamed kitchen windows. I was pleased to notice how much Phil and I looked like the other kids in our neighborhood. Sitting on the front porch with our Kool-Aid-stained mouths, we were all hungry for dinner and waiting for our fathers.

“I opened her door today,” I finally said.

“Did she wake up?”

“Uh-uh.”

Phil rubbed his finger over the silver tooth, and didn’t ask any more, just kept his eye out for Dad. When his station wagon pulled onto our street, I saw his gray hair was swept to the side, and with his chin up, his mustache caught the sunlight. I stood and saluted.

As he turned into the driveway, the women in Popsicle colors

came out of their homes again, some wearing aprons now. When he got out and fetched his briefcase and hanging bag from the backseat, they came so close he seemed to sense them there.

“Is there a problem?” he asked before turning to face them.

The blonde stepped forward, then hesitated, staring at the bars and stripes on his uniform, and then his nametag, which read ROY HARRIS. Finally she said, “Your daughter’s been home all day.”

“That’s because I bit Mary Beth,” I said, helpfully, running from the front steps to greet him.

“She says her mother is inside,” the woman continued. “But I’ve been ringing the bell for hours.”

My favorite thing about my father’s mustache was how it hid his expression. I could look right at him and pretend he wasn’t mad. “I appreciate your concern,” he told the woman. “I’ll handle this.”

I nodded to her because I was convinced he could handle all of this, but he placed his hand on the top of my head to stop it from moving. “Tillie, clean that mess off your face,” he said, and quickly disappeared through the garage door.

As Phil and I followed him, I pulled off the stickers, my eyes watering when invisible hairs came with them. We stopped short of going into the house, staying there beside the rubbish bins.

“What on earth is going on here?” he yelled from inside.

“I think he’s in the kitchen,” I said.

Phil leaned his head through the doorway, concentrating—and when we heard the bedroom door open we held our breath. For a while it was silent, and then Dad said something too quiet to hear.

I grabbed a piece of Phil’s shirt. “Do you think—”

“Sh.”

Dad's voice got louder, and finally words we could make out: "What's wrong with you?"

I inhaled the smell of oil stains from the cement floor.

"Tell me," Dad shouted, still in the bedroom. "Did you even know she stayed home from school today? Did you think to feed her? Because nothing's making sense to me right now."

"She's alive," Phil said in practically a whisper.

I tipped my head backward to stretch out the cramp in my throat, staring a long while at the pink insulation on the ceiling, then down the wooden walls to Phil's sled, hanging midway, and the mower propped in the corner. What a relief, all the yelling and stomping through the house.

"Why is there food in the living room? What's the heat doing on?" When he headed our way again, his keys rattling, we hurried closer to the rubbish bins as if we hadn't been eavesdropping. "In the car," he told us. "We're not going to eat frozen meat for dinner."

As we walked down the driveway together, our neighbors all appeared to be busy—checking an empty mailbox, coiling a garden hose, buffing the car with a sleeve.

"Nothing to see," Dad told the blonde, who stood at her front door as if waiting for a report. He opened the back door of the car for me.

When we pulled off our street, Phil, who had taken Momma's seat up front, rolled the window all the way down and turned around to see how it messed up my hair.

I rolled down my window, hoping for the same effect, but the wind didn't touch him. Kneeling into the breeze, I slid my mouth along the bristly strip of the window frame, tasting metal and dust. My teeth hurt whenever we drove over bumps in the road.

If I concentrated, I could smell a hint of Momma's gardenia

lotion, even though it had been a long while since she'd ridden in the car. She'd swing her orange hair back and forth to the music—she knew every song on the radio—and when the 5th Dimension or Peter Paul & Mary came on, she'd turn up the volume and I'd sing with her. The only sound when we drove with Dad was the air rushing through the open windows. Sometimes as we drove, Momma's orange hairs still blew through the car.

We had to park two blocks away from the commissary because the marching band had taken over the parking lot to practice for the weekend parade. "Can we go?" I asked Dad, feeling the band play the notes on my ribs. There would be flyovers and songs I knew and miniature flags for all the kids to wave. "Can we?"

"We'll see," he said. A phrase I learned a long time ago meant no.

When Dad marched down the sidewalk, one soldier after another stopped to salute him. "Evening, Colonel Harris, sir." And he returned the salutes with such a sudden whipping motion I thought his wrist would snap.

"Keep up, Tillie," he'd shout now and then. "You've got to hustle."

I tried, but the trombones kept sliding my head in the direction of all those blue uniforms and white gloves.

Phil stayed by Dad's side as if he were on an invisible leash. He had a knack for finding pennies on the sidewalk whenever we went out, but he picked them up so quickly, he hardly lost a step.

"Come on, Tillie." Dad's voice was farther away now.

The parade music jiggled my insides, and lifted the hair up on my arms. I wanted to be the girl with the pompons tied to her shoes, jabbing a baton at the sky. I danced along behind my father, danced to the *womp womping* of the tuba, the wild

drumming. I trotted with fancy steps, keeping my eyes on my father's hand, held out to the side with his fingers spread apart. If I could only catch up, I knew he'd take hold.

We drove home to the sound of Phil flipping the lid of the ash-tray open and closed. Sitting in the backseat with me were paper bags filled with hamburger meat, buns, a carton of milk, and an assortment of cleaners—liquid Lysol, Brillo soap pads, and powdered Ajax with bleach. I was beginning to enjoy the tiny pain of hunger and how I could make it hurt more or less with my mind. Curled just below my window, I felt the car turn left and slow, stop and slow—the rhythm that meant we were near home. But when I raised my body to see our ladybug bush and our blue door, I saw the neighbors watching us pull into the drive.

Dad stiffened his shoulders, stepping out of the car with the kind of posture that reminded you he was used to being in charge. He carried a grocery bag in one arm and turned my head forward with his other hand, so I would face our house. When he let go, my head swiveled right back to the neighbors, heading to their own homes now. I wondered if the little girl pushing her baby carriage thought of me—jumping at the window—even as she disappeared around the corner.

“Go inside,” Phil said. “Go on!”

Dad walked right over the trail of crushed potato chips on his way to the kitchen and began to bang the pots and dishes around and mop the floor, lecturing the empty room until, finally, hamburgers hissed in the frying pan.

I waited in the living room with the dolls Momma had made—long-nosed elves, brown- and pink-skinned Raggedy Anns, their big button eyes watching the closed bedroom door to see if she would come out. How many days had it been since

she bathed and dressed and left her room smelling of gardenia lotion? How many days since I sat beside her on the couch, our legs touching, as she sewed? I remembered those times as if they were rolled into one overstuffed day: the hi-fi turned all the way up, Rod Stewart then Dusty Springfield singing. Momma would make up her own words—“Isn’t this more fun than cleaning?”—and sing them right over top of the ones playing on the albums.

When Dad called us to the table for dinner, my eyes and throat burned from the intense cleaning he’d just given the kitchen. As he served the food, he lectured about how we ought to pick up after ourselves, how we ought to behave at school, and how I should not choke down my food, but I couldn’t make myself eat any slower.

After we cleared the table, Dad brought a hamburger and a pile of wrinkled peas to Momma. I followed him like a shadow into the humid room, where he raised the blinds and set dinner on the bed beside her face.

“Please,” he said. That was all.

Without raising her head, she reached her thin hand from the sheet to take nothing but the top bun. She barely opened her mouth, straining to take a single bite, and soon she and the bun slid beneath the covers so that only her orange hair showed.

Dad swatted me on the bottom so I’d leave the room, and when I was in the hallway he asked, “What am I supposed to do?”

My brother stayed out of all of it, hunched over the rug in his room, where he took apart his rubber band ball, band by band. It went from a sphere the size of a cantaloupe to a hundred loose ends covering the floor.

. . .

There was so much the neighbors couldn't have understood about our family by staring at our blue door from the lawn that day. They could not have known the relief I felt in hearing grown-ups in the house—even the sound of Momma crying facedown on the bed and Dad cursing as he scrubbed the different rooms, putting everything right. They couldn't have known the comfort of sinking into bathwater for the first time in days and washing the fine clay dust from my skin, or of hearing clothes tumble in the dryer along with the scrapes of pennies that had fallen out of Phil's pocket. Most of all, they could not have appreciated the small miracle of Momma coming to my room that night to tuck me in.

She came in her pink terry cloth robe, carrying the beautiful cup we'd made together. It had started out as just an ordinary white mug from our cupboard, but we had glued plastic rubies to it.

"There you go, Bear," she whispered, handing me the steaming cup. She settled at the edge of my mattress, her face still creased from her long sleep. I chattered about baby carriages, ladybugs, and sour Kool-Aid until she closed my hands around the cup and insisted, "Taste it."

I sipped the warm, bitter drink, feeling the rubies with my tongue in between swallows.

"I'm trying," she said. "I'm trying for you, okay?" And she reached for *Alice in Wonderland*, turning to the page where we last stopped. I was captivated with her singsong voice, how quiet it was that night. Sometimes she read the same sentence twice, and sometimes she had to pause until she'd wiped the tears from her eyes.

I was fading, blinking, trying to will myself to stay awake,

to have this time with her a little longer, but every part of me felt heavy. The cup began to slip from my hands, and when I squeezed my fingers closed to catch it, one of the rubies fell into my lap.

Momma took the cup from me, and I picked up the ruby, saving it in my pillowcase, where I liked to tuck my hands. What the neighbors couldn't see as I lay my head down was how Momma adored me, how she didn't leave until I was asleep. I tasted the bitter drink in the back of my throat, and the room began to spin.