



# juniper blue

A NOVEL

SUSAN LANG

JUNIPER BLUE

*western literature series*



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*To the wildness that informs and sustains us  
and to those who love it*



## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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PART I



Rain poured from the eaves in great hissing streams. A bright bolt stabbed at the bank across the wash; thunder exploded, jolting Ruth up from where she sat at the table. A pinyon flew apart across the wash, and a spear of wood sailed toward the house, dropped into muddy water rampaging down the wash. Then another pain tightened her belly, took her breath away, and she sank back into the chair, clutched the edge of the table and hung on until it finished with her.

Was this really it then—and not more of the same aggravation? Would this occupation of her body finally be over?

For days now the huge mound of flesh in front of her had been contracting erratically, shooting her through with hot buckshot. Keeping her awake. But last night's pain felt more serious, this morning's even more so. Two days ago, Kate and John Olsen had wanted to

drive her into San Bernardino to see a doctor. Something wasn't right, Kate said.

"There's nothing to worry about," she had told Kate. "After all, I've heard that Indian women stop off along the trail to give birth—then just continue on." She'd even refused to let Kate stay with her. It seemed simple enough at the time to drive down to the Olsens' at the first sign.

She should have listened. This could be it, all right.

Or maybe this would ease off again. Could the Model A even make it the four miles to the Olsens' in such a storm, especially through the North Fork, where the two washes came together across the rut road? This kind of rain could sweep the car away.

Another pain sliced long fingers into her, squeezed until she could scarcely bear it before releasing her to breathe again. Getting to her feet, she looked back to see a spot of blood left on the chair. She needed no more convincing. If she wanted Kate's help, she'd better leave now, storm or no storm.

Ruth stuffed a few things into her satchel and started for the front door, flung it open just as a hand snatched her back, gripped her gut and tried to rip it out. She held on to the doorframe, gasping, while wind-whipped rain pelted her, embedded hail stinging her cheeks. When the pain diminished some, she stepped outside into the swirling water. Then the sky cracked apart, light ribboning outward to shatter it like window glass. Thunder threw her upward, brought her to her knees on the flooded ground.

Cold drops beat against her back as she tried to rise. Searing pain tore through her, and a rush of hot water gushed down her thighs, pushing her back down. For a moment, she thought she'd peed herself. Then she looked at the ground, where her bloody fluid blended into the rest.

She crawled toward her Model A, knees sliding in the muddy earth under her. The pain, constant now, intensified to wrack her again before she reached the running board. It took several attempts to pull herself up, boost herself inside, where she doubled up moaning in front of the steering wheel she could barely get behind. Her hand shook wildly as she reached for the choke, pumped it once and switched on the ignition.

Nothing. She choked again and turned the switch, choked and turned again. And again. Pushed her foot down on the gas pedal, as if the car might already have started, the rain and growling thunder drowning out the sound of the engine. But it was stone dead. She let go of the switch, sat shivering with cold and agony. Then another dagger thrust deep and hard inside her, twisting as it traveled. She yelled out, yelled out more as it stabbed and twisted again.

Ruth pushed open the door and stepped out, but her legs wouldn't hold her. She slid onto the ground, her shouts swallowed up in the swollen storm. Unable to propel herself further, she lay on one side and felt herself surrender.

Some Indian woman she turned out to be. So much for the family rumors, she thought bitterly, as a wave of nausea hit her. Then even that was swept away by the tidal wave of torment that carried her toward a place without thought or word or emotion. Where there was only pain, pain, pain, her own animal cries and dry heaves, the cold wet coming down and pooling under her, the hot flow slushing out between her legs.

Through a thick haze of anguish she watched drowned ants float by, inches from her face. Her eyes drooped shut, but she had recognized something just ahead and opened them again. She began edging closer. Scarcely able to endure the throes each movement brought, she dragged her wracked body forward, immune to its protests. Ruth reached out as she neared the floating strands of black hair outside her cabin door, grasped them in her fingers, and hung on as if they alone would save her. Now her blood would soak into the earth to mix with his. Closing her eyes, she drifted away into stark and unrelenting pain.

The sound of the big engine slit open her eyes enough to vaguely recognize the Olsens' truck pulling up. When John Olsen lifted her from the ground, she kept Jim's hair locked tight in her fist. Inside they fussed over her, wrapped her in blankets far too hot, rubbed her skin and hugged her to them. She tried to tell them to stop, it was all right now, she had his hair in her hand; they shouldn't worry. "Along the trail," she heard herself say.

"What, Rute, what did you say? She talking, John. Get more water. You have to come back, Rute."

Of course she was talking. What was the matter with them, she wondered, a bit irritated. She clutched the hair tighter. The blankets were making her hurt worse again, pains coming hard again. Shivering now. She wanted the numbness back. Ruth felt her legs pushed apart, held there; something jammed inside her. “No. No.” Behind her eyes lurked that smirking face, that mass of orange hair. “No!” Then clawing pain chased the memory from her, seized her very breath.

“Stop, Rute. You have to help.” Someone was slapping her. Was that Kate? Surely not Kate slapping. “Come on, Rute. You have to push it out.”

Push what out? Push out the pain? It was too strong. Too long. Warm hands squeezed her cheeks, and she opened her eyes to find a big face inches from her own. Kate’s face. She blinked to bring it into focus.

“I can see the baby’s head, Rute,” Kate said, squeezing her cheeks again. “The baby has black hair. You hear me, Rute? The hair black.”

“Black, Kate. Is it black?” she tried to whisper.

“You push down next time, Rute, you hear me. Push it out.”

Next time? It was all one long hurting.

“Now, Rute. Now push. No. Not kick. Push. Have to push.” She felt it ease enough to let her breathe. Something cool swiped across her forehead. “I know you tired,” Kate said. “But you can do it, Rute. You have to. Just a big push and it all be over.

“Okay, time now. Push it now,” Kate said as pain pinned her again, held her there squirming. “Ya, that better, ya. Harder now, Rute. Goot, goot. More hard . . . okay, wait, wait.” It eased and Ruth began drifting again, until pain snatched her back.

“Now. Push again. Hard, Rute, that’s it. . . . Again, harder . . . push, push . . .”

A baby’s cry filled the room. Ruth raised her head to see, laughed out at the child with dark skin and black hair Kate laid on her belly. John Olsen stood behind with a basin, his face beaming.

Kate cleaned and wrapped the baby, placed it in Ruth’s arms, the same relief on her face that Ruth felt inside. “A boy,” she said, opening Ruth’s closed fist. “I take this now,” Kate told her, as she pulled away what looked like blades of grama grass.

So it had been Jim’s all along. Ruth looked down at the infant in

her arms, smiled at the way its face was smashed out of shape, bent down and kissed the top of its lovely dark head. Then pain gripped her again, hard, and she heard herself gasp for air.

“It just afterbirth, Rute. I get it now.”

When Kate began massaging her belly, another excruciating wave took hold. Ruth felt the urge to push this time, while before it was forced. When she did, there came a slick *sloosh*, and she heard Kate cry out in surprise, looked over to see her lift up a screaming infant smaller than the other, hold it out to inspect. Ruth watched in horror as Kate swiped a hand over the infant’s head, as if she might wipe away that red-orange fuzz, the color of rotting peach. Eyes welling, Kate looked over, steadied her gaze.

“This one a girl, Rute,” she said.

## CHAPTER TWO

**A**n excited chittering and clucking hiss turned Ruth's attention to the window. On the sill sat a red squirrel, its forepaws against the pane. It scolded again, scratching tiny claws at the glass. The strange sight was almost enough to lift her mind from the wailing bundle wriggling in the corner cradle. Take her thoughts off the tiny head with orange-red fuzz. Almost. The other bundle in the cradle was quiet—despite the near continual racket that went on beside it. She glanced over, reassured herself that the hair on the quiet one was still thick and black. At least she had that.

Her need to pee finally dragged her out of bed as far as the slop jar. She cringed at the sight of the belly that hung there like a huge flap of thick skin whenever she unbuttoned her pants. Kate had laughed and said it would tighten back up. But Ruth was glad Jim wasn't around to see it. At least she could pee again without so much sting—Kate told

her a doctor would have put in stitches—and she could walk without as much soreness. Her bleeding was lessening. Maybe things were healing down there. She wished she could say as much for the rest of her.

Ruth went to the stove and lit the fire, filled the coffeepot with water, not because she wanted the beverage but because that was what she did in the morning. She had few desires these days, save relief from her life. But as she reached across for the coffee can, her arm glanced off the stewpot, sending it clanging to the floor.

The wail in the corner became a terrified shriek, and the dark head next to it began to move. Ruth rushed over and snatched the caterwauling bundle, jamming it to her shoulder as she marched to the other side of the cabin.

“There, there,” she said, trying to pat and soothe this helpless creature thrust upon her. “It’s only a stewpot. It can’t hurt you,” she crooned in a voice so false that it made the child struggle and cry even more.

They had both been thrust upon each other, she and this girl child—who hadn’t chosen her for a mother any more than she had chosen it. That was the one thing that connected them. The rest . . . well, Ruth just didn’t know what would come of it.

Kate said it would pass, this blackness that had come over her after the birth. Said it happened to many women. Ruth knew it was more than that. She could no longer remember what it felt like even weeks ago, who she was before the babies came. Let alone who she had been before the rest happened. She sometimes forced herself to recall things she had done, times she had laughed. But it was like remembering from the outside, watching some other woman she had been. Each time she lay down to sleep, something in her still hoped to wake and find that the last few months had been nothing more than a nightmare.

Ruth held the baby out and looked into its frantic little face, the translucent skin deep red from screaming. To stop the squalling, she pulled a breast from her shirt and put a nipple to the tiny, quivering mouth. She looked over at the other dark-haired bundle in the cradle to set the milk flowing. Ruth didn’t want to hate this child in her arms. She was trying not to.

She was certain the other child, the boy, was Jim’s—and not some throwback to her mother’s rumored Indian lineage. She could sense

his spirit in the child. But the other, the red-haired one, was definitely not Indian, and the hair color too significant to deny.

But how could this have happened, she asked Kate? She'd never heard of such a thing—twins from two different fathers. Yet the evidence was unmistakable. Kate told her she'd heard rumors of it among women, but had never seen it before herself.

Ruth placed the quieted child back beside her brother. The girl was smaller and hungrier than he was, always needed more. That had been a problem from the beginning. Ruth's breasts would tighten and hold on to the milk whenever she tried to feed the girl, while milk would pour down when the boy was at her breast. It was Kate who came up with the idea of substituting the one for the other in her mind, though it had taken some practice to accomplish. Even Ruth's own body did not want to keep this child alive.

Taking up the slop jar, Ruth walked out through the fine mist to empty it behind the outhouse. Water still dripped from eaves and trees, the sky hidden behind a thick paste of cloud. Would these rains ever stop? She dumped the slop, watched it sink slowly into the rain-washed earth.

Just beyond the cabin sat her Model A, its custom yellow paint the one bright sun in the gray day. If only she could hop in it and drive away from these creatures who confined her with their obligations, who bound her with invisible chains. She wondered if she would ever be wholly herself again, if there would always be parts of her somewhere outside herself, needing and wanting and being, parts embodied in those voices from her cabin.

As huge as she'd become, the babies were easier to carry when they were inside, quieter too. Now she would have to lug the two of them everywhere, along with diapers, blankets, and cloths. Thank god she had the Model A. Except for those final two weeks, the pregnancy seemed almost a breeze when she thought about it now, her climbing around the mountains—even with a bellyful of babies—hiking down to the Swedes' to keep fit for birth. That walk would be impossible today. For a moment she imagined herself traveling down canyon with the kind of cradle board she had seen some Indian women use in El Paso. She could envision the boy's black hair above the pack strapped to her back. But what about the girl? Another image appeared: the cry-

ing girl bundle bouncing along behind, dragged over the rocky terrain on a rope. A laugh escaped before she could clamp it back.

Ruth knew she had to fight this mean impulse—even if these shots of black joy were the only relief from the darkness that had overtaken her. How bizarre and complicated life was, after all, a bit like those Russian novels she'd read, where lives other than her own had been twisted out of shape by circumstance. She had been in the midst of her happiest moments, when along came an evil that planted its seeds. It had taken months to mitigate the hatred she felt for Charlie Stine, but the girl's birth had brought it all back. Now hate kept rearing its head, hard set against what nature meant her to love.

The drizzle had stopped. Clouds were lifting, though a steady rumble still came from the flooding wash. She walked over and stood on the bank. She would have to dig to find her spring again when the flood stopped. Behind her, diapers snapped and flapped on the rope she had strung between trees to skin rabbits and other game. She guessed it had truly become a clothesline now. Jane Thompson and the other townswomen could gloat over it, Ruth mused blackly. She was becoming as domestic as any of them.

Muddy water poured off Rocky Mountain, the ground already saturated from last week's storm, rolling rocks and branches fast down canyon. Ruth thought about the way forces from far away gather strength and finally come do their work to change people's lives, the same way they change the shape of a canyon. And even when they were repaired, the lives were never the same as they'd been. The spring inside her would be harder to dig out than the one across the wash.

A chorus of bawling had started up within her cabin. For a moment Ruth stood her ground, continuing to watch the storm's destruction, the splintered pinyon across the wash, the changed terrain of the banks of the streambed, as gathered rainwater poured from the mountain rising on the other side. She felt the pull of her children's claim on her and turned around to confront it, though she made no move toward the cabin—despite her body's urge to get there on the run.

"Oh, Jim," she whispered. Ruth looked at the sopping ground in front of her cabin, remembering the horror that took place there only months ago. She felt herself start to dissolve, liquid inside her rushing to join the torrents around her. Then a section of her hair lifted slightly