Bread for the Moon

Jennie VerSteeg
"I can't see," I kept complaining. I bounced up and down next to him in the cab of the truck. "I can't see," craning my neck at the mountains. "Can't see what?" John Paul shifted in his seat, guiding us farther into British Columbia. John Paul, a miracle of blonde geometry, squinted over at me. He saw what was there—spindly trees tethering the slopes, November Ponderosa pines, and firs a tired green, the rest of them some kind of torched spruce. Candy on fire.

"I don't know," I said, taking a pull on my homebrew. "I guess I can't see what else is there. Or what's on the other side."

"I believe there's more mountains on the other side, lady." He kissed me. "Unless I miss my guess."

Last November I was in love with John Paul.
This November, I'm still in Wallace, Idaho. John Paul is elsewhere.
I'm lactating, and very tired.

In Idaho, it's difficult to see. Impossible. There is no place in this state where I could stand on a flat spot, my eyes pinned to the edge of the land where it cleaves a blue bowl of air. I can't track snowstorms or funnel clouds knocking down fenceposts, phone wires, the mile markers on country roads. Wallace snakes between mountains. They shed more light than the sun or one of the several slivers of moon. The sun can only be seen into this valley at flat out noon, when, even then, it's like oyster liquor through a sieve. Too, I almost always have rain for lunch, anyway. It rains here.

The geologists come out when it rains. I don't know what they do, but they pock the clam colored rock and crowd the few lunch counters, and they father innumerable children, who will all, it seems, come to sit in my classroom in St. Rose of Lima grammar school.

"Who was here before anybody?" I ask my class. I spent much of last night making transparencies and ditto masters detailing the many features of the Coeur d'Alene Indians. Since the 50s there has been a shift in the teaching of elementary school history. We are no longer to impress upon the children their share of White Man's Burden, but are supposed to emphasize the melting pot. I'm supposed to make them forget the Coeur d'Alene lolling sullenly on the streetcorners here, and in Coeur d'Alene and Sandpoint, drinking their government checks, slinking home with sleepy drunk Irish mothers, to trailers and lake shacks and motels.

Before anybody? My twenty-five taffy-boned, milktoothed second graders scuffle and murmur in their pastel desks. The chairs are bolted to the tables. A tiny, pinched piece of a girl, legs swinging under her uniform, raises her hand.
"God?" she asks.
The girl who answered by question is right. Of course. I'm still a new teacher, a second year teacher, and sometimes I don't know how to ask the questions I need to ask to get the answers I'm supposed to get.

"Very good," I say to the class. "Of course, Our Father has always been here. I didn't ask the question correctly; I'm sorry."

Three of the more devout make the sign of the cross and wait for instructions.

When I was in grammar school in Des Moines, in between elaborate games of guessing the letter of the day and annual visits from the dental hygienist and her flannel board pieces illustrating the four basic food groups, I watched, we all watched, the Apollos slam into the ocean. We all got out of classes to watch them on T.V., "the future happening now." The sky was falling. History.

The girl who answered my question is named Rehoboth, which is, I've found out, Hebrew for "room enough." She is the youngest of seven rabbity children born to a couple who drive the whole brood to Coeur d'Alene every Sunday and Wednesday night for charismatic Mass and prayer meeting. Rehoboth heals the sick. Rehoboth speaks in tongues. Rehoboth's brother Peter, a skewer of bamboo in Miss Delaney's fifth grade homeroom, interprets her chanting, gasping streams on the playground after lunch, while a ragged circle of children look puzzled and finger their medals. The parish is embarrassed, the diocese concerned.

Rehoboth worships Mary.

Sister Mary Joseph is beside herself. In Religion class Rehoboth sits, smiling, hands remarkable in repose, a piece of papyrus or silk, a smirking Byzantine Madonna, spacey and holy.

"We adore Mary, the Mother of God. We pray she will intercede for us. We do not worship Mary. Do you understand?" Sister slaps a ruler into her palm.

Rehoboth gazes at the broken slate of the blackboard. "Yes." The cardboard alphabet cards with all the Palmer Method letters paired upper and lower case, the discrete little arrows indicating the correct stroke.

"Now. Do you worship Mary?"

"Yes." Rehoboth smiles as if in pain, or ecstasy.

I am interested in prostitutes. I want to tell the children about the whores in Wallace. A town full of men, all shifting, squinting, starting, smoking, smiling, has brought them to spread like hot jam on one whole story above the bar just a block from St. Rose. And the hunters. After a summer of drought—and rain, and fire—the seasons open and the men come over from Spokane and up from Moscow to paint the town with elks' blood, drying into smokestains in truckbeds, dripping from snapped, streaked deer, pheasant, rabbit, dripping into the gravel lots behind the prostitutes.

"This happens here," I want to say, "This is history."

John Paul had worked spotting fires over the summer. He had worked on oil rigs, in the silver mine, in the Potlatch and Kootani sawmills. There
were pictures of him posing with the heads and immense racks of dead elk. The animals looked wizened and tired.

"But what are they like?" In John Paul's bedroom, and in his bed, we were only light and heat. Flour sack curtains drawn against a high window full of branches. The knotholes in the wall were papered over with grey electrical tape. The bedsprings wheezed. Although I never saw him naked (not once; it was always night), I felt him under me, winged hips awkward and apologetic as a boy's, his smooth chest, fisted nipples, the veins in his arms and neck surfacing. It was never right—his cock too long or my hips too shallow. One of us always hurt, our faces wet. I asked John Paul about the prostitutes.

"They're like," I rocked forward, kissing him. He murmured, "Oh—they're like whores, I guess. Nice enough gals." He traced my wince.

"But you had a favorite girl," I whispered, kneading his shoulders. "You knew her.

John Paul laughed low. "I knew her and knew her, lady," John Paul breathed in hard, damp, "but that's about it."

"Didn't you ever—ouch—careful, sweet love—didn't you ever talk to her?" I stroked his scrotum, his penis finding someplace softer. I wanted him to have talked to her, to have taken her out for a hamburger or to a rodeo. I wanted her to pull away with some kind of dignity and say he shouldn't feel obliged to treat her nice, or to treat her at all. Then he sits her down hard on a barstool. "Tell me about yourself."

I was a cheerleader. I am an only child. I was the second soprano in a gospel trio. I like to dance. I like pizza. I was named after Patsy Cline. I'm in love with you.

"I talk to you gal," he whispered.

I met John Paul because a kind man was concerned that I wasn't meeting any nice boys. My landlord worked in the sawmill with John Paul. "He's an okay fellow," he said, "and he went to school, too, down at the university, so you two can talk books, or whatever." He winked at me.

After John Paul left, after the month of tea colored stains on my underwear, and sitting down suddenly in the middle of giving spelling tests ("Attic," I'd say, the world buckling, "Apple"). I ventured out one night to the Oasis Tap, walking down the narrow streets of Wallace, keeping time with the St. Ignatius, imagining the sunset beyond the scrubbed mountains. The district was kind. The geologists pragmatic. I was a young girl who'd made a mistake. They forgave me for things I've never done.

The Tap sees few women. Few good ones. The whores are upstairs. They have their rooms, their Chinese lamps, their radios. I caused a stir at the bar. Two women I'd seen before came out from under the Rainier and Heidelberg signs and came to my booth with a yellow cheese sandwich and ginger ale. One had a tattoo and the other had a baby. They'd gotten them the same winter, before they knew each other. They'd seen me around too. Girl or boy? High or low? Daddy or not?
I'm from Des Moines, Iowa, a strange place. A surprising place, like the old billboards said. My father would roll down the window when we drove to our Wisconsin vacations. As we passed the flat, shimmering fields, or the hog shit in the confinement pens, he'd say "Smell that?"

"Yeah." It was a gas station restroom smell, as reassuring to me as the smell of my shit.

"Know what it is?"

"What?" I shifted and reached over the seat to touch my mother's shoulder rounded against her bedpillow and that morning's smudged and crumpled Register tossed out.

"That's the smell of money, kid," Dad would say. The sun is hot there, the ground roiling with fossils and earthworms, the leavings of glaciers and herbicide, shit and money.

Hey sweetheart—

By the time you read this your old loverboy pain in the ass is off to parts unknown. Yeah, I don't know, gal—the sawmills going bust and I'm feeling that wanderlust. I figure I'll go on up to Prince Rupert, or Alaska. I still know some guys and I could get on up there on a rig. Hope you don't spend too much time thinking about old long lost John Paul. You know we didn't have an awful lot in common, lady—you were far too good for me and put up with my backward Western ways in fine Iowa style. But no amount of good loving can make two people as different as we are stick together. I do thank you for all that. Remember me whenever you drink a beer! And sorry for the lack of a proper farewell, lady—I don't go for all the sturm und drang—just a coward, I guess! Ha!

Thanks again—
J.P.

He owned a topographical map of Mexico, two rifles and a stack of Jack London paperbacks. His pubic hair was clover honey. I crushed the dead flowers his old lover had sent him into his soft fur. His old lover was an angel, off to the Sorbonne and then married. His mother, too, was an angel. A dead one.

How did I get here? Maybe it was the ancient pull of going west, young man. I thought of forests, Yellowstone and cowboys enough to cotton eye Joe with in a barroom, giggling drunk, wearing a skirt. I left a land of shit and money to come to the dying West. I subscribed to the Seattle Times and caught a ride in a van with a girl who lived on my dorm floor, bound for a hot summer with her Western boyfriend on lonesome Highway 2.

I went to the state university back home. The motto was "Science with Practice." So I was taught to teach as though it—teaching—is something that can be taught. A science. They videotaped me teaching mock lessons to rows of empty chairs, then the tapes were critiqued by my classmates, who suggested that I make better use of the educational media available
to me—films and filmstrips, dittoes, transparencies, worksheets. Chalk.

I spent a lot of evenings in the library reading articles in Instructor and First Teacher on how to motivate children to read. Gold star charts still work. Anything you can put in neat columns or boxes clearly labeled with a child’s name. My students at St. Rose are hard to design these things for, though, because they’re in second grade. This is the age for changing your name, probably because until you’re this age, six or seven or eight, I don’t think you know you can do it—can do whatever you damn well want to with your name. Toss it out and start over clean. Most of the time it’s not serious. Matthew prefers “Matt,” or the other way around. Jennifer wants “Jenny” or even “Niffy.” My last gold star chart had all the names correct because I took each of the children aside during recess and asked “What do you want to be called on my next reading chart?”

“Daisy,” said Rehoboth breathlessly, breaking away from her brother. I put up the chart on a Monday in October. Across the top was a green and yellow bookworm, bespectacled and smiling a huge half circle, wearing an aviator cap and a long, fluttering red scarf. The worm was sitting in what was supposed to be a space capsule, but after an evening of shredding brown cardboard, it was only a tube trailing globs of cotton ball exhaust. Arching above the work, in blue paper covered with glitter, were the words “Reading is Out of This World!”

The children crowded around before the bell rang, locating their names. After the Pledge, roll call and morning prayers I introduced the chart to the students. “There’s something new in our classroom. Who can tell me—hands, please!—who can tell me what it is?”

The children had questions. How many stars? For how long? What if a kid reads a whole bunch of Clifford the Big Red Dog books—do they all count as one star?

My favorite student, Luke, a big seven year old with a “Masters of the Universe” lunchbox, raised his hand. “What’s that thing the worm is in?” I smiled and nodded, taking one step toward the children. “That is a very good question, Luke. It’s supposed to be a spaceship, but I don’t think I did a very good job.”

The children agreed. “Looks like a loaf of bread,” said Jenny. Niffy. “Wormy old bread!” crowed one of the twins. “Wouldn’t send bread to the moon, ain’ no people there.” Reheboth was red from the effort it took to use her mother tongue, rocking a little in her desk. “Don’t need no bread, don’t need no nothing, just spacemen up there gonna toss it all back down.” She quivered.

All eyes turned to me.

I call Des Moines every Sunday night and reverse the charges. I call with Baby fastened to my breast, near the furnace, surrounded by my students’ work, kneeling in a sea of cheap, soft paper. When I was a girl there was so much of it. In Wallace now, even at St. Rose, the teachers
are given a stern paper conservation speech to deliver on the first day of class, having to do with spitwads, airplanes, cootie catchers, and passing secret notes. I tried to relate it to the children's lives by talking about trees and sawmills closing. I scared them.

And Rehoboth, I see, still transposes her ps, bs and ds. Silent e escapes her. I have to decide whether to hold her back.

Static nuzzles my mother's voice. "Oh darling, you just sound so quiet."

I stare around the room at my calendars. Everyone gives away calendars here: the credit union, the bank, the gas station, the beauty parlor, pool hall and church. I didn't know what to do with all of them; it was slapstick, me staggering down the main drag, baby in one arm, a stack of calendars in the other. I've never thrown away a calendar. They're all thumbtacked neatly in a line on my cool wall, low, as if for a child.

"It's just the connection, Mom." I squint at the calendars. It is Armistice Day. "Remember your soldier dead." "Stop and smell the roses."

"You sound so far away!" Mother sounds like she's yelling down a laundry chute.

"I am far away," I whisper. I imagine downtown Des Moines tonight, conventioneers' headlights fanning rainbow puddles of street grease. Teenagers and transients dodging each other on the Loop, past the Plasma Bank, the pawn shops and wig shops and delis, all lit up in red neon from the Traveler's Insurance umbrella and the KRNT Weather Beacon, newly lit for the first time since the energy shortage.

"Please come home when the term ends," my mother is saying. "Send pictures of that baby," orders Dad on the cordless.

The history lesson for tomorrow is about the Jesuits and the Cataldo Mission. I'll look out the windows at the rain. There are still mineshafts enough to throw yourself down, if you're alone and free in the West. My students will work on their lesson, drawn across their desks like delicate bows. The school's furnace and their pencils scratch.

I think I have my history confused. I kneel and squint at my row of calendars. What day is it? I forget what has happened and what I wish had happened, what could happen and what will happen. I wait at night. I can make myself think John Paul is coming in from working graveyard, opening his shirt, the tawny sawdust falling from his chest, raining on my neck. Only the whores are constant. And the nuns. And Baby.

And I do love the prostitutes for the gifts they've given me, dreams of the sturdy stock that compels a girl to run—from the strap, or a strict Mormon mother with a ramrod spine, or lucky babies cracked open on the tiles of gas station bathrooms. Gone for good. I didn't run from anything. The hunters must leave their mark all over them. In the little store pinned to the road outside town, the licorice haired wife won't let the hunters touch the beer, preventing accidental feather prints on cool cans tacky with wild animal blood.

"History is happening. Look!" I want to say to Nifty and Megan and
Luke. I want to say to Daisy and Peter, "There are cool women covered with feathers and blood."

The money comes easier in Calgary, and I understand the girls are going north this spring. The old nuns, too, die unexpectedly of influenza. I take my customary lunch at my desk: high, flat noon, my cup of rain.

I'm not tired of Baby. I'm just tired. The nuns don't offer to babysit and neither do the whores. My parents send checks and have helped me buy a junior bed on time, for when she's older.

Her name is Alene, after the Indians. "Coeur d'Alene," I've found out, means "heart of an awl" or "needleheart." I like to think that the whole city, the river, the race, were named after her tiny, bounding heart. This hidden sunless town is the Body broken for us, and Alene is the heart, is the Blood; I drink in all of this and remember him. But I choke on the Host, sweet Mary! This bitter Eucharist, the reeling wafer that is Idaho, not my home. Tonight I ache with milk. Alene's eyes begin to follow me everywhere, drunken blue in her hot skull.

Tonight I'll walk out in the street with Alene deep in ether. I'll stand out there squinting into the dark dark. And I'll pitch these words, finally, chuck the whole damn story into the air: my misfit, my lover, my daughter, my Idaho not mine, I throw you all toward where I imagine the moon, and I wait, my face turned toward the trees, for it all to rain back down in pieces, bread for the moon.

_Jennie VerSteeg_