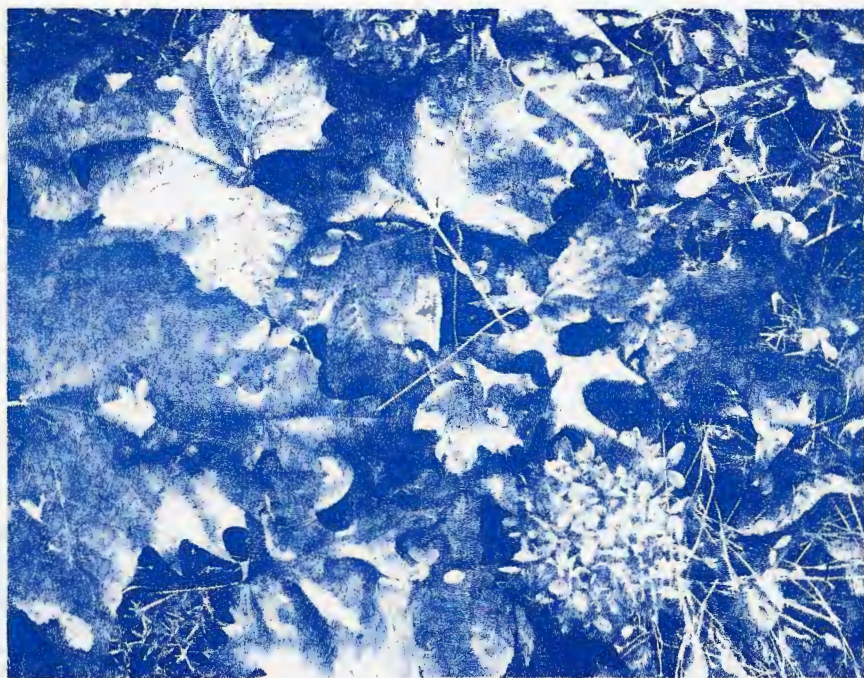


# WASCANA REVIEW

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*Life Writing*



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## PRESERVES

Marlene Wurfel

My big sister is back from her honeymoon. A shotgun marriage, Grandma called it, and we are all lined up in the living room, waiting for the blast. But Ralph is nice, and Rose-Anne looks and acts the same as usual, just a bit more important. So we all climb down off of our careful fence of good behavior, and rattle around them like a bunch of tin cans after a car that announces, "Just Married."

Ralph is good-looking, I suppose, but has a beard. When he talks to us 'girls,' as Dad calls me, Mom, and Grandma, he smiles a bit too wide and reveals one, very deep dimple. When he talks to Dad and the twins though, he is serious and nods a lot.

Rose has sent me a brown package with a postcard of Maui taped to the box. My Dad has picked it up from the post office on his way home to meet Ralph and Rose-Anne. Inside, is a shell necklace, a piece of volcanic rock with a turtle glued to it, and a conch shell.

"Hold it to your ear and you can hear the ocean," Ralph says. I close my eyes to hear better.

"It sounds lonely," I say. I am somewhat offended by the ultra pink of the shell. "Little girl," it accuses, and so I want to say something grown up. "Desperately lonely," I say. Rose-Anne looks slightly disappointed, but Ralph squeezes her hand and she giggles.

"Oh, it isn't lonely, sweetie," she says.

Tyler grabs the conch away from me and then Chris grabs it away from him.

"I don't hear nothing," he says, then tosses it back to Chris. They are jealous, probably because they didn't get anything.

Nobody has seen Rose-Anne since Christmas. She's been going to university in the city, studying biology. Dad calls the university "a hay-wire joint." He thinks Rose-Anne is a fool to go there and made her get student loans. But he sends her money anyway, and when they talk on the phone he always ends the conversation with, "You take care of my Rose-Anne for me. She's a good girl, my Rose-Anne."

Rose-Anne would send me letters written on loose-leaf paper. She'd draw amoebas in the margins with speech bubbles that said things like, "You Rule" and, "Pardy Hardy." But they never said anything about Ralph.

The puppy is Ralph's wedding gift to Rose-Anne. It has been barking

at Romeo under the sofa since it got here. Romeo hisses at it, but it doesn't seem to care. Mom retreats into the kitchen and begins a loud dialogue with herself about whether or not the mayonnaise is still good.

"Don't mind her, she's a bit loopy," Dad says, and steers Ralph into a dining room chair. Rose-Anne follows. I can tell she's miffed when Dad pulls out a chair for Ralph but not for her. The boys begin fighting over the remote and Grandma joins the discussion about the mayonnaise in the kitchen. I listen to Dad and Ralph. Dad is talking to him about the price of pork, and Ralph is trying to sound attentive and informed. Rose finally gets up and goes over to the piano to play "The Rose." She is showing off, but we all know that it's the only song she can play.

Chris yells at her to, "Shut-up!" Grandma comes out of the kitchen and tells the boys that the piano takes precedence over the TV. They turn up the volume.

Dad starts to yell at Ralph over the noise of the television, and Mom yells at him from the kitchen.

"Stop yelling at Ralph in there!" Dad checks himself, and I see that Ralph is relieved. He was beginning to get very uncomfortable, but now relaxes back into his chair.

So I say, "Who needs pig farmers?" This excites Dad greatly and puts Ralph back on the edge of his seat. Then Romeo does his part by darting out from underneath the sofa and swiping a bright smear of blood down the puppy's face. It yelps and cries and Rose-Anne rushes over to fuss over it.

"Poor puppy," she says. "Yes, you are my poor, poor, puppy." She fusses over Ralph like that too. She tells him obvious things like, "There's only one bathroom in this house for seven people." Or, "That's the back yard," and "This is our dining room table," I can't help but think that Ralph is stupid, even though it's her that's telling him those things.

The phone rings and it's Tyler's girl friend who Dad says is too uppity for him. While I know perfectly well what "uppity" means, I can't help but imagine that in her case it has something to do with pointy breasts.

I take my necklace, my volcanic rock with the turtle glued to it and my conch shell into my bedroom and close the door. I lie on my bed and listen to the ocean.

At supper everyone is silent, even the puppy. Rose-Anne has told us that she is pregnant. "Blamo!" I think. Grandma says that she suspected it all along. My father says that what really gets him is that they blew all of their money on a trip to Hawaii. My sister argues that it was cheaper by far than a traditional wedding and that they did it to save him the expense. Ralph says that it was valuable time for them to get to know each other before he goes back up North. Grandma snorts very loudly at this.

"Well," says my mother, "what's done is done. And there's no use

arguing about what's done." She sets her cutlery down and frowns at the sleeping puppy.

Ralph is a biologist and works up North. He is doing field research and writing a doctorate thesis on arctic shrubs.

"They're fascinating," he says. My father is furious but Ralph keeps talking about shrubs. "Some have life spans longer than people, though they won't grow higher than 30 centimeters." I think of Marty Marchuck who is a dwarf and believes anything anyone ever tells him. I imagine him standing in a field while Ralph measures him and writes everything down on a clipboard. "You wouldn't think of the arctic as an area containing much biodiversity, but there's so much up there, and I'm not even talking about the aquatic life. In fact, there's a type of Arctic Heather which has been seeded by glaciers travelling from as far away as..."

Dad slams down the salt shaker with which he has been violently salting a radish.

"So you're going to haul my little girl up there to have a baby in the middle of the Goddamned North Pole?" He picks up his glass and slams it back down without taking a drink. He stares at Ralph accusingly.

"You can live in an igloo, Rose!" Mom smacks Tyler as soon as he says this, and Rose-Anne starts to cry.

"Oh no, of course not," says Ralph. "I apologize if we've given you the wrong idea. Actually, my contract is only until November, and in the meantime, I'll be saving up money enough for a down payment on a house for Rose-Anne and—the baby." He smiles benevolently at Mom when he says "the baby," and begins to rub Rose's back with one hand. This, of course, makes her cry harder.

"Daddy," sobs Rose, "I want to stay here until November."

"Damn rights you will," he says, and pops the radish into his mouth with a crunch of finality. "There ain't no way my little girl is going to live up at the North Pole with a pack of biologists." I don't know if it's the extra salt on the radish, or his own sense of distaste, but Dad spits out the word "biologists" like something rotten.

"Actually," says Ralph, "I don't work at the North Pole per se, but several degrees of latitude farther south than..." He is interrupted by one of Grandma's snorts. She hands him more peas.

Dessert is canned saskatoons on ice cream. My sister begins explaining to Ralph what a saskatoon is, but he says that he knows. After supper he tries to help Mom with the dishes. She is obviously irritated by this, but he hangs around the kitchen anyway, until Rose-Anne drags him into the living room.

We play Monopoly. Ralph makes a big deal out of congratulating me every time I roll doubles or buy something, and when I land on Free Parking he messes up my hair and says, "Good job, Sweetheart!" I suffer this silently.

on my back with her finger and then asks me to guess what she wrote.

I guess, "I have big boobs," even though I know she wrote, "I love Ralph."

"You can tell, huh?" she says. She's been wearing baggy sweatshirts.

"Uh-huh."

"Do you like Ralph?"

"Sort of," I say. "I don't like his beard."

"I like his beard," she says and flops down on her back. "A man with a beard kisses soft. He doesn't scratch your face up with his stubble." I should remember that, I think. I can use it in the girl's bathroom.

"When are you going to have your baby?"

"November. Don't tell anyone yet, but Ralph wants to name it Tundra if it's a girl." I can hear Grandma snorting in my mind.

We lie there for a long while until Mom calls us for dinner. She has made a meatloaf that is more than half onions. We all know this to be her silent form of protest and that if we complain she'll let us all have it. But Ralph just goes on and on about how delicious it is. The next day, Rose drives him to the city airport and comes back all puffy and red-faced. Dad starts talking to her again almost immediately. Grandma says that the best thing for a weepy wife is work, but her and Rose take a long walk with the puppy and come home laughing.

That spring, Grandma gets sick. She stays in the hospital for a month, and is different when she comes home. She walks very slowly and grunts whenever she gets up or sits down. She doesn't talk much or eat much, and seems to always be staring through glass.

Me, Grandma, Mom and Rose all go to the lake when school lets out. Dad stays in town to work and the boys go to basketball camp. Rose gets pretty big and complains a lot. She complains about a lot of things that "aren't good for the baby." Things like bringing in the firewood or swimming in the lake when it's windy and there are white caps on the waves. When she tries to get away with not doing something by saying it isn't good for the baby, Mom snorts. She has taken this over for Grandma who has altogether stopped.

Sometimes Mom makes Rose-Anne cry by saying things like, "That Delleure girl didn't quit university when she got pregnant, but I suppose she has a husband who takes care of her."

Dad and the boys come up on most of the weekends and Dad brings Rose letters from Ralph. She lets me see most of them, but some she hides. I find the hidden ones that say things like "I miss the sweet smell of your white thighs." Or, "If you were here right now, I'd lay you down on a soft bed of moss and make love to you until the sunset. By the way, the sun never sets here." In other letters he just goes on and on about a particular type of shrub or about mice chewing holes through his tent. These are the

one's that Rose let's me see, but I can tell she wants me to find the others. They are in a big envelope in her underwear drawer marked "PRIVATE."

I tease her and say, "Rose-Anne, your hair is as soft as an arctic sedge, and your lips as red as the black fly bites on my hairy white butt." When she punches me, I tell her that I don't think it's good for the baby.

When the saskatoons are ripe we drive to the ravine and the boys carry Grandma down the steep parts. We each want to fill up an ice cream bucket full, but the boys have brought their BB guns.

"Berry picking is women's work," Tyler says. Dad tells them they aren't men enough to pick berries yet, and that they best go shoot each other in the woods. Dad is the best picker of all, but lets them go with their lame excuse anyway. I don't mind. I don't want to hear them fighting all day. Juliet takes off after them even though Rose calls to her to stay. She leaps and sniffs her way down the riverbank, barking at things we can't see.

We pick hard and it's very hot. The mosquitoes are terrible by the river but no one wants to carry Grandma up the ravine. Mom and Dad start heading upwards though, and me and Rose stay behind with Grandma. We can hear shots echoing, but they get farther and farther away.

We pick silently until Grandma all of the sudden starts to cry. Rose asks what's wrong and she says that she misses David. It takes me a second to remember that David is Grandpa. I've never really thought of her as being married before, though I guess it's obvious enough.

"Oh Gran," says Rose, "I know exactly how you feel with my Ralph up North." Grandma gives Rose a blank look, and I can tell she's thinking, "Who's Ralph?"

Finally the boys come back with our lunch and a pair of antlers they found. They want to tie them to the hood of the car. Mom says we better not or somebody might think that her boys are a pair of mighty hunters and demand that we share our bounty with the rest of the village.

Dad says, "Oh come on, nobody would ever believe that our boys are good for something." Mom cuffs Dad on the top of his head and he ducks.

"How can you say that? How can you be so mean to my babies?" She says "bay-bees," as if it's a really long word, and she pulls them toward her. "My beautiful bay-bee boys." They are both gigantically tall like Dad and Grandma, almost a foot taller than she is. She kisses them and smooths down their hair. Tyler wriggles away but Chris puts his head in her lap. He chews his food silently. Lunch is mustard and bologna sandwiches with warm gererale. It's all Dad ever makes.

After lunch, Chris and Tyler carry Grandma back up the ravine. Rose adds Grandma's berries to her pail, and it's still less than what I've got. Rose picks slowly and keeps standing up importantly to stretch and rub her belly and the small of her back. She goes to the bathroom a lot, too.

At the top of the ravine, the boys put away their guns and grab some

pails. We form a line and make a sweep towards the car. The land is flat between the ravine and the road. Dad starts singing a dirty old song.

“The captain’s name was Randy, and Christ he had a dandy!” Mom and Rose throw rocks at him whenever he sings something especially rude, but miss on purpose. I pretend not to get it, and the boys laugh a little too loudly.

That night, Mom and Rose can the saskatoons. Grandma and Mom used to do it together, but now Grandma just watches TV with Dad. The windows fog up from the perpetual hiss of steam from the kitchen. Everyone is tired and sunburned and the boys get into a huge fight over an old tee-shirt of Dad’s that says, “Old Fart.” They both want to wear it to a party. Finally Dad takes it away from them, and Chris leaves, slamming the door. He bounces a basketball off the side of the house. Slam. Slam. Slam.

Tyler watches TV with Grandma and Dad, but Juliet won’t stop barking at Romeo. Tyler yells at her to shut-up, but she just gets more excited.

Slam, slam, slam.

I call Karen from my bedroom and tell her that I can’t take it anymore. Everyone’s fighting and I can’t stand my family.

She says, “You’re so lucky and you don’t even know it. I wish I had brothers and sisters. My family is sooooo boring.” I go to her place to sleep over. We build a tent out of blankets in her living room. Her parents don’t care how late we stay up or if we play music. Their house is so big they can’t even hear us. I tell her about Ralph’s letters. She says that she thinks Arlo Offenmyer has a crush on me. I know that she likes him and that I’m supposed to tell her that no, he’s obviously after you. But I feel a bit mean, and I say that I think so too, only he’s disgusting and I would never, never go out with him. Later we watch “Halloween,” but I fall asleep even before anyone gets killed.

November is hard. Grandma dies on the same day that Rose is supposed to pick up Ralph from the airport. Rose goes into Grandma’s room to wake her up and starts screaming and sobbing. Nobody really knows what to do. Finally, Mom shuts the door and calls the police. We all wait around the kitchen table without bothering to clear off the breakfast dishes. An ambulance and a police car come. They wrap Grandma in her bedspread and carry her into the ambulance. Rose keeps crying and insisting that somebody has to get her husband from the city. Dad tells her to forget about Ralph for a second, but she won’t give up. Finally, Sergeant Hollins says he’ll have Ralph paged at the airport.

When Ralph calls, Rose bawls and bawls.

She even says, “Ralph, this just can’t be good for the baby.” I hate her.

When Tundra is born, nobody is particularly happy, except for Ralph. Rose cries almost perpetually. So does Tundra.

Ralph is annoying. Why can't he say, "I bought a house?" Instead of "I purchased some real estate." They were supposed to move to the city right away, but Rose insists that she can't leave Mom alone right now. Mom snorts. All she ever does is take care of Rose, while Rose takes care of Tundra. In fact, Rose won't even let anyone else touch Tundra, who is blotchy and shakes a lot. Ralph holds Rose-Anne holding Tundra. They sit huddled together for long periods of time. He calls Rose-Anne, "baby," and I think, "You've got that right."

I find Dad crying in the tool shed. I smooth down his hair and tell him that Grandma was ready to die because she got to really missing Grandpa. He looks at me strangely. I can tell he wonders how I could know about something so true.

Ralph and Rose-Anne move out after New Year's, just when I start getting used to Tundra. She falls asleep in my lap, and I just sit with her weight pressed against me watching her breathe. Mom says that there's something special about the way a newborn baby's head smells.

"Sweet," she says, "and fresh. I think it's the breast milk."

Tyler says, "That's disgusting," and Dad reminds him that he was a baby once.

"And pretty happy, if I can recall, about breast milk," Dad says.

Tyler responds by punching Chris in the arm, and they take off towards the gym. I don't think I'll miss them when they go to college, but it's strange.

I come home after school and Mom and Dad aren't there. Mom has left a note about warming up pot roast. I grab a bag of chips and phone Karen.

"She's at the swimming pool," her Mom says, which I know means she's making out with Arlo someplace. I look inside all the bedrooms even though I know I won't find anybody. Rose's old bed is still parked in Grandma's room. The canopy and the stenciled flowers look ridiculous. It's a little girl's bed, I think, and Grandma died in it. I find Romeo sleeping under the couch. He has grown fond of his hiding place, even though the puppy is gone. The house is hot. And quiet.

I sneak down into the pantry as if someone is watching me. The jars are lined up carefully, segregated according to color. There are green dill pickles and orange pickled carrots. Sweet pink jars of crab apples, and loud red raspberry jam. I pick up a jar of saskatoons. I measure its weight in my hands and scrutinize its bright purple against the audacity of the beets.

I put it to my ear. The glass is cool against the heat of my temple. I close my eyes to hear better. I hear Grandma snorting, or is it Mom? The distant echo of shots and Juliet barking. Dad is singing, and there is the plop of rocks following his voice.