

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE, ART, LOSS, AND LOVE

Rebecca Wagstaff

I was born an artist—I see this more clearly now. Yes, I am a painter, but that is only one of the mediums I use to make art.

In the '80s I studied painting at Brigham Young University, and then taught traditional hand bookbinding classes for the art department briefly after returning from an apprenticeship with famed bookbinder Arno Werner. It was at this time I became acquainted with and soon married artist Clay Wagstaff, who had returned to Utah after finishing his masters degrees in California. I had not previously entertained the possibility of marrying another artist, but my decision to marry Clay was the best I have ever made. We've had a life of creativity together—twenty-seven years so far. After marriage, we moved to a remote place in southern Utah.

I've always instinctively valued self-sufficiency—the knowledge plus skills to make and do essential things—taking responsibility for my own health and more. Naturally I chose home birth midwives when I became pregnant with Hannah. It was the right choice for me and my baby. Raising a child—and we also chose to homeschool—is an act of creativity. I loved having my daughters at home with us, participating in our daily lives.

When Hannah was about two years old, a photocopy of a soap recipe fell into my hands. Of course I had to make it because I love to make useful, functional things. Unexpectedly my soap proved to be better quality than soap from the store. So we turned artisan soap making into a business that we still operate. About this time, my great-uncle's house

in Tropic became available and we bought our first home. Clay's art also extends beyond painting and drawing. He has put in countless hours during our twenty-three years here, updating, remodeling, constructing, and finishing a freestanding studio in the backyard and more—creating unique and beautiful spaces for our family.

Miriam was born just before Hannah turned six. Again, I chose a midwife. Clay remodeled the attic into a charming bedroom, finishing it in the nick of time. After nurturing Miriam well into toddlerhood, and with her dotting older sister to help look after her, I began painting seriously again and was quite productive for several years.

I painted "Inheritance" with Hannah as my model—her unreal, thick, long hair, braided, then loosed to make it wavy. I was contemplating the idea of inheritance—what have I inherited that is of most value to me? What have my daughters inherited? What have each of us inherited from our Divine Parents? And then this interesting idea—"children are an heritage from the Lord"—another way of saying my children are an inheritance the Lord gifts to me.

I chose the wool paisley shawl to directly symbolize my ancestors, and Clay's, who immigrated from England and elsewhere, sacrificing much—sometimes all—to do what they believed was right. But the shawl indirectly represents all my forbearers. The book Hannah holds is a first edition Book of Mormon, representing the great heritage from God I believe that book is to all of us. She also holds an early American coin. The abstract geometric lines I often include in my paintings indicate passageways between worlds or dimensions, even the possibility of piercing the veil. The expression on this girl's face is soberly contemplative in part because she is considering all the things that I am thinking about while I'm making this painting.

In August 2008, friends invited us to join them on an unofficial handcart trek in Sanpete County. For some reason I felt uneasy and increasingly uncomfortable as the hours passed the night before our early morning departure. Overnight I also developed painful sciatica,

and felt it would not be possible for me to walk with the trekkers the next day. Clay and I decided we would drive around, taking landscape painting scrap photos and then join the group at camp later in the afternoon. Hannah, who had recently returned from a trip to visit friends in Virginia, begged to go with us, which surprised and touched me. My uneasiness was at a high pitch by then, but I assumed my concerns were for Miriam—being the youngest in our family and appearing the most vulnerable—so I took Hannah aside and gave her careful instructions to watch over the safety of her little sister that day. I needed Hannah to go with Miriam and protect her.

We got the phone call about the accident less than an hour after the group left. I wanted to ride in the back of the ambulance with Hannah's body, but they said there wasn't room so we three rode in the ambulance cab to the hospital where we were provided a room to be with Hannah, for as long as we wanted, they said. We were in the room for many hours, and little by little thoughts came. We would make a phone call and then another, to family and friends. Then I realized we were *not* going to turn our sweet daughter's body over to strangers in a strange mortuary, so Clay called a friend who dropped everything and built a coffin for us. There were many other details. Lots of people helped us. It took all those hours to get everything arranged because I could only deal with one slow thought at a time. Hannah's great-granny and grandma came to be with us and to help wash Hannah and dress her. We took Hannah home in our van and buried her the next morning in a tiny remote cemetery alongside some of her ancestors.

Jeremiah writes that Rachel wept for her children "and would not be comforted, because they are not." This is a painfully beautiful and accurate expression of what it *felt* like to lose Hannah.

The second night, crystal clear words came into my mind: "Your sacrifice is accepted." I immediately cried out, in my mind, "How could it be a sacrifice if I didn't agree to it?" The reply came just as quickly "You agreed before you came here." I continue to ponder on that exchange.

Jesus Christ made the great and supreme sacrifice of Himself to save all of us. We talk sometimes of God the Father's suffering in allowing the sacrifice of His Son. I believe that Jesus' Mother also made an immense sacrifice, so that Her Son could be our Savior. Was it not all planned out before They came here? As I apparently participated in my life plans before I came here?

It seems to me that sacrifice does not end when we depart this life. And apparently we, the ones in need of saving, are given the opportunity to willingly make seemingly impossible sacrifices ourselves—like Abraham and Sarah, and many others. It appears that sacrifice is required for us to progress. I feel certain there is purpose in the massacre, or “sacrifice” of the Innocents. The sacrifice those mothers, and families, made, is for a wise purpose in God, even as we—behind the dark veil—might struggle to understand.

In the midst of pain I could never have imagined, I thankfully continued to feel gratitude to God for His many, many mercies. That I was able to care myself for Hannah's body—that beautiful body I had birthed fourteen years earlier. That she had not suffered in death, that I have reason to believe that “death was sweet” to her. Grateful that we had fourteen years with her, that we had spent so much quality time as a family. I felt somehow connected—as I never had before—to everyone on this globe who suffers loss of loved ones. When we lose someone we are very close to, someone we dearly love, we feel profound loss and pain—and it *feels* for a long time, that we, like Rachel, cannot be comforted.

Clay and I expressed our grief differently, but both of us had the sensation that we were unable to draw a full breath of air for months following, and we hardly slept. While I *knew* even at the very beginning that *Hannah* was okay, that she was absolutely fine—it's us left behind who are suffering—it still *felt* like the gap of her absence was unbearable. I *knew* that God loved me, that there was a purpose in Hannah's death even if it wasn't clear to me what that was, but at the same time, I was suffocating—every breath a struggle.

Miriam immediately developed severe behavioral problems which lasted over three years. I could “feel” her overwhelming pain, but I didn’t know how to reach her and help her through my own all-enveloping pain. But we did our best. Fortunately Clay and I kept talking. We worked at being kind to each other. We tried different things; we kept on loving each other and Miriam. We prayed a lot. It took awhile for me to begin to comprehend that many *others* felt great grief for the loss of Hannah. Intellectually I understood this idea, but the mantle of pain was so thick around me. Grandparents, cousins, close friends, aunts and uncles, and other relatives were all hurting. And especially Miriam—her whole world had caved in at eight years of age.

Like me, Hannah and Miriam were born artists. Their drawings, from the time they could hold a pencil were confident, imaginative, well-designed, and composed. The girls loved reading and being read to for hours at a time. Their play was always creative and often involved imagining and then making things together and individually. And they always had “projects” of various kinds, underway. When Hannah was twelve, a wonderful violin teacher moved here and the girls began lessons, both progressing rapidly and loving the opportunity. We don’t know how Hannah’s gifts would have developed in this sphere, if she had stayed here longer, but that’s okay. She is an amazing and gifted eternal being, continuing to progress as we all are.

Miriam showed unusual aptitude for music from a very young age. At two years old, when our family would watch old classic musicals, for weeks afterward Miriam would “sing” the songs from *My Fair Lady*, *Oliver!*, *The Sound of Music*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, etc. *in tune*, as she went about her daily play. We watched Ingmar Bergman’s version of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* when Miriam was four. It’s a long opera and I assumed a four year old was not going to be happy to sit through it, so I began reading the subtitles out loud. It wasn’t long before she impatiently interrupted with “Mama, will you please be quiet so I can hear the music?!” She sat captivated through the entire opera.

Miriam took to the violin like a duck to water. The time came to transfer to a new teacher, which meant we needed to take her regularly to northern Utah. I delayed, and founded the Bryce Canyon Music Camp in an effort to bring more music opportunities into our rural area, but it was too late. Miriam needed much more. At eleven, Miriam added viola to violin and began playing in orchestras and chamber groups in Utah County. She jumped into fiddling then, too. We were away from home maybe half the time, sometimes more. I got a little painting in here and there, but my creativity went into Miriam and her music education for the next seven years as she auditioned, competed, progressed, and performed. She's a true musician.

This year, Miriam is a freshman in college and a little while ago she asked me to suggest edits for an essay she wrote for her English teacher about her experience of losing her sister Hannah. I was surprised that Miriam was able to share her deep and tender feelings in a more public venue—and glad. It's a beautiful essay.¹

It's been ten years since Hannah died and I still sometimes *feel* a little like Rachel. I'm never without the feeling of Hannah's (mortal) absence. But I know Rachel's children are not really lost, and she *will* be comforted and healed.

Our latest creative big endeavor has been turning our home into a bed and breakfast. In April Clay proposed the idea since we live next to Bryce Canyon National Park, and I said yes. We spent the whole summer working like crazy to make this place into River Stone Inn & Gallery. I worked with such intensity that I didn't take time to think what it would be like to host strangers in my house day after day, so I'm very glad that it has been an almost entirely great experience. As we finish up details of our new business, I look forward to returning to my painting. It's been too long!

Hannah is still very much part of our family—I just hung her Christmas stocking up alongside of ours.

1. Miriam's essay is available on the Dialogue website.



Rebecca Wagstaff
Hatching
oil on muslin on panel, 9x15, 2005



Rebecca Wagstaff
Hatching II
oil on muslin on panel, 9x15, 2005



Rebecca Wagstaff
Hatching III
oil on muslin on panel, 9x15, 2005



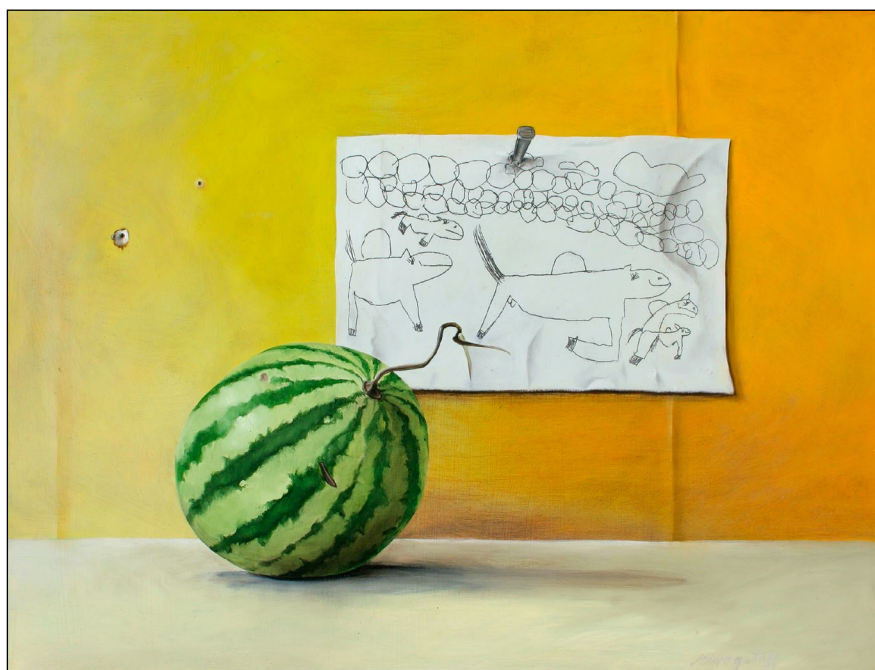
Rebecca Wagstaff
Hatching IV
oil on muslin on panel, 9x15, 2005



Rebecca Wagstaff
Passageways
oil on canvas, 48x48, 2009



Rebecca Wagstaff
Contemplating
oil on panel, 38x30, 2006



Rebecca Wagstaff
Green Melon with "Horse Family Flying"
oil on panel, 15x19, 2005



Rebecca Wagstaff
Rose
oil on canvas, 12x12, 2004



Rebecca Wagstaff
Hidden Vessel with Bread
oil on panel, 30x24, 2005



Rebecca Wagstaff
Branch & Remnant
oil on muslin on panel, 18x24, 2007



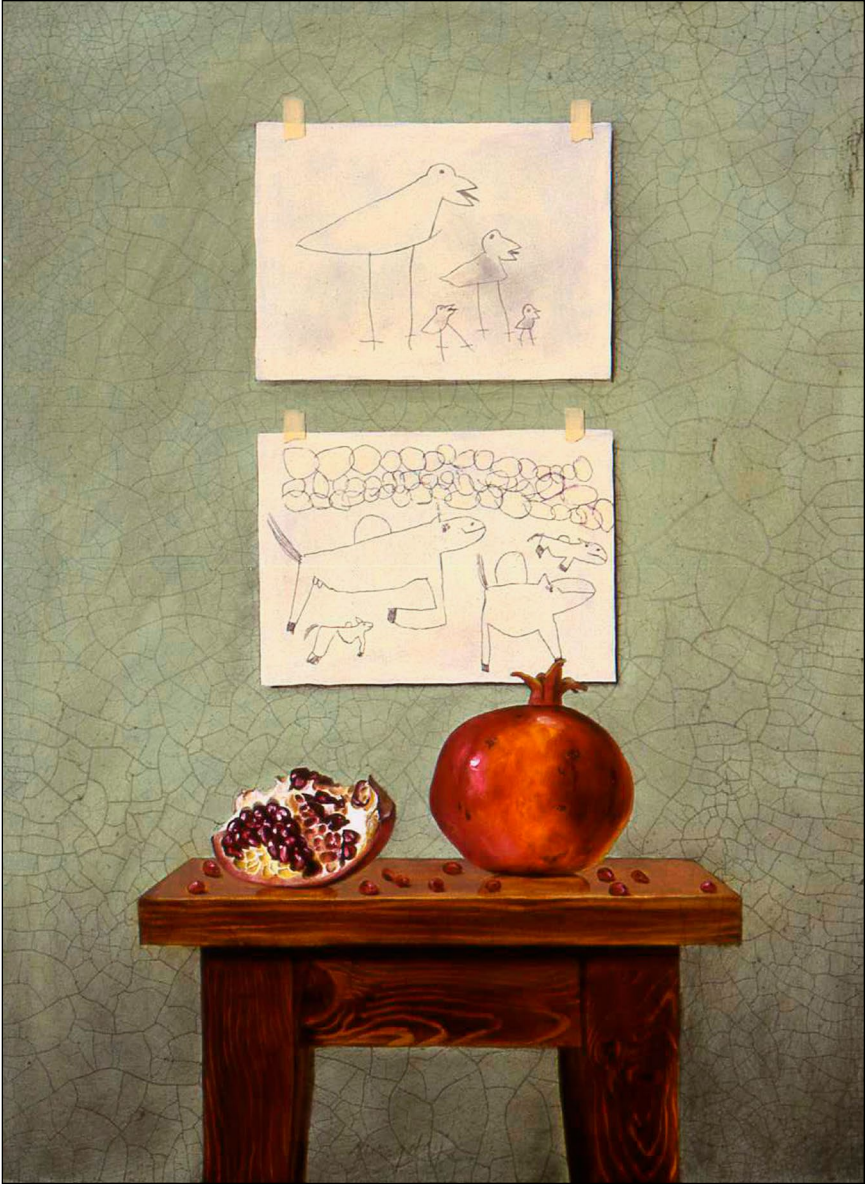
Rebecca Wagstaff
Willows
oil on canvas, 60x36, 2003



Rebecca Wagstaff
Branch & Vessel
oil on muslin on panel, 24x38, 2007



Rebecca Wagstaff
Considering
oil on panel, 38x21, 2005



Rebecca Wagstaff
Crow Family & Family of Flying Horses with Pomegranate
oil on panel, 24x18, 2005