

MISS MAAS

WILLIAM STANISICH

2021 final version

Every student at Jackson Elementary School moved inexorably through a series of teachers to the Sixth Grade, which was the summit. Miss Maas had always taught the sixth grade; she had wild eyes and hair pulled into a bun with errant wisps on all sides. The teachers all had reputations.

She said she had something special for us: instead of the dreary State Curriculum we would devote every Wednesday to watercolor painting. “It has allowed me to excel.” She showed us her paintings and we all agreed that they were very good indeed. “Watercolor is free and alive. We’ll go to the museum to look at Winslow Homer and Chinese ink paintings and you will see what is possible.” She assured us that we all could learn to be artists.

The other days of the week we were to study the curriculum prescribed by the state. She confided to us that she knew the Superintendent of Schools quite well. He always invited her to stage an exhibition of her students’ art at the Board of Education each spring. She seemed to have some kind of dispensation when it came to the regular curriculum, and her attitude towards it became as rebellious as her hair.

Unlike other Jackson Elementary teachers in the 1960's, she did not practice corporal punishment, which was still legal. Miss Schaefer, the fifth-grade teacher, rapped knuckles when she lost control. We liked to push her to the limit until she was red in the face and rapping someone else's knuckles. Sixth grade was supposed to be a relief.

I was glad to learn how to paint and leave my babyish efforts behind. The first Wednesday she handed out materials and told us to store them in the shelf under our desks. "Always wait until everything is dry so that your books won't get wet. They don't belong to you." The first task on Wednesdays was to tape paper to our boards on all four sides. She then showed us how to wet the paper with natural sponges. "Now, float, float, float, those colors in." It was impossible to control the shapes and everybody was frustrated. "Just keep going. Use your imagination and, after the recess, everything will be dry and you can make sense of it all."

When we came back and were seated she demanded that we pay attention. The dried watercolors were chaotic, with colors and blooms that oozed out all over the paper. "I want you to take twigs and ink and look carefully at your paintings. After awhile you will begin to see trees or animals or something else. Looking hard is the most important part because it will unleash your imagination."

One inert boy dared to say that he saw nothing. “Then take the twigs and dip them in India ink and start to draw—something, anything.” She didn’t care if the paint underneath went with the lines or not. She convinced us that we had to keep going and we would stumble into a discovery.

After lunch we piled our paintings on the side cabinet. “I would like five monitors to hold up the paintings for all to see,” she said. I didn’t volunteer because I wanted to wait and watch. Five people lined up, holding paintings aloft across the front of the room. She suddenly turned her head away dramatically. “I want my eyes to be totally fresh when I see them.” She wheeled back and exclaimed, “Wonderful, just wonderful.” Of course, some were more wonderful than others. She chose two and asked for another set of five. She repeated her ritual of turning away, closing her eyes in order to be totally fresh, and then making her choices. She explained why she chose some paintings but not others; “Most of all, I want you to be free, to let go.”

She urged us to let the paint do what it wants to do, to sing out. One dim girl asked, “How can paint sing, Miss Maas?” ... “Give it time,” she replied tightly, “You’ll learn as we go.” She gave a clue: some colors gain intensity when they are put next to certain others. We were asked to experiment and find them.

After she had seen all the paintings, it was time for afternoon recess. When we returned, her top choices were pinned to the cork board where they would remain until the following Wednesday. The rest of the week we worked on history, algebra and grammar with grim determination.

One day after lunch we returned to see her sitting alone, clearly unhappy. She did not seem to have friends among the other teachers and her moods changed abruptly. As with Miss Schaefer, we learned to recognize her hot face, even though she was not going to rap knuckles. Instead her eyes darted around the room and she announced that things had gone missing again. "I can't understand it," she lamented, "my favorite fountain pen is gone." Her eyes pivoted around the room locking into mine for a second. I was sure she thought I had taken it. She didn't accuse anybody but her anger and disappointment accelerated during our silence. She finally made clear she would be vigilant from now on and we all breathed more easily for the moment.

Our watercolors were beginning to get better. She again urged us to use our imaginations, to look at the blooms of color and try to see something recognizable. "Living with an active imagination is one of the gifts of drawing and painting." It was true. The world outside the

classroom was suddenly filled with more subjects than we could paint. She showed us Chinese ink drawings and gradually we paid attention to our paper as it came alive. Letting the paint flow of its own accord was the key to finding shapes, something we could barely put into words. We were gaining power over the universe and it felt like playing god. She did not want us to mimic what we saw. What we actually saw on our paper had the ability to lead somewhere we hadn't expected. As she scoured the line-ups every Wednesday afternoon she surprised us with her choices. She wanted each of us to make something new. "Don't repeat yourself". It became more difficult to please her and she was more unpredictable in her praise and silences, which we did not understand.

I came down with the flu and had enough of a fever that I had to stay home. On the first day I was absent several friends called me to tell me that the mess I had stuffed into my desk drawer had exploded out onto the floor, tin cans rolling all over. Miss Maas also exploded and declared that everything should be taken to the back row, my new place of shame. Until then I had been praised constantly even though I always felt the brittleness of my position. Her hard stares when she was engaging in her inquisitions about stealing gave me a hint of what might happen if she declared me the thief and had evidence. I stayed home as long as I could and secretly held the thermometer next to a light bulb to exaggerate my symptoms. I was absent so long that

Miss Maas suddenly relented and had my things restored to the first row. I got calls again from classmates who were enjoying my ricochet back and forth. I knew that she felt guilty because she herself threw guilt around helplessly.

On the first Wednesday after my return she asked us to paint redwoods, my favorite subject. I loved to make the trees begin below the bottom edge of the paper and grow past the top. She told us that Sequoia sempervirens grow for centuries. Even though they are not blatantly red, she noted, inside the brown trunks there is a red glow that gave me fuel for ways to paint them. Her idea to “float, float, float” colors opened my eyes to the many vertical lines of reds I could float before coating them with a transparent brown bark. After lunch she let out a squeal of delight when she saw the two paintings I managed to finish. She observed that there were many ways to suggest an interior life within the paper. I was glad to be the one to stumble into an interior life.

Unhappily for us, she kept up her painful interrogations regarding thefts. Whoever was taking items seemed to know her heart because she took each theft more personally than the last. “I am at the end of my patience,” she said sternly. The series of losses seemed minor to me but they disturbed her. Her face was lined with worry and she seemed to become ever more tense with each loss. The latest heist was a group of natural

sponges that she had brought in herself. She used them constantly in her own paintings and there was no better way to wet the paper before “float, floating” colors. She was being generous to us and someone was betraying her directly by taking them. Even though I knew I was innocent, I was hurt that she continued to stare directly at me during her rants. Maybe I had taken them in a kind of daytime sleepwalking. But of course that was crazy.

We went to the museum to see a big exhibition of Van Gogh paintings. They were electric with bold strokes that seemed to delineate his insanity. She had read us some of his letters to his brother and we felt that we knew him. Maybe he was not so different from Miss Maas. She showed us the self-portrait of him with his bandage where the ear had been. He must have felt betrayed by his ear to cut it off. I had never seen such blazing yellows and blues before. She pointed out his use of ultramarine blue, which appeared everywhere in his paintings. It was mysterious and seemed to have red inside; maybe it was a holy color because he used it in his Madonna and Child. Or possibly it was a sign of his insanity because it made his starry night so intense and his crows so scary. With her help we were thrilled to come so close to him physically. No reproduction could convey the power and mystery of the paint itself.

His suffering and his ecstasies filled the room. The artist himself seemed immortal in these paintings,

which were so vivid and fresh. Compared to his paintings, the musty photographs of him and his asylum looked remote in time, practically dead. I began to recognize the power of painting as a way to let people in the future know what you had felt.

We returned to our watercolors the following Wednesday with a new bravery. She bought us a group of large sunflowers, and everybody started with blooms of bright yellow and orange oozing all over the paper, just what she liked. By the time they were dry in the second session we were busy with wild strokes of ink delineating petals, stems and centers. We added dry color to emphasize the shapes and background colors; ultramarine blue was the most popular, of course. When the wild sheets of paper were lined up at the front of the room, Miss Maas declared them a triumph. "I think van Gogh came here and guided your brushes himself." She chose many more paintings than usual and her head snapped back and forth with glee.

It was time for the exhibition at the Board of Education. Miss Maas had kept all her weekly favorites on several shelves of the side cabinet. She declared a day in order to choose the group that she would hang downtown. She was more excitable than ever. The slightest noise when she was closing her eyes to refresh them for the kill would set her off. "I take this seriously", she pointed out needlessly. We were terrorized into silence. Her eyes darted and blazed and she acted as if her job

depended on our fledgling work. She forgot all about grand theft and chose paintings ruthlessly, leaving out about half of the class. I had eight paintings in the show, which made me glad but uneasy; I didn't like any prominence in her volatile presence.

We all went to the Board of Education in a chartered bus. They guided us to a conference room in which Miss Maas had arranged over sixty watercolors in double rows above the paneling. She had worked the whole weekend to perfect her presentation. We milled around like visitors to a museum and our watercolors looked impressive indeed. A very well-dressed man with silver hair and a conservative tie went up to Miss Maas and startled her. He extended his hand and shook hers, as she puffed up and beamed, like some red headed bird. "Miss Maas", he extolled in a smooth voice, "You have done it again. Your students would make a fortune if they could keep up the stunning work." He spent at least fifteen minutes surveying the room, never stopping in front of any of them. "We are sending these paintings to the newspaper and a reporter is going to show up at Jackson Elementary School." She looked only at him and could not seem to find words to thank him. He suddenly said, "Now I have a meeting and will have to move along." Sensing her disappointment, he added, "I can only marvel at your ability to get your students to paint this way year after year."

Neither of them spoke to us and she did not single out any of our paintings to explain what she had taught or how we had learned. He was gone too quickly and his perfect clothes separated him from her as well as from us. The reporter and photographer did come to the school the following week and Miss Maas took up most of the space in the photograph. Individual paintings were impossible to discern in the newspaper. As the year neared its end, she continued to bewail thefts in her classroom. She became like a lighthouse that cast its light in a fog. Her accusations hurt less as she became her own victim, barely looking at her suspects. After that month we graduated to Junior High School safely and no one was convicted of any crime.

One day during the summer I took the bus downtown and sat beside the window in a seat for two. I noticed Miss Maas standing in the aisle no more than five feet from me. She stood tall and held the pole tight because of the lurching of the bus. She stared straight ahead. Seeing her in public was a bit of a shock. She seemed older, her face tighter. Her eyes were tired and directed inward. She seemed lost. She moved towards the exit and got off on a block of apartment houses that had been built in the twenties for office workers. They were as disheveled as she, disappearing into her private life.

One day during the next year I was talking to a friend, whose brother was in her new sixth grade class. He told me that she was disturbed because people were stealing

in the classroom. She was selecting monitors to stay behind during recess to catch the culprit red-handed.

I suddenly had a clear picture of her pain. I even gained a bit of tolerance for her malice. She created an atmosphere of fear and suspicion yet she had given us the confidence to paint freely. Learning to take chances in art would last a lifetime. Her selfishness in accusing eleven year olds of something they had not done was something we might come to forgive. After all, she had explained a great deal about Van Gogh's madness and had opened our eyes to the splendor of his work. We would have to see people in more than one dimension after Van Gogh and Miss Maas. Why did she accuse us of stealing from her? She was certain she was missing something.

After teaching for many years myself, I now recognized her feelings of betrayal. Much that she had given us had been taken from her own life as a painter, perhaps keeping her from gaining the recognition she wanted so badly. There was simply not enough time, not enough energy left by the year we met her to fulfill her life hope. She was missing things that mattered to her, but "things" did not seem to include the vital achievements she left behind. She gave us her ability to inspire her love of art as well as the discipline to achieve it. Her true value eluded her along with her evaporating possessions. She would never guess what seeds she planted, unrecognized by her as well as by the world.

Her gift was unconditional love, the kind of virtue that Chaucer describes in his Oxford Scholar. “ Gladly would he learne and gladly would he teache.”