"Winter 1946"

Andrew Wyeth (1946)

Winters 1967-2006

-- Reflections on Feeling, and Not Feeling, Death and Endings --

This Wyeth painting, "Winter 1946", captured my soul at the Philadelphia Museum of Art last spring, the weekend after Sandy Trowbridge's memorials in Washington, D.C.

Sandy Trowbridge's family, my best childhood friends, summered in an old Cape house down the street from ours in Harwichport, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. They had their own tennis court out back. I looked to Sandy to be something of a second father to me, my own father having died mid-game on that court when I was eight years old.

Seated outside the court fencing, I watched my Dad lean over to pick up a ball and then fall to the ground. He lay motionless just behind the service line at the eastern end of the court, a spot that marks the start of my fatherless future. This occurred in a single moment of that day, August 23, 1967.

Just as my mother was not ready to be husbandless, so I was not ready to be fatherless. I believe the same held true for my two older brothers.

But there was more than being unready. My mother struggled silently to survive her own loss, and the losses to her three boys. There was a mandate in her that had distant roots, and that grew through each of us, to not speak of grief. We were all stricken with unspeakable grief.

There was no one to help free my family and me, as a husband or father might, from this dreadful mandate --in my case, the quiet dread of further loss and humiliation if I exposed my sorrow. "Keep loss to yourself." This isolating rule has been a most reliable and ruthless dictator of my being, taking form in dreams as an insatiably ruthless Rat who eats my heart with swarms of gnawing mouths if I dare to not comply.

Although Sandy and especially his then wife Nancey, and each of their children, were extremely generous with me, neither he nor anyone could father (or mother) me so as to eradicate my fatherlessness --eradicate my loss and, with it, my forbidden feelings.

For decades, the felt-necessity of that impossible eradication was pursued by my imagination in radical and exhausting activity: I quietly fantasized Sandy to be a replacement of my father, giving him a status in my emotional life that kept me in

compliance, protecting me from seeing and speaking my family's loss, which is what I peculiarly sought.

This fantasy, which was out of my awareness until last spring, apparently relied on Sandy's life and presence. For, with the Trowbridge family's email announcement of Sandy's death on April 27, 2006, a denial that had stood between me and my father's death died too. Upon reading it, I was returned, in a moment, to the winter of my August 1967.

In Wyeth's painting you will see me as a boy and as a man: I wander over the hill of the death of my father, Denis Brandon Maduro. There is a chill in the air. The fathered-life that I knew is suddenly ended. Beyond my control, I am thrust over that hill; it is overcast; someone central to me has abruptly become a *was*. His is no place or time to which I can return or that returns to me. In an instant, he became immaterial, confused memories ... images colored by a dark, fear-struck incomprehension that what is known as unbreakable and certain can be, is, broken. What I knew to be my landscape is forever behind me, and I am now in an unknown place beyond my former familiar horizon, carried by the, for me, at eight years, utterly alien momentum of a downhill.

It was a quiet chaos back then, and continues, marked by widespread unpreparedness and collapse of innocent presumptions. This unfamiliar, wintry place on a far side of the hill is where I have been wandering.

As of that summer moment when he reached down to pick up that tennis ball, and didn't come back up, there was no longer the safe, familiar presence of a father with which to face and understand matters of loss ... to understand that my needs were no longer ordinary ... for it was his loss, and its impact on me, that was the matter. I was without the man most likely to make sense of his death, and the fear and pain that were in it for me.

Starting at just that moment in 1967, I needed most what I no longer had.

Yet I was not aware, until recently, that my condition has long been one of need, for I was never seen as particularly wanting, or in trouble. The aftermath of my father's death occurred amidst a seeming invisibility to my mother (and others) of my crumbled, unspoken emotional world.

My disoriented wanderings were not reflected in adult eyes. Rather, in those eyes I saw other sights and, behind them, in the opaque darkness of her pupils, my mother's fear and vulnerability. And there were no guardians who saw and interrupted my life-surrendering compliance with this mandate to not feel. Instead, my mastery of my feelings was perceived to be "brave," as the 10-year-old Stephen T. put it in the Trowbridge living room while I watched, through those old Cape windowpanes, as the EMTs matter-of-factly carted my father's body across the green grass that served as their second driveway.

I missed my mother's recognition and articulation of my fear and sadness, and was hurt that my surely obvious chaos and pain was averted. Perhaps she avoided my wounds in the erroneous belief that spoken acknowledgement entrenches and intensifies the suffering; or, perhaps she felt I needed answers, and that she had none for me.

So, I compliantly saw my path and myself as ordinary. (Ordinariness is antithetical to shattering loss and its chaos and grief). All along, however, parallel to this path and in the shadow of my ordinariness, walked that which would not be seen ... a figure of humiliation-stung grief ... grief of which no one cared to speak.

A sphere of silent sorrow has existed alone, progressively blacked-out, since that moment in 1967 when, on that Cape Cod tennis court, the presumptions and feelings of certainty and fatherhood were broken. Though my mother and others took many loving and well-intended actions on my behalf, their replies to my struggle were distant, disembodied and ghostlike. Their actions and words matched the event of loss, but not the body of my pain that yearned to be seen and grasped.

My emotional life took on a love-inimical quality of being threatening, undesirable, of no importance, again unspeakable. I *had* to live in harmony with this ghostsilence ... with this mandate to hide myself. So, I built my feelings a personal dungeon where they could not reach into the world-of-others and touch ... or be touched.

For decades now, these emotions have been refrigerated in an isolated sanctuary, on the cold, wet floor of which rests the skeleton of a child beside the skull of his father -- dream symbols of too-early-deceased father-and-sonhood, and of perished grief. One consequence of this unspoken story, and the mandate that invisibly sets its stage, has been the foreclosure of embodied feeling during my youth ... another loss of life, though this time my own.

A solitary world is built of these elements. In Wyeth's image, my world's private landscape is bounded by hope-limited horizons and unitary seasons of cold, overcast silence ... repeating winters.

With respect to me, my brothers, and my mother, a simple poem comes to mind: "Silence is no certain token/ That no secret grief is there;/ Sorrow which is never spoken/ Is the heaviest load to bear" (Frances Ridley Havergal).

If my being were treasured, wouldn't someone have seen me in trouble? Have showed up? Wouldn't someone have come to find me ... to speak to me about what's going on, and bring me back to someplace *with* them? Would my new situation have to be ordinary? Would others' avoidances and fears of feeling take precedence, when feeling afraid and sad *with* someone is what I needed and, without knowing it, have long longed for? Some find it hard to understand the depraved self-value that pervades such an isolated being.

What if, despite others' avoidances and reactions, I was to presume my emotional self's worthiness to be seen and spoken? Would catastrophe follow? Would the good in Mother Nature break off and leave too?

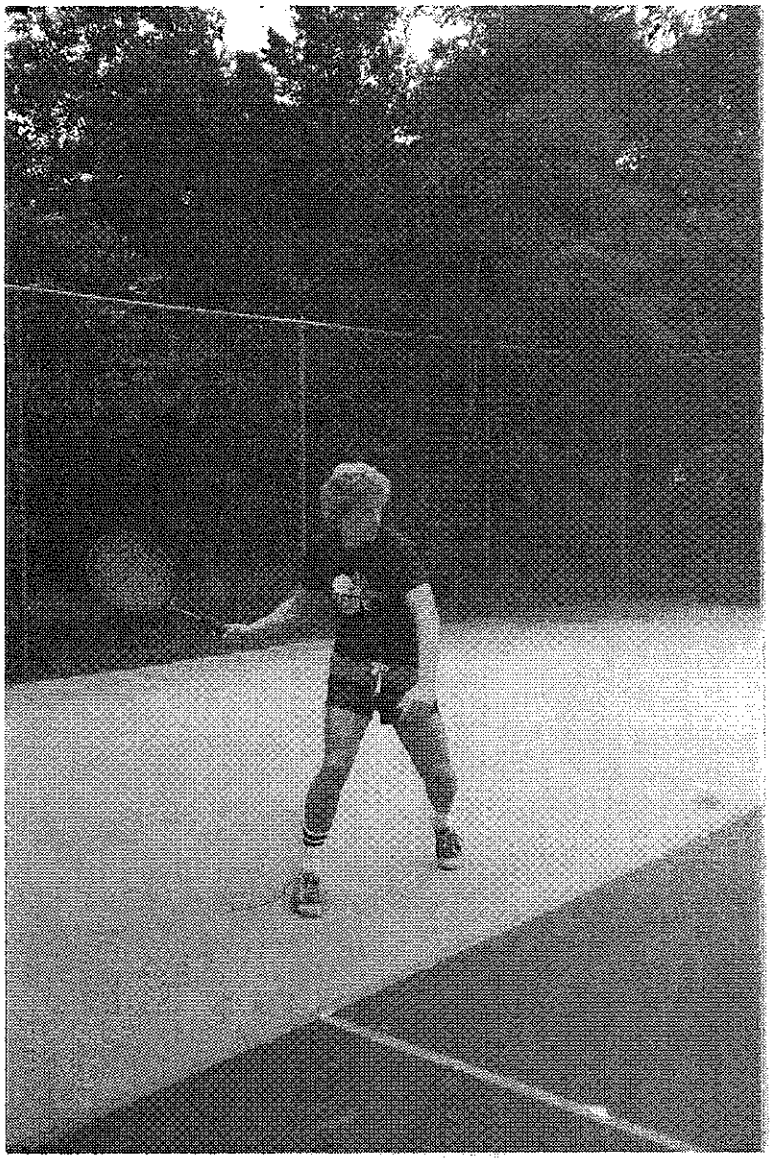
I will know when my spring comes, for there will be a thaw, and I will be able to touch and feel touched; grief will drip and then run like a river through my body, and I will feel free to feel and be.

Perhaps "*will*" should be "*would*" to protect against false optimism. There can be brief moments of emotional touching and springtime, but then they freeze back over. At such times, the grief is thick –seemingly too much for this man who is *as if* new to sadness.

Present deaths and endings dig up old ones, and 1967 lives in the foreground of my 2006.

PNM

January 6, 2007



"X" marks the spot

... another Wyeth

From Museum Commentary on "Winter 1946"

Winter 1946, 1946
Tempera on composition board, 31 3/8 x 48 in. (79.7 x 121.9 cm)
Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina, 72.1.1

Andrew Wyeth's meticulously imagined art conveys a tragic vision. Considered together, his paintings comprise a lifelong meditation upon the frailty of life and the imminence of death. The artist celebrates the bleak landscape of late autumn and winter, the weathered barns and farmhouses of Maine and Pennsylvania, and the people who endure a hardscrabble existence on the margins of society.

Winter 1946 is one of the artist's most autobiographical works, painted immediately after the death of his father, the celebrated illustrator N. C. Wyeth. According to the artist, the hill became a symbolic portrait of his father, and the figure of the boy, Allan Lynch, running aimlessly "was me, at a loss—that hand drifting in the air was my free soul, groping." Even without this story, the image is troubling: a dark, jagged form set awkwardly against an oceanic swell of brown. A skilled dramatist, Wyeth eliminates all distracting elements from the scene. The boy and his thoughts are visually isolated, his eyes averted. Further deepening the physical and emotional alienation of the boy, the artist has us look down upon the scene from an improbable height. The heightened clarity of the picture results from Wyeth's use of the egg tempera medium: ground earth and mineral colors mixed with yolk and thinned with water. Wyeth once admitted he likes tempera for its "feeling of dry lostness."