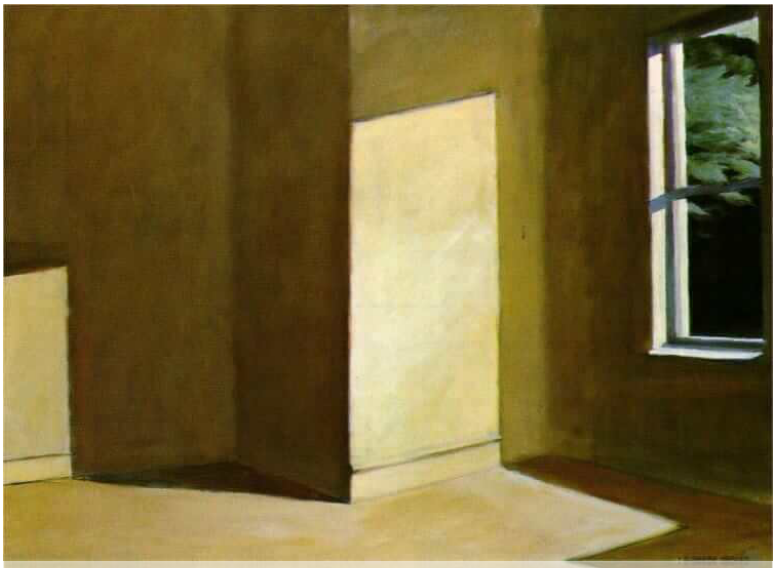
THE FINALLY HUMAN



"SUN IN AN EMPTY ROOM," EDWARD HOPPER

TOM LITSTER

Whereas no one ever becomes old in a single instant.
— Simone de Beauvoir

1. Questions

MY NOTION OF WHAT IS "OLD" recedes further into the future. I'm fooling myself, of course, but shifting my gaze between beginnings and endings helps with that. It poses questions different from only wondering what might yet be disclosed about me, which could be one of two things: an old horse circling a fenced pasture in smaller and smaller circles, or (changing the metaphor) an old man who puts on his coat, walks out the door and disappears. Of course, it may turn out to be something else altogether. Old age is no simple state of being.

Gertrude Stein's dying words (the story goes) were, "What is the answer?" Receiving only perplexed silence from those gathered around her, she pressed on, "What is the question?" Another time and place, and the questions might be, "Is this all there is?" Or "What was it all for?" We might take such questions to mean a hankering for a richer life lived and regret over coming up short.

"Old men should be explorers" wrote T.S. Eliot. Then a later American poet, Theodore Roethke, regarded Eliot—who describes his shrunken man in "Gerontion" as "a dull head among windy spaces"—as an old mystic in a windy chapel with the wind blowing up his ass. Roethke wrote, "Old men should be explorers? / I'll be an Indian. / Ogalala? / Iroquois."

Or take that old saw, "there is more than meets the eye." It could be a call to unexplored places, but more often it means we're suspicious.

Back to the questions. Should I expect a just measure between age and wisdom, and a calendar of how and when I accumulated it? Ralph Waldo Emerson seemed to think so: "There is a proportion between the designs of a man and the length of his life." A sort of American Veda, Emerson, saw a journey of self-realization through continuous acts of perception, insight and cognition. I'm skeptical of all assurances about reaching "age," especially sanguine assumptions about a long

view from a hilltop where we will finally see where we have come from and where we are going.

Having arrived at conspicuously aging, I wonder if I am an immigrant from a land the young ones find unimaginable. I'm reminded by popular culture's texts—movies, television, advertising—that it's a land that no longer exists, a time from before. I have a friend, an aging one like me, who still lifts his guitar from its case, fingers a little less nimble than they once were, and sings the occasional Woody Guthrie song—*This land is your land, this land is my land*. Are you kidding? I think to myself. I say nothing to him. We are two lumps in the porridge that haven't been stirred out (yet).

Stein had the odd luck that her memoir, *Paris France*, was published on the day Paris fell to the Nazis in 1940. I suppose Simone de Beauvoir was somewhere in Paris that day. Thirty years later she published *La Vieillesse,* a thousand years of how society and its citizens view old age: "Whatever the context may be, the biological facts remain. For every individual age brings with it a dreaded decline." She reminds us that Siddartha, before he was Buddha, saw an old man for the first time and remarked, "It is the world's pity that weak and ignorant beings, drunk with the vanity of youth, do not behold old age!" Beauvoir said she wrote her book to break a conspiracy of silence.

Enough with twentieth-century French literary lionesses. I'm surrounded by images of aging but urged by well-meaning friends to "remain youthful." They mean the usual things—stay active, make plans, learn new things, keep up my friendships. Others are old, they are not, nor should I be, seems to be what they believe. Do they fear old age? They laugh and admit there are times to "act old"—stairs and icy streets—but otherwise we should act with determination and think of ourselves as any age.

I'm cautioned by culture to prepare for my "golden years." The unprepared will face inevitable problems accumulating with those years that might detract from the advertised smiling faces and sunny landscapes of a good retirement. Above all, I should not become one of the isolated elderly, nor think of myself as no help to society. Loneliness and depression are grave threats, a risk factor for an early death along with smoking and obesity.

Is that a warning meant *for* me or *against* me? I might, in my years of poor health and disposition, lift too much from the public purse. The way I see it, my old age is my time to try on my dying. Until then it has been, and will be, pretty much trial and error and a sort of on-going calibration.

There is a problem with how we talk about aging and the elderly. It falls too easily into one of two overly simplified categories: old age romanticized or old age as a possibly tragic series of injustices that can be alleviated through medical research, political and social reform, or by our own investments and financial planning. Popular literature of gerontology is bipolar: flatly optimistic or pessimistic.

Should I champion the rights of the elderly as a dispossessed group, foster the politics of insubordination and collective demands in us older ones as a way of enforcing our rights, rail against the crimes of culture with regard to us and remind everyone of the blunt, often unseen prejudices. Shall I rescue "authority" from "authoritarianism" by arguing it is possible—though not necessarily so—that a nobility of wisdom, an authority, might come with age? Then I could insist on the Crone as a wisdom figure in her own right, independent of the Wise Old Man.

I could whole-heartedly raise my polemical voice alongside any of these voices, but not in this essay.

2. If It Sinks, You Die

ACCORDING TO THE BLACKFEET OF MONTANA, Old Man traveled the land making people and arranging things. "He came from the south, traveling north, fixing up the world as we see it today," as legend goes. He made mountains and prairies, rivers and waterfalls, birds and animals, and finally being tired, went up a hill and lay down to rest. It occurred to him to make a woman and child from clay. "You must be people," he said, and he covered them over underground. After three days he uncovered his people and told them to rise and walk with him to the river. "I am *Na' pi,* Old Man," he told them.

At the river, the newly created woman asked Old Man, "How will it be? Will we always live, will there be no end to it?" Old Man said, "I have not thought of that. We must decide." The woman said she would throw a stone into the river, "If it

floats, we will always live. If it sinks, people will die, that they may always be sorry for each other." The stone sank, as stones do. "There," said Old Man, "you have chosen." This is a story of beginnings.

Stephen Jay Gould, American paleontologist and evolutionary biologist: "The hankering after an origin myth has always been especially strong for the closest of all—the human race … we seem to prefer the alternative model of origin by a specific moment of creation—for then we have heroes and sacred places." And then Gould wrote, "Look for something in the middle, and you will find nothing but continuity—always a meaningful 'before' and always a modern 'after.'"

The people of Old Man were alive, but they had not yet lived. This was a low bar, early in the story. More stories would be needed to account for the world of experience—myths if you like, about how to go forward over the higher bars. The people took on the mythic character of living in a middle, directed from the beginning towards an incomprehensible vacuum proposed to them as their end, but not quite able to connect beginning to end. We can imagine that they immediately started filling the vacuum with hope and consolation. What remained was to accept and rehearse death. Old Man was not particularly helpful with this.

The people rehearsed their death in shared stories, even elevated it from plain to heroic death. Bravely facing it was acclaimed as the most courageous thing to do and the cowardly were ignored. If death came unexpectedly to someone, they were to be admired for their courage in facing its suddenness. Among other things, that made going to war easier.

And so the central problem of life has remained with us—it will end. We knew it from the beginning, shortly into childhood, that we were already in the dwelling-place of our own doom, and at every period of life it has lived with us as a threat. William James called it "the worm at the core."

Historical religions addressed how to bear it. In a new version of the old hero who could go into the underworld and return alive with a gift or power to help us all, Christianity won out by offering us resurrection as a way of lifting Old Man's stone out of the river. It granted us immunity from the mess of biology and guaranteed it with a supernatural healer.

Darwin encouraged the whole modern mess of biological beginnings and endings. He told us that we, the most abundant large animal, are biology struggling for life and facing great destruction. He promised us "death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply." This was only slightly helpful. He didn't have much to say about the frenzy and exhaustion, the sores and secretions and farts prior to that moment, which is still nearly impossible to face in its coarseness.

Freud, on the other hand, saw the bare underbelly of being human: "It is not for us to confess that in our civilized attitude toward death we are once more living psychologically beyond our means."

Existentialists stressed death's importance, but philosophers argued over whether it is an essential source of meaning and true freedom. Long before, Plato proposed "that the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death." Some argue that the great rediscovery of modernity was a fear of death. But then we are a little suspicious of modernity, aren't we?

Those less theologically, biologically or existentially inclined can hope their death will be taken as a sign of a good life and they will be praised for peacefulness at the end. Some will no doubt see a grace note for the ultimate harmony in human maturing as we enter into Soul. A very few will master a detached concern with life itself in the face of death. Though we are not eager for our dying, each of us can hope that a fading mind retains some coherent verbal power, permitting us a dignified moment as evidence of a life.

Of course, there are suggestions of something less detached and harmonious, something that may accumulate over the last years and be evident at the end.

William Gass, in "The Doomed in Their Sinking," describes his alcoholic mother in an undignified moment in the bathroom, hoisting her robe held together by safety pins, the one she wore "straight through the living room and loony bin, every nursing home and needle house we put her in," so she could "hover above the hole." His mother was drowning in "her own ocean like a message in bottle so that she sank slowly." Gass is writing about suicide, "living the long death," which

is the last stage of a series of small acts against the self that "inflicts your dying on those you are blaming for it better than burning or blowing up."

Gass continues: "Crane went sudden as a springboard. The Gulf gave nothing back." And "Plath with pills, or Crane or Woolf with water, Plath again by gas, or Berryman from a bridge."

John Berryman from a bridge between Minneapolis and St. Paul. His *Dream Songs* and poetic alter ego, Henry, with a tragic sense of himself, startled my younger self with "Inner Resources / I conclude now I have no / inner resources, because I am heavy bored." Berryman exhausted almost everyone around him with his obsessions with alcohol, love, fame and his father's suicide, incessant labor to get every word in a stanza right and a desire to assume the heroic burden. Berryman knew his faults. He was too much of everything. When he was sober, he was often contrite. He left a note on the kitchen table: "I am a nuisance."

Kurt Vonnegut said smoking was the only classy way to commit suicide.

We can be left very alone as mortality accumulates around us. At the age of twenty-nine, Mary Shelley published *The Last Man* after nearly everyone she loved had died, leaving her, as she put it, "the last relic of a beloved race, my companions, extinct before me." Already a sense of being left alone was a proportion of her life. Her novel foresees a plague far in the future. It spreads everywhere on Earth, eliminating humanity except for a poor, uneducated English shepherd who had been taken in by a nobleman enamored of the arts and high thinking of the day. Now the shepherd is alone and primitive again, unredeemed by Romanticism and Enlightenment. A critic called her novel" diseased" and it was not reprinted until the 1960s.

My mother lasted until she was 95-years-old, and with greater dignity than Gass' mother. Still, over her last years she asked me, now and again, why she was still living, as if I could possibly answer or even wanted to try. She saw no real design in such an old age. Her fundamental lament was that all of her family, all of her old friends, were gone. They were a directory of the dead.

Should I reach beyond the grave to remind Emerson that any of this might also be a proportion of the length of a life? Old age is not necessarily a corrective.

3. Solitude

SOLITUDE IS THE FINISHING TOUCH for some lives. I don't think of my solitude as solitary confinement. I'm not "doing time." I don't mark the passing days with shadows moving through trees and across the street outside my windows or make plots for life after confinement. I'm trying to ease myself out of years spent pitting word against word in my mind, ambition against failure in the world and solving one problem and then another. I no longer have a clear hypothesis about the life cycle or the world going on without me. The world I was once in does not miss me, nor do I miss it.

Developmental psychologists recommend that in my aging I take an interest in wholeness and integration. Carl Jung called it "centrovision," the achievement of psychic wholeness in the last phase of life. It's a notion that entered the cultural vocabulary of the highly educated who had enough ease of life to make time for it—a category that includes me, I suppose. We deploy words like wholeness, balance, silence and reconciliation of opposites in order to lure it—whatever "it" actually is—close, like we might wait for a slippery eel to come close enough to grasp it with our bare hands. If we grasp this slippery wholeness we hope it may counteract any chaos we suddenly feel around us.

As for me, I wait for a quietism away from actions and grasping. I hope for a single-minded effort of memory and imagination over a long time. If I I meet resistances within my own mind—this is my eel—imagination will help me learn from what I've given up, after I give it up. It cannot be grasped after.

Michel de Montaigne recommended that in the twilight of our years, when "our forces begin to fail us," we withdraw back into our own selves, like animals removing their traces at the opening of their lairs, burrowing into quiet oblivion. We should not fear a descent into solitude and silence. We should gladly retire inward, release ourselves from worldly obligations, contemplate and write essays. "What do I know?" he asked himself.

As Montaigne explains it, "It was a melancholy humor, produced by the gloom of the solitude into which I had cast myself some years ago, that first put into my head this daydream of meddling with writing. … I presented myself to myself for argument and subject." His essays are a place where his self can be a chameleon,

changing from line to line, from page to page, and come into being as it meanders through an essay.

Montaigne's advice, when I first read it, was remote from my frenetic younger self. I regarded it as advice, mostly sententious, to possibly consider another time. Rebellion had been put into my head, not melancholy or a gloom of solitude (what did that even mean?). It required enthusiasm, action and a partisan point of view, not removing myself into retreat. I expect his advice would be even more poorly received now by an even more frenetic youth, seeking constant upgrades as they try to absorb rapid changes. But rampant creation of the new and the carelessness of a throw-away culture need an opposite. The opposite is being old, especially "baby boomer" old.

For those who have aged into some sort of solitude, Montaigne might sound like wonderful advice, but try following it. He could afford it. He was the son of a wealthy man and himself a middle-class lawyer, who retired at the age of thirty-eight to a tower in the family château. Virginia Woolf argued that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," although she considered this "an opinion upon one minor point."

Here's another approach: maybe what I really need to do is tunnel through the thick part myself. Or put another way, tunnel down through the floor and out beyond the foundations of what I took to be the world and my life in it. Forward and backward in the dark, past shovelfuls of discarded dirt, making my escape from fictions and one bad hypothesis after another. Or William Gass one last time: "It's like the terrible blizzards I once put in a short story. I had never experienced blizzards like that, but I had experienced snow. You just turn up the volume." Either way, I am a seventy-year-old now, so I had better go armed to the teeth because there will be monsters.

Roger Angell, twentieth-century American essayist known more for writing about sports, especially baseball, than about solitude and being old, wrote a lovely essay, "This Old Man." It begins: "Check me out." In a few economical paragraphs his more than ninety years are presented as misaligned knuckles and fingers, twists and jogs in his spin, failing eyesight, jagged pains from nerve damage, the stents

for his ragbag heart and his morning pills. He walks outdoors with a cane, and his wife, before she died, told him to "Stop brandishing!"

But it's generally okay, Angell tells us, and recalls Casey Stengall saying, "Most of the people my age is dead. You could look it up." He hasn't "forgotten Keats or Dick Cheney or what's waiting for me at the dry cleaner's today." He has felt deep love and loss, outgrown most of his ambitions, and has friends who are probably perplexed to see him still upright but take him out to dinner. He wants us to know that "we elders have learned a thing or two, including invisibility," and "getting old is the second-biggest surprise of my life, but the first, by a mile, is our unceasing need for deep attachment and intimate love."

This seems closer to the details of what is ahead for me than a dead French essayist who was enamored of the classics and the powers of Reason, and who found himself "entirely destitute and devoid of any other matter" and so renounced the world for writing. I'm pretty sure I would enjoy a cup of coffee and an hour with Roger Angell, who is not dead yet, surprisingly.

4. The Center of the Poem

THERE ARE PATTERNS we discern in our lives "at rare moments of inattention and detachment, drowsing in sunlight," to inflict a little more T.S. Eliot on you.

I see traces of my myself, perhaps the ones Montaigne meant I should erase "like the beasts of chase, who efface the track at the entrance into their den." I do my best to erase the impersonality and irony I once cultivated to impose distance. I hope to relax my perpetual hypervigilance, be easier to penetrate, and come closer to open dialogues with myself and others. The distance that I do want is from the muscular mind, always too full of purpose, that turned out not to be a stay against chaos. Mostly it came up with those bad hypotheses.

I sit at my windows a lot these days and I see we are far from the people of Old Man. Legends are mostly given over to patristic scholarship. We found our modern subject: a vanity about ourselves, all the way down to an intense interest in the architecture of our cells. Poetry is about poetry, novels investigate writing

novels, and on it goes. Postmodernists decided to give history a good trouncing and conditioned it on imprecise signifiers as a false story of ourselves.

If you happen to walk by and see me at my windows, in one of those moments in sunlight, understand that it's not reasoning, and is not subject to the coarse tests of pragmatism or problem-solving, and do not mistake contemplation for passivity. Hannah Arendt lamented that the contemplative life has perversely been rendered valueless when it should be our highest activity. That's one of the places it all went wrong and left us alienated in the modern world, she says. But hey, I'll give Emerson the benefit of the doubt, and try to find a way to be in the world that proportionally suits my years.

I do not expect this will be easy. It will require a habit of mind, I think, that takes into account scattered points of reference and propositions that once seemed sharply defined by their separateness and realizes they are inseparable, each one always needed to others to operate and make sense. Or maybe, like art and dreams, that the whole person is involved and it's necessary to relax the arrogance of the conscious mind. This is how I might balance the despair of knowing a limited life is coming to a conscious conclusion with the integrity and nobility of experience.

If I'm fortunate, tensions will come to a still point now and again, however transitory. This point has been sighted in ballet and Zen, and the Upanishads instruct us about reconciliation and ananda. It has been seen in the aspirations English Romantics and as an origin point of creation. Mexican poet Ocatvio Paz: "But all of us, at some time, even for a fraction of a second, have glimpsed something similar. One does not have to be a mystic in order to know this truth … It is not impossible that, after this first encounter and deceptive contact, the reader may reach the center of the poem."

I wonder, at the center of the poem is there a quest for grace? Connotations of the word "grace"—religious favor, prayer, compassion, good fortune, the unerring beauty of poise, moral virtue—may cause distress in my unsparingly secular friends, but not in me. Maybe grace is just being caught off guard in the flux and reflux of passions, in between dreaming and waking, in pockets of unconnected, unwired time when everything comes to terms. I think it has something to do with discovering what the questions are.

In any case, every story needs an ending, otherwise it would lack charm. Perhaps an ending for me will be *one thing contracts, another expands*. There will be the contractions of mobility, eyesight, breath and money. Friends will dwindle by way of dying and I will become more invisible in the world. I hope there will be expansions. A silence that is neither empty nor hollow, but rich and full, a pattern I had not seen before, or a simple thing like unexpectedly seeing an old friend in a cafe. I may still be dazzled, put on my coat and leave without a word, smiling.

I think of my mother asking, "Why am I still here?"

> *Weaker and weaker, the sunlight falls*
> *In the afternoon. The proud and the strong*
> *Have departed.*
> *Those that are left are the unaccomplished,*
> *The finally human,*
> *Natives of a dwindled sphere.*
> —Wallace Stevens, "Lebensweisheitspielerei"