

# LOSING IT

WILLIAM IAN MILLER

in which an aging professor  
LAMENTS

his shrinking BRAIN,  
which he flatters himself  
formerly did him Noble Service

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A Plaint, tragi-comical, historical, vengeful,  
sometimes satirical and thankful  
in six parts,  
if his Memory does yet serve



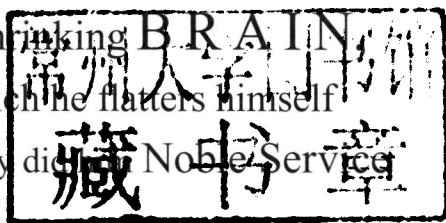
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*LOSING IT*

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NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

For my teachers:  
to own up to debts  
I can never repay

And as with age his body uglier grows,  
So his mind cankers.

—*The Tempest*

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## INTRODUCTION

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# Striking Out

**T**he phrase *striking out* can suit an enterprise launched in grand hope no less than one that ends in humiliating failure. It may also invite an editor to strike out the first sentence and tell me to start over, or just to give it up. If the general themes of this book may strike some as glum and grim, others will find solacing compensation in the joie de vivre of its gallows humor, some of which is intended. But such joie, like all joy, will soon be followed by a letdown. The figurative trapdoor opens and you drop, and are left dangling.

In common usage, the “it” in *losing it* can stand for any number of things. But in this book, “it” refers mainly to mental faculties—memory, processing speed, sensory acuity, the capacity to focus. Sometimes “it” will mark general physical decay outside the brain, as when I complain about joints and organs, sags and flaccidities, aches and pains. This “it,” whether mental or physical, is more general, and the process of losing it more drawn out, than when

“it” stands for a cell phone or virginity, each of which can be lost in mere seconds of thoughtlessness.

You will discern, however, that now and then I lose it in the sense of *flipping out*. That kind of losing it describes a fit of rage, usually thought of as losing “control,” when the expectation would be of a more modulated show of irritation, or of feigned indifference. That particular idiom is quite recent. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates its earliest recorded use to 1976, from England, not America, which might count as a minor surprise.<sup>1</sup> But to lose it in that sense was already latent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when one could lose, if not the pronoun “it,” then nouns like one’s patience or one’s mind, something less concrete than the head you could lose to an executioner’s ax already in fourteenth-century usage.<sup>2</sup>

The discussions that follow circle around the theme of growing old, too old to matter, of either rightly losing your confidence, or wrongly maintaining it, culpably refusing to face the fact you are losing it. Yes, you can grow old gracefully. But what does that mean? Does it require withdrawing quietly without making others feel guilty, accepting, if not quite invisibility, then a quiet confinement to the shadows, from which you politely tell the economists measuring national happiness or the psychologists who study the well-being of oldsters that you couldn’t be happier? And these experts, coding your response, are stupid enough to believe you.

Does growing old gracefully mean that you don’t fight old age with unseemly cosmetic surgeries? That you alter your personality to fit what properly respectable old age is supposed to be? Will you have to affect a certain look? But what if you are not blessed, like Robert Frost was, with thick white hair and the appropriately etched wrinkles? Just how are you to face decline and the final drawing down of blinds?

I hate confessionism (except, it seems, my own, which I can manage on terms of my choosing). I am compelled, however, given the subject, to be self-referential at times, though I will mostly do so by attributing my anxieties to you, the reader; or, when not making “you” the bearer of the burden, it will be “we,” share and share alike.

Though most of you are not professors of law, and even if you

are, you will not be one who teaches law students Icelandic sagas in a course called Bloodfeuds, or one who offers seminars, depending on the year, on topics such as disgust, humiliation, charlatanism, and revenge, and then gets paid as if you were teaching corporate law or bankruptcy; and though only half of you will be male, and even fewer of you Jewish, and almost none of you have grown up in Green Bay, Wisconsin, or have read an Icelandic saga and had it transform your life, I operate under the reasonably sincere belief that my experiences are those of Everyman. "Everyman," by the way, with its medieval associations, is gender neutral.<sup>3</sup> We are still plagued in English by the politics of the third-person neuter pronoun, for which I mostly use *he*, *him*, *his*, and an occasional *one*, when it does not seem too prissy. I do not employ *she/her* as a neuter pronoun, settling instead for the good husbandry of neutering males, which is what old, even middle, age effectively does to males anyway.

The "you" and "we" of my exposition is a claim of my averageness and yours too. Please do not be insulted: in our culture of inflated self-esteem, to be average, and to recognize yourself as such, is to bear a mark of distinction. And unless you suffer from incurable positive thinking and its attendant imbecility, my experiences should be readily comprehensible to you, if not always exactly shared. (Caveat: I will not quite be able to repress all my irritation with and contempt for so-called positive psychology and the related field of positive emotions, with their fatuous takes on old age, wisdom, happiness, and well-being—not to mince words, these fields are either culpably moronic or a swindle, one in which its purveyors, it seems, believe their own con.)<sup>4</sup>

The first four chapters—part I—retail the ways of losing it in unsettling detail; they are largely about brain rot. The book's middle will be in good part historical before we turn to more reflective (timeless?) matters in the last parts. In history or in ancient tales, we find more interesting people than either you or me: the likes of David, Joab, Beowulf and his grandfather Hrethel, Lear, of course, Enrico Dandolo (who, blind and over ninety, led the Fourth Crusade), Saint Anskar, apostle to the blond beasts of the North,

various ancient Egyptians and curled-bearded, dark-haired beasts of Assyria, some Talmudic sages and magic men, several cagey and ruthless denizens of the Icelandic sagas—a berserk Viking, a wily lawyer, two homicidal poets—together with other old cynics, ascetics, and geezers—old Jews, old Christians, old pagans, and dying in the end with Jezebel. It will be impossible not to respect their tough-mindedness, to recognize their laudable as well as their blamable differences from us, but mostly to experience their deep kinship with us. They are never so different as not to be recognizable and comprehensible, even or especially when the concern is whether you are too old to take revenge and may wish to retire from such stern duties.

I treat wisdom in part II and show it is not all sweetness and light, rather the contrary, if wisdom is to be wise. Wisdom suffers greatly at the hands of modern psychologists who claim to study it, but then so does old age, when they patronize it with positivity. What can the quality of the wisdom you achieve be when it comes to you, if it indeed does come to you, at the same time your mental abilities are on a bullet train heading south?

No different from us, people of yore complained, and the three chapters in part III will be devoted to complaining. How much are you allowed to complain, and in what style? Are there strategies of compelling others to take your complaints seriously, especially when you complain about losing it, or about plain old aches and pains? What about complaints to God, when he reneges on his promises? What too of sorrow, despair, emptiness, when complaint gives no relief, and you end by turning your face to the wall?

Beds figure prominently in this book, for not only might you be put into one or be unable to get out of one, but you might actually choose to take to one. Sickbeds and deathbeds are dense with meaning and play an important part in one retirement ritual I examine in some detail in chapters 10 and 11. Retirement from active life, and from life plain and simple, can be graded on style points which, if we do not live so long as to be demented, we have much control over. How is one to go down? With all guns blazing, raging against the dying of the light, or in bitterness consumed by fantasies of revenge? With whining and whimpering self-pity

or in garish self-abnegation, as the renouncers of the *Upanishads*? Doped up in hospice or hospital? In apathy, whether abject blank dementia or cold stoic firmness?

And what about your property? Are you still with it enough to know what to do with it, if you have any? The soon-to-die worry about their property and what to do with it: should one waste it in riot? Burn it? Bury it in a mausoleum? Pay it over to doctors? Pass it on to heirs who are impatient for it and not willing to concede it to be wholly yours to begin with? Or take it with you, just to annoy them? And just how do you do that?

Like gravediggers, morticians, and archaeologists, a medieval historian, which in part I am, owes the dead for giving him a job and feeding his family. Part of this book, thus, if not quite a Book of the Dead, is a prologue to one. And thus I deal with those end-of-the-road reflections, those that lead you to recognize unpaid and unpayable debts, uncollected ones too. These kinds of musing lead to related matters in parts IV and V: Hamlet's defying augury, his heebie-jeebies—a signal not always false that something's up, maybe rather lethal, and getting ready to face the end is all. I wonder too about taking stock of one's life, and how that is to be done with an ever more spongiform memory. Some of the emotions that play their part as you become increasingly aware that awareness of any sort is ever harder to achieve get their turn. And would you do it over were you offered the chance? Are do-overs desirable, if by some trick they were possible?

Throughout a good portion of history and a wide range of cultures, old age was (as it still is) more likely to subject you to ridicule than to respect. If you were rich and powerful, the ridicule would be behind your back, unless you were nearly blind or deaf. Rollicking good fun was to be had by setting stumbling blocks before the blind or by shouting insults into the ears of the deaf. The biblical injunctions not to treat the halt, blind, and deaf to such abuse are not metaphors. These unfortunates were given no special privilege, unless it was a negative one. One chilling example: David, after having been mocked by the Jebusites, who claimed they could beat him

with their blind and lame, the Jebusite way of saying “with both hands tied behind our backs,” responds: “Whoever would smite the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, who are hated by David’s soul” (2 Sam. 5.8).<sup>5</sup>

The Jebusite blind and lame are about to find themselves props in David’s cruel joke, whose wit is to force literalism upon Jebusite trash-talk metaphors. And while at it, why not trick a blessing from your blind old father, rendering him a fool and filling him with anguish? Little kids mocked old bald men who, if the particular bald man happened to have God on his side, could avenge himself by calling down two she-bears to maul the brats. Forty-two mischievous town tykes of Jericho got eliminated that way, getting their comeuppance when the prophet Elisha decided their taunts regarding his baldness were not to be borne (2 Kings 2.23–24). What the crippled and blind, the old and bald, would not have given to have had Elisha’s connections.

John of Trevisa, in a late fourteenth-century treatise discussing the ages of man, minces no words about *elde* (old age): “Everyone has contempt for the old person and is annoyed and bored by him” (All men dyspyse þe olde persone and ben hevy and wery of hym).<sup>6</sup> Consider yourself lucky, I guess; it is better to be old now than it ever was,<sup>7</sup> not because you will not be despised and found to be a bore, but because there are drugs to alleviate much of the pain of your greater life expectancy, psychologists who get richly funded to flatter you by “proving” your sense of well-being is at an all-time high, the Internet to fill the emptier time, and old-age pensions, still possibly solvent if you do not linger too much longer, to keep you housed and fed.

Life is a desperate struggle not to be laughed at, sneered at, or looked down upon. It is next to impossible to cheat others of the small pleasures they achieve at your expense. Even if you accept being ignored, in fact seek to be ignored, you still risk ridicule. Minding your own business when you are old, ugly, and deformed seems to provoke little boys and teen girls. They do not even have to be your own children, nor do they need to know you at all. And no, I am not even close to paranoid. I hardly feel persecuted or singled

out, nor am I. I am only growing old, and with it comes that sense of self-estrangement I remember last from puberty.

Say you are, as I am, in your sixties. We take it for granted that dividing up humanity by decadal age cohorts starting at thirteen—into teens, twenties, thirties, and so on—is a perfectly natural way to carve up a population. But making a plural of the multiples of ten to indicate an age cohort is rather recent. True, we have girls referred to as in their teens as early as 1673, but for the other multiples nothing is recorded before the last third of the nineteenth century. Until then the plural of a multiple of ten was more likely to be used to refer to a decade in a century, and not before the eighteenth century at that. Marking age cohorts in this fashion is of an ilk with those older traditions that divided the “ages of man” variously into three, four, six, and seven stages.<sup>8</sup>

These older traditions of dividing up the course of life have been much studied in the past couple of decades. The schemas show wide variation. In John Burrow’s words: “Anyone who goes to medieval discussions of the ages of man with the intention of ascertaining at what age youth was then thought to end, or old age to begin, will find no easy answer. The texts offer, indeed, a bewildering profusion of different answers.”<sup>9</sup> Old age can begin anywhere from thirty-five to seventy-two in the various ages-of-man schemes.<sup>10</sup> In classical Rome, Livy calls Hannibal *senex* (old) when he is forty-four, while Cicero refers to himself as *adulescens* at that same age.<sup>11</sup> Cicero, though never short on self-serving estimations of himself, is sixty-three when he calls himself *adulescens* at forty-four, so there is some excuse. He may not have classified himself that way when he was forty-four.

Youthfulness is somewhat relative and the stage of life is partly in the eye of the beholder. My mother, who is a preternaturally fit eighty-nine (she still swims a half mile a day and plays eighteen holes whenever the weather does not prevent it), refers to her golfing partners as young. When I press her, she says they are sixty-five or seventy. Middle age has been pushed back. Thirty-five could qualify when I was a child and forty surely would. Some say I am middle aged at sixty-five, but that is because they are already forty-



five and have revised in a transparently self-interested way the ages of man, in order to avoid having to think of themselves as middle aged. Old age is pushed back even more forcefully by people already in it. More than half the people between the ages of sixty-five and seventy-four surveyed in a National Council on Aging study in 2002 thought of themselves as middle aged or young, as did a third of those over seventy-five.<sup>12</sup> Only the AARP pushes the other way, sending you membership solicitations when you reach fifty.<sup>13</sup> Seventy is not young, for the Bible tells me so, and fifty does not yet qualify as old except to people in their twenties and thirties. Yet strangely, the teens in my father's high school yearbook look to me like men and women. In the picture of my dad going off to war, he looks like the man he indeed was; in more than one way he was older at twenty-three than I am now.

Do not think that because of miserable life expectancies old people were a rare sight in ancient, medieval, or early modern times. The big culling took place in the first few years of life; in a population in which life expectancy at birth was twenty-five years, if you made it to twenty, you could expect to get to fifty-four, and if you made it to forty, you were likely to get to sixty-three.<sup>14</sup> One could expect a not insignificant 6–8 percent of the population to be over sixty.<sup>15</sup> Females stood a better chance at all ages than males, child-bearing years notwithstanding. War, violence, and occupational accidents ensured that men died at slightly higher rates.

Even under the brutal demographic regimes that made surviving childhood a bet against unattractive odds, the notion of dying in childhood, or later, in the so-called middle of one's life—the very term *middle* indicating it was not properly an end—was thought unnatural. It was considered natural to die only in one's old age. In medieval times the law did not excuse people on account of age from the onerous legal obligations of attending courts or from owing various services, military or otherwise, until they had reached sixty, sometimes seventy. Then as now, sixty often served as an excuse, and seldom as a qualification, as when it served as the minimum age for membership in the *gerousia*, the Spartan senate.<sup>16</sup> Nowadays, we do not find it natural to die even in old age.