

THIS OLD MAN Roger Angell

Senior editor, staff writer; written in his 90s

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READER 1: Check me out. The top two knuckles of my left hand look as if I'd been worked over by the KGB. No it's more as if I'd been a catcher for the Hall of Fame pitcher Candy Cummings, the inventor of the curveball, who retired from the game in 1877. To put this another way, if I pointed that hand at you like a pistol and fired at your nose, the bullet would nail you in the left knee. Arthritis.

Reader 2: Now, still facing you, if I cover my left, or better, eye with one hand, what I see is a blurry encircling version of the ceiling and floor and walls or windows to our right and left but no sign of your face or head: nothing in the middle. But cheer up: if I reverse things and cover my right eye, there you are, back again. If I take my hand away and look at you with both eyes, the empty hole disappears and you're in 3-D, and actually looking pretty terrific today. Macular degeneration.

Reader 3: I'm ninety-three, and I'm feeling great. Well pretty great, unless I've forgotten to take a couple of Tylenols in the past four or five hours, in which case I've begun to feel some jagged little pains shooting down my left forearm and into the base of the thumb. Shingles, in 1996, with resultant nerve damage.

Reader 4: Like many men and women my age, I get around with a couple of arterial stents that keep my heart chunking. I also sport a minute plastic seashell that clamps shut a congenital hole in my heart, discovered in my early eighties. Counting this procedure and the stents, plus a passing balloon angioplasty and two or three false alarms, I've become sort of a table potato, unalarmed by the X-ray cameras swooping eerily about just above my naked body in a darkened and icy operating room. But never mind. Nowadays, I pop a pink beta-blocker and a white statin at breakfast, along with several lesser pills, and head off to my human wreckage gym, and it's been a couple of years since the last showing.

Reader 5: My left knee is thicker but shakier than my right. I messed it up playing football, eons ago, but can't remember what went wrong there more recently. I had a date to have the joint replaced by a famous knee man but changed course at the last moment, opting elsewhere for injections of synthetic frog hair or rooster combs or something, which magically took away the pain. I walk around with a cane now when outdoors – "Stop brandishing!" I hear my wife, Carol, admonishing – which gives me a nice little edge when hailing cabs.

Reader 6: The lower-middle sector of my spine twists and jogs like a Connecticut county road, thanks to a herniated disk seven or eight years ago. This has cost me two or three inches of height, transforming me from Gary Cooper to Geppetto. After days spent groaning on the floor, I received a blessed epidural, ending the ordeal.

Reader 7: I've endured a few knocks but missed worse. I know how lucky I am, and secretly tap wood, greet the day, and grab a sneaky pleasure from my survival at long odds. The pains and insults are

bearable. My conversation may be full of holes and pauses, but I've learned to dispatch a private Apache scout ahead into the next sentence, the one coming up, to see if there are any vacant names or verbs in the landscape up there. If he sends back a warning, I'll pause meaningfully, until something else comes to mind.

Reader 8: On the other hand, I've not yet forgotten Keats or Dick Cheney or what's waiting for me at the dry cleaner's today. As of right now, I'm not dead and not yet mindless. Decline and disaster impend, but my thoughts don't linger there. It shouldn't surprise me if at this time next week I'm surrounded by family, gathered on short notice – they're sad and shocked but also a little pissed off to be here – to help decide, after what's happened, what's to be done with me now. It must be this hovering knowledge, that two-ton safe swaying on a frayed rope just over my head, that makes everyone so glad to see me again. "How great you're looking! Wow, tell me your secret!" they kindly cry when they happen upon me crossing the street or exiting from a diner, or departing an X-ray room, while the little balloon over their heads reads, "Holy shit – he's still vertical!"

Reader 9: Here in my tenth decade, I can testify that the downside of great age is the room it provides for rotten news. Living long means enough already. A few notes about age is my aim here, but a little more about loss is inevitable. "Most of the people my age are dead. You could look it up" was the way Casey Stengel put it. We geezers carry about a bulging directory of dead husbands or wives, children, parents, lovers, brothers and sisters, dentists and shrinks, office sidekicks, summer neighbors, classmates, and bosses, all once entirely familiar to us and seen as part of the safe landscape of the day. It's no wonder we're a bit bent. The surprise, for me, is that the accruing weight of these departures doesn't bury us, and that even the pain of an almost unbearable loss gives way quite quickly to something more distant but still stubbornly gleaming. The dead have departed, but gestures and glances and tones of voice of theirs, even scraps of clothing reappear unexpectedly, along with accompanying touches of sweetness or irritation.

Reader 10: Our dead are almost beyond counting... My list of names is banal but astounding, and it's barely a fraction, the ones that slip into view in the first minute or two. Anyone over sixty knows this; my list is only longer. I don't go there often, but once I start, the battalion of the dead is on duty, alertly waiting. Why do they sustain me so, cheer me up, remind me of life? I don't understand this. Why am I not endlessly grieving?

Reader 1: In the days before Carol died, twenty months ago, she lay semiconscious in bed at home, alternating periods of faint or imperceptible breathing with deep, shuddering catch-up breaths. Then, in a delicate gesture, she would run the pointed tip of her tongue lightly around the upper curve of her teeth. She repeated this pattern again and again. I've forgotten, perhaps mercifully, much of what happened in that last week and the weeks after, but this recurs.

Reader 2: Carol is around still, but less reliably. For almost a year, I would wake up from another late-afternoon mini-nap in the same living-room chair and, in the instants before clarity, would sense her sitting in her own chair, just opposite. Not a ghost but a presence alive as before and in the same

instant gone again. This happened often, and I almost came to count on it, knowing that it wouldn't last. Then it stopped.

Reader 3: I'm leaving out a lot, I see. My work – I'm still working, or sort of. Reading. The collapsing, grossly insistent world. Stuff I get excited about or depressed about all the time. Dailiness – but how can I explain this one? Perhaps with a blog recently posted on Facebook by a woman I know who lives in Australia. "Good Lord, we've run out of nutmeg!" it began. "How in the world did that ever happen?" Dozens of days are like that with me lately.

Reader 4: Intimates and my family – mine not very near me now but always on call, always with me. My children Alice and John and my daughter-in-law and my granddaughters, who together and separately were as steely and resplendent as a company of Marines on the day we buried Carol. And on the other days and in other ways as well. Friends in greater numbers now, taking me to dinner or cooking in for me. (One afternoon, I found a freshly roasted chicken sitting outside my front door; two hours later, another one appeared in the same spot). They saved my life. In the first summer after Carol had gone, a man I'd known slightly and pleasantly for decades listened while I talked about my changed routines and my doctors and dog walkers and the magazine. I paused for a moment, and he said, "Plus you have us."

Reader 5: Recent and not so recent surveys confirm that a majority of us people over seventy-five keep surprising ourselves with happiness. Put me on that list. Our children are adults now and mostly gone off, and let's hope full of their own lives. We've outgrown our ambitions. If our wives or husbands are still with us, we sense a trickle of contentment flowing from the reliable springs of routine, affection in long silences, calm within the light boredom of well-worn friends, retold stories, and mossy opinions.

Reader 6: We elders – what kind of a handle is this, anyway, halfway between a tree and an eel? – we elders have learned a thing or two, including invisibility. Here I am in a conversation with some trusty friends – old friends but actually not all that old: they're in their sixties – and we're finishing the wine and in serious converse about global warming. There's a pause, and I chime in with a couple of sentences. The others look at me politely, then resume the talk exactly at the point where they've just left it. What? Hello? Didn't I just say something? Have I left the room? I didn't expect to take over the chat but did await a word or two of response. Not tonight though. When I mention the phenomenon to anyone around my age, I get back nods and smiles. Yes, we're invisible. Honored, respected, even loved, but not quite worth listening to anymore. You've had your turn, Pops; now it's ours.

Reader 7: I've been asking myself why I don't think about my approaching visitor, death. He was often on my mind thirty or forty years ago, I believe, though more of a stranger. Death terrified me then, because I had so many engagements. The enforced opposite – no dinner dates, no urgent business, no fun, no calls, no errands, no returned words or touches – left a blank that I could not light or furnish. Now it's different. Death will get it on with me eventually, and stay much too long, and though I'm in no hurry about the meeting, I feel I know him almost too well by now.

Reader 8: 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. We oldies yearn daily and hourly for conversation and a renewed domesticity, for company at the movies or while visiting a museum, for someone close by in the car when coming home at night. Take it from us, who know about the emptiness of loss, and are still cruising along here feeling lucky and not yet entirely alone.