

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/4

Gene Twaronite
Aging Awkwardly

IN A FEW DAYS, I'LL BE 68—a little closer to staring off into space while drooling uncontrollably (actually, I'm already doing that), a little closer to that final scattering of my molecules into places unknown, which does sound kind of fun.

According to figures compiled in 2011 by OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), U.S. citizens have an average life expectancy of 78.7 years. I could move to Slovenia, where it's 80.1 years, but I doubt it'd be worth it.

So, with any luck, I should be around for at least another 10.7 years as long as I don't do something stupid, like wingsuit flying or free soloing. I've also got good genes, since both my parents lived into their 90's. So stick it, OECD!

I'm still left with the fact, however, that I've used up a good two thirds of my life or more. Not sure if Einstein would have agreed, but time does move faster relative to the amount you have left, the closer you get to that big black hole that awaits all of us.

Forget that Robert Browning claptrap: "Grow old along with me!/The best is yet to be." While all signs indicate that I am certainly not growing younger, damned if I'll sit back and wait for decrepitude to overtake me. Acquiescence is just not my thing. As for the supposedly greater wisdom that comes with age, I'd much prefer the libido and strength of my twenties.

We are bombarded with advice on how to accept our limitations and age gracefully. A recent CNN article (The secrets to aging gracefully) says I shouldn't hide behind makeup (which I don't, though on some guys it looks great) and that I should ditch the spa (never tried one, unless having egg on my face counts as a facial). People who age gracefully, it says, "exude confidence." All I can manage is a little false hope before breakfast. They are also "up on the latest trends," which means my Led Zeppelin t-shirts are out. As far as not being afraid to embrace my grays, how about silver?

Another article says that to live longer I should get plenty of sleep (check), avoid too much stress (check), and that I should not consume more than two alcoholic drinks per day (OK, forget that one). And, oh yes, aim to have sex at least once a week (actually I added that one, which does sound like a good idea).

When it comes to aging, I think the pundits have it all wrong. "Gracefully" sounds too accepting, like Fred Astaire or Ginger Rogers dancing off into the sunset. No one's ever compared me to Fred (Ginger maybe, but not Fred). I'll just muddle along like always, making up the dance as I go along, tripping over my feet as I forget where I'm going. One thing I do know. I'm going to age as awkwardly as I've lived, lurching this way or that, higgledy-piggledy.

So I've come up with a few tips of my own. Make some noise every once in a while, just to let people know you're not dead yet. For me, it's

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cranking up some AC/DC or Stones (no soft rock allowed!). Let the neighbors know you're there, though preferably not after nine p.m.:

DO SOMETHING SILLY — NOT STUPID — EVERY DAY. Silliness requires that you step outside of yourself and do something that makes no sense at all. Do it because it makes you laugh. Do it because it makes those around you think you're nuts, which is part of the idea. It's a kind of creative defiance that turns the world around a little, if only for a moment. And it doesn't cost anything, unless you get fined for drawing a silly face on your tax return.

Part of being human is making an occasional ass of yourself, but try not to make a career out of it. I don't care how respectable and careful you are. At some point in your life, you're going to be an ass. I'm sure Pope Francis is a cool, upstanding guy, but even he must look back on some of his early days and say, "Boy, what an ass I was!" And look at St. Augustine. He got to have all that fun being an ass, then confessed it all and became famous. So it's OK to be an ass once in a while, but eventually you have to own up to it and take responsibility.

And since everyone is an ass sometimes, try not to be too critical. Your turn will come soon.

Some final tips. If you do a lot of drinking, it's best that you not keep guns around the house. And if you can no longer laugh at yourself or face another day, do like an old dog and go off quietly to die in the woods. Don't blow your brains out in the kitchen. Have some sympathy for the cleaning crew.