On John Cheever
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Entries from *The Journals of John Cheever* (New York: Knopf, 1991):

Old age seems to have presented me with two discernable changes. I think these are constitutional. One is an increase in fear. In reading of a Vermont winter I think not of the skiing in the mountains in a morning light; I think only of the cold as some premonition of death. I think only of pain. And watching on TV a film of some waves breaking on a shore in the early morning, I think how far I have gone from this light, this freshness, this sense of being a happy participant.

"What seems to be bothering you?" says the doctor. Spread out on the examination table, stark naked, one says, "I feel terribly sad."

The Hemingway story, or stories, about nada—the utter nothingness that is revealed to an old man—seem to correspond to what I've experienced these past months. I feel that perhaps the sorrow of these days will be revealed to me as having had their usefulness. The nature of this sorrow is bewildering. I seek some familiarity that eludes me; I want to go home and I have no home.

I think what an enormous opportunity it is to be alive on this planet. Having myself been cold and hungry and terribly alone, I think I still feel the excitement of an opportunity. The sense of being with some sleeping person—one's child or one's lover—and seeming to taste the privilege of living, or being alive.

I conclude that these are the last weeks or months of my life. There seems to some genuine fatigue and sadness here, as well as some contemptible narcissism. Self-love, one reads, is characteristic of our time; and here is self-love at its most intense.

I had, fleetingly, this morning, a sense of the world, of one's life, one's friends, and one's lovers as givens. Here it all is—comprehensible, lovely, a sort of paradise. That this will be taken quite as swiftly as it has been given is difficult to comprehend.

I feel like one of those old men one reads about in the family-interest columns in afternoon papers. Grampa is having a struggle with age. Gramp doesn't want to grow old. Gramp doesn't understand that even the stars in heaven have their time of brilliance and then grow old.

The ballgame is rained out and I, with the old dog, go to bed at nine.

The first day of the New York Memorial Hospital. I am confronted with the fact that I cannot type very well. There is some damage to my dexterity. The confusion of the experiences I have traveled through in the last month has led me to ask if such truths, mostly dealing with the ardor with which we pursue life at a medical level, are not in some way dim. Now that I know a little more about a life of quiet desperation, lived hourly in fear of death by suffocation, I seem to have learned nothing.

In the waiting room we joke about how our hair falls out in clumps. Men and women are going home from work. I walk alone to the elevator and return alone to my room.

The pain in my chest is, at this hour, my main occupation.

My chemistry seems, for the first time in months, to have arrived at harmonious proportions. I tell my wife that at twenty minutes to three on January 21st it was decided that I would not die.

The medicine I have been taking for the last month has done nothing to block the cancerous tumors, and on Tuesday I will take up another course of medicine. So we drive home.

There is very bad news from the doctor, and Mary and I embrace and weep.

One could write about an old man or an old woman waiting out the later afternoons in those outpatient rooms where the music is tireless and vulgar, where the woman whose taste chose the pictures on the walls and subscribed to the dog-eared magazines has long

since gone to other pursuits, and where one waits for ever and ever to hear one's name or number.

I must, this morning, call the broker, order stationary, and have my watch fixed.

I have never known anything like this fatigue. I feel it in the middle of dinner. We have a guest to be driven to the train, and I begin to count the number of times it takes him to empty his dessert plate with a spoon. There is his coffee to finish, but happily he has taken a small cup. Even before this is empty, I have him on his feet for the train. It will be for me, I know, twenty-eight steps from the table to the car, and, after he has been abandoned at the station, another twenty-eight steps from the car to my room, where I tear off my clothes, leave them in a heap on the floor, turn out the light, and fall into bed.