Almost 700 years ago, St. Bernardino of Siena gave voice to a universal truth about old age. We all strive to reach it, he wrote, but when it arrives we complain. Although it beats the alternative, "nobody wishes to be old."

Including William Ian Miller. A 65-year-old professor at the University of Michigan Law School, Miller still teaches, publishes and rides a motorcycle. But he's acutely aware of aching joints, "sags and flaccidities." He has also noticed a marked decline in "memory, processing speed, sensory acuity and the capacity to focus."

In "Losing It," Miller rages against the dying of the light. Drawing on ancient history and literature, he provides a mordantly witty and deadly serious meditation on growing old - and what it means to act your age.

Miller is contemptuous of the adherents of the relatively new field of positive psychology, who seem intent on "imposing on their doddering subjects their own irrational propensity to see an empty glass as three quarters full."

Old age, he acknowledges, can offer "the modest pleasure" of having gotten through it all - and no longer yearning for "an eternity of repeats, comeliness restored, all neurons firing and nether regions functioning."

And there is some benefit from preferring "rosy error" to "the depressing truth."

Nonetheless, he insists, with a characteristic curmudgeonly candor, that redefining debilities as rational adaptations - old people stop learning new things because they prefer to spend their time on intimate interpersonal relationships - is "frustrating and tiresome."

Piling on, so to speak, Miller reminds us of "the dim prospect" that anything we say or do will be remembered. No one, he writes, captured the "evanescence of fame and glory" better than Henry of Huntingdon, a 12th century archdeacon. Although the kings and dukes of his age seemed to be renowned, Henry asked whether in a century any of them would be spoken of "any more than his horse or ass." And, Miller adds, the same fate applied to Henry himself.

Even if death is, in this sense, depressingly democratic, Miller recommends going out in style. In the 21st century, he laments, a "glorious death" has become more difficult to imagine (or achieve) than in ancient times - and most of us are reduced to hoping instead for "a good death."

Although the final departure is often sudden or messy, it might help to prepare some famous last words (lest you suffer the fate of Pancho Villa, who exclaimed, "Don't let it end like this, tell them I said something"). More desirable, of course, is to combine words and deeds, as did Todd Beamer, a passenger on United Flight 93 on September 11, 2001, with "Let's roll."

Hoping that he won't lose more of "it" than he already has, Miller, the academic traditionalist, fantasizes about going out as a suicide bomber at (a trendy) cultural studies conference. Or making a few ironic remarks, drawing up his feet, in the presence of his children and his grandchildren, and taking his last breath.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.