

# THE MADNESS OF THE KING

Scholars, doctors, and performers have long questioned the spark of “madness” that brings King Lear to the heath in the middle of the storm. Just about every psychiatric diagnosis has been lobbed at this moment: bipolar disorder, acute psychosis, organic brain syndrome, and involuntional melancholia to name a few. But the most common theory of our modern age is that the king is suffering from the onset of dementia.

In Shakespeare’s day, life expectancy averaged 35 years—yet we meet King Lear in his 80<sup>th</sup> year on the planet. He rages on the heath with the strength and power of a young monarch, heaving himself through the rain for control of his faculties and the world around him. While he still has some hold on his memories and bodily autonomy, he struggles with the disorientation of time and space, impaired judgment, and powerful mood swings. His personality begins to shift as he wrestles with his thoughts—the abstract imagination of his retirement years and the reality of his relationships with his daughters causing feelings of confusion, sadness, and shame.

**What is the cause of Lear’s madness?  
We leave that for you to decide.**

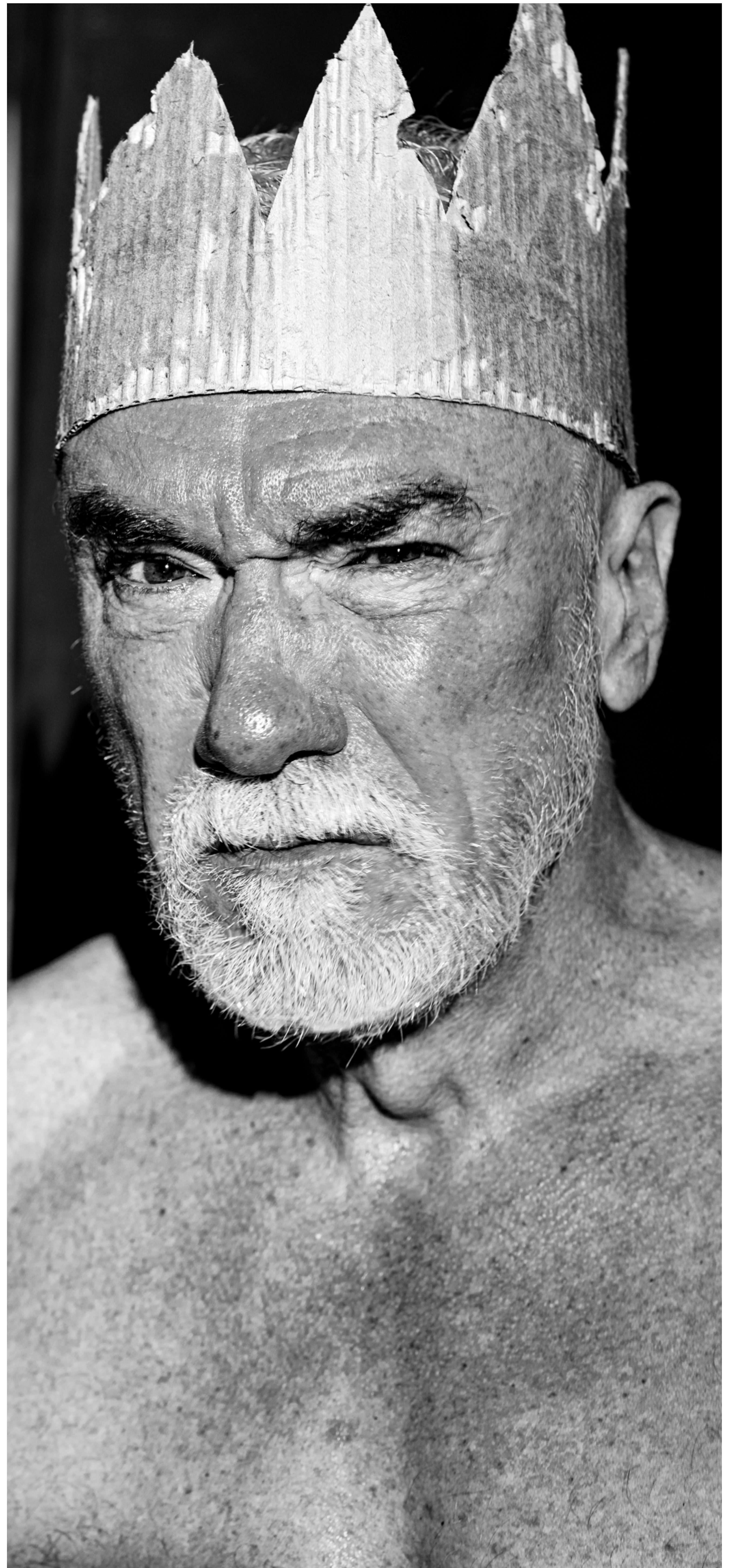
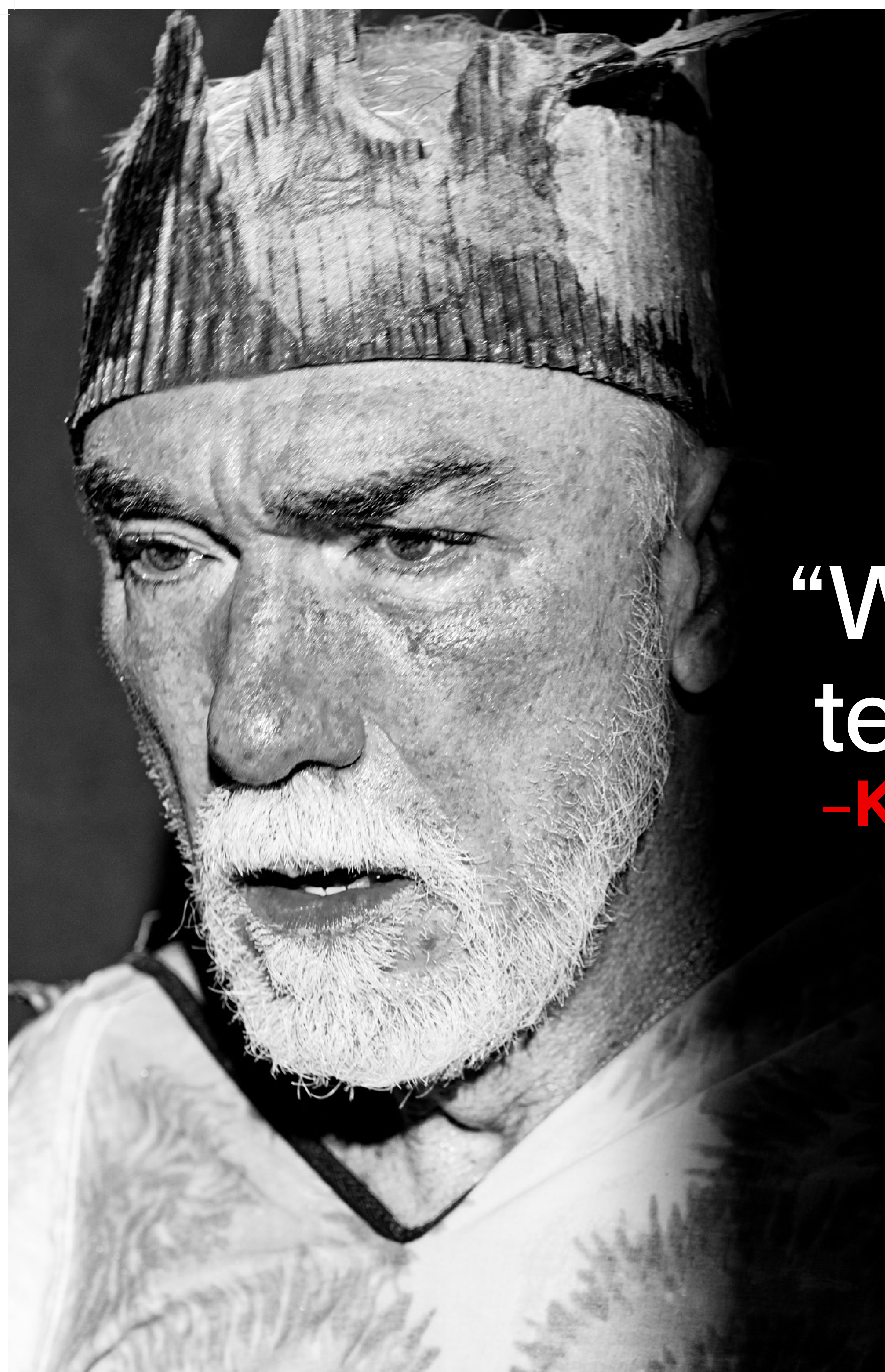


Photo of Patrick Page by Patric Shaw.





“Who is it that can  
tell me who I am?”  
—**KING LEAR**, act 1, scene 4

Photo of Patrick Page by Patric Shaw.

As humans, we rely on our memory for everything—muscle memory to guide us through our days, memories of our loved ones to bring us joy, memories of pain to remind us of the things we shouldn’t do again. We test our memories with puzzles and games, we fortify them with photos and videos. We trust our memories to be truthful, to remind us of who we are, where we’ve been, and where we intend to go.

But memory is notoriously fickle—it is often faulty and, as we age, it

becomes more and more fleeting. So what happens when a powerful mind suddenly becomes weak? What does it feel like to lose control of your memory? Anger and frustration, sorrow and confusion coalesce into the hellscape of a war-torn mind. King Lear’s howls upon the heath are not the cries of a madman, they are the call of a man adrift within the sea of his own mind.

What does it feel like to forget? And, perhaps most haunting, what does it feel like to be forgotten?