

The last word

by [Jean Janzen](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue

And who is this young stripling beside you,
Uncle George bellows from his hospital bed
in Chicago, untamed city of wind and soot.
His white hair in a tousle, he sits up,
surveys us, this man who terrified me
as a child with his fiery preaching.

Young marrieds in the '50s, we stand beside
his rumpled bed above the traffic
on Michigan Avenue, sirens echoing.
In this city my husband is studying
the body's diseases while I read *Hamlet*
and *King Lear*, both of us seeking cures.

Lear cries "Howl, howl, howl!"
Surgeon enters with his sharpest knife,
pours medicine that kills before it heals.
No rescue without nakedness, Shakespeare writes,
Lear fumbling the button at Cordelia's throat,
all of us leaning into the final word, *mercy*.