

**Act IV, Scene vi**

**Fields near Dover**

*Enter GLOUCESTER and EDGAR dressed like a peasant*

GLOUCESTER  
When shall we come to th' top of that same hill?

"that same hill" – i.e. the hill they had been talking about (i.e. to Dover Cliff)

EDGAR  
You do climb up it now. Look how we labor.

"You do climb up it now" – In fact, they do *not* climb up it now. They are in a field near Dover, but they are nowhere near a cliff's edge, and Edgar is certainly not about to allow Gloucester to commit suicide. He is, however, going to allow Gloucester to *think* that he is killing himself. This might seem to be some kind of a cruel trick Edgar is playing—as though he were repaying Gloucester for falsely proclaiming his son an outlaw. But that is not the case. For Edgar, though he is not yet aware that his bastard brother has engineered these awful circumstances, will not believe that Gloucester would have acted against his own son out of malice—that he would have to've been deceived by *someone*—and will do what he can to take care of the old man now. But note that Edgar will not only take care. He will seek also to mentor his father—just as he, along with Kent and the Fool, sought to mentor Lear.

GLOUCESTER  
Methinks the ground is even.

EDGAR  
Horrible steep.  
Hark, do you hear the sea?

GLOUCESTER  
No, truly.

EDGAR  
Why, then, your other senses grow imperfect  
By your eyes' anguish.

"By your eyes anguish" = *because of the pain of your eyes*

GLOUCESTER  
So may it be, indeed.  
Methinks thy voice is alter'd, and thou speak'st  
In better phrase and matter than thou didst.

"In better phrase and matter" = *with better words and more sense*. (Edgar appears to have let his Poor Tom character slip, presumably because his real focus is on caring for Gloucester.)

EDGAR  
You're much deceiv'd. In nothing am I chang'd  
But in my garments.

GLOUCESTER  
Methinks you're better spoken.

EDGAR

Come on, sir. Here's the place. Stand still. How fearful  
And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!  
The crows and choughs that wing the midway air  
Show scarce so gross as beetles. Halfway down  
Hangs one that gathers sampire. Dreadful trade!  
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.  
The fishermen that walk upon the beach  
Appear like mice, and yond tall anchoring bark  
Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy  
Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge  
That on th' un-number'd idle pebbles chafes  
Cannot be heard so high. I'll look no more,  
Lest my brain turn and the deficient sight  
Topple down headlong.

"choughs" = *jackdaws* (a species of bird; the word is pronounced as *chuffs*)

"that wing the midway air" = *in flight halfway between here and the beach below*

"Show scarce so gross" = *seem hardly as large*

"Halfway down ... Dreadful trade" = *Halfway up the cliff's face someone has climbed and is gathering "sampire" from the rocks (sampire is a herb used in pickling). A dangerous occupation, truly*

"yond tall anchoring bark" = *that ("yond") tall ship ("bark") anchored out there*

"Diminish'd to ... a buoy" – i.e. The tall ship seems as though it has been reduced to the size of her cock-boat (a rowboat), and the cock-boat itself seems the size of a buoy.

"murmuring surge ... so high" = *sounds made by the waves that wash over (chafe) the uncountable, unmoving pebbles cannot be heard (because the men are too high above the beach)*

"Lest my ... down headlong" = *for fear that my mind will go giddy and my sight fail, so that I overbalance and fall down headfirst*

**By his description of the world below, Edgar provides Gloucester with what we might call the gods'-eye view—the big picture. This is *one* perspective that we do not always have a chance to make use of, as we must spend most of our waking hours mired in the details of our days. Some of us might suspect we are in forests, but we can't be sure because there are so many trees obstructing our vision!**

GLOUCESTER

Set me where you stand.

EDGAR

Give me your hand. You are now within a foot  
Of the extreme verge. For all beneath the moon  
Would I not leap upright.

**For the moment, recall that back in Gloucester's castle, when Lear was close to insanity, Regan reminded him that he was on the "very verge of [nature's] confine." And of course he fell—not to his death, as it turns out, but to insanity, which is a *kind* of death.**

GLOUCESTER

Let go my hand.

Here, friend, 's another purse, in it a jewel  
Well worth a poor man's taking. Fairies and gods  
Prosper it with thee! Go thou farther off.  
Bid me farewell, and let me hear thee going.

"Fairies and gods / Prosper it with thee" – i.e. Gloucester wishes Poor Tom well, saying that he hopes that good fortune will bring more jewels his way.

EDGAR

Now fare ye well, good sir.

GLOUCESTER

With all my heart.

EDGAR

[*Aside*] Why I do trifle thus with his despair  
Is done to cure it.

"Why I ... cure it" – *The reason I (seem to) toy with him in his desperate state is to cure this suicidal impulse in him*

GLOUCESTER

[*Kneeling*] O you mighty gods!  
This world I do renounce, and in your sights  
Shake patiently my great affliction off.  
If I could bear it longer and not fall  
To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,  
My snuff and loathed part of nature should  
Burn itself out. If Edgar live, O bless him!  
Now, fellow, fare thee well.

*He falls forward*

"renounce" = *give up; abandon*

"Shake patiently my affliction off" = *with patience relieve myself of suffering. Note the dramatic irony of Gloucester's use of the word "patiently." To be truly patient is to exercise the heroic virtue of perseverance—to endure "affliction." For Gloucester to say that he wishes to patiently stop enduring is a contradiction.*

"fall / To quarrel with" = *come to rebel against*

"opposeless" = *irresistible*

"My snuff ... itself out" = *the last remains ("snuff" = the smoldering wick of a candle) of my hateful ("loathed") life ("part of nature") would wear out naturally*

"He falls forward" – And of course falls nowhere. In performance, this moment is a curious one. For many viewers, it is fraught with contradictory emotions. If we rightly feel sympathy for Gloucester, we will feel something like his despair, and we may feel the fear of his falling when he is at the height of his goodbye prayer. And when Gloucester does *not* fall (as of course he cannot), we may feel relief that his suicide has been thwarted, or if we are of a different turn of mind we may feel sad for him that he must continue to dwell in his grief. On top of this, we may simply laugh—for Gloucester's "fall" is often (whether rightly or wrongly, and not always) played as a comic gag—and then, having laughed, immediately feel guilty for having been the sort of cruel people who would "trifle with his despair."

We will look at three directors' treatment of this moment. Two of them play it as a gag. One does not. Before we see them, however, consider how *you* would direct it. Would you play it for laughs or for pathos? And how would you justify your choice.

EDGAR

Gone, sir. Farewell.  
[*Aside*] And yet I know not how conceit may rob  
The treasury of life when life itself  
Yields to the theft. Had he been where he thought  
By this had thought been past. Alive or dead?  
[*Aloud*] Ho, you sir! Friend! Hear you, sir! Speak!  
[*Aside*] Thus might he pass indeed. Yet he revives.  
[*Aloud*] What are you, sir?

"conceit" = *imagination*

"treasury" = *storehouse*

"Yields" = *consents*

"thought had been past" = *he would not be capable of any more thought*

"And yet ... been past" – Edgar fears that Gloucester's belief that he was actually falling from the cliff top might actually have been enough to kill him (i.e. by heart attack).

"Ho, you sir!" – Edgar now adopts a new character. He pretends to be a peasant on the beach at the base of the cliff and that he has just witnessed the old man's fall.

GLOUCESTER

Away, and let me die.

EDGAR

Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air,  
So many fathom down precipitating,  
Thou'dst shiver'd like an egg. But thou dost breathe,  
Hast heavy substance, bleed'st not, speak'st, art sound.  
Ten masts at each make not the altitude  
Which thou hast perpendicularly fell.  
Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again.

"Hadst thou ... feathers, air" = *if you had been made of anything ("aught") other than spider threads ("gossamer") or feathers or air*

"So many fathom down precipitating" = *falling down so many fathoms. (A fathom is equal to six feet [nearly two meters]. It is a unit of measurement normally applied to depths of water bodies.)*

"Thou'dst shiver'd" = *you would have shattered*

"heavy" = *solid*

"sound" – i.e. *no bones are broken*

"Ten masts ... perpendicularly fell" = *The masts of ten ships, one on top of the other, would not equal the height from which you have fallen straight down*

"Thy life's a miracle" – Superficially, Edgar means that Gloucester's having survived the fall is miraculous. His more pointed meaning, however, is that Gloucester's life itself, his very existence, is a miracle—as is everyone's life, come to that. The gods have given humans their miraculous beings. Or we might say that the gods have *loaned* lives to humans (think back to Lear's meditation on the animals' lendings to us and the idea of ephemerality, of fleeting temporariness, that those lendings suggest). But whether our lives are given to us or are on loan, they come from the gods, and we must not, Edgar implies, scant the gods' courtesy. They, not we, are the ones who decide when our lives are over—just as, incidentally, the gods, not kings, are the ones to decide when kings shall retire. Among his other presumptuous actions in the play's first scene, consider that Lear's *greatest* presumption may be in his forsaking of the throne without first checking to see how the gods would feel about it. Thus we see what Edgar's plan has been in his trifling with Gloucester's despair. It has been to teach him this fundamental truth: the gods do *not* "kill us for their sport." They intend, rather, that we should live out our "allotted span of insect hours" (Christopher Fry) in humility, with perseverance and awareness.

At this point, as well, note the difference between the falls that Lear and Gloucester experience. Earlier Lear is said to be on the "verge of [nature's] confine," and Regan and Goneril tip him over the edge with the intention, ultimately, of killing him (the suggestion is not too extreme). Gloucester's fall is both the same and different in that he too is tipped over the edge by his own child, but Edgar's intention is not to kill his father. It is to bring him back to life.

GLOUCESTER

But have I fall'n, or no?

EDGAR

From the dread summit of this chalky bourn.  
Look up a-height. The shrill-gorg'd lark so far  
Cannot be seen or heard. Do but look up.

"dread" = *fearsome*

"chalky bourn" – i.e. the boundary ("bourn") of the sea made by the chalk cliffs of Dover

"a-height" = *on high*

At the alleged ledge of the cliff, Edgar had painted for Gloucester a picture of the gods'-eye view. Now on the would-be beach, he offers the opposite picture, the scene from a mere man's point of view. Taken together, Edgar's scene paintings are examples of the inversion and changing-perspectives motifs.

GLOUCESTER

Alack, I have no eyes.  
Is wretchedness depriv'd that benefit  
To end itself by death? 'Twas yet some comfort  
When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage  
And frustrate his proud will.

"'Twas yet" = *it had always been*

"When misery ... proud will" = *When a person in despair could trick/overcome the oppression of a tyrant (in this case, life itself) and "frustrate" life (by committing suicide)*

EDGAR

Give me your arm.  
Up. So. How is't? Feel you your legs? You stand.

"Feel you" = *have you any feeling in*

GLOUCESTER

Too well, too well.

EDGAR

This is above all strangeness.  
Upon the crown o' th' cliff, what thing was that  
Which parted from you?

"above all strangeness" = *the strangest thing*

"parted" = *departed*

GLOUCESTER

A poor unfortunate beggar.

EDGAR

As I stood here below, methought his eyes  
Were two full moons. He had a thousand noses,  
Horns whelk'd and wav'd like the enridged sea.  
It was some fiend. Therefore, thou happy father,  
Think that the clearest gods, who make them honors  
Of men's impossibilities, have preserv'd thee.

"methought" = *I thought*

"whelk'd" = *twisted*

"enridged" = *furrowed*

"thou happy father" = *you lucky old man*. (Edgar's addressing Gloucester as "father" is deliberately ambiguous. The word *father* can be used as a general expression of respect for one's senior, whether he is actually the speaker's father or not.)

"clearest" = *most righteous*

"make them ... impossibilities" = *achieve honor by performing actions that are impossible for humans* (such as sparing the life of one who falls from the top of the cliff at Dover)

GLOUCESTER

I do remember now. Henceforth I'll bear  
Affliction till it do cry out itself  
"Enough, enough," and die. That thing you speak of,  
I took it for a man. Often 'twould say  
"The fiend, the fiend." He led me to that place.

"Henceforth I'll ... and die" = *From now on ("henceforth") I'll endure the pains and sorrows ("affliction") of life until affliction itself (which presumably is sent by the gods) sees that I have borne enough and allows me to die a natural death*

"Often 'twould say / 'The fiend, the fiend'" – Gloucester concludes that the raving of Poor Tom, his naming of the demons inside him, was proof that he (Gloucester) must have been tricked into attempting suicide. This idea is consistent with Tom's earlier account (during the storm) of all that demons have done to try to persuade him to destroy himself.

EDGAR

Bear free and patient thoughts. But who comes here?

"free" – i.e. free from guilt or self-reproach

*Enter LEAR fantastically dressed with wild flowers*

"fantastically dressed" – i.e. dressed as though he were a character in a fantasy

The safer sense will ne'er accommodate  
His master thus.

"The safer ... master thus" = *A man in his right mind would never appear like this*

Lear has been absent for a relatively long period. On reappearing, he is seen to be thoroughly insane. He is now prone to hallucinations and his lines (in which, generally, he styles himself still a king) seem often to be disconnected. But as Edgar will observe, Lear's speeches are "matter and impertinency mix'd" (a blend of sense and nonsense). And indeed, some of the play's most significant observations about human nature and the world's workings are expressed in the mad king's words.

LEAR  
No, they cannot touch me for coining. I am the king himself.

"they cannot ... king himself" = *they* (the authorities) *cannot arrest* ("touch") *me for minting/counterfeiting money* ("coining"—which was a king's right), *for I am the king*

EDGAR  
O thou side-piercing sight!

"thou side-piercing sight" = *you heart-breaking sight*. (This sight of King Lear insane and wandering alone is no less painful to Edgar than was the first sight of his blinded father. That Edgar calls it a "side-piercing sight" is another suggestion of his function as a Christ figure, for Christ is said to have had his side pierced by a Roman soldier during the crucifixion.)

LEAR  
Nature's above art in that respect. There's your press money. That fellow handles his bow like a crow keeper. Draw me a clothier's yard. Look, look, a mouse! Peace, peace. This piece of toasted cheese will do't. There's my gauntlet. I'll prove it on a giant. Bring up the brown bills. O well flown, bird! I' the clout, i' the clout. Hewgh! Give the word.

"Nature's above art in that respect" = *a born king can never lose his natural rights*

"press money" – i.e. money paid to recruits when they were impressed (forcibly enlisted) into the army

"crow keeper" = *scarecrow*

"Draw me a clothier's yard" = *Give me a yard-long arrow* (i.e. a yard as defined by a "clothier," a cloth merchant)

"Look, look ... will do't" – The mouse that Lear sees is probably imaginary, as is the piece of cheese with which he would feed it. **Lear's action is important for its suggestion of what he now knows to be the proper relationship between a large (even godlike) being and a little (manlike) wretch of a being: the greater *must* care for the lesser.**

"gauntlet" – soldier's glove (which he throws down in front of someone that he wishes to challenge to a fight)

"prove it on" = *defend myself/my case against*

"Bring up the brown bills" = *Call up the soldiers armed with pikes* (which were painted brown to prevent rusting)

"well flown bird" – Lear praises the shooting of the arrow with the falconer's call of approval to his hawk.

"i' th' clout" = *right in the center of the target*

"Hewgh!" – Lear imitates the sound of the arrow flying towards its target.

"Give the word" = *Give me the password*

EDGAR  
Sweet marjoram.

"Sweet marjoram" – "Sweet marjoram" (Edgar's "password") is an herb that was said to help heal diseases of the brain.

LEAR  
Pass.

GLOUCESTER  
I know that voice.

LEAR  
Ha! Goneril, with a white beard! They flatter'd me like a dog and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say "ay" and "no" to every thing that I said! "Ay" and "no" too was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em. There I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words. They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie. I am not ague-proof.

"Goneril, with a white bear" – Still obsessed with his daughters' cruelty, Lear mistakes Gloucester for Goneril.

"flatter'd me like a dog" = *gave me flattery in the way that a dog fawns over its master*

"told me ... were there" = *said that I had white whiskers (representative of wisdom) even before ("ere") I had any black whiskers (i.e. when I was no wiser than a boy, who is unable to grow a beard at all)*

"To say 'ay' and 'no' ... no good divinity" = *To say yes or no to everything to which I wanted them to say yes or no, this was not good theology (i.e. was poor policy)*

"once" = *on one occasion*

"peace at my bidding" = *be silent at my command*

"there I found 'em" = *then I learned what they (the flatterers) are really like*

"There I smelt 'em out" – **Note the changing-perspectives motif. Where earlier Lear could not see the truth of Goneril and Regan, he could later smell them out. This is one way in which he learns to "see better."**

"Go to" = *it's true*

"I am not ague-proof" = *I am not immune to a feverish cold (an "ague").*

**In effect, Lear, for all his imagined kingliness, says that he is no more than a man—one who, like other men, may catch cold. This, Shakespeare seems to say, is the starting point for anyone who chooses to see his place in the order of the universe. Recall that this is part of the mission for many tragic heroes: to be divested of their hubris so that they may learn their true nature and their place in the true order of the universe. More of Lear's lines to follow suggest his growing awareness of the universe in which *he* lives. But note that his understanding is a dark one, informed by cynicism, contempt, and despair. And note too that Lear's wisdom has not fully ripened by the point of this scene. He still has some journey to go.**

GLOUCESTER  
The trick of that voice I do well remember.  
Is 't not the king?

"trick" = *inflection (vocal and/or verbal qualities)*

LEAR

Ay, every inch a king.  
When I do stare, see how the subject quakes.  
I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause? Adultery?  
Thou shalt not die. Die for adultery? No.  
The wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly  
Does lecher in my sight.  
Let copulation thrive. For Gloucester's bastard son  
Was kinder to his father than my daughters  
Got 'tween the lawful sheets. To't, luxury, pell-mell!  
For I lack soldiers. Behold yond simpering dame,  
Whose face between her forks presages snow,  
That minces virtue and does shake the head  
To hear of pleasure's name.  
The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't  
With a more riotous appetite.  
Down from the waist they are centaurs,  
Though women all above.  
But to the girdle do the gods inherit.  
Beneath is all the fiend's. There's hell. There's darkness.  
There is the sulphurous pit—burning, scalding,  
Stench, consumption—fie, fie, fie! Pah, pah!  
Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary,  
To sweeten my imagination.  
There's money for thee.

GLOUCESTER

O let me kiss that hand!

LEAR

Let me wipe it first. It smells of mortality.

"every inch a king" – There is pun here. **Can you spot it?**

"cause" = *offense*

"goes to't" = *enjoys it* (i.e. copulation)

"lecher" = *copulate*. (Though used here as a verb, the word *lecher* is normally a noun that refers to a person given to sexual impropriety.)

"kinder" = *more natural and more loving*. (Lear knows nothing of Edmund's treachery. His line, therefore, is an example of dramatic irony.)

"Got 'tween the lawful sheets" = *begotten* (i.e. given birth to) *in wedlock* ("lawful sheets" = *sheets of a marriage bed, not a bed of lust*)

"luxury" = *lustfulness; promiscuity*

"pell-mell" = *in haste and confusion; without concern for proper order or procedure*

"For I lack soldiers" – Lear's logic seems to be that if he, the king, will "let copulation thrive," then he can provide himself with an army.

"simpering" = *smiling* (especially in a silly or affected way)

"Whose face between her forks presages snow" = *Who looks as if she is chaste (virginal)—whose face foretells ("presages") that between her legs ("forks") is a temperature as cold as snow* (i.e. she seems not lustful)

"That minces virtue and does shake the head" = *who pretends to be scrupulously (mincingly) moral and gives shakes of her head* (that would suggest embarrassment or disapproval)

"To hear of pleasure's name" = *even to hear of sexual matters*

"fitchew" = *polecat*. (The word *fitchew* was often used to describe prostitutes.)

"soiled horse" = *horse over-fed with spring grass* (and therefore frisky)

"Behold yond ... riotous appetite" – i.e. The seemingly sweet young girl is a deceiver. She is just as sexually improper as any animal in heat.

"centaurs" – mythical creatures that were half-human (as far as the waist) and half-horse; they were notoriously lecherous

"But to the girdle do the gods inherit" = *Only the top half of a woman's body belongs to the gods*

"Beneath is all the fiend's" = *The lower half of her body belongs to a demon*

"sulphurous pit" – One feature of hell, according to traditional descriptions, is a pit of burning sulphur.

"consumption" = *destruction*

"civet" = *perfume*

"apothecary" = *chemist/druggist* (Here, Lear addresses Gloucester as the "apothecary.")

**If Lear speaks of women generally as sexually overwrought deceivers, his belief is borne of his encounter with Goneril and Regan. But judging by Shakespeare's characterization of women overall (in various works), we would not say that he holds with Lear's current conception of female nature. Lear's perspective in this matter, plainly, is way off! And his speech here should stand as an indication that he still has some learning to do. For all of his insightful commentary in the scene broadly, he has not arrived at "the palace of wisdom" (William Blake).**

**Note that Lear's speech includes a number of half-lines. These do not so much create dramatic tension (the reason suggested for some half-lines noted elsewhere) as they disrupt the rhythm of Lear's language and reinforce a sense of his mental incoherence.**



GLOUCESTER  
O ruin'd piece of nature! This great world  
Shall so wear out to naught. Dost thou know me?

"This great world ... to naught" = *The whole universe will likewise (i.e. like this degraded version of his old master) collapse into nothing ("naught"). Note the apocalypse motif.*

LEAR  
I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squiny at  
me?  
No, do thy worst, blind Cupid! I'll not love.  
Read thou this challenge. Mark but the penning of it.

"squiny" = *squint*

"blind Cupid" – Cupid, the Roman god of love, was often depicted as blind. **And ironically, Lear himself, in the first scene, was blind to love when it came to Cordelia.**

"Mark but the penning of it" = *Just take a look at the way it is written*

GLOUCESTER  
Were all thy letters suns, I could not see.

EDGAR  
[*Aside*] I would not take this from report. It is,  
And my heart breaks at it.

"I would not ... It is" = *I would not believe this could happen, if someone were to tell me about having seen it. But it is happening*

LEAR  
Read.

GLOUCESTER  
What, with the case of eyes?

"with the case of eyes" = *with only sockets (where eyes should be)*

LEAR  
O ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head nor  
no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case,  
your purse in a light, yet you see how this world goes.

"O ho, are you there with me?" = *Ah, is that what you mean?*

"Your eyes ... a light" = *your eyes are in a serious condition (a "heavy case"), while your purse is light (i.e. because it has no money in it to give it weight)*

"how this world goes" = *what is happening in the world*

GLOUCESTER  
I see it feelingly.

"feelingly" – Gloucester means that he "sees" (in part) by using his sense of touch. But "feelingly" can also mean *with great emotion*. Therefore, he also means that he *emotionally* feels the pain of a cruel world.

**Both Gloucester's line here as well as Lear's lines before and after it emphasize the change-in-perspectives motif.**

LEAR  
What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes  
with no eyes. Look with thine ears. See how yond  
justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear.  
Change places and, handy-dandy, which is the justice,  
which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at  
a beggar?

"What, art mad?" = *What, are you insane? (a question that is nothing if not ironic, coming from Lear)*

"justice" = *magistrate*

"rails upon" = *harshly scolds*

"handy-dandy" = *take your pick*. (The phrase is derived from a guessing game in which an object is concealed in one hand.)

GLOUCESTER  
Ay, sir.

LEAR  
And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold  
The great image of authority.  
A dog's obey'd in office.  
Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!  
Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back.  
Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind  
For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.  
Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear.  
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,  
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks.  
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.  
None does offend. None, I say, none. I'll able 'em.  
Take that of me, my friend, who have the power  
To seal the accuser's lips. Get thee glass eyes,  
And, like a scurvy politician, seem  
To see the things thou dost not. —Now, now, now, now,  
Pull off my boots—harder, harder—so.

"the creature run from the cur" – i.e. the beggar running from the dog

"There thou ... in office" = *That* (i.e. the scene of a man running in fear from a dog) *is a perfect analogy for authority* (in the world of human beings). *Humans obey dogs in high places*

"Thou rascal beadle ... whipp'st her" – Lear hallucinates a beadle (i.e. a parish constable) to whom he calls out to stop whipping a woman for the crime of prostitution. The beadle, says Lear, should whip himself (i.e. "strip [his] own back") because he is just as guilty of sexual misbehavior as she is, for he wishes to "use her in that kind" (i.e. in the same way) too, though hypocritically he punishes her.

"usurer hangs the cozener" = *one criminal punishes another*

"usurer" = *loan shark*

"cozener" = *petty cheat*

"Through tatter'd ... pierce it" – i.e. Poor people (wearing "tatter'd clothes") are easily seen as guilty of crimes. Rich people have "robes and furr'd gowns" to hide their crimes. If you cover up the rich person's sins in armor made of gold, the spear of the law cannot hurt the sinner. But if a poor person's sins have no more than rags for armor, then a mere straw is all that is needed to injure the sinner.

"None does offend" – Well, it might be truer to say that *all do offend*. But if we are all offenders, what difference does it make? What need have we of laws and judges? We might as well call ourselves all innocent and leave it at that. Here, Lear's irony is invested with both a sense of hopelessness about human nature *and* a feeling of compassion for all humans, rich and poor alike, in their failings and frailties.

"I'll able 'em" = *I (the king) will vouch for the offenders* (and so exempt them from punishment)

"Take that of me" = *accept that promise from me*

"glass eyes" = *spectacles*. (Recall, incidentally, Gloucester's having said to Edmund "Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles"—this before he unjustly accused Edgar of villainy.)

"scurvy" = *diseased*

"seem / To see the things thou dost not" – i.e. Put on a disguise—in this case, eyeglasses—and pretend that you can see. You won't be any different from the other diseased deceivers of the world who pretend that *they* can see.

**Most striking in this speech is Lear's clear perception of humans' hypocrisy and the social injustice that they thrive on. At this point, his perspective on corrupted human nature takes in the big picture. In a sense, he is like Edgar describing to Gloucester the view from the top of Dover Cliff.**

EDGAR  
[*Aside*] O matter and impertinency mix'd!  
Reason in madness!

"O, matter ... in madness" – i.e. Lear's words have "matter" (weighted meaning) and "impertinency" (irrelevant details) at the same time.

LEAR  
If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.  
I know thee well enough. Thy name is Gloucester.  
Thou must be patient. We came crying hither.  
Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air  
We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee. Mark.

"If thou wilt weep my fortunes" = *if you wish to cry over my sorrows*

"We came crying hither" – i.e. Humans enter the world crying.

"wawl" = *wail*

"Mark" = *pay attention*

GLOUCESTER  
Alack, alack the day!

LEAR  
When we are born, we cry that we are come  
To this great stage of fools. —This' a good block!  
It were a delicate stratagem to shoe  
A troop of horse with felt. I'll put't in proof.  
And when I have stol'n upon these sons-in-law,  
Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!

*Enter GENTLEMAN with attendants*

GENTLEMAN  
O here he is! Lay hand upon him. Sir,  
Your most dear daughter—

LEAR  
No rescue? What, a prisoner? I am even  
The natural fool of fortune. Use me well.  
You shall have ransom. Let me have surgeons.  
I am cut to th' brains.

GENTLEMAN  
You shall have anything.

LEAR  
No seconds? All myself?  
Why, this would make a man a man of salt,  
To use his eyes for garden water pots,  
Ay, and laying autumn's dust. I will die bravely,  
Like a smug bridegroom. What! I will be jovial.  
Come, come, I am a king, my masters, know you that?

GENTLEMAN  
You are a royal one, and we obey you.

LEAR  
Then there's life in't. Come, and you get it, you shall get  
it by running. Sa, sa, sa, sa!

*Exit running. Attendants follow*

GENTLEMAN  
A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch,  
Past speaking of in a king! Thou hast one daughter,  
Who redeems nature from the general curse  
Which twain have brought her to.

"we cry that we are come" = *we weep to see that we have arrived*

"great stage of fools" – Shakespeare (like other playwrights of this time) often compares human experience to the work of actors on stages, emphasizing the illusory and temporary nature of human life.

"This' a good block" = *This is a well-made hat*

"It were a delicate stratagem" = *it would be a clever ploy*

"to shoe / A troop of horse with felt" = *to put felt* (Lear is probably inspired by the "good block" made of felt cloth) *on the shoes of military horses* (in order to silently approach one's enemies)

"put't in proof" = *make a trial of it*

"stol'n upon" = *sneaked up on*

"The natural fool of fortune" = *born for fortune to make a fool of me*

"cut to th' brains" = *vexed to madness*. (Lear calls for surgeons to tend to an imaginary head wound.)

"seconds" = *supporters*

"a man of salt" – i.e. of salt tears

"smug" = *neatly dressed*

"there's life in't" = *things are not desperate yet*

"and you get it, you shall get it by running" = *if you wish to get it (i.e. the ransom), you must do so by chasing*

"Sa, sa, sa, sa" – a hunting cry used to encourage hounds

"A sight ... a king" – i.e. To see such mental distress is heartbreaking enough in the lowest ("meanest") wretch. But it is unspeakably sad ("past speaking of") when it is seen in a king.

**Note that the Gentleman's observation makes a touch to Edgar's earlier lines "When we our betters see bearing our woes, / We scarcely think our miseries our foes" and "How light and portable my pain seems now, / When that which makes me bend makes the king bow."**

"Thou" – The Gentleman speaks in apostrophe to the departed Lear

"general" = *universal*

"twain" = *two others*

"her" – i.e. (human) nature

EDGAR  
Hail, gentle sir.

GENTLEMAN  
Sir, speed you. What's your will?

"speed you" = *may God prosper you* (a common greeting)  
"What's your will?" = *What do you want?*

EDGAR  
Do you hear aught, sir, of a battle toward?

"aught" = *anything*  
"toward" = *that is going to happen*

GENTLEMAN  
Most sure and vulgar. Every one hears that  
Which can distinguish sound.

"sure and vulgar" = *certain and commonly known*  
"Which" = *who*  
"distinguish sound" = *understand what is being said*

EDGAR  
But, by your favor,  
How near's the other army?

"the other army" – i.e. that of Goneril and Regan

GENTLEMAN  
Near and on speedy foot. The main descry  
Stands on the hourly thought.

"on speedy foot" = *approaching rapidly*  
"The main ... hourly thought" = *We expect to catch sight of the main body of the army at any hour*

EDGAR  
I thank you, sir. That's all.

GENTLEMAN  
Though that the queen on special cause is here,  
Her army is mov'd on.

"on special cause" = *for a particular reason*

EDGAR  
I thank you, sir.

*Exit GENTLEMAN*

GLOUCESTER  
You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me.  
Let not my worser spirit tempt me again  
To die before you please!

"take my breath from me" – Gloucester is not asking the gods to "take [his] breath." Rather, he is saying that it must be the gods who decide when his life should end, not himself.

"Let not ... you please" = *Do not allow my bad angel to tempt me anymore to commit suicide*

EDGAR  
Well pray you, father.

"well pray you" = *you pray well* (i.e. his intention is good)

GLOUCESTER  
Now, good sir, what are you?

EDGAR  
A most poor man, made tame to fortune's blows,  
Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,  
Am pregnant to good pity. Give me your hand.  
I'll lead you to some biding.

"A most ... good pity" = *I am a poor fellow who has become submissive to the assaults of fortune and has been instructed by his own sadness. And this sadness has made me full of ("pregnant to") pity (for others who likewise suffer).*

"biding" = *a place to rest*

**Note that Edgar describes himself as one who, in his way, has taken the "physic" that Lear, in the storm, had recommended to the "pomp" of the world. The first-born of an earl, Edgar has been wealthy and privileged (though not necessarily a *proud* young man, for we have no real knowledge of his nature and behavior before his being deceived by Edmund and forced to flee his home), but he has been made to stand in the company of "poor naked wretches." And this has taught him how to care for others—how, therefore, to "show the heavens more just."**

GLOUCESTER  
Hearty thanks.  
The bounty and the benison of heaven  
To boot and boot!

"The bounty ... to boot" = *May the generosity ("bounty") and blessing ("benison") of the gods come to reward you in addition ("to boot") to my thanks*

*Enter OSWALD*

OSWALD  
A proclaim'd prize! Most happy!  
That eyeless head of thine was first fram'd flesh  
To raise my fortunes. Thou old unhappy traitor,  
Briefly thyself remember. The sword is out  
That must destroy thee.

"proclaim'd" – The word "proclaim'd," referring to that which has been announced, can refer to one who has been publicly declared an outlaw (recall that Edgar, on the run from Gloucester's hunters, had said "I am proclaim'd"), or it can refer to a more general assertion—in this case, to Regan's assurance to Oswald that a promotion would come to whoever finds and kills Gloucester.

"fram'd" = *made into*. (Oswald makes a dark joke, saying that Gloucester's function in being born a human was to make life better for Oswald.)

"thyself remember" = *think of your sins* (i.e. in order to make his peace with heaven before dying)

GLOUCESTER  
Now let thy friendly hand  
Put strength enough to't.

"Now let ... enough to't" – Plainly, Gloucester has not been wholly cured of his suicidal impulse, given that he is so eager for Oswald to kill him.

*EDGAR interposes*

"interposes" – i.e. stands between Gloucester and Oswald in order to protect his father

OSWALD  
Wherefore, bold peasant,  
Dar'st thou support a publish'd traitor? Hence,  
Lest that the infection of his fortune take  
Like hold on thee. Let go his arm.

"support" = *protect*

"publish'd" = *proclaimed*

"Hence ... on thee" = *Get away ("hence"), unless ("lest") you want the trouble coming to him to come to you too*

EDGAR  
Chi'll not let go, zir, without vurther 'casion.

OSWALD  
Let go, slave, or thou diest!

EDGAR  
Good gentleman, go your gait, and let poor volk pass.  
And 'chud ha' bin zwagger'd out of my life, 'twould not  
ha' bin zo long as 'tis by a vortnight. Nay, come not near  
th' old man. Keep out, che vor ye, or ise try whether  
your costard or my ballow be th' harder. Chi'll be plain  
with you.

OSWALD  
Out, dunghill!

EDGAR  
Chi'll pick your teeth, zir. Come, no matter vor your  
foins.

*They fight, and EDGAR knocks him down*

OSWALD  
Slave, thou hast slain me. Villain, take my purse.  
If ever thou wilt thrive, bury my body.  
And give the letters which thou find'st about me  
To Edmund Earl of Gloucester. Seek him out  
Upon the British party. O untimely death!  
Death!

*Dies*

EDGAR  
I know thee well. A serviceable villain,  
As duteous to the vices of thy mistress  
As badness would desire.

GLOUCESTER  
What, is he dead?

"Chi'll not let go ... no matter vor your foins" – Edgar now adopts yet another persona as he confronts Oswald (though why he does this is not entirely clear). The phonetic spelling of certain words is meant to suggest a peasant dialect. Edgar and Oswald's dialogue is paraphrased here.

**E:** I will not give up without further cause (i.e. *you must give me better reason to forsake the old man*)

**O:** Be gone, peasant, or you die!

**E:** Good sir, get you on your way ("*gait*") and let poor folks go past. If I could have been scared out of my life by swaggering like yours, I would never have lived so long—not even so long as a fortnight. No, don't come close to the old man. Stay away, or—I promise—I'll test which is harder, your head ("*costard*," a kind of apple) or my club ("*ballow*"). I'm telling you straight.

**O:** Get away, you who were born on a pile of manure!

**E:** I'll pick *your* teeth, sir. Come on! I don't care about your sword thrusts ("*foins*"). (Edgar seems to say that he scorns Oswald's weapon—a sword or perhaps a dagger—as no more frightening than a toothpick.)

"Upon" = *among*

"serviceable villain" = *rogue who will do any dishonorable job*

EDGAR

Sit you down, father. Rest you.  
Let's see these pockets. The letters that he speaks of  
May be my friends. He's dead. I am only sorry  
He had no other deathsman. Let us see.  
Leave, gentle wax, and, manners, blame us not.  
To know our enemies' minds, we'd rip their hearts.  
Their papers is more lawful.

[Reads] "Let our reciprocal vows be remember'd. You have many opportunities to cut him off. If your will want not, time and place will be fruitfully offer'd. There is nothing done if he return the conqueror. Then am I the prisoner and his bed my gaol, from the loathed warmth whereof deliver me, and supply the place for your labor. Your wife—so I would say—Affectionate servant, Goneril."

O indistinguish'd space of woman's will!  
A plot upon her virtuous husband's life.  
And the exchange my brother! Here, in the sands,  
Thee I'll rake up, the post unsanctifi'd  
Of murderous lechers, and in the mature time  
With this ungracious paper strike the sight  
Of the death-practis'd duke. For him 'tis well  
That of thy death and business I can tell.

GLOUCESTER

The king is mad. How stiff is my vile sense,  
That I stand up and have ingenious feeling  
Of my huge sorrows! Better I were distract.  
So should my thoughts be sever'd from my griefs,  
And woes by wrong imaginations lose  
The knowledge of themselves.

EDGAR

Give me your hand.

*Drum afar off*

Far off, methinks, I hear the beaten drum.  
Come, father, I'll bestow you with a friend.

*Exeunt*

"deathsman" = *executioner*

"Leave" = *by your leave* (i.e. with your permission). (Edgar breaks open the waxen seal on the letter.)

"our reciprocal vows" = *the pact we have made with each other*

"cut him off" = *kill him* (i.e. Albany)

"If your will want not" = *if you do not lack the will*

"fruitfully" = *plentifully*

"There is ... the conqueror" = *We shall have achieved nothing if he (Albany) returns victorious*

"gaol" – a British spelling of *jail*

"for" = *as a reward for*

"servant" = *lover*

"indistinguish'd space of woman's will" = *limitless range of a woman's lust* ("will," in this case)

"the exchange my brother" – i.e. Goneril will exchange the virtuous Albany's life for the love of Edmund.

"Here ... murderous lechers" – Speaking to the dead body of Oswald, Edgar says he will bury this "murderous" servant "in the sands" (of the beach) and leave the spot "unsanctified" (unblessed), as is appropriate for vicious self-servers such as he. Apparently Shakespeare has made a mistake in having Edgar say that he will bury Oswald's body in the sand, because this action is not actually taking place on the beach. The characters are still supposed to be in a field near Dover.

"in the mature time" = *when the time is ripe* (i.e. right)

"ungracious paper" = *wicked letter*

"death-practis'd duke" = *the duke whose death has been plotted*

"stiff" = *stubborn*

"vile sense" – Gloucester calls his sense "vile" (wicked) because it will not allow him to escape from his sorrow by relaxing into madness (as Lear has).

"ingenious" = *conscious*

"Better I ... themselves" = *I would be better off insane ("distract") so that I might lose consciousness of my sufferings in a world of illusions ("wrong imaginations")*

"the beaten drum" – i.e. the battle is approaching

"bestow" = *accommodate*