

Repeat by Elizabeth Hoyle (8ENG2)

The crowd was ironic. It troubled me that so many people would flock to see a place that, centuries ago, many would have dreaded seeing the inside of. I knew I certainly wouldn't be here if I had a choice, the Tower of London isn't exactly my idea of a fun day out. However, between the school, the history unit and my parents, I didn't.

The sounds of the crowd – of everyday life – seemed so wrong as they bounced off the walls of the courtyard. The bright colours of the tourist clothes also seemed out of place as they separated, moved and blended again as their owners walk around. The smells of cheap fast food; processed meats fried in god-knows-what permeated the air. Smell, sound and sight combined in a cacophony that assaulted in my senses. It was hard to believe that I am standing in the exact same spot as men who were doomed to die, centuries ago. It all seemed so far away.

As I stood in reverie, I noticed my school group ahead. Students were talking, laughing, daring each other to steal things from the gift shop, doing anything and everything except listening to the guide. I didn't understand how they could be so frivolous. Our single teacher was too busy trying to control the distracted mass to notice the one student left behind.

The student in question didn't care, really. They would find me eventually, and if it means that I get a few minutes peace from my peers, then I would gladly stay here for eternity.

Looking around, my eyes were inevitably drawn to the gallows. You wouldn't have thought that a pile of wooden planks and a rope could look ominous, but this structure certainly did. It loomed over the crowd, casting a shadow that seemed slightly too long for 1 o'clock, as if all the shadows were bending themselves towards this source of darkness.

I remembered a science lesson not too long ago, when Mr. Dunning had explained that gravity is the force that attracts two objects. If that was true, then there was a definite attraction between me and that pile of wood. I felt my feet pushing me forward, as if they had suddenly declared independence from my body. I was walking towards the gallows.

It was easy to imagine how a convicted criminal would have felt, treading this same path towards their death. I could feel the same twinge in my gut, just before fear flooded it. I heard the blood rushing in my ears, pulsing with my suddenly erratic heartbeat. I could taste a strange tang, my apprehension suddenly becoming edible.

I looked up, and realized with a start that I was standing barely an inch from the barricade surrounding the gallows; standing in its shadow, the air colder, the surroundings bleaker, my spirit dropping ever lower.

The fear swirling in my gut gave a particularly violent twinge. I had a strange desire to reach out, to feel the crumbling wood beneath my fingertips. It was a strange feeling and I was more than a little bit terrified.

I felt my arm extend. I could feel the muscles working: biceps straining to lift my arm, triceps extending and the muscles in my finger pushing as it too was raised. But even standing this close, with my arm stretched as far as it would go, I wasn't close enough to touch. Part of me was relieved, the other frustrated. It took me a moment to realize that my leg was lifting too, propelling me over the barricade.

At that point, I was at war with myself. I was trying to get myself over the barricade to touch the gallows, and trying to stop this, and walk away. I was bewildered and more than a little panicked at what was happening. It's one thing to have a strange notion, another thing to act upon it in this sort of manner.

My leg kept moving up and over the barricade, firmly planting itself upon the ground behind. It was closely followed by the other leg and before I knew it, I was standing behind the barricade. It was only a matter of time before the lazy guard noticed me and I was thrown out. Whatever happened now, it had to be done quickly.

At the first touch, my hand jumped back as though scalded. Immediately I felt my limbs slacken. The internal struggle ceased. I was in control again.

But the damage was done. I realized this as I looked around, wondering if anyone had noticed me. With my entire attention focused on the lump of wood directly in front of me, I hadn't noticed what was going on behind. Now, instead of the wild scrum of 21st century tourism, I was surrounded by men and women that looked like they were part of an historical re-enactment. Grubby children were scampering through the massive crowd, dressed in rags. Even grubbier adults stood, waiting patiently and smiling. At random intervals, carts pulled by bony horses stood selling meats and bread, the salesmen shouting to the crowd. A man dressed all over in black stands on the stage of the gallows, which are suddenly new, sturdy and ready to kill. At that point, I was only sure of one thing: this is not a re-enactment.

But there was something else; everyone seemed shorter, as if I was looking from a new perspective. My body felt strangely different, and there were things jangling in my mind that I couldn't make sense of. Thoughts I didn't believe, memories I shouldn't have. Memories of a woman, filthy streets, laughing children. And a murder.

The people below were looking at me. The man in black was calling me forward, and three fundamental truths hit me. One: I shouldn't be here. Two: somehow, impossibly, I am here. And three: I'm about to get a new understanding of how Middle Ages executions worked. First hand.

I was pushed up the stairs by forceful hands. Still struggling to process what was going on, I didn't hear what the executioner – my executioner – was saying, until I heard "Mr Cooper, you are convicted of murder, sentenced to be hung by the neck until dead. Do you wish to say anything?"

I just stared. How could I say anything? Not two hours ago, I had been walking off to yet another day of school. So instead of words, I let out a strangled whimper.

Then the noose was around my neck and the trapdoor prepared. It was all happening too quickly, wasn't time meant to slow down in situations like these?

I didn't feel the trapdoor opening, but the sudden jerk of my body as two forces clashed in a fatal dance was strong. Gravity pulled, and the rope held firm.

I couldn't see. Couldn't think. Most importantly, I couldn't breathe. As my entire body screamed at the lack of air, the pain of the rope chafing my neck seemed diminished, unimportant. And as the oxygen left my brain, so the world faded from my view...

The boy struggled. They always did. But he died in the end. They always do. It was always more fun with the children, to watch them struggle. And in this gaol, on my home ground, they were so easy to pull in. Humans are so good at destroying themselves, I just help them along a bit. Touch, walk, hang. Repeat.