

The Pardon

Tyburn Gallows, 1447

Slavish to the letter of the law or perhaps just plain
Malefic, the hangman refuses to return his due
And the gallowbirds—babe-naked, marked for

Quartering from Adam's apple to navel—scarcely
Dare meet each other's eye as the messenger
Spurs his nag back to town. Should they kick

Up a fuss? Demand their earthly goods, wood-soled
Shoes and shirts, the woolen hose holding each
Wearer's shape like a ghost? Thwarted, the mob

Rumbles, a faint thunder on the horizon...one felon
Takes his cue and strides off, rubbing at the roadmap
Inked upon his chest with an idle thumb. One sits

Poleaxed at the platform's edge; the Wheel has spun
Too fast to catch his breath. Laughing madly, two leap
Down to join their drunken friends while the last

Looks blinking around him, shaken awake to this
Shadow-dream—the rain-dark fields, glinting leaves,
Kingfisher and reeds of a high summer day—then

Stiffly, like an old man, begins his journey back.

ELLEN WEHLE