The Price

for Norman Dubie

A few of the living are vomiting red rinds
of the magistrate's forsaken tomatoes
into rain buckets while the parched dead
roam dispassionately and

—their many arms draped in black mourning—
disperse books with blank pages, ask
testaments, last visions, of their starving
neighbors.

And to think this is just a draught,
forgotten, only history.

Have you ever turned
from some news photo, a portrait, say,

of a handsome woman strangled,
the blue lips never finishing
their last sentence, an offer
of tomato soup or a single biscuit, perhaps?

Certainly, pockets of the near world
may insist on revealing themselves,
whether you wanted to watch or not.
her gesture may have annihilated
your concept of death. How tentative we feel about this:
The facts pile up around us like heads until all we can do
is inhabit our own survival.
If only rain would prove cleansing.
Everything begins moving away on its own, we’d like to think,
all meaning suicidal, beyond us, until something like quiet is achieved.
For instance, the quietude of a hundred rain buckets
left to leak in the daylight as they slip backwards out of our picturing. What is to take their place? This
is the question Emerson asked himself years after “Nature,” but only hours after his young son was cold in the grave. Surely the innocence of this death
need not concern us—history deeps closing us off from itself, or can’t we accept this?
Say we’ve imagined murdering the rich magistrate’s wife for all the reasons validating such a thing. Then what? We wake in a perverse stillness, gorged

on that quiet again, a moral all its own. An impotence.
The knife that jags an instant on your own windpipe. What we’ve imagined
is nothing more than mood music, a vengeance miming heaven.
But in time, the air turns discordant, winter comes in, and,
like gas rattling the throats of the poisoned, our own thoughts leave us, moving away, out over the buckets, the news photos, the stench. As if they have lives of their own. In tomorrow’s edition, a maniac rains bullets through the children.