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KEVIN CLARK

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.