

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.