

Bread and Water

for Bob Keeler

It sounds like a meal for prisoners,
for the condemned
gathered to share their last supper again.

No one to cater,
served by the youngest and rawest of trusties,
we eat the repast
rehearsing rituals of sweathouse and bath;
facing another six days under sentence of death.

We share the lone swallow and bite
as wards of the Church,
surviving another week's seizure and search,
purging our throats,
scrubbing the skin of the fruit from our teeth
with water in thimbles, and bread
broken like flayed, public flesh
of a prisoner culled by a crowd's holiday breath.

From the refectory, down the barred passage,
we file to our cells
to sleep with the feast, to wake for the walls
of commerce, our crassness.
The water, percolating through earth,
recharges our aquifers;
the bread, still sweet in the fasting mouth,
we hold as our manna until the next sabbath.

—Dennis Clark