

BLIND MAN TO THE HEALER

Jim Richards—Department of English

Sir, spare change? Well, then sit with me
if you have nothing to give. It's cool here
outside Zion's gate in the afternoon shade;
birdsong ascends from the Kidron; olive
groves soften the view of the mount. Oh,
I wasn't born blind, though I earn Caesar-heads
by saying so. I was once Herod's chief executioner—
soft word for what I did. I brought more heads
to my basket than Joe of Aramathaea
has brought to his purse. Then one day
in Galilee as I returned from fishing, I stopped
on the banks of the Jordan, sweet green
it was that day, and slow. A crowd
had gathered to hear a lunatic preach.
He stood ankle-deep, clad in camel's hair
and leather. Come from the wilderness,
he spoke of vipers, fruit, stones; he said
"the axe is at the root!" and threatened us with fire.
A true madman he was, dipping people
in the swirl, polluting the current with their sins.
Strange, but they did seem to come clean—
one man even white as a dove rising
out of the flow, his eyes clear as a child's.
I could never take off a head like his.
That day I started seeing things differently,
darker, I mean; I was going blind. Any light
caused me pain, even the glow of eyes
in the heads I cut off was too bright for me.
But the day they brought in that Baptist,
with his breath of locusts and honey, his wild hair,
I couldn't help but look at his eyes, long and hard.
They burned like fire, or something more painful
and pure. They were the last thing I ever saw.
Since then I take heads in the street; my eyes cold
and hard as coins. Go on, touch them and you'll see.