

Jericho

I didn't mean to stop. Believe me.
Mostly, I'd've kept right on.
The stony road to Jericho

is hazardous at any time.
A guy with saddlebags and samples
is asking for it really.

And, of course, a man well-bruised
has always been the bandits' ruse.
I had my good wife's admonitions

singing in my ears.
Keep on riding. Stop for no one.
But what I saw that day was different

and had me reining in my horse,
who likewise was a little spooked,
the cries inchoate at the start

before resolving into Hebrew.
I knew right then it would be hard;
and complicated too — those Jews

with all their wayward views
upon the god we share.
There's been some history between us

but, as for now, the man was naked,
his robe and all possessions gone.
They'd left some welts across his shoulders;

an ankle too was almost broken.
He gasped a story through his thanks.
Three robbers, young, with heavy clubs

and heavier demands,
a language that he didn't know
but understood the drift of.

He told it through his thickened vowels:
a sudden bout of violence; then
the silence of the road.

I patched him up with oil and wine,
some bandages I had by chance.
Continuing, without complaint,

he told me there'd been two before me
who'd managed not to notice.
In a hurry to the temple,

he winced and added dryly.
Of course, he caught my accent too
and maybe thought at first

I'd stopped to give a *coup de grace*
or steal his less-than-nothing.
But, no, for reasons that I then

and still don't understand,
I hoisted him up on my horse
and led it slowly to an inn.

We turned up just on dusk.
He'd groaned a little with the jolts
but, wearing now the robe I'd offered,

his dignity returned, almost.
At the inn I hired two rooms
and waved aside his promises.

Gratitude's a hard emotion.
Not wanting more of it, next morning
I had a tray sent to his room,

gave the keeper two denarii
and guaranteed the rest.
There's still some days to go, I said,

before he's fit to travel.

I swung into the saddle,
my wife's words with me still,

closer in but softer now.

I didn't leave him an address.
There's no point in prolonging things.

Our differences are deeper
than decencies and misadventure.
He'd be OK from there, I figured.

At best, among our own,
the two of us will find ourselves
a bit less simple in our givens.

And so I ride to Jericho
working on a form of words
my wife will understand.

