

**New Fiction by Michael
Carson: The Childhood of
Barabbas**



My first memories are of the hills outside Judea. A small

lizard, with a black stripe and black eyes, staring at me and I at it. I knew then if I looked away first, I would die, so I did not look away. It disappeared behind a rock, and I turned around, back toward the caves.

Antonius and Deborah appeared around this time. I see them clearly as I see that lizard. Antonius's arm, wrapped around Deborah's shoulder, pulled Deborah's close as they stepped down into the shadows. Her feet, bound with bloody cloth, felt for a rock that hurt them less. Once far enough into the black, they unbound the cloth from their hands and face and touched each other gently. Deborah sobbed. Antonius used the side of his thumb to pull her chin up near his and pressed his lips against the pale gray patch of skin beneath her eye.

These are not their real names. They don't have real names. They aren't real and they made me understand this as soon as they reconciled themselves to the fact that I would not keep away from them because I had nowhere to go. Outside the law no one is, said Antonius. How I was able to understand them is beyond me. Deborah imagined the caves conceived me, this gap in the earth, and the earth knows all languages all minds because it came before us and is inside us.

I enjoyed staring at their faces. They reminded me of the melting rocks far back into the caves tipped with beads of dark water. At first Antonius grew angry at me, cursed me when he found me watching Deborah sleep, the only time she removed the cloth. But I told him I had never known anything could be so beautiful.

Do you know what you look like? he asked.

I didn't know what he meant. I shook my head.

He laughed and threw a small rock down toward the far back of the cave and it fell and fell and made no noise because he

thought it didn't have a bottom, but I knew it did and heard it crack against itself somewhere far away and Deborah woke up with a start as if from a dream.

We lived together as we could for several years or months. They were dying but we were all dying. Antonius believed that those who behave as if they are dead are closer to God. He laughed sometimes when he said this and looked at me as if he were asking me a question. Deborah would only hug her chest as if trying to crush her own life out of her. I believed she was God and told her so and she told me you can't be God if you don't believe in Him and Antonius said maybe the little bastard is right, maybe that's exactly what God is.

Eventually the disease that ate their flesh ate it faster than it could reproduce itself and a sore on Antonius neck grew and grew. I believed it would burst and he would be saved but it stilled like a rock and interfered with his breathing and two days later he had become no more than a stone with blue eyes staring up at the stone milking water above us. Deborah screamed through the night, a curdled broken sound I have never heard before or since. I went to her and touched her back and she shuddered and stopped the noise at once. We looked at each for a long while until she told me to go away.

I found her at the bottom of the gorge the next morning. She had pushed Antonius's body off and threw herself after. She had little life in her but enormous strength. She could not reconcile herself to what the sun demanded. I arranged their graves in the crevasse where she had wanted to be, not in the caves, which she could never love, and covered them both with dirt and stones and a wreath of spiked plants.

That night, I searched for the rock Antonius threw down into the cave. It turned out not to be a rock at all but a small wooden coin with a wax image of Deborah before she had grown

beautiful. I thought to burn it but mastered my anger and placed it under the earth where their bodies lay. A snake eagle watched me. I screamed and cried and threw clumps of dirt until it flew away.

Days passed. Years. I'm not sure. I started to go down towards the side of the cliffs where the sun disappeared, to get water at the black lake. I didn't need it as I had the moisture from the rocks, but I liked seeing myself in the flat, sunlit expanse. The image of me would change shape, and I would touch it and it went away, blurred. The sunlight would begin to hurt my eyes. I would admire this pain in me, wonder if it was me, or another me, and I would not look away until the dark came alive with the sound of gray birds hidden inside the invisible.

One day in the colder months I climbed down from a vigil at Deborah's cliff and found shadows all around the lake's edge. I immediately fell to the earth in the manner of a lizard, as Antonius had instructed me. He said that the only other people who come to these hills are soldiers who would kill us in a heartbeat because we were outside the law, and we offended the law by merely existing. Thieves and murderers live here too, Deborah said. Thieves and murderers are just the inverse of soldiers, said Antonius. They would all disappear like smoke without the law. Deborah rolled her eyes and Antonius laughed.

Perfectly still, my chin against the warm earth, I watched the shadows descend into the water one by one, by turns, embracing a taller, gaunt shadow at the lake's center. They did this until the light turned the black water the color of blood. Then they climbed up onto monstrous jackal-like animals and disappeared into the further distance.

They returned the next day and the day after that. I crept closer at each appearance. On the fifth day, I saw the man in

middle of the lake clearly, his long raggedy beard and a calf skin on his towering, bony shoulders. I could see his eyes like those of that lizard from even that distance and his eyes did not look away from me even as he pulled yet another body from the water.

I would not look away. I stood and walked the last hundred or so meters, through the crowd of ugly, wax faces. They parted easily, like flesh pulling back from Antonius's sores, and I stopped at the shoreline. A young man who had been in the water with the tall one, staggered out of the lake far away from me as he could. The tall one watched me, and I could see he was afraid and unsure of himself because he had never before been afraid in his life.

All are welcome, he said.

His words had no meaning to me outside the shape they made in my own mouth as I repeated them back and thought of Deborah's eyes when I touched her that one time and the noise stopped for a moment inside her. This man did not have long for this world either. Death had already crawled inside him to die. The crowd around me breathed as one. I would come across many crowds in the years to follow, but they never could be more to me than this first one, waterfowl making noises to each other for the sake of making noise, unsure, terrified, as willing to worship this man as to cut off his head.

The man flinched, pressed his fingers to his eyes, and waved at a woman near the large animals. This woman put aside the small bowls she had been filling with red water and approached me, brushed my hair from my eyes and asked how I came to be all alone in the desert.

If I knew the answer, I wouldn't have told her. People don't deserve answers just because they ask questions. But they think they do, and this is why they are unhappy. I walked out from under her small, cool hand and through the small crowd of

shepherds and fisherman and tax collectors, all bound in bright rags and half blind with sunlight.

When I passed beyond their last larval head, the entire mass moved all at once, contracting like a muscle, but I did not look back. I ran for my life, as fast as I ever did in my life, until my head swam with bright dots, and I found Deborah's cliff and held my knees to my chest and rocked.

The soldiers came one day at noon. I'm not sure if they did so because they had heard about me or if a new administration had simply ordered the hills cleaned of undesirables. This is language I would hear later, in different cities, and have never been able to make sense of what it means. Only in the hills and mountains have I ever felt clean, pure, and filled with my own desire.

Their Captain ordered the cave searched. They made their way into the dark clanking their swords against rock and cursing the gods and the officer to disguise their fear. I hid deep down in the pit that Antonius believed had no bottom, in an opening no man could ever fit, and listened to the voices that I could sometimes hear down there, scratching sounds mostly but sometimes something more, a whisper, a song of some sort that set my heart on fire.

This went on for hours. I heard new noises up above, the echo of them leaving. I waited several hours or what I imagined to be hours and crawled out into the moonlight. It was a half-moon that night, my favorite. I liked to go to Deborah's cliff and stare up into the gap where the white light disappears into absence. The longer I stared the more the light around it moved and then too the entire landscape and Deborah and Antonius sat up among the rocks. Deborah adored the moon. The sun lies, she said, but the moon guides us through the world's nightmares into our dreams. Antonius agreed. I did too. You

could hold its divots and pits and bruises in your eye for as long as love is insofar as it is love.

The soldiers were waiting. They must have found my footprints in the dust near the grave or Antonius's portrait of Deborah, that mewling image of her before she became God. They laughed and shouted names at me and I stared down the Captain, who only had one eye and the sad frown of men deranged by pity. I held myself in the shape of a bat and tried to only hear, to not see, to go beyond seeing into pure noise and sound like the noise far down below but it was no good and I smelled one of the horrible ones creeping up behind me. Maybe I could have saved myself, but I would not look away from the Captain who was afraid like they are all afraid together.

I woke up inside the thudding noises of sprawling Jerusalem. Ancient criminals watched me from the corners of a barred room, near a fouled cistern, hiding in their human stink. I would be in many dark rooms like this in the years to come. The drunks and liars around me moaning and begging God for mercy. They didn't mean to hurt anyone, they say in one breath and wish horror and hell on their enemies in the next.

It's always the same, but I prefer it. I like the dark. I like the honesty. I can think of Deborah's face, hear Antonius' laugh. No one can take the memory away from me here, and I tell the others about it the only way they understand, through fists, insults, pain. I'll burn down Rome! I scream at the guards, when they open the door, carrying spiked clubs and metal chains. I'll set fire to the waters of Babylon!

The old men in the corners, who have been here the longest, who have managed a life in these holes pocking the bright ugly life above, beg me to play along, to just be polite to the soldiers, to keep everyone out of trouble. Shut your mouth, they say. Keep it down. Don't be a fool. They'll put you on

the cross.

You think I'll blink? I shout back, my mouth weeping blood.
You think I'll look away?