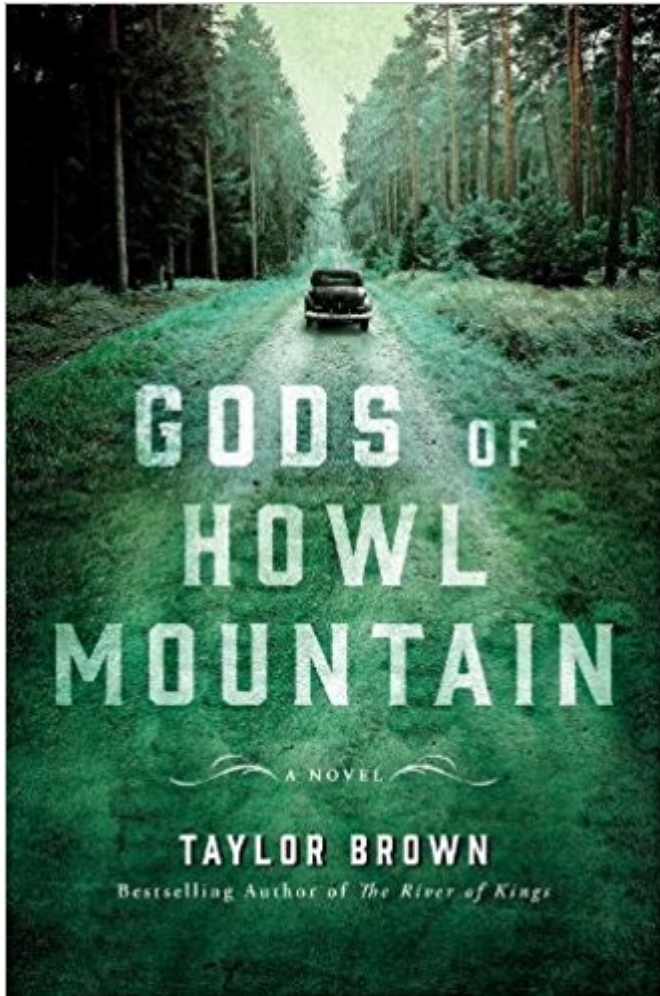


# New Fiction: Excerpt from Taylor Brown's *The Gods of Howl Mountain*



There was the stone pagoda, three-tiered, built on a small hill over a stream that shone like pebbled glass. The platoon had dammed a pool in the stream. They crouched in their skivvies, soaping and scrubbing the August grit from the creases and crannies of their bodies. Howitzers were perched on the hills around them, like guardian monsters. Still, the Marines washed quickly, feeling like prey without their steel helmets and green fatigues, their yellow canvas leggings that laced up at the sides. Their dog tags jingled at their necks, winking under the Korean sun.

Rory stood from the pool, feeling the cool water stream like a cloak from his form. His bare feet stood white-toed on the curved backs of the stones, eon-smoothed, so like the ones on the mountain of his home. He walked up the hill toward the accordion-roofed temple where they were billeted. He passed olive shirts and trousers drying on rocks and bushes, spread like the skins of killed beasts. The air felt full of teeth. Earlier that day, searching an abandoned village, they had taken sniper fire. Their first. They were Marines, but green. The whip-crack of the shots had flayed the outermost layer of courage from their backs; they were closer now to their bones.

A pair of stone lions guarded the entrance to the pagoda, lichen-clad beasts with square heads and heavy paws. "Foo dogs," the Marines called them. There was a nisei in their platoon, Sato, whose older brother had fought with the 442nd Infantry Regiment in World War II. All Japanese Americans.

"Komainu," he said. "Lion dogs. They ward off evil spirits." Someone had thrown his shirt over the head of one of the beasts. Rory pulled the garment away, so the creature could see. He stepped on into the temple. The air felt cool here, ancient, like the breath of a cave. The black ghosts of old fires haunted the sconces. The place smelled of incense and Lucky Strikes and nervous Marines. Their gear lined the walls. He had never been in a place this old. Granny was never one for churches—"godboxes," she called them—and those in the mountains seemed flimsy compared to this. Desperate cobblings of boards, some no more than brush arbors. But standing here alone, nearly naked at the heart of the temple, he felt armored in the stone of generations. Swaddled. No bullet could strike him here. No arrow of fear.

He wanted to remain in this place, so still and quiet amid the hills of guns. But a cold wind came whistling through the temple, lashing his back, and he remembered that fall was coming soon, for leaves and men. Blood so bright upon the sawtooth ranges, and the screaming that never stopped.

He could never forget.

Rory woke into the noon hour, his bedquilt kicked off, his body sweat-glazed despite the October bite. His lost foot throbbing, as if it were still attached to the bruised stump below his knee. He rose and quickly dressed. His bedroom window was fogged, the four panes glowing a faint gold. Paintings, unframed, covered one wall. Beasts of the field, fowls of the air—their bodies flaming with color where the sun touched them. They reminded him what day it was: Sunday. He scrubbed his armpits and washed his face, slicked his hair back and dabbed the hollow of his neck with the sting of Granny-made cologne. He donned a white shirt that buttoned to the neck, a narrow black tie, the bowler hat that had been his grandfather Anson's. He looked at his face in the mirror—it looked so old now, as if a whole decade had snuck under his skin in the night. The flesh was shiny beneath his eyes, like he'd been punched.

He was sitting on the porch, carving the mud from his boots, when Granny came out. She had a pie tin balanced in the crook of one arm.

"I can get that," he said, jumping up.

"I'm fifty-four years old. I ain't a god-damn invalid."

She sat primly in the beast of a car, straight-backed, as if she were riding atop a wagon. It was no stretch to imagine her riding shotgun on a Wells Fargo stagecoach, a short-barreled shotgun in her lap. She looked at him as he slid behind the wheel.

"You had the dreams again?"

"No," he lied.

"You need to take that tincture I made you."

"I have been."

"You been pouring it through that knothole in the floorboard. That's what you been doing."

Rory fired the engine, wondering how the woman could know the things she did.

In an hour they were down into tobacco country, square after square of mildly rolling fields passing on either side of them, the clay soil red as wounds among the trees. Giant rough-timbered curing barns floated atop the hills, like weathered arks, holding the brightleaf tobacco that would fill the white spears of cigarettes trucked all over the country. Chesterfields and Camels and Lucky Strikes. Pall Malls and Viceroy's and Old Golds. The highway wound through Winston-Salem, where the twenty-one-floor Reynolds Building stood against the sky like a miniature Empire State. It was named after R. J. Reynolds, who rode into town a back a horse, reading the newspaper, and went on to invent the packaged cigarette, becoming the richest man in the state.

"They say it's the tallest building in the Carolinas," said Rory. Granny sucked her teeth, wearing the sneer she always did when forced to come down off the mountain.

"It ain't whale-shit compared to the height of my house, now is it?"

They passed Greensboro and Burlington, assemblies of giant mills, their smokestacks black-belching day and night, while beneath them sprang neat little cities with streetcars and straight-strung telephone lines. They passed Durham, home of Duke Power, which electrified most of the state, and then on into Raleigh, passing along the oak-shadowed roads as they wound upward toward the state asylum at Dix Hill. It was massive, a double-winged mountain of brownstone that overlooked the city, four stories high, the narrow windows stacked like medieval arrow slits. The center building

looked like something the Greeks had built, four giant columns holding up a triangular cornice, with a glassed rotunda on top.

They signed the paperwork and sat waiting. When the nurse came to fetch them, Rory went in first. His mother came light-footed across the visiting room floor, hardly a whisper from the soles of her white canvas shoes. She was like that, airy almost, like a breath of wind. She could be in the same room with you and you might not even know it. Her black hair was pulled behind her head, waist-long, shot through with long streaks of silver. Her skin ghost-white, as if she were made of light instead of meat. As if, squinting hard enough, you could see her bones.

"They treating you good?" Rory asked.

She nodded and took his hands. Her eyes shone so bright, seeing him, they ran holes in his heart. She said nothing. Never did. She was always a quiet girl, said Granny, living in a world her own. Touched, said some. Special. Then came the night of the Gaston killing, and she never spoke again. Rory had never heard her voice. He knew her smell, like coming rain, and the long V-shaped cords that made her neck. He knew the tiny creases at the corners of her eyes, the size of a hummingbird's feet. He knew the feel of her hands, so light and cool. Hands that had scooped out a man's eye with a cat's paw, then hidden the detached orb in the pocket of her dress.

There had been three of them, nightriders, each in a sack hood. The year was 1930. The men had caught her and a mill boss's son in an empty cabin along the river. The place was condemned, destined to be flooded under when the waters rose. They bludgeoned the boy with ax handles, but she fought them, finding a cat's paw from a scatter of tools, an implement split-bladed like a cloven tongue. She took back from them what she could.

An eye.

None of them was ever caught.

The boy they beat to death was named Connor Gaston. He was a strange boy, people said. But smart. He liked birds, played the violin. His father ran the hosiery mill in town. A boy of no small advantage, and she a prostitute's daughter. Probably one herself, the town said. Didn't she live in a whorehouse? Wasn't she of age, with all the wiles and looks? Hadn't she lured the boy there to be beaten, robbed?

She refused to defend herself. Some said a hard blow to the head had struck her mute. Others said God. The doctors weren't sure. She seemed to have one foot in another world. She had passed partly through the veil. The Gastons wanted her gone, buried. Forgotten. This stain on their son's name. The judge declared her a lunatic, committing her to the state. Her belly was showing when they trucked her off. Rory was born in the Dix Hill infirmary. The Gastons were already gone—packed up and returned to Connecticut, with no forwarding address.

Rory and his mother sat a long time at the table, holding hands. Rory asked her questions, and she nodded or shook her head, as if too shy to speak.

"Any new paintings?"

She nodded and brought up the notebook from her lap. They were birds, mainly, chimney swifts and grey shrikes and barn swallows. Nuthatches, bluish with rust bellies, and iron-gray kinglets with ruby crowns. Carolina wrens, chestnut-colored with white thunderbolts over their eyes, and purple-black starlings, spangled white. Wood thrushes with cinnamon wings, their pale breasts speckled brown, and lemon-breasted waxwings with black masks over their eyes. Cardinals, red-bright, carrying sharp crests atop their heads, and red-tailed hawks that wheeled deadly over the earth.

They were not like prints on a wall. These birds were slashed across the paper, each creature angular and violent and bright, their wings trailing ghostly echoes of fight. They were water-colored, slightly translucent, as if she painted not the outer body of the bird but the spirit, each feather like a tongue of flame. Strange fires that burned green and purple, rust and royal blue. Rory knew that eagles could see more colors than men. They could see ultraviolet light, reflected from the wings of butterflies and strings of prey urine, the waxy coatings of berries and fruits. Sometimes he wondered if his mother was like that, if she discerned the world in shades the rest of them couldn't see. As if the wheeling or skittering of a bird's flight were a single shape to her, a poem scrawled in some language the rest of them didn't know. His heart filled up, like it always did. Tears threatened his eyes.

"They're beautiful," he said.

As always, she sent him home with one. This time it was a single parrot, lime green, with red flushes about the eyes. He would paste it on the wall of his room, part of the ever-growing aviary that kept him company.

It was late afternoon when they started toward home. Rory lit a cigarette, Granny her pipe. Their smoke unraveled into the slipstream. They passed city cars painted swan white or flamingo red, glade green or baby blue—bright as gumballs under the trees. Every yard was neatly trimmed, many staked with small signs that read: WE LIKE IKE. The people they passed looked strangely clean and fresh and of a kind, like members of the same model line.

Soon they were out from beneath the oaks and the traffic thinned, falling away, and the land began to roll and swell, an ocean of earth. In the old days, Rory would ask Granny to

tell him stories of his mother. Of how beautiful she'd been and how kind. Of how she once held a death vigil for a giant grasshopper she found dying on the porch, singing it low lullabies as it lay legging the air on its back, green as a spring leaf. How she buried it behind the house with a little matchstick cross.

"Girl had angel in her blood," Granny used to say. "Where she got it, I don't know. Not from me."

But all those old stories had been told, again and again, save one. The story only his mother could tell. What really happened that night in the valley.

The land rose before them, growing more broken and steep, the mountains hovering over the horizon like smoke. Howl Mountain was the tallest of those that neighbored it, the fiercest. It rose stout-shouldered and jagged, like the broken canine of some giant beast. On its summit floated a spiked island of spruce and fir, a high-altitude relic of prehistoric times. The wind whipped and tore through those ancient evergreens, whirring like a turbine, and it did strange things.

It was said that gravity was suspended at the mountain's peak, and in the falling season the dead leaves would float upward from the ground of their own accord, purring through the woods, as if to reach again those limbs they'd left.

There was a lot of blood in the ground up there, Rory knew. Guerrilla fighters from the Civil War, throat-cut and shot and hanged by rope, and frontiersmen before them, mountain settlers with long rifles who warred with the Cherokee, dying with arrow-flint in their bellies, musket balls in their teeth. And who knew how many rival tribes in centuries past, blood feuds long forgotten before any white man showed his face, the bones of the fallen scattered like broken stories across the mountain. Some said it was all those men's souls,



trying to rise, that made the dead leaves lift.

Rory thought of what Eustace had told him, when he was little, of how men in the mountains had made a sport of eye-gouging and nose-biting. How those wild-born woodsmen faced each another inside rings of roaring bettors, their long-curved thumbnails fired hard over candle flames and greased slick with oil, and how Davy Crockett himself once boasted of scooping out another man's eye easy as a gooseberry in a spoon. Back then there was no greater trophy in your pocket than another man's eye, followed closely by the bit-off tip of his nose. A cruel story, like any Eustace told, but designed perhaps to make the boy proud of what his mama had done when cornered.

He was.

He just wished it had not stolen her voice, and he wondered sometimes if there wasn't something wrong with him, that he wasn't himself silenced by what he'd seen in Korea. By what he'd done. He looked at Granny.

"Is it true you got that eye hid somewhere, stolen by some deputy you had in thrall?"

She sniffed.

"Ain't nothing but trouble in that eye, boy. Some things are best left buried."

"I got a right to see it."

"Sure. And I got a right to tell you to go to hell."

*[\*\*Gods of Howl Mountain\*\*](#) is forthcoming from St. Martin's Press on March 20, 2018 and is available now for pre-order wherever books are sold.*

