

New fiction from Taylor Brown: Excerpt, 'Pride of Eden'

The following is an excerpt from Chapter 2 of Taylor Brown's newest novel, [Pride of Eden](#), out March 17th, 2020. Reprinted with permission from St. Martin's Press.

Lope knelt before the fire engine, rag in hand, polishing the silver platters of the wheels. An old song rose in his throat. Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf, begging his baby not to go, not to be her dog. Lope let the words hum against his lips, unvoiced. There was heat in the blues, he knew, as if the singer's heart were held over the blue hiss of a gas flame.

Lope started to part his lips, to sing to the sleeping engine, when a whistle rose in accompaniment, like the train songs of old. A turbocharged diesel came whining up the drive, a black Ford dually with smokestacks risen over the cab like a pair of chrome horns. The truck skidded to a halt before the firehouse bays, rocking on its wheels, as if summoned here.

Little Anse Caulfield jumped down from the cab, his backcut cowboy heels clacking in the gravel. He was a square-jawed bantam, built like a postage stamp, bowlegged like the old jockey he was. He wore a bush hat, the brim pinned on one side, and the small round eyeglasses of a small-town clerk, his nose smashed broad and flat against his cheeks, as if by God's thumbs. His eyes were iron-gray. In one hand he held a double rifle, like for shooting elephant. He stood before the open bay, squinting at Lope.

"You ain't seen a lion, have you?"

Lope stood from the wheel. He snapped the rag at the end of one long, dark arm. "Lord," he said. "Not again."

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Her name was Henrietta. She was a golden lioness, born on the grasslands of Africa, sired by a black-maned king of the savannah. She was still a cub when poachers decimated her pride, killing the lions for their teeth and claws and bones. The cubs were rounded up and sold on the black market. She became the pet of an Emirati sheikh, who later sold her to a Miami cocaine lord who enjoyed walking her on a leash amid the topiary beasts of his estate, ribbons of smoke curling from his Cuban cigar.



“Heracles Slaying the Lion.” Roman mosaic, Liria, Spain.

After a team of DEA agents raided the place, she found herself under the care of Anse Caulfield. His high-fence compound on the Georgia coast was a sanctuary for big cats and exotics of

various breeds. It was located an hour south of Savannah, where the dark scrawl of the Satilla River passed beneath the old coastal highway—known as the Ocean Highway in the days before the interstate was built. On this two-lane blacktop, laden with tar-snakes, tourists had hurtled south for the beaches of Florida while semis loaded with citrus and pulpwood howled north. Sometimes they'd collided. There had been incredible wrecks, fiery and debris-strewn, like the work of airstrikes.

Now traffic was scarce. Log trucks and dusty sedans rattled past the compound, which was set back under the mossy oaks and pines. Behind the corrugated steel fence, there lived a whole ambush of tigers, many inbred or arthritic, saved from roadside zoos or private menageries or backyard pens. Some surrendered, some seized, some found wandering highways or neighborhood streets. There lived a duo of former circus tigers, a rescued ocelot, and a three-toed sloth once fenced in a family's backyard jungle gym. A range of smaller big cats—servals and caracals popular in the exotic pet trade. An elephant that once performed circus handstands, a troop of monkeys, and a lioness.

Anse called the place Little Eden.

No one knew why he kept the property, exactly. His history was vague, rife with rumor and myth. Some people said he'd been with an elite unit in Vietnam—a snake-eater, operating far behind enemy lines. Others said a soldier of fortune in Africa. Some claimed he was a famous jockey who'd fallen one too many times on his head. But Henrietta was his favorite—everyone knew that. He'd built a chain-link enclosure for her, sized like a batting cage for Paul Bunyan, and people said his big dually truck cruised the night roads, rounding up strays to feed her. Others said it was Henrietta herself who stalked the country dark, loosed nightly to feed. Why she would return in the morning, no one knew.

"You reported it yet?" asked Lope.

"What you think I'm doing now?"

Lope got on the radio. The schools would be locked down, the word put out. The county cruisers would begin prowling the backroads along the river, looking for tracks. The firefighters would take their own personal trucks. When he emerged from the radio room, the firemen had paired off into two-man search teams. Anse stood bouncing on his bootheels, grinding his teeth. The odd man out.

"I'll ride with you," said Lope.

They aimed up the old coastal highway at speed. Lope had one long arm extended, his hand braced against the dashboard.

"This fast, ain't you afraid you could hit her crossing the road?"

Anse was hunched over the wheel, his chin pushed out like a hood ornament.

"Serve her right, running out on me again."

Lope eyed the elephant gun rattling on the rack behind their heads.

"Where's your tranquilizer gun?"

Anse sucked his lips into his mouth, then popped them out.

"Forgot it."

They passed the old zombie neighborhoods built just before the market crashed. Satilla Shores, Camden Bluffs, King's Retreat. Whole housing developments killed mid-construction, abandoned when the housing bubble burst. Their wrought iron gates stood twisted with vines, their guard shacks dusty and overgrown, vacant but for snakes and possums and the odd hitchhiker needing shelter for the night. Their empty streets snaked

through the pines, curling into cul-de-sacs, skating along bare river frontage. They turned in to one called Plantation Pointe, the sign weedy and discolored. The community was neatly paved, with greening curbs and sidewalks, periodic fire hydrants standing before overgrown lots. There were four or five houses built, pre-recession dreams that petered out. They were empty, their windows shining dumbly in the morning sun, their pipes dry, their circuits dead. Squatters had been found in some of them, vagrant families with their old vans or station wagons parked in the garages, the flotsam of Dumpsters and thrift stores strapped to the vehicles' roofs. The vagrants cooked only at night, in fireplaces of brick or stone, like people of another age. They kept the curtains drawn.

The dually rolled through the neighborhood, the tires crackling around empty cul-de-sacs. The windows were up. Lope had his ballcap turned backward to press his face closer to the glass, scanning for a flash of golden fur in the trees. "How'd she get loose?"

Anse frowned. "Same's last time."

"And how was that, exactly? I never got it straight."

Anse chewed on his bottom lip. "Look," he said, pointing over the wheel. "A kill."

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They stood in the overgrown yard. It was a whitetail doe, or used to be. It had been torn inside out, the guts strung through the grass. The rib cage was visible, clutching an eaten heart.

"Lord," said Lope. "You been starving that thing or something?"

Anse spat beneath his bush hat and looked up. A white clot

bubbled in the grass. "She's born for this. What do you expect?"

Lope looked out at the tree line. Fragments of the Satilla River shone through the trunks and vines and moss. The lioness must have stalked the doe from the woods, bursting forth to catch her across this man-made veld. Anse had the elephant gun cradled against his chest, still staring at the mess in the yard. "Used to be lions all across this country, hunting three-toed horses and ground sloths, woolly mammoths."

"You mean saber-toothed tigers?"

"They ain't tigers. They're saber cats. Smilodons. Then you had the American lion, too—*Panthera leo atrox*—four foot tall at the shoulder. Them cats owned the night. 'Course they disappeared at the same time as the rest of the megafauna, ten thousand years ago."

Lope shivered. "Thank the Lord," he said.

Anse's upper lip curled in sneer. "They would of ate your Lord off his cross and shat him out in the woods."

Lope stiffened. He thought of the hymns sung in the small whitewashed church of his youth, where his father, a deacon, had often preached on Sundays, his face bright with sweat. Songs of chariots and lion dens and flying away home. He looked at Anse. "Not Daniel they didn't. 'God hath sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths.'"

Anse smiled at the killed deer. "Hath he now?"

Lope could remember his first structure fire more clearly than his first kiss, than his first fumbings for buttons and zippers in the dark of movie theaters and backseats. The stable fire peeled back the darkness of the world, so bright it seared him.

He was ten at the time. He'd already developed a fascination

with fire. Under his bed, he kept a cardboard box filled with cigarette lighters he'd collected. He had a vintage Zippo, a butane jet lighter that hissed like a miniature blowtorch, even a stormproof trench lighter made from an antique bullet casing. He would sit cross-legged on his bed and thumb the wheel of a Zippo or Bic, relishing the secret fire in the house. Sometimes, after school, he would erect small temples of kindling and tinder in the backyard, then set them alight, watching rapt at the transformation—the twist and glow of their dying architecture, the chemical brightness.

The day of the fire, he followed a black pillar of smoke home from school, weaving down the shoulder of the road on his BMX bike as the fire engines roared past. His heart raced faster and faster as he realized what was burning.

The stables where his father worked.

The man had grown up on one of the sea islands, riding bareback on marsh ponies while other children were still hopping around on hobbyhorses. A hard man among his family, but strangely tender with animals. He spoke to horses in Gullah—a tongue Lope never heard him use among men. His loose-jointed body seemed built for horseback, his seat and shoulders bobbing in time to their trots. With his long limbs, he could trick-ride with gusto, swinging low from the saddle like an Apache or standing high atop their spines, his arms spread like wings. He worked as the barn manager and groom for a local equine community.

Lope straddled his bicycle before the blaze, his face licked with firelight. Antlers of flame roared from every window, like the blazing crown of a demon, and the smoke looked thick enough to climb. An evil hiss pervaded the scene, pierced now and again by the scream of a frightened animal. Only later did Lope learn that his father had been inside trying to save the last of the horses when the roof beams collapsed.

Ten years old, Lope could not help but feel there was some connection, that his secret fascination had sparked this awful happening. His secret desires or jealousies. So many times, he'd wrapped his arms around himself and wished for the gentle touch and cooing voice his father gave only to his horses—never his son. So many times, Lope had huddled over his yard-built temples and pyres, watching them burn.

Back at Anse's truck, Lope called his wife. He told her to stay inside with the baby until she heard from him.

"Larell Pope," she said, using his full name. "I got a cut-and-color at ten. One of my best clients. I'm not canceling on her because some zoo animal is on the loose. I already have a girl coming to watch Lavonne."

Lope turned toward the truck, gripping the side mirror. "Please," he said.

"That new dryer ain't going to pay itself off, Larell."

"It'll get paid."

Lope could sense Anse waiting behind him, his boot heel grinding into the pavement. "Just cancel it," he said, hanging up.

When he turned around, the old man was sliding a giant, double-barreled pistol into a holster slung under one arm. The gun looked like something the captain of a pirate ship would carry, with twin rabbit-ear hammers and double triggers.

"The hell is that thing?"

"Howdah pistol," said Anse.

"Howdah?"

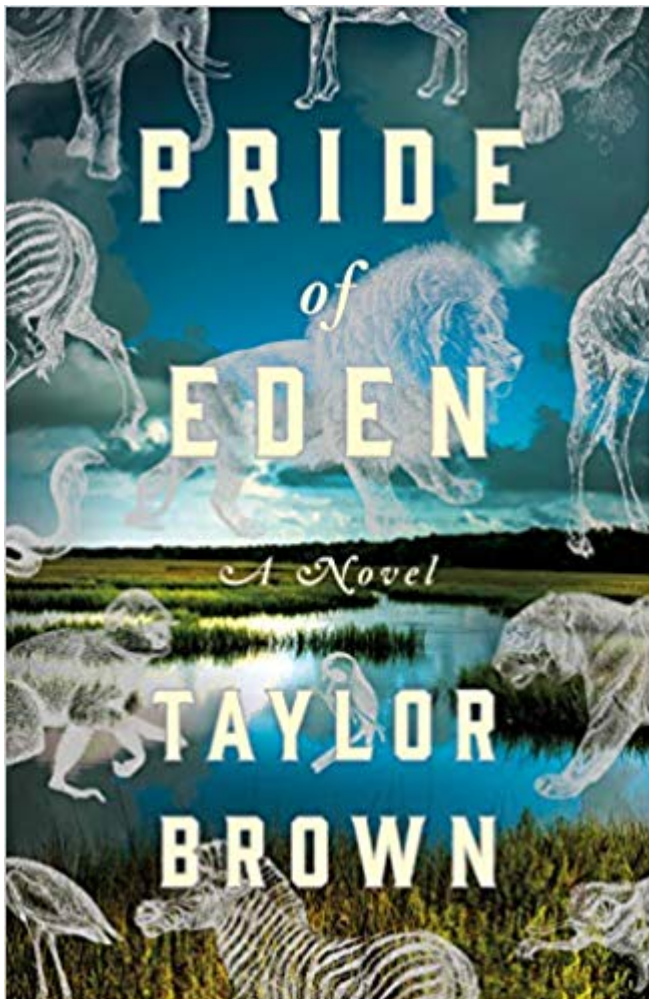
"An elephant carriage. Back in the colonial days, hunters carried these pistols on shikars—tiger hunts—in case a pissed-

off tiger tried to climb the elephant they were riding.”

Lope swallowed. “Hell,” he said.

The old man took the double rifle from the backseat and held it out. “Can you shoot?”

Lope looked at the old safari gun. The twin barrels were huge, the stock scarred from years in hard country. He sniffed. “I can shoot,” he said.

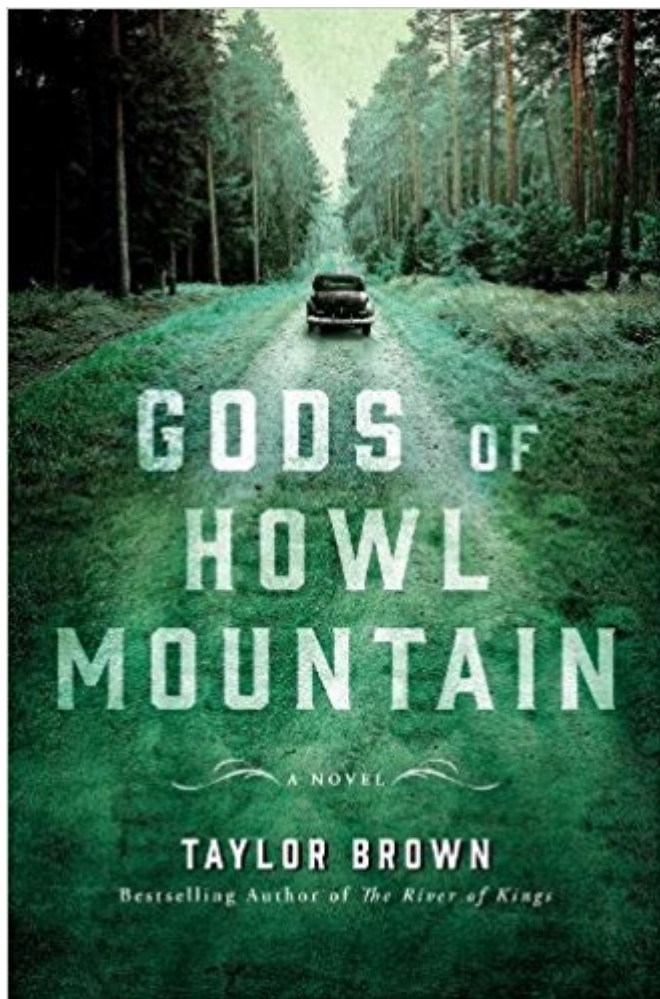


Brown, Taylor. [Pride of Eden](#) (St. Martin's, 2020).

Look for the novel on March 17th wherever books are sold. It is also Wrath-Bearing Tree's giveaway book for the month—a comment anywhere on the site enters you to win.

An excerpt from Brown's novel [Gods of Howl Mountain](#) as well as [an interview with Taylor](#) appeared in the February 2018 issue of *Wrath-Bearing Tree*.

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 Viceroys 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.

An Interview with Taylor Brown, Author of Gods of Howl Mountain



The Wrath-Bearing Tree (Andria Williams): Taylor Brown is the author of a collection of short stories, [*In the Season of Blood and Gold*](#), and three novels: [*Fallen Land*](#), hailed by

Booklist as “a masterpiece;” [The River of Kings](#), and [Gods of Howl Mountain](#), out next month (March 2018), of which a starred *Booklist* review said:

It's the characters, so wonderfully vibrant and alive in their all-too-human variety—scared, tightly wound, angry, damaged, yet resourceful and resilient, some honorable, some not—that demonstrate Brown's prodigious talent. Brown has quickly established himself in the top echelon of Southern writers.

An [excerpt](#) from *Gods of Howl Mountain* appears in this month's issue of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*.

Thank you so much for answering our questions, Taylor.

Let's start with some background on *Gods of Howl Mountain*. The novel is set in rural North Carolina in the 1950s. Rory Docherty, a young man freshly home from the Korean War, has returned to the mountain where he grew up. He lives with his grandmother, a folk healer; his father is dead and his mother, mute since witnessing a terrible crime, has lived most of her life in a mental hospital nearby. Rory finds work running bootleg whiskey for a powerful local family. But when he falls for the daughter of a preacher, he gets himself into a new brand of trouble that may open up secrets about his mother and his past.

Begging my own Yankee ignorance here: Is there a Howl Mountain, North Carolina? How did you develop a fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains and its long legacy of family feuds, bootlegging, folk medicine, snake-handling, and more?

Taylor Brown: There is no Howl Mountain, North Carolina – the place and history are products of my own imagination. That said, I was inspired by the history and folklore of Blowing Rock, a town in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. The town itself is named after “The Blowing Rock,” a

rock formation that stands three thousand feet above the Johns River Gorge and is storied for a powerful wind that blows upward out of the gorge. Legend has it, a heartbroken Native American brave leapt from the cliff, only to be blown back into the arms of his lover. That idea of mysterious winds inspired the cyclonic updrafts at the top of Howl Mountain, which I do envision as being in roughly the same area as Blowing Rock. However, I wanted to be free to create a geography and history of my own.

Though I grew up on the Georgia coast, I've long had a fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains, as well as the world of bootlegging, folk medicine, stock car racing, and more. As a child, I remember hearing my father play the song "Copperhead Road" by Steve Earle, still one of my favorite songs. The narrator is a Vietnam vet whose family has been involved in bootlegging for years, and who returns from Vietnam to begin growing the new cash crop of the region – marijuana. I can remember sitting in front of the stereo in my dad's study as a kid, playing that song over and over again.

Like most of my novels, *Gods of Howl Mountain* started with a short story. This time it was "Kingdom Come," the second story in my collection, *The Season of Blood and Gold*. With that story, I decided I wanted to write a novel set in this time and place. In fact, it was a large part of my motivation to move to western North Carolina in 2009, where I lived for two years—first in Asheville, then in Black Mountain, NC.

It's strange how organic these books become over the years. In 2013, I met Jason Frye, a writer who has become a great friend and editor of mine. Jason is from Logan, West Virginia, and his grandfather used to catch rattlesnakes to sell to the serpent-handling churches in the area. Jason has a black-and-white photograph of this one-armed snake-handling preacher on his office wall, and he directed me toward Dennis Covington's incredible book *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake-Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. Later, I ended up seeing

someone who was in herb school in Asheville, and she was an incredible help for the specifics of Granny May's folks medicine.

So, as you can see, this story has traveled quite a long road with me.

WBT: I can't help but notice that many of your novels and stories feature characters whose lives have bumped up against the vast movements of history and, in particular, war. There's Callum and Ava in *Fallen Land*, for example, caught up in General Sherman's "March to the Sea" in the final year of the American Civil War; or Lawton in *The River of Kings*, who's still grappling with the legacy of his recent service in ways that sometimes baffle or worry his college-student brother. In *Gods of Howl Mountain*, Rory is a Korean war vet and amputee, and you've mentioned that your newest work-in-progress features a female Army vet as well. Where do you think your attentiveness to veterans comes from—and your—what I would call—remarkably mature, long-range, compassionate interest in the ways war shapes whole generations, whole nations?

TB: That's a very good question, Andria. I've begun writing a little about my father, who was killed in a motorcycle accident last fall.

WBT: Yes, I remember that, and I am so sorry.

TB: He was of the Vietnam generation, and I grew up with stories of his time in the Army. For instance, he sent his 21st birthday on guard duty at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, marching through a hailstorm. Later, he graduated from the University of Georgia Law School and Army OCS at Fort Benning in the same year.

Fortunately, he was never sent to Vietnam, but the threat of war hovered over his entire early manhood, as it did over his entire generation's. He had so many friends who were impacted. One of his good friends, Sully, was a Green Beret in Vietnam,

and I know my father was very moved by how the war has impacted his friend—the emotional and physical trauma. I think, as a burgeoning writer, you're maybe especially attuned to such stories or emotions.

What's more, 9/11 took place during a very formative time for me: when the towers fell, I was a freshman in college—nineteen years old—and I knew my generation was going to war. The military was never an option for me, as I was born with bilateral club feet, which have necessitated a multitude of reconstructive surgeries. but so many of my friends had to consider their involvement (or lack thereof).

Of course, 9/11 kicked off the GWoT, so our nation has been at war for most of my adult life. I think it's easy for the average civilian to forget that; after all, so little of the general population has "skin in the game" these days. But, as a writer, I think your job is not to be incognizant or unaware of such things, you know? I think your job, in some part, is to try and empathize with the experiences and traumas of others, to put yourself in their shoes (or boots).

WBT: Yes!

In a "Writer's Bone" essay interview with Daniel Ford, you mentioned that you've written several stories based on old ballads, and that *Fallen Land* was inspired by an American ballad of Irish descent, "When First Unto This Country, A Stranger I Came" (Library of Congress Archives of American Folk Song #65A2). What is it about these ballads that speaks to you so strongly? Was there any particular music that inspired, or worked its way into, *Gods of Howl Mountain*?

And, as a fellow writer, I'm curious: Are you careful about the music you listen to when working intensely on a novel, the way some authors are careful about what they read? Do you have "sets" of music that have sort of accompanied each of your novels?

TB: Yes, as I mentioned before, I think Steve Earle's "Copperhead Road" certainly influenced this book—it's just a song that's been big in my imagination since I was a kid. It's a modern ballad, really, and I love how it juxtaposes outlaws from two different generations. Steve Earle's "Johnny Come Lately" does much the same thing, exploring the vastly different homecomings of soldiers returning from WWII versus Vietnam.

WBT: I know that song! We had it on an old Farm Aid CD when I worked in rural political organizing. Steve Earle is a good guy – a big supporter of Farm Aid! And wow, that video really has the same feel as the opening of *Gods of Howl Mountain*. I can see how the tone of it worked its way into the novel.

TB: As for the old ballads like the one that inspired *Fallen Land*, I think there's something so timeless and visceral about them. These were songs of the people, sung again and again and again, the verses evolving over the decades. I think of those ballads as survivors, really. It's like natural selection—only the strongest songs survive century after century, migrating from old countries to new ones, from mountains to prairies to coasts. There must be a nugget of truth or beauty or power in these old songs that just won't die, that continue to move our hearts and blood.

I'm fairly careful about what I listen to when I'm actually sitting there writing. Often, it's music that doesn't have lyrics, or else I can't understand the lyrics well—I don't want to have other words in my head. Rather, it's the mood or atmosphere of certain songs that seems to help. Also, there's music that helps with certain projects, but not while I'm actually writing. For instance, I've been working on something that relates to motorcycles, and I've been playing various

renditions of my favorite song of all time—"Vincent Black Lightning 1952"—on repeat.

Not surprisingly, it's another modern ballad.

WBT: You are thirty-five, and *Gods of Howl Mountain* is your fourth book. This just might make you the Leonardo DiCaprio of fiction writing! What is it like to have published "early and often?" In Virginia Woolf's "Letter to a Young Poet," she famously writes, "For heaven's sake, publish nothing before you are thirty." How would you respond to Ms. Woolf?

TB: Ha, sometimes I feel a lot older on the inside than I look on the outside! To be honest, though, I only had a few short stories published before I was thirty. It may seem like an "overnight success," but I spent the large part of a decade working in near isolation, writing and throwing away two novels before *Fallen Land*, as well as tons and tons of short stories. I really didn't know another serious writer until I was around thirty years old.

I've heard that Virginia Woolf quote before, and, I don't know—I think that sometimes writers use it as an excuse. Looking back at my early stories, there are some cringe-worthy moments, sure—and plenty of things I would do differently now—but I don't regret them. We only have so much time to express ourselves in this life, and early work shows us where we were then and how we've arrived where we are now. It's all part of the journey, I think.

WBT: I love that—"we only have so much time to express ourselves in this life."

This seems like a good time to ask if you have any advice for the even-younger poets (or fiction writers) out there, those who hope to make writing their life's work?

TB: I think Harry Crews said it best: "Get in the chair." There's really no secret but that. Desire, discipline, and

force of will. And what did Calvin Coolidge say? “Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.” I think that’s as true of writing as it is for anything. It isn’t going to be easy. You’re going to get knocked down again and again and again. You’re going to have to write through shitty jobs and shattering heartbreaks and rejections. But that makes you tough—not just with writing, but in life.

I hear young writers whine sometimes because they got rejected from the hippest new lit journal. Fuck that. In my book, rejections are badges of honor. Paper your walls with them. Each is proof that you kept writing despite all the forces trying to keep you from making your art, and every rejection is one step closer to the glorious moment of publication. Every rejection makes that moment sweeter. So keep your chin up and keep swinging, and remember your heroes went through these same battles. If they didn’t, you might want to find new ones.