

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?"

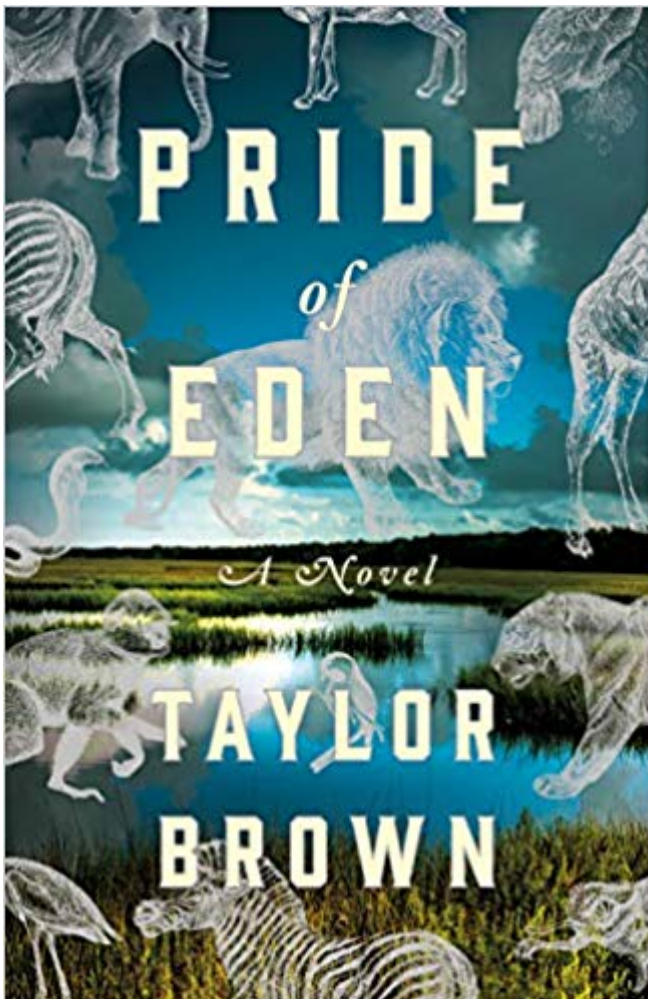
"An elephant carriage. Back in the colonial days, hunters carried these pistols on shikars—tiger hunts—in case a pissed-

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.