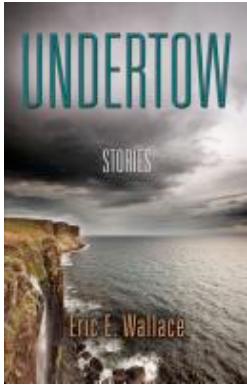


UNDERTOW

Stories

Eric E. Wallace

Rabbit Creek Creative
Anchorage, Alaska - Eagle, Idaho



***UNDERTOW** features 18 dramatic and entertaining stories by award-winning author Eric E. Wallace. What do teaspoons have to do with love? A pawn ticket to rebuilding someone's life? A skunk to changing the future? A baby's pram to calamity? Filled with unusual juxtapositions and remarkable characters, the diverse stories of **UNDERTOW** touch on important themes, including love, war, mortality, ambition and memory. Eric Wallace's distinctive voice is sometimes lyrical, sometimes ironic, sometimes quietly-humorous. And always engaging.*

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ISBN 978-1-63263-280-7

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Cover photography: © Mossel_Dreamstime.com

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Some stories in this collection have appeared elsewhere, some in slightly different form. The author gratefully acknowledges these periodicals, anthologies and organizations:

Toasted Cheese Literary Journal: "Cell Block"

Rosebud Magazine: "Under the Hood"

The First Line: "Loch Ness Monsters"

Writers in the Attic—Rooms: "Birds of Prey" & "Room Enough"

Writers in the Attic—Detours: "Road Work"

WritersWeekly.com: "Long Road Home" & "In the Moment"

Petaluma Readers Theater: "Undertow"

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

First Edition

Rabbit Creek Creative

2014

In loving memory of
LINDA SUTHERLAND
and
IAN WALLACE

For Kathy

Birds of Prey

The room, small and windowless, could be claustrophobic. But Bryce has found it to be stimulating, a place from which he can command the earth.

The dream, open and limitless, should be freeing. But for Bryce, inevitably, it turns frightening, suffocating.

Day after day, the two—the room and the dream—come together, feed upon each other.

Bryce's room is far out in the desert, part of a cluster of trailers eyed only by the relentless sun and a few covert satellites. Blank-faced boxes, blotchy with camouflage paint. Some little more than shipping crates perched on jack wheels.

None has a window. But inside, monitors reveal the world. Inside, men and women change the world.

If you spend long hours in these dark rooms, no matter how ordinary your own home when you return to it, you may twist and turn in your sleep, hunting for daylight, for air. If you spend long hours in these rooms doing what you excel at, it's very possible your dreams may try to shred your soul.

Bryce's dreams forever plummet into nightmares.

Almost always they begin with the same magnificent prelude, the same startling transformation.

A great blue heron, first a huge silent shadow, then a sudden soft fuselage, slategray and flashing rust, drops over the roof and commands the pond, shoving

aside astonished lilies, spearing aghast goldfish one by one, taking leisurely, insolent flight when Bryce open the door.

Instantly Bryce becomes the heron, soaring freely over rugged Idaho rangelands, with slow sensuous beating of long wings, following a weary stream, sharp eyes patrolling smudgy dots of sage on the cracked brown earth.

When exhilaration shatters, Bryce is the drone, the predator, the reaper. The sere and bumpy landscape, resolutely mountainous, is now very much like Afghanistan or Pakistan. He flies with terrible speed and singular, deadly purpose, controlled by some power far behind his unflinching eyes.

Sometimes he is lucky and awakes before the hellfire in his belly shoots forward on a pitiless trajectory of devastation. Sometimes.

His wife isn't very sympathetic. "It's no dream, Bry. We gotta take care of that damn heron." She fondles his top uniform button. "And it's your job to fly those pretend planes. You're keeping us all safe. Go get 'em, tiger."

Bryce knows the party line. Mostly he subscribes to it. With his superb aviation and computer skills, piloting unmanneds is second nature to him. He flies them from a soft leather chair in an air-conditioned trailer overflowing with high-tech gear. The only attempts at décor: a frayed sports banner and a melancholy rubber plant. No masks, no chutes, no ejection systems. And no hostile fire.

Except for the dreams. They are the enemy, firing at him nightly. They tear into him brutally, making him gasp and sweat. Making him doubt.

This morning, no dream, the real heron descended at dawn, performed a reconnaissance, stabbed a fleeing frog, flipped it into the air and gulletted it with unblinking indifference, moments later rising to the west with serene majesty, Bryce frozen in place at the kitchen window. He thinks it fortunate that his wife is still asleep.

The image still lingers as Bryce leaves the late afternoon briefing and settles into the cramped trailer cockpit beside his sensor operator, a redheaded captain. She nods to him and continues muttering into her headset microphone. There's no smile on her freckled face. She's already awash in data. The room flickers wanly from banks of computer screens. It smells of ozone and cheap industrial cleaner. Humming uneasily together, the electronics and air conditioning achieve a low and dissonant chord.

Bryce's UAV, launched by controllers overseas, is waiting to speed over the mountains towards a village believed to be hiding an important figure, a 'really big fish.' Intel has spoken.

Bryce takes control of the Predator. Joystick, throttle, readouts, radios, computers, GPS, satellites—he has all the technology he needs, but foremost is pure instinct. He streaks over sullen crags, swoops down long, ancient gorges with grace and ease, arcing up for the next sharp ridge, banking, dropping lower as the target nears, an insignificant enclave sleeping at the end

of a sloping valley. The plane's amazing cameras reveal lazy smoke in the thin dawn light.

My dusk is your daybreak, my power your weakness, my knowledge your death. Where did that come from? Bryce wonders, readying to fire.

Headsets vibrate a crisp command. "Take out the center structures. That's affirmative."

Bryce sees rough, sand-colored buildings, sagging tents, tiny moving figures. *Women carrying water* his brain screeches, three, a detached voice counts down, *those can't be kids and goats*, two, *surely a trick of light*, one, a small flock of birds arises, veers abruptly, fire! Bryce launches the missiles, someone yells a triumphant "splash!" the village erupts in flaming dust, pixilated chaos, and Bryce pulls up and away, his temples pounding, impossibly hearing screams smelling bloodstench seeing shredded flesh tasting gritty bile feeling searing agony.

Bryce wants to believe he's only a force of nature, merciless yet dispassionate, only a great blue heron doing what he knows to do: fly, kill, fly.

But what, Bryce wonders, does a heron know of human error, of collateral damage?

"Awesome flying, Major!" mutters the captain. Her face has lost its ruddiness but her eyes maintain their steeled obedience.

Bryce nods, removes his fat, sweat-stained headsets, scribbles at his paperwork, creaks open the door of the olive and gray shipping container. Outside, he quickly jams on dark glasses against the accusing glare of the desert. He's assailed by an incongruous

Birds of Prey

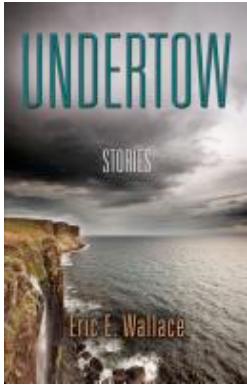
blend of smells: the stink of frying hamburgers and the earthy overtones of sage. Grease and sadness, he thinks, hold the fries.

Swallowing dust and bile, he swims through the heat and the sand towards the central trailer.

What does a heron know of nightmares?

Bryce clinks up the metal stairs, enters another sightless room, prepares to report.

And tonight another dream awaits, ready to close its dark-feathered walls around him.



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