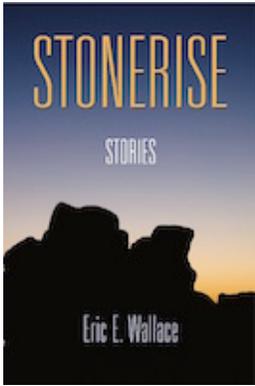


# STONERISE

STORIES

Eric E. Wallace



*STONERISE: An anthology of nine dramatic and entertaining literary short stories by award-winning author Eric E. Wallace (UNDERTOW; HOAR FROST). Could your memories keep you alive? What would it take to make you climb a mountain? Could you be happy living in complete poverty? To what extremes might you go to protect your privacy? What might you learn while working inside a gorilla suit? Filled with highly-evocative settings, unusual juxtapositions and remarkable characters, the diverse stories of STONERISE touch on important themes—including grief, love, mortality, obsession and memory. Eric Wallace's distinctive literary voice is sometimes lyrical, sometimes ironic, sometimes quietly-humorous. And always engaging. "Such gorgeous prose! (His) writing flows with authority in its language and with characters so richly rounded, so soulful." - Toasted Cheese Literary Journal.*

# Stonerise

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*Obsessions. We all have them.  
Sometimes more than one.  
Often they are minor.  
But they can also take over our lives.  
Francine Gray, for example, has dropped everything  
to build a three-story stone tower.  
By hand. By herself.*

Place, fit, pivot, step, select, reject, select, lift, pivot, step, lower, fit. Stretch. Breathe. Gulp water. Distract yourself. Continue. The new rhythms of life. The overweening rule was to disregard time. As long as it takes. Years, most likely. A decade? A lifetime? If necessary.

Her rhythms developed syncopations. Dropped stones broke the tempo. Thank heavens for steel-toed boots. Stubborn edges, unruly knobs, quirky corners incompatible with their neighbors needed chisel and mallet. There were fissures to split. Read the stone, find the grain, hit the spot. Centuries cracked in a few blows. Clink, clunk, thunk, thud, thwack, clatter. Exhale. A music all its own. Under it, the steady ground bass of the sea, the undulating descants of the river...

She worked agitatedly to build the narrow upper staircase, this time fashioned from absurdly-steep, code-be-damned, foreshortened cedar risers—later, perhaps, to be partly encased by rocks—and eventually she perched excitedly on the uppermost step, clinging to a jutting stone, peering over the wall, feeling like a lighthouse keeper spying the Pacific for the first time or Cortez, agog atop his peak in Darien, believing he was looking at infinity.

*from "Stonerise", one of the nine absorbing stories in this third  
anthology by award-winning writer Eric E. Wallace*



# STONERISE

Stories

Eric E. Wallace

2016  
Rabbit Creek Creative  
Anchorage, Alaska – Eagle, Idaho

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## Pride

The king of beasts, thoroughly unmajestic, lay on his side in a state of ennui. Several hundred flies, his courtiers, stuck close to his massive, dark-maned head, murmuring, offering small bites of fealty. The lion flicked his heavy tail, yawned, rolled over and closed his eyes. The dark mantle of flies shimmered. The grey savannah dust rose slightly, settled back down.

Camera shutters chattered. Lenses swung like stick-weaver nests wind-dancing on a yellow fever tree.

The breathless tourists in the Land Rover meant nothing to the lethargic king and his sprawled-out family. Here in the Serengeti, dusty safari vehicles, their high canvas tops raised in perpetual salute, came and went every day. Not threatening. Not interesting.

The thick air smelled of dung, decay, diesel and the syrupy perfume Anna exuded as she pirouetted with her Leica.

"Safari, I'm good!" Tim smiled for a selfie.

Joy pointed her fancy Nikon at a drowsy cub. "Aw, what a cutie."

"Look!" Anna whispered. "Isn't that a secretary bird? Eating a snake?"

Beyond the lions, a big grey-white, quill-crested bird strutted in the grass, working a wriggling snake into its gullet.

"Finally! A kill!" Clint swung his binoculars. "A black mamba, *dendroaspis polylepis*."

"How do you know these things?" Tim asked.

"Clinton just does," said Joy, twirling her gold Tiffany bracelets. "I married for smarts, not just for money."

Clint shrugged. "What can I say?"

The snake still struggled. Anna took more photos. "Not going down easily, is it?"

"It's doing the mamba samba," Tim said. Anna sighed.

"*Sawa! Sawa!*" Hosea, their Maasai guide, started the engine. "Time we go!" They'd heard Hosea speak perfect English, but he often mauled the language. "Tourists expect it," he'd explained.

"Bye-bye, lions," said Joy. "We'll miss you."

Hosea adjusted his sunglasses. "Plenty more later."

"Better be. We want action." Clint jammed his binoculars into his vest. "So far it's more like the Peaceable fucking Kingdom than wild Africa."

"*Hatari! Sawa!*" said Hosea, grinding into gear.

This was the third day of their private safari. They were staying at the most exclusive lodge in the park. Each morning, after the staff brought coolers packed with drinks and gourmet lunches, Hosea drove his charges out into the hot, bright landscape.

So far he had shown them giraffes, hippos, elephants, cape buffaloes, wildebeests, gazelles and multitudes of zebras.

## Pride

Today they searched for lions. The Land Rover raised clouds of ochre dust. Anna, Joy and Tim bounced hard, struggling to stay seated. Clint stood in the open, holding the front rail, flexing his knees to adjust to the constant bumps, the wind savaging his hair, sun glinting in his eyes.

"Look!" Tim pointed. "Commanding our tank—it's Patton himself!" His words blew backwards.

They hurtled past granite outcroppings, castellated termite mounds, umbrella acacias. They scattered chattering families of baboons.

Far off, dust devils raced in circles, rain clouds trailed shadowy virgas. Mountains seemed tiny, illusionary. The air smelled sweet and pungent.

"*Ndiyo!*" Hosea yelled. "I take you to a special water hole. Everyone come there to drink. Plenty prey!"

The terrain changed. They saw deeper grass, more trees and a levee-like ridge which looked like it might hide a creek or a small river, possibly flowing right to—

"There!"

Hosea hit the brakes. Joy's bracelets jangled, Tim's water bottle spilled, Anna's sunhat sailed. Clint almost flew over the railing.

Hosea grinned with satisfaction. "Look, *makafiri!*" He turned off the engine. He'd stopped the Land Rover a few meters from a muddy track which crossed between the grasslands and a large pond of brown water.

"We stay here and watch," Hosea said quietly.

The watering hole was busy. Warthogs, zebras, and gazelles drank close to each other. Half-submerged

hippos grunted, snort-sprayed and wallowed. A herd of elephants stood beyond small shrubs, waiting their turn.

"Let's join them for a drink." Tim pretended to open the door. "On second thought, I'll break out the beer." They raided a cooler.

Clint took a giant swig of a Tusker. "So, where's the action?"

Hosea dabbed his forehead with a red-orange bandana. "Here, mostly truce. But over there..." He gestured to the right. "...sometimes is killing ground."

It was the perfect cue. As everyone looked, a female lion eased from a gray-green thicket, ambled into the grass. Stopped. Raised her nose. Opened her great mouth, showed sharp, yellowed teeth. Turned her head toward the pond.

"That's more like it," whispered Clint. "*Panthera leo*. Go get 'em, girl." He aimed his camera. "Shit! What's with that?"

The lion had settled into the tall grass, disappearing but for the tip of one ear, which twitched briefly, dropped out of sight.

Hosea drank some water. "Don't worry. She one smart simba. Just watch."

It was quiet except for engine pings, low snorts, soft whinnies, insect buzzes. The hot air bore the muted stink of fermented pond muck and putrid hippo excrement.

A small herd of zebras left the watering hole, crossed in front of the vehicle and entered the grass. Only a few yards in, they stopped. They raised their

heads, sniffed, flicked their tails. They were about sixty feet from where the lion had settled.

Everyone in the vehicle rose, cameras poised. Clint tensed at the rail. Sweat creased his face.

One zebra turned. It left the herd and slowly moved toward the unseen lion.

Joy gasped.

"No!" Anna muttered. "Don't."

Tim dialed a control on his Canon. "Let's go to the movies," he whispered.

Clint's breathing was shallow. He narrowed his unblinking eyes. Slowly wet-fingered the slight breeze. Nodded.

The lone zebra stopped. Snuffled. Inched forward. Stopped again.

The grass exploded. A roaring eruption of dirt, fur and straw. The zebra yipped, spun, fled toward the stampeding herd.

The lion bounded, took one prodigious leap, claws extended. She thumped down, missing her prey by inches.

And then she gave up. Yawned. Settled back into the grass.

"What?" said Clint. "What the hell?"

Joy sat down heavily, a hand to her face. "Oh my!"

"Thank God," said Anna. "I didn't need to see—"

"Dumb fucking lion," Clint snarled. "Goddamn lazy lions. What is this, Disneyland? Why'd she quit? Sleep, screw around—that all they do? Shit!"

Hosea cleaned his sunglasses. "Don't hunt all the time. Maybe she killed last night."

"And the current score..." Tim raised a beer, "...is zebras one, lions zero."

The radio crackled. Hosea had a fast-paced exchange in Swahili.

"*Asante sana.*" Hosea lowered the handset and beamed. "Large pride. Ten kilometers from here. We go?"

"You bet we go," Clint growled. "Gotta be a true lion somewhere. Somebody hungry for blood." He gnawed at his nails.

They drove northwest, stopping only for a long line of jostling wildebeests crossing the trail.

"Migration time coming," Hosea said. "Soon, thousand wildebeest here."

They crisscrossed through the savannah to a monumental island of granite. Shrubs and vines clung to the rocks. Small trees leaned out from jagged ledges. "These rock-places called *kopje*," Hosea said. "Made from volcanoes."

"Ah," Tim nodded. "Volcano poop."

Hosea drove close. Beneath an enormous outcropping, ten or more lion cubs lay strewn about the grass, curled in sleep. Above, on a flat ledge, a female lion dozed among tiny pink wildflowers, her paws dangling.

"Idyllic" said Anna, fanning herself with her hat.

"Hello, little sweeties," said Joy. "So cute."

*Pride*

"More goddamn snoozers." Clint opened another lager. "'Forget this photo safari crap. I want my Winchester. Show 'em some real hunting."

The lions slept. Hosea smiled with paternal pleasure. The women took photos. Tim entertained. Clint drank.

Heat waves pulsed from the open rocks. Lizards darted between cracks. Iridescent sunbirds sought nectar. Shadows crawled over the grass. High up, vultures circled, kept watch.

"Well, pardon me." Clint gulped his Kilimanjaro. "I gotta pee." He reached for the door.

Hosea snapped to. "Sir! You cannot do that! You must stay in the vehicle!"

"I know what I'm doing. Those stupid cats don't care."

"Sir! I insist!"

Joy was wide-eyed. "Honey, listen to him."

"Fuck it," said Clint. "Gonna enjoy a long pee."

"Hey, guy, it's not safe," Tim grabbed Clint's vest. "I'm not lyin'."

Clint shook him off. "I know the wilds," he sneered. "No big deal."

Hosea blocked the door. Clint shoved past, pushed under the canopy, grabbed the vertical muffler pipe, levered a leg over the rail and clambered out.

"Sayonara!" He dropped to the ground with a thud. "Serengeti!"

They called in raised whispers, a frantic chorus. "Sir! Come back! Ohmygod! Don't! Sir! Stop! Please! Clinton!"

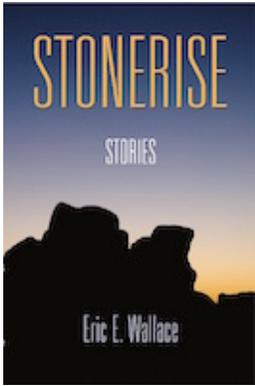
Clint waved airily. Unzipping, he jogged toward a big boulder lying apart from the *kopje*.

"*Mungu wangu!*" Hosea crossed himself.

The king of the pride had been napping. Blinking, he arose from his private quarters behind the giant rock, shoulder muscles rippling, huge black mane waving like a battle pennant. His enormous maw opened in astonishment, in anticipation. He offered a warm, guttural greeting, readied a close, hot-breathed royal embrace.

Clint was transfixed.

Human and lion were about to get a taste of what each had always wanted.



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