

DAVID RABE

—from *Girl by the Road at Night*

There was a guy in Whitaker's high school like Bonefezi. Because Whitaker trekked in from the country to high school in nearby Platteville, he knew a variety of kids, both farm kids and Platteville kids. Walking toward the area he is assigned to guard, he thinks about going to school in his father's truck, and then he thinks about his father lying motionless under all those covers in that big bed in Wisconsin at this very instant. It doesn't make any sense, so damn hot here and still winter there. His father had big callused hands and was maybe too quick to fly off the handle, but if he said he'd be there, he showed up. Whitaker traveled to grade school by bus, but his father drove him and Roger three miles to the pickup spot each day. Later on when Roger was in high school and had a car of his own, he drove Whitaker to the bus stop. Then Whitaker started high school, and Roger drove them both all the way to school and back. But Roger graduated when Whitaker was about to become a sophomore, so the job fell to his father. In good weather, the trip took maybe forty minutes, which meant his dad had to waste the same amount of time getting back to the farm. Whenever he could, Whitaker bummed a ride home. But often the best he could arrange was to get dropped off at the house of a friend who lived along the way. And then one winter morning, with the both of them finishing up pancakes and gulping coffee before rushing out to the truck, Whitaker realized he was in a brand-new, special kind of companionship with his father. He hadn't ever really thought of such a thing. They were alone a lot, Roger having gone off to work at a car dealership owned by a friend's older brother.

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Whitaker started trying to think of things he might say to his father, or maybe even some questions he might ask. He wondered what he wanted to know. Then winter came and he watched his father face down blinding sleet and long, ice-disguised stretches of pavement. When the old F100 Dually struggled and fishtailed, his dad cursed, demanding that the tires with their goddamn overpriced chains catch. If the windshield froze up so it looked like they were trying to see through paraffin, he poked his head out the open side window. Occasionally, they spun to a halt. Even though Whitaker was sixteen and strong, he was told to get behind the wheel while his father went out and manhandled the truck, shouting and shoving until the damn thing got back where it belonged and acted like it was supposed to.

It was in the late spring that one Saturday his father pulled the Nash into the yard with Roger following in the truck. His dad had made the purchase at the lot where Roger worked. Two mornings later, as Whitaker drove off on his own for the first time, he had such a sense of negligence, he was sure he'd forgotten something. He braked and looked in the rearview mirror, and he saw his father by the front door laughing, and he laughed, too. They were both free now, and then he looked again. The old man was turning away, walking into the house. The door closed and the empty front porch looked abandoned and forlorn and forgotten when that wasn't the case at all.

Whitaker, following, as best he can, the lieutenant's stupid map, goes along the road. It's annoying to have these stupid directions; he's pulled guard before without them, but he feels like he better try to do as they say. It looks like he should turn at the ditch and go toward the area behind the bunker. The ground is a dusty pale brown under the moon. It's pocked with holes and strewn with stones that seesaw under his boots. The coiled concertina wire has a leaden color as he arrives beside it, though the many barbs to his left and right, hit with moonlight, seem silverish. He strolls for a time along the wire before halting to look down toward the Vung Tau highway and the ammo dump. Nothing moves and there is no sound but a barking dog far off and then another dog closer picking up the cry. He loosens the sling on his rifle and switches it to his left shoulder, then checks the map and walks toward the bunker. My first general order, he thinks, is to take charge of this post and all government property in view. My second general order is to walk my post in a military manner, keeping always on the alert and observing everything that takes place within sight or hearing. Fuck me, he thinks. I guess that means I can't whack off.

The barking has ceased; he's back on the road. The road vanishes to his left at a hill. The guy like Bonefezi in Whitaker's high school was a Platteville kid

named Silvestri. Silvestri and Whitaker and all of them hated school, and Mr. Prendergast, the chemistry teacher, was weak, a regular milquetoast, and they all knew it the minute they saw him, so he was their goat. Once they hung fifty Trojan prophylactics all over the classroom; they hung them from the lights and from the radiators, they taped them to the blackboard. Mr. Prendergast, arriving as the bell rang, tried to pretend he hadn't noticed by proceeding directly into his lecture, until Silvestri raised his hand. Ignored for several minutes, Silvestri climbed up onto his desk and after several more minutes, began stomping his feet until Mr. Prendergast looked at him and he cried out, Sir, what's the point? There are dirty goddamn prophylactic rubbers hanging all over our classroom, Mr. Prendergast. Dirty goddamn prophylactic sexual rubbers! What's the point?

Whitaker is back at the wire and again the cries of the dogs have begun. That was a good thing ole Silvestri and me did, he thinks, seeing himself somehow at the center of the story. Then the sudden, hollow whoom-woom of two mortar rounds firing startles him, and he flinches but hears no trace of their trajectory until there is a faint and distant double thudding where they hit. He wonders, should he perhaps insert a magazine, knowing, of course, he shouldn't, but still, maybe he might prepare himself a little. He will lock the receiver open; he will unfasten the catch of one ammo pack. But then he worries that walking around with the receiver open could get dirt in it. Should some of the enemy actually come, how would he behave? Kill the fuckers, he thinks. Bang, bang. He is at the road, peering over lengths of desolate terrain featureless in the dark except for patches of gravel catching light from somewhere, and empty except for the hulking machinery, stacks of tools, the mound of dirt near the ragged outlines of the half-built bunker. Silence has returned. They did a lot of funny stuff to Mr. Prendergast. He is walking again, taking long steps controlled by a slow, methodical inner rhythm. In this manner he negotiates the whole area, thinking only of his walking until he finds that tiny, quick steps seem more interesting. Though he intends to walk the entire route in this new, entertaining style, he suddenly quits. He's at the very edge of the compound. He's at the perimeter. There has been no firing for a while now. Deciding he will sit for a little on a stack of empty sandbags, he puts the rifle to his shoulder to aim into the dark. Bang, bang, dead gook; bang, bang. And one time Silvestri took the anatomy skeleton out of its jarlike case, and after hiding it, he climbed into the jar himself, so he was standing there looking out grinning when Mr. Prendergast entered the room. Get out of there, Silvestri, yelled Mr. Prendergast. Get out of there right this minute. Where's the skeleton? Silvestri only smiled. Whitaker is grinning. Mr. Prendergast tried to force open the

door of the jar, which worked like a coffin lid, but Silvestri held it shut from the inside. Mr. Prendergast screamed, You get out of there right this minute, Silvestri! I mean it now—where is the skeleton? That skeleton is worth a lot of money. Money! screamed Silvestri and burst out of the case to run around the room opening cabinets, slamming doors and drawers. Everyone, all of them joined in. It's not here, Mr. Prendergast! Not here! Slam! Bang! Not in your desk, Mr. Prendergast. Bang! Slam! Not here! Not here! Where did you last see it!

A flare appears, so distant it seems a star. He stops at the sight of it hanging miles out among the ghostly hills. There is fighting in the jungle there, a skirmish. Another flare, a spark creasing the total black, leaps up and then another comes. Three match flames in the enormity of that black sky. He grows tense, listening, tilted toward those trembling, airborne specks to hear the gunfire. He waits, straining, but no sound comes and then the grinding rumble of a truck reaches him, faintly, gearing down for power, and he sees it moving with its headlights off way down below where the evac hospital has a few lights on. And then something else happens: a shout. A light comes on much closer, the beam darting crazily. It's a flashlight. Someone is running on the paths among the tents where Whitaker lives and they're waving a flashlight all over the place and they're yelling, but Whitaker can't make any sense of what they're saying. Other lights pop on in scattered tents and then more and more lights, and people are coming out from some of the tents. Whitaker jams a magazine into his rifle. He locks and loads a round; he pushes the safety on. Something is wrong. He sets off at a trot. Guys are zigzagging around. Most of them wear T-shirts and underwear. They run and yell and some start beating on metal, their canteen cups or something. "Snake! Snake! Big fucking snake!"

"Where? Where?" Whitaker calls; he's the only one armed.

"Griffin went down to take a shit, and there was this big fucking snake. Twenty feet long at least. Thirty. Forty." It's Doland standing there in his fatigue cap, Bermuda shorts, and flip-flops.

The floodlights at the basketball court go on, and Whitaker thinks he sees a flash on the gravel, a bolt of whipping dull gray that seems to have no end and then it's gone. "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"It was right there, Doland. Do you think I should shoot it?"

"What? Where?"

Down near the latrine there's an excited cry. It's a bunch of people yelling all at once in a kind of swelling cheer, like at a football game. Several guys run past

Whitaker into the tents, and other guys run in the opposite direction. One of them is carrying an armload of beer, and he goes backward for a few steps so he can announce, “Randall says the stupid thing went into the shit trench. It’s in the shit trench. They saw it. Fucking thing’s a monster.”

Now Whitaker is positive he saw it; that’s what it was on the basketball court, he’s sure of it. Still, he wants a better look.

“Whitaker! What the hell are you doing? Stop where you are.”

It’s the lieutenant coming straight at him, and he’s got his pants on, his boots, too, his baseball cap with its bar and a T-shirt. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I saw all the hullabaloo, sir, and there’s a big snake, so—”

“What’s your fifth general order?”

“What?”

“Tell me your fifth general order, Whitaker! I want you to tell me your fifth general order.”

“I saw all the noise and everybody and I—”

“What did I just ask you?”

“My fifth, sir?”

“To quit my post only when properly relieved,” the lieutenant barks at him. “That’s your fifth general order! Do you want to end up in the stockade?”

“What?”

“What’s your fifth general order? You spit it out!”

“To quit my post only when properly relieved! Sir!”

“Is this your post?”

“What?”

“Have you been properly relieved?”

“No, sir.”

“And is this your post? Right here?”

“No, sir.”

“So where is it? Where is your post?”

Whitaker takes off toward the bunker, striding briskly and then breaking into a trot. The gigantic slapping sound, the whoosh and the yellow wall of light that balloons over him and throws his shadow down onto the dirt ahead, like a ghost squirming in the gravel, turns him around. Fire is reaching from the latrine area where he knows the latrine box can be moved off the shit trench so the shit can be burned. The way everybody’s hooting and carrying on, they must have moved the box, poured in gasoline and diesel, and then ignited the trench with the snake still in it. They’re burning the shit with the snake in it. The flames rocket and rattle. The

stink of burning fuel, the stench of the shit, and the heat roll over him. The whole campsite is vivid and weird, like it's going to blink out and be gone. Then shouting starts up again. It had been silenced or covered by the fire. But he doesn't dare look any longer, because even though the lieutenant has been caught up by the spectacle, Whitaker knows the prick will wheel around and glare at him any second now.

He hurries on to the bunker, and once he's there, he ducks behind it. He sits down in the dirt with his rifle resting on his lap. What a crazy thing. That snake was dinky dow. Why would it just do that, just crawl into their camp? The way it was running, it was scared of people. He feels like he saw its eyes, even though he couldn't have. He hates snakes. He's killed them all his life. Every time he saw one all over Wisconsin. So why does he feel sort of bad? Did he really see its eyes? Even though he couldn't have. Maybe it was trying to get the garbage. Maybe it was hungry. Or maybe it used to live here. In the jungle that used to be here. He stands quickly and looks around warily. Did he have to worry about that now? Because if it lived here, others might have lived here, too. The snake might have brothers and sisters. It might have come looking for them. They might be looking for him. They might all come back.

The fire has died down and the campsite is quiet. A couple of men stand talking. They look like officers, but he can't really tell. He turns once more toward the hills that seem empty now, silent and dark. In the daylight a village is often discernible in that area, tin roofs and a church steeple shimmering in the sun like scattered toy blocks. But there's just the darkness. Full of secrets. Two flares climb from the black, and then tracer rounds float up from one point and sink in another. The first of the flares sputters and goes out, while the other, with a slight lateral drift, descends. But up leaps a new one to make a pair, then a third and a fourth climb to form a cone of leaden whiteness. A nearer noise whirls him around, beginning to aim the rifle. A figure is crossing the field toward him. Reese. It's midnight— past midnight, actually. Reese is late. Whitaker's shift is over.

And the way he feels, it's like someone out there beneath those failing flares is dying now. He has heard nothing, seen nothing, but someone is dead, having put up light to find the enemy all around him. Alert to the silence in which there is only the scrape and grind of Reese approaching, his mind has eyes to see into that blackness and then even further, into another day when someone on one of those hills will look over the miles from there to here—to this place where Whitaker will be standing, having desperately sent up flares in a call for help as the enemy closes in on him. Poor fucking Mr. Prendergast, he thinks. He can hear the steps of Reese behind him getting nearer. One afternoon as Mr. Prendergast entered, the entire

class bellowed in unison, Good morning, Mr. Hoosier! He glanced at them, only the briefest alarm in his eyes as he sat down behind his desk. They called, How are you this morning, Mr. Hoosier? I'm not Mr. Hoosier, he said. Yes, you are. I'm Mr. Prendergast. No, Mr. Hoosier, don't you know your name? I'm Mr. Prendergast! No! We're tired of calling you Prendergast. Prendergast is stupid.

Reese arrives and Whitaker hands over the forty rounds of ammunition that they are not to put into their rifles unless they mean to kill somebody. Reese says he would like to get a shot at a VC as long he was old and coming in backwards.

"Did you see the snake?"

"No. I was tryin' to sleep, man. You can guess how screwed up that was. The place was a loony bin. Did you see it?"

Whitaker shakes his head, and hands over the lieutenant's map and Reese stares at it. "What the fuck is this?"

"It's the route we're supposed to walk."

"Who says?"

"The lieutenant drew it up."

"You're puttin' me on."

"No."

"You gotta be kiddin' me."

"No." The flares have vanished. The sky and landscape look peaceful. The heart attack that felled Whitaker's father landed with the force of a truck. He yelped and shoved out with his fist, as if to fend off a thing he could see, all the while going down like a man bowing, only he didn't stop. Whitaker had been about to walk from the kitchen and he turned back at the yell, and before he knew to kneel down, before he knew to telephone for help, he stood there, frozen.

Reese points at the diagram and says, "What's this?"

Whitaker looks. "The bunker."

"No kidding."

He leaves Reese muttering and turning the map upside down and around, every which way. "This is fucked up, man," he says. Whitaker staggers a little, actually stepping sideways to catch his balance. Soon he will sleep. A little further along in the night, he will be awakened to walk some more. At six am, he will go to work. And like a filament in his mind, without which he could not see anything at all, there begin to hover and glow the tiny dark-haired bodies of the girls in the countryside and villages who everyone says are riddled with sickness beneath their loveliness. But he doesn't care. What can he care? In the afternoon he will go and

move within and against them. Find a part no one has taken time to find. Make her breathe. See the changes in her eyes. Hear her.

DAVID RABE has been hailed as one of America's greatest living playwrights since his early plays on the Vietnam war, a quartet written after he returned from Vietnam in 1967. Four of his plays have been nominated for the Tony Award, including one win for best play. Rabe is the author of the novels, *Dinosaurs on the Roof*, and *Recital of the Dog*, and a collection of stories, *A Primitive Heart*. Born in Dubuque, Iowa, he lives in Northwest Connecticut.