

**Douglas Goetsch**

**1989**

I woke each day to the same couple of songs  
on my radio alarm, due no doubt  
to the alchemy of programming format,  
though it felt more like Groundhog Day—6:05  
and Randy Travis still *waiting for you to forgive me,*  
*but you keep saying you can't even start . . .*  
Or “Kokomo,” that ode to tropical paradise—  
*Aruba, Jamaica, ooh I wanna take ya . . .*  
Anywhere but here, a roominghouse of men  
I never spoke to, a gray sky excreting ice and sleet  
all through March. I trudged back and forth  
to a job that had me so stressed and tired  
even my clothes wanted to quit.  
My only solace: re-runs of *Hill Street Blues*,  
that lovable band of dysfunctional cops—  
Andy Renko bickering in his Southern drawl  
with Bobby Hill, his black partner,  
alcoholic Norman Buntz who rode alone,  
little Mick Belker hauling in perps from undercover  
like a dog dragging in dead squirrels, sweet  
Sargeant Esterhaus pronouncing the benediction  
with long pointed finger: “Let’s be careful out there.”  
It didn’t air till midnight, and kept me up till 12:55,  
when, once again, the beautiful public defender  
and the smart precinct captain climbed into bed  
after a day at each other’s throats, to laugh  
and tease and touch like teenagers.  
Then five hours of sleep before The Beach Boys  
chimed in from *A little place like Kokomo*—  
*we’ll get there fast, and then we’ll take it slow—*

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and I wished that beautiful wall of sound  
could hold back the day, or I could float  
forever in Randy Travis's high lonesome feeling  
*like a stone you have picked up and thrown  
to the hard rock bottom of your heart.*  
I don't know how I managed, each morning,  
to reach over and turn off that radio,  
peel back the covers, get up, dress  
in the dark tunnel of a life so desolate.  
I mean that: I don't know how I did it.  
I don't know how anyone does.

## At the Residence

Every odd morning, in the small hours,  
they see the paramedics rolling up  
with sirens off. “Lucky stiff,” they say,  
all through breakfast—dying in your sleep  
better than hitting the Lotto. And so  
they wander off to nap in the dayroom,  
courtyard, barber shop. Even nap-proud Leo  
gives it a go, like a baby in a carriage  
hoping to get stolen. The other chief  
activity: complaints about the food—  
*Who could possibly survive on this?*  
The staff helped organize a food committee,  
they died (lucky stiffs), new officers  
got elected and the food hasn’t changed,  
at least not according to my grandfather.  
“See this?” he says, pointing at the sauce  
on his Salisbury steak. “I call it motor oil.”

## One Good Thing

Who knows how  
you've gotten here,  
but you can always  
do one good thing.  
In fact, you should.

Wash a dish or  
water a plant.  
That's not nothing.

We're not talking  
about paying the bills,  
or even changing  
a light bulb, but maybe  
that underwear  
finds the hamper?

Just one thing.  
Then rest awhile.

Soon you might be  
up for a shower,  
or egg salad.  
But this isn't a race,  
so take it easy.

But don't watch TV.  
If you do, not the news.  
You already know enough

of other people's trouble,  
or achievements—what  
Mandela or Gandhi did—  
and you're not on  
some march to the sea.

This is more about  
making the bed  
and putting socks on.  
Basic stuff, in sequence,  
like breathing out  
before breathing in.

You've got a right.  
You're on this earth,  
for whatever reason,  
with nothing to  
apologize for—at least  
nothing today, so far.

## Simple Math

Two plus two will always equal four,  
as sure as God made green superheroes.  
You don't need to know anything more

when you're little. You'll know the score  
when greasy-headed Nicholas Shapiro  
says, "Two plus two don't always equal four,"

gazing down at the school bus floor,  
"but zero times a million is still zero."  
"Well you're stupid," you say, not knowing more.

"Well *I* heard your parents got you at the store,  
along with your adopted brother Theo—  
so I guess two plus two *could* equal four."

"So what?" you say, "at least we aren't poor,  
and we're not a bunch of Jewish weirdos."  
But Nicholas isn't listening anymore.

And the bus rolls on like a portable war,  
where zero times a million is still zero,  
and two plus two will always equal four.  
You don't need to know anything more.

## Telemachus at 50

My father? I'm tired of the subject.  
But you keep asking, so here's a story:  
when I was three years old he took me sailing  
out behind the house in a little skiff.  
Each time we reached the mouth of the harbor  
I'd stand and point and ask, "What's over there?"  
He'd just turn for home without a word.  
My father didn't teach the things that matter—  
how to read the trades, trim the sails,  
outrun storms or else steer into them,  
and who to take on board. I learned haphazardly,  
from old pirates, gamblers and ne'er-do-wells,  
and I learned late, and never had much of a ship.  
But somehow I managed to see the world  
with my own eyes, lands where the light itself  
is a different color, shining on girls  
with iridescent skin, where fruit falls  
from astounding heights and tastes peppery,  
where the wisdom sayings seem silly at first,  
and the local gods are full of fiery joy,  
and toy-like coins jangle in my pockets  
as I keep wandering this amazing place  
that is my home. No treasure for the heart  
that stays in the harbor—my father may  
have known that—I don't know. And you come  
to tell me he's nearby, and proud of me?  
He's proud of *who*, exactly? And who is *he*?

## Too Soon

Too soon to write a love poem  
for a shy girl who won't  
tell you on the phone  
what she is wearing—  
just “underwear.”  
Too soon to say “girlfriend”  
though she likes it on the lips  
of others jumping to conclusions,  
like a Frisbee through a window.  
Too early for “I love you” —  
though no problem with  
a punch on the arm,  
“I’m going to steal that sweatshirt,”  
“You’re sort of awesome.”  
The language of the shy  
is full of *maybe*, full of  
*kind of*—“I maybe  
kind of miss you a little” —  
words to sand down a confession  
lest it scratch her underbelly  
or bring to boil what she  
wants simmering on a burner  
or under T-shirt and jeans.  
It’s premature for nicknames, Sarah  
my tomboy (*in panties!*),  
Princess *Whatever*, queen of shy,  
too soon for a love poem—ah,  
but too late for the blackbirds  
to get back in the pie.