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The Hourglass

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The Hourglass

I take a little detour off the freeway now and then
to get a glimpse of their
high celestial shine again—

the guard towers and the razor wire and the silvery cement
of the prison where my cousin Kenny lived (felonious
assault/armed robbery) for
seven years until he was set free, and married, bought
a house out in the country, where he lived
another seven
years happily (it seemed)

until one day he took a chainsaw to a tree
to rid his property of some tree disease, and in
the course of this was pinned beneath
a limb so heavy that it took
four men to lift it off of him. He

was dead already when they found him, so
no one knows how long he might have
borne that weight and lingered—whether
it took him many hours to die, or if, as they
so often say, he never knew what hit him.

But long before this end, my
cousin would ride his bike ten miles across forbidden
busy streets on Saturdays to play with me a game
we called Don't Kill Me, Kenny, Please.

Because to say this was the only way to win.

It was the kind of play that made my parents
wary, so when
we heard my father's pockets full of keys, we
turned on the TV and pretended to be watching:

The laughter, meaningless.
The hijinks and the wasted drama, completely
wasted on the likes of him and me, while
the hourglass of the living room seemed to be
so stuffed with sand it never budged. How

could it? Tedium, being—as we
would both learn better, later, in our
very different ways—the highest
of all the prices to be paid for
getting in or staying out of trouble.

Until one day, despite the parents
everywhere, he got a knife out of the kitchen, and
chased me with it to the tool shed, where
I was supposed to say, “Don’t kill
me, Kenny, please.” But didn’t. I just
stood there, instead, understanding

how weary one might grow of games like this—
(although, in truth, I wasn’t weary yet). I lifted
my shirt, pointed to my heart, said, “Go ahead.”

Well, of course, he didn’t. He
rolled his eyes, tossed his
knife to the floor of the shed, and then, sounding

to me like a very old man (older, as it
turned out, than
he would ever be) and
also (more surprisingly) as if, perhaps he’d
already considered the possibility
of killing me no matter what I said, he

told me he was sorry, but this wasn’t something he
was willing to go to prison for—killing
his stupid cousin just because she was so boring. So

I said: “Don’t kill me, Kenny.” (Sigh.) “Please.”

Of course, I wanted to live, mostly, but maybe I
also had already some sense of my-
self driving just like this one day past all
the brilliant sprawl of all the time ahead, feeling

as if I'd already somehow escaped this
life without regrets. Or might. And

even got a glimpse of all those prisoners
shuffling around on the other side
of an electric fence—which
would have been humming
in my subconscious, in the sun.