

## *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.