

## Freeway Haunt

Phoebe Cao

“Remember when we used to do coloring books together?” asks my dead brother. “Things were so nice before we had to start studying for school. And we’d constantly fight over the colors, too.”

“Never.” I keep my eyes on the road. “You always let me pick first.”

He says nothing else for the rest of the ride. From the passenger seat, he stares out the window at the pink-streaked oil painting sky until we return home. My vision avoids the brand-hot sight of him, yet still catches on the flowing edges of his presence burning my periphery.

Even after all this time, I can’t look him in the face. I can’t bear to name him.

Mom is cooking dinner when I pass through the kitchen. The stove fire pops and crackles. She looks up from the steam, sees my plastic shopping bag, and frowns at me. “You bought another sketchbook again?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t even draw anymore.”

“She’ll try to get back into it, won’t you, Vivi?” my brother says.

Mom doesn’t hear him the way I do, but she gives a put-upon huff and dismisses me with a, “Suàn le. Qù huà ba.” *Never mind. Go draw then.*

But I can’t draw. Not anymore. When I settle at my desk in my room, 2B pencil in hand, I look at the blank page and dissolve into a bleeding watercolor, blind but for the same lippaged mosaic vision: shards of glass, flickering lights. A near empty freeway the landscape backdrop to frantic cops and first responders. A dull gray Toyota Corolla, crumpled like a scrapped piece of sketchbook paper.

The first time I saw my brother after his death was at his funeral three years ago. He stood by and watched in solemn silence as our family imploded. It took me so long to notice him that by the time I finally looked up, he was already gone.

The second time I saw him was on Chinese New Year's Eve for a couple seconds. The third time was on my fifteenth birthday for a couple minutes. Then my brother started appearing more and more, for longer each time, and I asked him why. As it turns out, even teenage prodigies don't know everything. He can't tell me where he goes when he's not with me; all he knows is that he's somehow right where he needs to be.

Now he's around practically every day. Yet I still see that seventeen-year-old boy sprawled upon the asphalt, open eyes blank and unblinking at the Bay Area daybreak.

"*Qǐ lái le!*" *Get up!* This is my brother's incessant refrain on days when my chiaroscuro shadow eclipses my mind and I hate myself too much to get out of bed.

"Mama means well," he says after every fight I have with Mom. "She just doesn't know how to show it. After you stormed out, she cried herself to sleep, did you know that? Maybe you should try to make up with her."

"Why don't you tell her that *I* cried myself to sleep?"

"I did." Even though our parents can't consciously hear his spoken words, they certainly get the sentiment of whatever he says to them. "Why do you think she cooled down so fast?"

"Baba is getting awfully thin these days," he says whenever Dad comes home from work too late and leaves too early. "It can't be healthy to work that much. Maybe you should get him to take a break."

In the end, my brother is the one who convinces Dad to get some sleep. No amount of nagging from Mom and me—one of the rare times we're united—can convince Dad to go to

bed, but just a bit of cajoling from my brother and Dad is snoring in front of his dead computer screen, cheek plastered against his paperwork-strewn desktop.

My brother never stops talking to me:

“Why don’t you hang out with your friends anymore?”

“Why can’t you get along with Mama and Baba better?”

“Do you have any idea what you want to do in college?”

Perhaps we both know it, but won’t say it aloud. He’s visiting more now because time is running out. Not for him, but for me. Now that I’m in my senior year of high school, approaching his age when he died, the future looms grave. It feels as if the day I surpass him in age will dawn a judgement, a deliverance.

The day after I fail my spring semester midterms, I wake up early. The sunrise taunts me, cold and sulfurous. My furious heart wrests itself free from the image, freeway and car crash and dead boy, and before I’m fully awake I’ve already slipped into his room.

His bedroom is as it’s always been, a bookshelf-framed cubist exhibition blocked out by doorstopper textbooks and a golden arsenal of trophies. There is no art, but I still keep searching for it. The only room decor lies overhead, an evenly distributed scattering of glow-in-the-dark stars speckled upon the ceiling, ever enduring. Dad bought them for us several years back—one set for each of us. My brother’s are warm sunshine yellow; mine were iridescent silver. My stars have long peeled off, age-weary and unresilient. His are still in perfect shape and color.

I fall supine upon the bed. The duvet is soft velvet, pale beige darkening when I rub my hands against the fabric’s grain. I slide my palms across the velvet: up, down. Up, down. The desk chair creaks, cants, and spins around, and there he is, peering at me through the sepia semi-brightness.

“Couldn’t sleep again?” he asks.

I fix my eyes upon the ceiling. Sunlight snuffs out the stars as the dawn breaks into earnest morning.

He follows my gaze upwards. "You can have those, you know. I think Mama and Baba won't mind."

"They're yours," I say. "I don't want them."

He slumps back into his chair, spinning around, kicking his feet like a child. He tips himself back at a dangerous angle. "So what did you draw earlier?"

"Nothing." I hesitate, and then say more quietly, "I couldn't draw. I can't."

"Why not?"

I squeeze my eyes shut but still see the stars. Their collective glow, so yellow and brilliant, are indelibly pontillated into the swirling Van Gogh insides of my eyelids.

"Vivi," my brother says. This time, it's his turn to hesitate. "Is it my fault?"

I get up. On my way out of the room, I knock over his chair. It falls to the floor with a dull thud.

Mom and Dad waited until the weekend after my older brother got himself killed in a car crash to inform me that he'd been dead since last Sunday morning. They'd waited until the onset of spring break to tell me the truth so I wouldn't be distracted during midterm season, I was already struggling in my classes, I shouldn't be burdened with any additional stress. They'd let me take advantage of the week-long break to recover from the news before I bounced back the following week and continued with school, with life.

It was an accident, they'd said. For some inexplicable reason the car had malfunctioned, causing him to careen into the steel guardrail just short of the exit. It wasn't his fault, they said. Your brother was an exemplary young man, the best son we could ask for. Children like him are the reason we leave our homeland to fight for our place in

America. He was valedictorian, he was going to give a lovely inspiring speech at graduation, he was going to Stanford. He loved us, he'll always be with us. He loved you so much.

My parents had seemed as always—my father, ever the stoic; my mother, sharp and no-nonsense. If they were any sterner, any more somber than usual, either closer to or more distant from each other, I hadn't noticed. Perhaps they were just that skilled at hiding. Perhaps they were just that desperate to hide from me.

Artist's eye or otherwise, I was utterly blind to the things that matter. Perhaps it was even willful ignorance.

My brother was a good driver. It was a good car. It was a fine day with mild traffic. They never sued the manufacturer. He was fully alert, uncontestably sober. He wasn't focused on anything but his steady grip on the wheel and the fast-approaching stretch of road before him.

I don't think about it because I can't stand to look it in the face.

I next see my brother seated beside me in my school's vacant parking lot. I've just had a screaming match with Mom and Dad at dinner because they found out I'm skipping classes to sit at the gum-dotted, birdpoop-streaked lunch tables outside, ignoring anyone who approaches me in concern or exasperation, watching glaring bright clouds drift past in desultory arcs overhead for hours on end until I nod off to dream about where they're going.

What's the big deal, I'd snapped at Mom, it's just school, to which she'd shouted back, you're a high school senior, you'll be going to college in a few months, your brother was never like this, to which my response was simply, Fuck him!, and then she slammed her chopsticks onto the dining table, and because the chopsticks were bamboo and the table was pine the clatter they made against each other evidently didn't sound violent enough for her purposes, so she also flung her porcelain rice bowl to the floor, shattering it against the ceramic kitchen tiles. And then I shot up from my chair, jostling the table and making

everything laid there flinch away from me, and I repeated, what's the big deal, and then I ploughed on, it's not even that bad, it's not like I'm out partying or having underage sex or smoking weed or anything, which she took as a threat to become a drug-addicted prostitute and end up jailed for life, and then she recruited Dad, and then both of them began shouting over each other about how they came all the way to America young and poor and barely fluent in English all so their future children could have the best futures, don't you know Americans won't give Asians the time of day unless we're the best of the best, why do you have to be so difficult. Then I thought of what I could say that would hurt them the most and I decided upon, if you wanted your children to be happy then why is my brother dead, isn't it funny how you lost your favorite child and now you have to settle for me, don't you wish it was me that died instead, and I didn't hear what they said in response to that because I immediately seized my car keys and stormed out of the house. So now I have to spend the night in my car at my high school.

I know. I'm not a child who's easy to love. I'm restless, irritable, and rebellious. I'm a watercolor gray and harsh-edged, runny, water bleeding through soggy, saturated paper. I've had straight C's and D's since the latter half of freshman year. I haven't been able to muster the energy or the will to clean my room in months. I regularly go out for late night walks around our neighborhood and fall asleep curled up on public benches, hunched over picnic tables, or half slumped on a swingset with the metal chain in my clammy grip digging into my face. I go empty-handed—no pepper spray. No house key. No phone.

My brother always follows me. He never lets me out of his sight. Go home, he says. Don't wander too far. Let Mama and Baba know where you are. At his most nagging, he acts like a parent.

But Mom and Dad have all but given up on me. They let me run wild, stand by as I crash and burn. Mom has only three rules for me. Never drive a Toyota: those are dangerously unlucky and kill beloved children. Never drive a gray car: those are also dangerously unlucky and kill beloved children. Never eat tangerines: whenever he stayed up late studying she'd peel a tangerine for him, arranging the wedges into a perfect mandala upon a gleaming white plate, and remind him to take a break.

Xīnkǔle, she'd say. The closest translation is, *you've worked hard*. An acknowledgment, an expression of appreciation for effort. Dedication. Sacrifice.

The color of my scratched, grimy Honda Civic is several shades darker than the vivid vermillion of Chinese red envelopes I had originally chosen, but I can't tell if that's the fault of the car's paint coat or of the world for muting itself into numb dullness.

I turn on the radio.

My brother groans. "Stop skipping through every song."

I skip even faster.

"Why can't you just make a choice and stick with it, Vivi?"

I punch off the stereo and step out of the car, slamming the door so hard I can feel the reverberations through my feet.

He follows me as I pace around the lot. "Vivi."

"No."

"Why can't you just talk to me? Vivian!"

I trip over a scar-like crack in the faded asphalt. He catches up and peers down at me, blocking my eyes' path to the cold sky. "Are you okay?"

I've finally had enough. I shoot to my feet, slapping away his proffered hand. "Why the hell are you still here, Davie?" I finally look back at him. Finally put a name back to that face. "Don't you have somewhere better to be?"

For a heartbeat, an emotion wild and jumbled flickers across Davie's face. "I don't know. I don't want to."

"You mean you want to stay here? You want to follow me around and watch me screw up my whole life and turn into some stupid, pathetic loser?"

Davie turns his face towards the sky. All but the brightest stars are overshadowed by the city's unremitting light. "Why are you screwing up your life?"

So I tell him.

I tell him it's because the freeway leading to Palo Alto is smooth and black, just recently treated, burying any treadmarks he'd ever made along the path. I tell him it's because we still have his laptop but it hardly works now because it keeps dying, because I can't draw anymore, because everytime I bring a pencil to paper I can only imagine him lying on the freeway, unmoving and stiff. I tell him it's because Mom is a feral Goya dog, bared teeth red from the blood of her own pups, because Dad is a bald-wheeled Keifer robot snagged by a crevice in the ground, always spinning but never free. Because sometimes, I'm not sure they love me. I'm not sure we love each other. I'm a bleeding watercolor, and maybe all the love in the world isn't enough for us to face the truth and face each other.

I ask Davie why our parents lied to me, why they shut me out. He tells me it's because they love me, they just don't know how to show it.

I ask him if they'd loved him more. I hate them for loving him, for doting on him and demanding from him until he burned alive beneath the spotlight beam of their love. I hate them for loving him too much. I hate them for not loving him enough, for not loving either of us enough.

One hour and fifty-two minutes later, the family SUV screeches in and Mom and Dad come rushing out towards me.

After Davie got his driver's license, we all went to a famous hotpot restaurant in Palo Alto, Chángshòu Jiā, to celebrate. The name means *House of Longevity*, according to Davie. Mom and Dad had glowed with pride, not owing to the license itself but to the unspoken guarantee that he would take care of himself, in everything, from now on. Independent and

undemanding. The easiest child graduating from lamblike obedience to iconographic sainthood.

Soon after, he started taking me out to that same place, just the two of us, whenever he judged that I was feeling unhappy: when I'd gotten flunked by my favorite teacher, for example, or dumped by some vapid teenage boy. Slowly it became a tradition which unceremoniously died in the spring of his senior year at the climax of college applications season.

My parents said nothing when I got my own driver's license. They might have even disapproved. But breaking my habit of doing exactly the opposite of what Mom and Dad want, I begin attending classes again. Anything beats what I've been doing of late—which is nothing at all.

Every face is gray as day. Lessons layer upon themselves, unintelligible static, and sweep away like eraser dust. Questions and answers writhe, scumbling and sickening: constant reminders of how I'd swim to the bottom of swimming pools as a child and stay there until I saw stars, dead set on holding my breath until the inevitable, dizzying rush back up.

The aftermath of the fight with my parents is quiet but fraught with stilted wariness. For weeks the air reeks of decidedly un-Chinese niceties, long outliving our mutual commitment to unsubtle jabs and cold shoulders. They make a show of only speaking English to me in their thick Chinese accents, halting and gratingly aloof with all its tenses and prepositions and filler syllables.

But as always, the ice gradually thaws.

In a rusty demonstration of goodwill, Mom cleans my room for me. I come home from school one day to the fragrant bustle of her folding my freshly laundered clothes, picking up trash from the floor, wiping the dust off my long neglected desk, even going as far as to rearrange my haphazard heaps of half-finished sketchbooks she always complains is a waste of space.

When she spots me, she merely says, “*Bāng wǒ pūchuáng.*” *Help me make the bed.* “It’s not good to spend so much time shut in your room. Come downstairs and do your homework in the kitchen, it will help you feel better.”

I start working nights at a local Starbucks. It’s grueling. Order after order smudges in the murk of my mind, efficiency an achingly elusive vanishing point. The too-rich aroma of roasted beans, the strident scrape of chairs, the guilt-inducing sight of patrons working or studying on their laptops making me wish I could shrink my presence into a crumpled wad and bin myself like an aborted sketch attempt.

It shouldn’t be this fucking hard.

The day after getting my first paycheck, I go back to Chángshòu Jiā. None of us has gone since then. It suddenly hits me that I’ve never driven this way on my own; it had always been Davie who had taken the two of us here.

It’s been three years. The place has changed. The lights: then buzzing steel gray dome pendants, now crisp yellow paper drums. The chairs: then cracked polyester seats, neon red and blue, now wooden and ramrod straight. The tables: then age-nicked metal, cool to the elbows, now veiled with starched white cloth. Even the music: then housewife-acclaimed compilations of Zhōngguó fēng, the sweet spot genre between traditional Chinese and modern, now mainstream American pop.

The employees used to recognize the two of us as regulars. It’s the little ones, they’d say, our favorite duo! Now it’s just me. Now there are new people who have never seen my brother, never seen him slurping red-hot ladlefuls of soup, never seen him drowning his fish balls and enoki and quail eggs in far too much Hoisin sauce and sesame paste, never seen how he’d always pile my plate with my known favorites at the self-serve before even reaching for his own.

The savory scent of beef and pork and lamb, málà broth, garlic and scallions: then home. Then sating, then warm. Now bizarre and dreamlike as Dali.

My vision tunnels into fisheye distortion. A wave of nausea engulfs my appetite.

“Table for one?”

I can't even force myself to look up. I whirl around and march straight back out the door before collapsing onto the curb outside.

Davie sits down beside me. “I missed this place.”

Encroaching night highlights the dust-misted rays of the streetlamps in sharp relief. Davie narrows his eyes at the parking lot through the congealing gloom. “I swear it looks smaller than I remember.”

As a child, I had sincerely believed that he was closer in age to our parents than to me. Perhaps he was the real parent. He is everything mothers and fathers can never be. He's responsible for all I've ever been, all I ever will be.

“Mom and Dad should've done better.” I can't help but flinch from saying this truth aloud.

“They shouldn't be so hard on you.”

“I mean they should've been better to *you*,” I say. “You were just a kid. Kids are supposed to have fun, not waste away their childhoods studying and collecting stupid trophies no one will care about ten years later. Not sacrifice their childhoods parenting their younger siblings because their parents are stupid assholes.”

“They love us. They tried their best.”

“And you think they're trying their best now?” I fixate on the gap between us on the curb where we're sitting. It's narrow but feels like an endless chasm. “I'm a failure and they don't even care.”

“You're not a failure.” Davie shifts, and the chasm widens. “And they're trying really hard to be different from before.”

“Don't tell me you don't blame them.”

The restaurant closes. The last employees leave. The night settles into Rembrandt darkness. And then Davie says, "I've had my moments of weakness."

"I've always been jealous of you," I say.

"Me too."

Silence falls again. We head back to my car, Davie slipping into the passenger seat with the ease of a shadow.

"But I was too proud," he says. "I thought I'd rather die than try to change anything."

I start the engine.

"I should've known better," he says.

I exit the parking lot.

"I," Davie says. He sighs. He's never looked or sounded so lost. "I fucked up, Vivi. I fucked up so bad."

I am a bleeding watercolor. Always ruminating, always obsessing, always seeing the boy on the freeway and never looking at his face. Never naming things for what they are, never looking the truth in the ugly eye. Now, the grime-caked painting finally clears.

I pull over behind a grocery store.

"Vivi?"

"I know it wasn't an accident." My voice is flat, grim.

He opens his mouth. Nothing comes out.

"You were going to Stanford," I say. "You were going to graduate *summa cum laude* because you're a fucking genius. You were going to end up rich and famous, you were going to end up becoming the president or win a Nobel Peace Prize for finding the cure to cancer or something, you were going to make Mom and Dad proud. *More* proud. You had your whole life ahead of you."

Again, he has no answer. For a long moment the air holds only the thrums of our hearts throbbing in tandem. “It didn’t feel that way,” he finally says. “Not for me.”

I shut my eyes and squeeze them so tight I see stars. I see the freeway, the car, the boy forever broken and dead, dead, dead.

“Vivi—”

I look out the windshield at the sky. It’s small and suffocating. I don’t look at him. “Fuck you,” I say.

He reaches out to me.

“Get out,” I spit. “GET OUT!”

After he’s gone, the ensuing silence is as loud as it is cruel and punishing. It expands into the space he leaves behind, draping itself across my shoulders with leaden gravity. Nothing will ever rightly fill where he was. The fog returns with a triumphant vengeance. For an eternity I sit there, burning eyes digging through the blank canvas sky for long-dead stars.

The day he died, I woke up to tree-filtered sunlight and the bustling birdsong of distant traffic. I got up and began my day. As my brother lay dead upon the asphalt, I ate breakfast. As they closed off the lane and swarmed his body, I brushed my teeth. As they took photographs of his snapped neck and fractured spinal cord, I dressed. And as they bundled him up in plastic and carted him off to the morgue, I did my homework.

Late the night before, he’d knocked on my door. He’d grinned with feverish excitement. He had never seemed so full of life. He asked me if I wanted to go to Chángshòu Jiā with him tomorrow. He said, for old time’s sake. It’s been far too long. I miss it. One last time.

I said no. I don’t remember why.

He'd been reluctant to leave—Are you sure, Vivi? But why? But, but, but, but of course he eventually gave up.

That single night had been the sole warning sign he'd ever shown. I'd been the only one to come face to face with it, and in my own childish selfishness had failed—refused—to see it.

He always keeps his word. If only I'd made plans with him, he would not have crashed his car the following morning. Perhaps he would have done it later. Perhaps he would have found some other way. But I know this deep in my bitter bones: if only I'd been better, known better, he would not have died the next day.

I stop attending classes again. Mom and Dad don't bother saying anything this time.

I almost rear-end Dad's car when we coincidentally arrive home at the same time one evening. He's stopped working so late now. He signals for me to pull into the driveway before him, but I simply sit there staring blankly at my hands on the wheel for so long he finally stops waiting and goes in first. Only after he parks, exits, and begins to walk towards me do I reel my senses back in and park my car behind his.

I stumble out, clutching my coffee-stained Starbucks apron to my chest. The rich aroma of Mom's cooking wafts out the house's windows. For dinner tonight we're having *lǎo yā bāo*—aged duck stew. I can't remember if it's supposed to be my favorite or Davie's.

"I just got fired from my job," I announce. "I missed a whole week and didn't bother to call in sick."

Dad furrows his brow. He stares at me like I'm being deliberately obtuse. "Why are you working? You should focus on studying."

"Dad." I give a shaky, drawn-out sigh. "I have straight F's in school right now. I can't even make a stupid coffee without messing up. I'm not going to college, alright?"

That expression of his—*nǐ shǎ háizi, you silly child*—deepens. “You don’t have to worry.” He looks away towards the house. “Mama and Baba will always take care of you.”

My breath catches in my throat. Then I nod. “I know.”

Together, we head in for dinner.

I collide my car with a low stone wall and scratch up the right side. Thin silver lines stretch across the vermilion paint coat like finger-smudged cirrus clouds.

“Go to hell,” I whisper into the dark. I’m in Davie’s room again, curled up on myself, a shadowy lump of a quivering mess at the foot of the bed.

Davie’s edges are messy and ill-defined. “Do you want me to?”

“What happens when you leave me again?”

“I won’t.”

My late night walks and outdoor sleepovers come to an end after I tumble off a playset and prick my face bruised with sharp, blistering wood chips. I taste sawdust for days.

Some days are worse than others. Today is a worse day and I can’t get out of bed. My sheets are stifling. My neck and back and limbs are old, rusted machines stiff and rigid from neglect, the rigor mortis of being alive and not living.

Is this what your body feels like when you die, if you could still feel? Is this how *he* felt?

I can hear Mom nearing my room. I've always been able to tell apart everyone's footsteps: Davie, measured and deliberate; Dad, clomping with single-mindedness; Mom, brisk and sharp. Hearing her approach me has never boded well—surely she's coming to shout at me. Surely I've done something wrong again. Surely she hates me now. But this time, her footsteps are subdued, steady as Davie once was.

"Xīnkǔle," she says. Then she leaves just as quietly as she came in. The ghost mother of a ghost son, of a ghost daughter.

For the first time in what feels like years, I emerge from the blankets. I open my eyes.

On my nightstand sits a white plate, upon which is arranged a circle of freshly peeled tangerine wedges.

I toss and turn in my sleep, beset with dreams of *then*. Shards of glass. Flickering lights. Crumpled car. If I'd gone, if I'd gone, if I'd gone. When I see the body, it's not Davie's but my own, dead and useless and forever lost.

"Why won't you leave me alone?" I ask.

Davie's sitting at his desk again. He spins in slow semicircles—back and forth, back and forth. "I want you to do better than me."

Baba rubs his graying temples. He's never looked so old. When he looks up at me, his eyes are clear and steady. He tells me there is nothing worse in the world than the old burying the young.

Mama stills her restless hands. She smooths her brow and softens her mouth. She tells me the one duty she expects of me is to outlive her and Baba.

Davie's sitting in the passenger seat again. "Where are you going?"

The world lies still and serene beneath the dew-varnished blue glow of predawn. The pinprick stars turn into bright spots of memory. The sky holds its breath.

I look at him for a long moment. He is everything that stars are: shining, burning. The center of gravity. Then a supergiant, larger than life, bottomless red maw devouring everything it had once touched with its light until its bleeding, iron-heavy heart collapses in on itself. Then exploding. Then a black hole—inescapable. Inevitable. His presence still strikes light-years later, refuses to be compressed into the infinitesimal space that accommodates his absence.

Where he was, now there is only an unfathomable *nothing*.

I have him forever committed to memory. Erased though he may be, the paper he lived upon will always bear the deep, pencil-indented marks of his being.

"I couldn't sleep again," I say. I pull out of the driveway. "Maybe this will finally make me crash."

We pass a Sichuan restaurant—closed at this time of day, of course. "You know Chángshòu Jiā?" I slide my palms across the wheel's cold, hard leather: up, down. Up, down. "It's so different now. I thought I hated it. But maybe it's not that bad. Maybe it'll be okay. Sometimes we just have to roll with it, don't we?"

"You've got so many books," I say. "Have you read them all? I don't even understand what most of them are about. If I were half as smart as you, I'd never stop reading. I'd never stop learning."

My eyes sting. We shoot past parks, markets, and cafes like a meteor. "I can't take your stars." The streets are empty. Everything is blue, blue, blue. "The glow-in-the-dark stars on your ceiling—Baba got them for you. They're all yours."

“You have to take care of the things that belong to you.” Contrition chokes my voice. “Doesn’t matter if someone gave them to you or if you earned them. You have to take care of your things.”

“So do you,” he says.

My grip clenches into white-nailed fists. I pull onto the freeway. “I’m fucked up. I’ve fucked up my life.”

“You haven’t.”

“Do you know how fucked up everyone is?” Bitterness begins to creep into my tone. “Mama and Baba are fucked up, too. Everything is fucked up.”

“I know.”

“It’s all your fault. You fucked up everything.”

“I know.”

The freeway is empty and desolate. Nothing ahead of us. Blue, blue, blue. And then I finally explode.

“What the hell were you thinking!” I take a shaky breath. “Why didn’t you say anything? Why couldn’t you just talk to me?”

Davie is silent.

“You’re burned out, fine! Go take a break. You don’t want to go to Stanford, fine! Go somewhere else, get a job, do whatever the fuck you want.” I increase the pressure of my foot on the gas pedal. “Mama and Baba are slowly eating you alive? Fine! You should’ve talked to me. I would’ve listened. I would’ve taken them on, I would’ve fought them to make them understand!” My voice breaks. The speedometer goes up, up, up. “If I’d known. If I’d *really* known. I would’ve helped you, Davie.”

He says nothing. And then, suddenly: “Vivi. You’re going too fast.”

“Didn’t you regret it?” I ask.

“Not back then,” he says. “But I do now.”

We’ve almost reached the exact spot he died: Interstate 280. Exit 20. The turn onto Arastradero Road, Palo Alto. It arches to the right, the steel guardrail tight against its inner curve.

I give a laugh that chokes into a sob. “Too fucking late.”

“Vivi.” He’s deathly pale. “*Please.*”

Almost there.

“VIVIAN!”

Here we are.

Before us spin the rolling green hills of Palo Alto. The sky is dark but warm. It’s striking how closely it resembles our ceiling stars back home.

I shut my eyes.

I still keep our childhood coloring pages somewhere in my room, where are they? Are they buried in unmarked graves of long-missed homework assignments and expired makeup palettes? I should find them. I should hang them up. Fantastical creatures, vivid rainbows, lofty castles in the air. Maybe I should draw something new. Maybe I should decorate Davie’s room with some art, brighten his day, god knows he needs it. Maybe a landscape, maybe the sky. Maybe us. Anything the unburdened mind can imagine.

If there’s no space, I can throw out some old textbooks, clear out some old trophies, it’s not like he needs them anymore, I know he doesn’t care about all that shit anymore, stellar grades and resumes and being the consummate son by collapsing himself into a black hole, the pinhole pinnacle of perfection.

He needs art. I’d really like to create something for my brother. Something new.

And then I open my eyes and yank the steering wheel to the left. The freeway lurches to the right. The car screeches. It screams as the rear scrapes against the guardrail.

The car tips onto its left two tires. The world hangs askance.

I hold my breath.

And then the other two tires collide with the ground. The car rocks like a boat in turbulent waters.

Eventually it settles.

We've stopped at a bizarre angle, barely forty-five degrees short of facing backwards on the road. We've mounted part of the grassy slope just outside the outer curve. Skid streaks mar the turf like scorch marks. We've knocked over a sign. We've snapped clean off the left side-view mirror.

For a long time we sit there, gasping for breath. Then I carefully back up and exit the freeway to turn onto Arastradero Road.

The sun has broken free of the horizon. It washes the waking world in gold. Sidewalks warm, stores open, early morning joggers emerge. As we near Stanford University, Hoover Tower stretches taller and taller from the distance.

I stop at a red light. The movement is smooth, deliberate. "I'm sorry. I get it now."

Davie looks out the window. His figure is cast in flat darkness, edges gleaming like a Klimt gold leaf painting. "I know."

"You don't have to worry about me anymore," I say. "I'll do better. I promise."

His expression crumples. He buries his face in his hands. His shoulders quake with gasping sobs.

I circle the campus in sedate loops. By the fourth lap, Davie has stopped crying. He raises his head and leans it sideways upon the headrest. His tears paint two wet paths across his tilted face; one follows far behind the other, streaming in parallel with the trail until finally diverging at his temple.

He's never looked so young. He'll never grow old. With a start, I realize I've already surpassed him in age.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"I know."

I leave the campus behind and drive onward. The morning has fully settled now; the day is young. It's bright outside. It's beautiful—the perfect subject for a new painting.

"Where are you going?" Davie asks me once more.

I focus on my steady grip on the wheel and the infinitely branched streets before me.  
"Anywhere."