

*Silphidae: Carrion Beetle*

There are four quarters in each hour, four electoral votes in Idaho, four species mentioned in the Torah. Four is the atomic number for beryllium, which is brittle at room temperature and used with copper to make gyroscopes. The threadsnake is the smallest in the world, averaging at four inches. A nickel weighs four grams; an adult hippopotamus weighs four tons. There are four seasons and four horsemen of the apocalypse and Eugenie Parker's body once held four pregnancies but only gave birth to two.

Eugenie liked to know these things because she liked a sense of purpose to things. She tracked objects, objects that had homes on tidy shelves, places they belonged, were expected to be. Objects held steady; they could be lined against a countertop and counted, recounted. There and over. Safe. Unlost. Things had adventures out in the world, then came back, ready to go out again for another tour.

To Eugenie, her lab was the center of her systems, where the door closed with a satisfying *thock* and her drawers opened on steady runners. Inside those drawers were gleaming objects to measure still more objects—ways to keep the metronome of her earth still pulsing.

She used to close out her day on campus with a jog through the paths of the Bagley Nature Area, but those cantering days were long over, arthritis settling at the base of her spine and in the bulb of her hips as it tends to do to those her age, which was long past standard retirement. She wasn't ready for all that and no one pushed; her mind was bright as a sink, her projects still clearly urgent. Her husband, Charles, a well-liked dean, had had no trouble retiring a decade previous. He gathered his things into a single banker's box and passed on what wasn't personal to his wife's graduate students, save an antique pair of field binoculars that had been his father's. These he set on the sill of their sunroom and quietly watched the spring ritual of the building of the nests.

Eugenie still walked home, even on the coldest and slipperiest of days, when she'd bully the coiled Yaktrax onto her boots and tromp into the florid world gone quiet at dusk. The half-hour it took for her to get from one imposing brick building to another much more diminutive one was her chance to work through the obstacles of the day and arrive at her next steps for the following morning.

Her daughter worried about this routine, the insistence on walking home from campus at her age and in her condition, and it's true it was taking longer and longer every year; once it took fifteen minutes, and now two units of fifteen.

But Eugenie *needed* this ritual. It put closure on her day and made her available to Charles. She never *really* put the lab away, not all the way, but if she had this walk, she knew she could keep it from bubbling up and turning her distant.

At home, Charles would be done, or nearly done, preparing dinner. Her offering was to set the table and clean up after, and his was to feed them both. They had made this division of labor early in their marriage—one cooks, the other cleans—when they both came home noodley with exhaustion, both helpless at the popping maws of their eager progeny. Now it was only Eugenie who was tired, though not unhappily so, and she still tended to the setting and cleaning of the dishes out of routine, a way to complete the day's cycle.

"Tell me about today," Charles would say, and she would tell him, and he would listen patiently and know not to give suggestions to the snarls and clogs; she would come to that just fine on her own.

"They want me to go out to Aitkin next week," Eugenie told him, folding cloth napkins under soup spoons.

"To give the crop diversity talk?"

Aitkin was where there was no line between sky and land, where each slate was gray-white in the winter, the crop lines buried deep with drifts. Eugenie gave talks to clusters of farmers who were tempted out of their houses with promises of spaghetti dinners, pie, and a chance to get away from their wives for a few hours with other men like them, their skin folded and leathered the same way, their flannels elbow-worn the same way. They'd look at her with marble-blue eyes, gray-flecked hair, forks full of red-ribboned pasta, and listen to her tell them they've been doing it not quite right all these years.

She loved these long trips where the landscape broke into pasture, coupled with a chance to have more in-depth conversations with the graduate students who came to assist her. Minnesota's swirl of ecotones is part of what held her fast to this state. That and, of course, Charles. And the children.

She had had a chance once, to replot herself on the map. A post-doctoral fellowship in Scotland, where the soil was peaty and

rich, an untamed and unfrozen landscape, greedy with carbon consumption and exactly dovetailing into her work on renewability at a time when chemicals of war were turned on the food that we eat. She felt the urgency and call to say yes but instead found herself saying yes of a whole other sort, to Charles, who was being wooed to a northern university with a tenure-track position and clear potential for more.

Eugenie surprised herself at this, at her pit-deep longing and the path she decided to take. She always thought she'd work her way around the globe as the soil needed her, but when she closed her eyes and played out the reel of her life without Charles in it, she felt a streak of pain runnel up inside her that rang out into the air.

Yes, a firm yes, she would go with him to the north woods, where administration drummed up an adjunct position she easily turned into a full professorship over the years.

Eugenie was valuable to the university, but in a wholly different way from Charles. Her work eventually garnered her awards and thus attention to the university, which brought funding and trust and hope. She was given her own lab, and once she got there, her spirits were entirely content. What did it matter if her lab was on an elite map point or a humble one, as long as she was allowed her research and her steadfast partner?

It's not that Charles didn't possess his own envelope of ambition too, his captured in a brief political race when the children were young. A path back to the university bloomed open, one that was long and good and concluded in his retirement from a deanship, much to the sorrow of his colleagues, not only because he was so very good but also because they were very afraid of what could follow his term. But this wasn't his concern, he firmly decided. He was stepping out from behind his desk and onto the trail. Those birds had been calling to him for quite some time.

He'd made trout chowder, an old standby, a signal the weather would soon shift. Charles made a habit of relying on the bounty of the co-op to signal seasonal eating. The fish was good and flaky, and Eugenie tipped her fork in appreciation. This was how he loved her, she knew, and how she loved him back was by taking what he had to offer and appreciating it for what it was.

Eugenie might find herself quiet and methodical in her lab, but in front of an audience of students or clusters of communities, she became dynamic. This was her inheritance from her father who taught literature and drama at a long-shuttered boys' preparatory school farther outstate. She grew up with tales of the Bible, Shakespeare, and Greek mythology as her bathtime stories. She'd skim the curtain closed, making her own magical yurt, and slosh around as her father told stories, patiently leaning against the skin. These were the days she was afraid to be alone, a fear she eventually shed in young adulthood.

"Once there were two brothers named Oliver and Orlando," he'd begin. And her father would tell her the story of two sets of brothers who were mean to each other and punished each other for land and power. He told her of the duke's daughters and how one fell in love with Orlando, but she had to run away too, into the woods. "She wore her hair tucked into a cap and wore slacks, just like a boy, and she had to teach Orlando how to love, even as she's, underneath it all, the woman he loves too." This was one of the stories that ended happily, which was a relief to Eugenie, as all the couples paired up and no one was left out.

She'd emerge slick as a seal and modestly ask for her towel. He'd wrap her tight and lift her against his waist and they'd gallop to her room, the one she shared with her big sister Edith, who'd roll her eyes, but only for a moment before she gave in to giggles too.

Eugenie learned that joy could be caught, so when she opened the door to that Aitkin church basement, she carried her passion at the center of her belly, in the crown of her chest, and she refused to let any skepticism puncture that. She had decades of research to prove herself.

And they had decades of government guarantees to drive them. "If I stop working a single crop, if I give up rotating soy and wheat and corn, then I lose the subsidy money," one pointed out.

"A fair point and a fair concern," Eugenie said. This was where she put up the slide—the one that told the story of the Nielsons, whose crop was destroyed year after year by hail, then drought, then hail, and hail again.

"The folks in town had a pool, betting on when he'd throw it all in," she told them.

They chortled appreciatively. They knew him. Not Paul Nielson specifically, but there was always one rolling through, some upstart without farming in his blood. He'd see a parcel of land go on the market and think maybe this is the way I'll feed my family. More often than not, they were gone in a few years, the house swinging empty of his small, hungry kids and the gradually more and more impatient wife. Sometimes the family went first, if desperation was strong enough, and he'd grudgingly follow, slower to realize what his wife knew before a penny was put down—that farming is not some hobby, not for some man who loved the outdoors but didn't know how to tame it.

"But no one ever won that pool." Despite everything, an underdog story is hard to resist. "He learned about a thing called regenerative agriculture. This is where the soil has a living root at all times." The slide behind her shifted from the barren devastation of a failed commodity crop to a grinning farmer kneeling in front of a lush green backdrop. He was broad-gutted and wore wind-softened overalls. Here she paused to measure her audience. "You use inputs on your crops generally? Herbicides? Insecticides?"

Nods.

"The crops begin to adapt, right? The weeds and the bugs begin to resist, so then we have to turn to something stronger. Of course, we're all losing out, that extra costs you money and time and us? Well, the crop yields are decreasing in nutrients."

Eugenie held up an apple, gorgeously red, shiny and film-perfect. "This is a conventionally grown apple. The fertilizers used on this orchard were pretty standard fare, which resulted in bigger, more uniform fruit, but the load of things like antioxidants and vitamins is diluted."

Two graduate students took their cue to bring out platters of cored and sliced apples. It was a taste test, inviting the farmers to use their senses to savor the proof.

What Eugenie was telling them wasn't new. It was a plea. It was a hope that this might be the time something would click—enough crop failure, enough just-getting-by prices, enough neighbors also turning. She needed only one mind with each visit because that one mind could be the domino, the early buyer who would tell others, like it was their own secret discovery.

She went on to talk about no-till options, keeping the nematodes and earthworms and other invertebrates that help enrich

the soil. “A monoculture feeds only a small part of the soil. Those kinds of crops are losing what makes soil *soil*—the riches that keep it from becoming *dirt*. Dirt is what causes erosion, what lacks in soil’s spongelike quality, its ability to be a carbon sink and part of a cycle rather than wash away in any rainstorm.”

She paused when one woman raised her hand to ask, “We rotate our crops. We have a fallow calendar. Isn’t that enough?”

So many wanted to do right, not just what had always been done. They’d watched their parents, their aunts and uncles fail in the same way, and knew a certain degree of openness was imperative. She had them, their faces turned to her like coneflowers, waiting for her response. What they really wanted to know was why nothing they did was ever enough, why less than a third of them could make a living doing what they loved.

“I wish it were,” Eugenie said gently. “The key is biodiversity. We need native grasses and paddock shifts. Those cows are moving microbe tanks, and they’ll enrich that soil that lost so much in chemical input. Your land will wake back up again.”

After the talk was done and after the small stream of questions, the woman came up to Eugenie.

“I don’t usually come to these things. I wasn’t going to. Until I saw your name,” she said. Looking around the room, Eugenie understood. She worked in a field over-saturated with men too.

“My name is Laura.” The woman held out a porcelain hand. She was young—younger than Eugenie’s daughter—and had hair the color of carrots.

That was how Eugenie met Laura.

In Laura, Eugenie found the kind of absorbent sponge her students didn’t quite have, always distracted by the competition between them like puppies at their mother’s teat. They lived in the land of the theoretical, the experiment, whereas Laura was a living enactment, day by day, the soil packed beneath her fingernails. The earth was a part of her and she of it.

Eugenie’s children were wary of this budding relationship, possibly more out of envy than anything else. Eugenie’s attention was always hard to capture, but Laura had done it so effortlessly. What no one realized was that Laura was becoming a kind of repository. Eugenie’s legacy wasn’t in her DNA. It was in her work. So

when Laura's small farm failed, Eugenie encouraged her to apply to the graduate program at the university. Laura did and handily got in, her GRE scores embarrassingly good and her application letter an honest declaration. Eugenie was not on the committee this year, and when she saw the list of accepted students, she felt muscles all over her body unclench, startling her. She had known this meant something to her, but not everything.

Laura didn't need Eugenie's help to establish her place. Her hands were dexterous and swift, making her an ideal lab assistant. Even more, her curiosity cracked things open, creating new tunnels toward solutions. Watching Laura test minerals in soil samples had the warmth of watching the ballet.

Autumn and spring semesters were robust—a humming campus, courses to teach, lectures to give. Summers were for close study, but their bodies weren't tethered in place, so Eugenie and Charles would leave when they could to go to their cabin up north, which perched just on the Canada border, so close that, a few years later when Trump became president, Charles joked with increasing seriousness that it would take only a few of them to tip it right over into their neighboring country.

When they were younger, they'd bring the kids, but lately the two declined; their daughter was busy falling in love and their son's own work made it harder and harder for him to leave. They invited Laura, which seemed odd at first, since Eugenie had never brought a student there before. Many journeys included overnight stays to look at soil sites, but never into space that belonged to her, not in this way—but she and Laura had developed a first relationship, that of farmer and community interest, and a friendship from this, just before the second layer had descended. Laura joined them happily and took a shift, sometimes even the whole drive, on the journey to the tiny house on the lake.

"Originally, it was just the main room and an outhouse, but we've made a lot of changes," Charles said on giving the first tour. He spent time up there solo while Eugenie pressed on during the academic year, brought his sleek new binoculars, a gift from his son, and his trim notebook, a Moleskine from his daughter, and he worked on his life list, the names of birds and details in neat narrow columns. "We put on an addition with bedrooms and running water.

Should be OK here.”

There were a few other cabins along the lake, but you could really see them only from the water. This spot had originally been purchased whole—the lake and the acres and acres around it—by Eugenie’s great-great uncle, so all the cabins belonged to family, none that she knew very well. Generations of time separated them.

The three took meals together and often went on an after-dinner walk, sometimes followed by a fire, but pockets of time were open for Laura to explore this wholly new biome. She’d bring her pack and canoe out to the tiny island toward the center of the lake, no bigger in circumference than the footprint of the laboratory building where she worked. A cluster of slender red pine grew up at its center, the rest scrub and sand. It was the decomposition there that Laura was drawn to, the ever-damp environment with smatterings of lichen and hen-of-the-woods. She loved this place that was both like the mainland and not like the mainland, this separate system using some of what wind and water blew in, but mostly its own northerly self. She’d lift a flap of outer bark on a fallen tree and lie down in the loam and watch steadily for hours, leaping up in realization that she’d been there all afternoon. She imagined the staghead beetles waving their slow good-bye as she brushed off her debris-covered legs and dug her way back across the lake.

Sometimes she came back with samples in Tupperware she pilfered from the pantry and, other times, a series of photographs she’d upload to her laptop, and they’d have an after-dinner slide show. She held out the flat disks of a walleye scales she’d found near great eagle tracks. It was as if, each evening, she had an offering to trade for her dinner.

Summers passed like this, and then Laura left for a doctoral program in Madison, which was both close enough and too far, and exactly right. She came back on occasion, driving up the long slope of Wisconsin and crossing Superior’s bridge into northern Minnesota. Out of nostalgia, she joined Eugenie on occasion on her outstate trips, carrying trays of apple tarts made by Charles. On the drive back, Eugenie would tell her of the work she was now doing on earthworms.

“They never belonged here,” Eugenie said. “And they’re harming our hardwoods, eating the duff, and we’re losing seedlings and



ferns.”

“And wildflowers.”

This time, Eugenie met with a gardening chapter to talk about what were being called jumping worms. It was spring again, and outside yellow rocket and prairie smoke dotted the fields.

Eugenie was so content, her body slack as she told Laura of this new work. “After this, I’m going to my daughter’s school to talk about decomposers. It’d be lovely if you’d come.”

“Will there be apples?” Laura asked.

“And pears and grapes and ants on a log.” Eugenie’s daughter taught at a small private elementary school where snacks didn’t come pre-packaged and the children learned to use paring knives. “They call it practical life,” Eugenie said.

“I’d love to come but, first, I have to tell you something.” Laura smiled. She ran her fingers through her hair, nervously taming it into a topknot, and took a deep breath. “Professor, I’m looking into postdoc work.”

They’d never articulated it. There was never any expectation that Laura would get a position at Eugenie’s university and, just as swiftly as Eugenie herself, work her way up to full professor, to run the lab, which had just gone through a massive renovation, to step in just as Eugenie stepped down. They never said this to each other, just as they never said Laura would still have been on that farm, miserable at its downfall, if she hadn’t come to that meeting. The word *owe* never occurred to them.

Laura looked at Eugenie at the wheel, saw her silver hair snaked back in a clip, her eyes locked on the road, her mouth unmoving.

“They’ve offered me a place in Scotland to look at the farming practices there,” she continued.

“Peat,” was all Eugenie could say.

Laura would fit right in there, with her brilliant blaze of hair crowning her brilliant mind. Eugenie wanted both, as a mother does. She wanted to keep Laura close and give her her inheritance, but she also wanted her out of that nest, winging into the clear May morning.

“They are so very lucky,” Eugenie said, honestly. She’d always guarded it so well, but when she felt a throb in her chest, she understood this was what it meant when people said heartache. “Yes. So lucky. You will do so well.”

And like that, Eugenie knew it was time for her to make her own flight. She would file a letter of retirement with the dean that afternoon. This realization brought no sadness with it. Instead, her body loosened again, which might have been what caused her to miss the fawn as it scampered across the road.

“I thought it was a sack,” Eugenie kept saying. “Just a crumpled paper sack drifting across the highway.”

Eugenie was sitting on the stretcher in the belly of an ambulance, a flannel blanket from the trunk of her car resting on the spindles of her shoulders. Laura had called it in, even though the accident resulted only in a slender bumper dent. Eugenie seemed so out of sorts. What if she’d dislodged something in her brain? Laura couldn’t risk it.

Eugenie wept, and it was a horrible thing to watch. She keened through the ambulance wait, which was first to arrive, and had rolling sobs for a bit after, but by the time the police arrived, she was herself again with the addition of a small butterfly bandage where she’d hit her brow against the window.

“Follow my finger,” the EMT instructed, and she glided with that point, willing to follow it anywhere to prove she was okay.

“She checks out,” the EMT told the police officer and Laura, as if Eugenie were an animal who couldn’t understand. “Heart sounds good, reflexes. She should probably have a doctor check her over, but no need for a luxury ride.” The woman smiled and touched Eugenie’s shoulder. She hadn’t meant to separate her like that, but Eugenie was in such a fog, the EMT wanted her to know she’d be taken care of. Laura held the keys.

“What will happen to the fawn?” Eugenie asked as she was helped back to the ground. She already knew the answer.

“The DNR’ll come.”

Eugenie nodded. The light in the small deer’s eyes had long blinked out, and she hoped, if there was a spirit world, that fawn was already finding its way into a new form.

Laura slid behind the wheel after quietly watching to make certain Eugenie was settled in. She had placed the folded blanket in Eugenie’s lap before moving to the driver’s side. The police car lingered, the officer’s head bowed as if in prayer.

Laura began the drive back into the city and asked her, “Do

you want to go home instead? Maybe you should just rest? Or to the hospital?"

Eugenie shook her head. She knew when she finally got home, Charles would ask her to tell him about today, and he would be gentle, but she wasn't ready for that yet.

Eugenie put her hand on Laura's arm, startling her. "Let's go back."

"Where? To the garden club? Did you forget something?"

"No, the fawn," Eugenie insisted. "We need to go back."

Laura immediately understood why, as only a fellow scientist could, so she swung a U-turn on a side road and rolled back toward the site. With the police car gone, it took a few passes to find the exact spot, and when, approaching quietly and reverently, they found her, her eyes had already begun to sink in their sockets. Eugenie unfurled the flannel onto the ground next to her—she *was* a her, Eugenie could tell now—and Laura helped, cradling the still-pliable head. They nestled her into the cave of the trunk and paused, Eugenie whispering, "I'm so sorry," before gently closing the lid.

They were only a few minutes late, though time for children works differently than it does for adults. It is both exact (*Shouldn't she be here by now?*) and inexact (they were easily distracted, playing a nomenclature game when the two women came in the door).

"Oh, welcome, welcome!" Eugenie's daughter, the lead guide (her term, insisting: *not* teacher), leaned in and kissed her mother on the cheek. She wrinkled one brow at the bandage on her mother's forehead. Eugenie shook her head once and forced a smile. Later. All of this would be told later. There was so much to finally tell, but not yet.

"Kids, this is Dr. Parker. She comes to us from the university, where she's a professor of science. She's also my mother. And this is Laura Reid, who was a student of my mother's."

"I study soil and worms and beetles all day," Eugenie exclaimed. The children made delighted noises, the *ooohs* overtaking the scant *eesh*. Eugenie laughed. "It's true. We like to think of worms as a gardener's friend. Why might we think that?"

"Because they dig tunnels!"

"Yes, and that does something cool called aerating the soil, which is kind of what a big plow does, but this one is teeny tiny in

comparison. What else?"

"They eat our garbage!"

In the greenhouse between the classroom building and the main building the staff kept a vermicomposting environment, and all scraps were turned into casings for their community garden.

"Yes. Those are called red wigglers, and they're different from our tunnel makers, the earthworms. They may look a lot alike, but they have very different jobs. I have another question for you. If I went outside and dug up a square foot of your garden patch, what would we see?"

The children looked out the window to see if the answers were out there.

"Dead leaves!" "Dirt!" "More dirt!"

Eugenie held out a laminated card that showed a bisection of soil from a plant's leaf tip to root tip and examples of all microfauna between. As she did this, Laura knew this was her cue to slip from the room and set up the next display.

"A mouse and her babies!" Beneath the rodent, a truncated tunnel and bulb of cut-away earth showed wormy mouse-babes in a huddle. "A bird!" "A spiderweb!" "Mushrooms!" "A snail!" "Lots of different flowers and bees!"

It was a simplistic drawing, attractive like a storybook and meant for the empathy of grade-schoolers. "What do you see here?" Eugenie tapped the plastic protected center where an animal that once was living lay, several insects surrounding it.

"Beetles!" one girl with glasses jumped to her feet. "I *love* beetles!"

"Poppy just did a research presentation on beetles," the classroom assistant explained.

"Oh, *good*," Eugenie clasped her hands together. "Because I have a surprise for you."

The day before, Eugenie had come in to set up an aquarium full of carrion beetles. Because of the smell, they went to the outdoor classroom to observe.

"They look like bumblebees!" Poppy declared.

"There are so many bugs that come out after something dies. There are botflies, and they're the ones who lay maggots. There's burying beetles, and they move a dead animal like a conveyor belt on their backs. But these are carrion beetles, and I have something for them."

She had a freshly dead shrew in a lidded container, which she slid into the rustling habitat. She'd put the tank in the shadows of a maple, its branches all yellow-green with new buds, and the hungry beetles began their cautious dance seeking small openings. It took some time, but the children were quietly patient, having learned the skills and rewards of observation from time at this nature school, and the beetles gradually burrowed into the skin, rearticulating the tiny rodent. Several times, one would tumble out like a cartoon wrestler, only to tumble back into the fray.

"It looks like it's coming back to life," Poppy whispered.

Indeed, the shrew burred and heaved and soon enough, nothing was left within.

"I wish we could do that again," one boy said longingly.

The children returned to the classroom where their tables had been filled by the classroom assistant with test tube racks and inside each tube was rich soil and a sprout.

"These beetles are a part of the cycle of life that helps keep healthy soil," Eugenie told them.

"We've been studying roots," Eugenie's daughter said. "Let's see if we can make some identifications."

Laura knelt next to a table of students. She held up a glass tube full of soil and spidery roots and, at the top, a sprig that would eventually grow into milkweed. Earlier in the week, the children had had a lesson on taproots and fibrous root systems and knew how to identify which was which.

"These are prairie plants," Laura told them. Eugenie couldn't help but notice how good she was with the children and wondered if there was anything Laura wasn't naturally good at. For a moment, she wondered if she had been as good as Laura was, if she would have been as good with four as she'd been with two.

Eugenie looked up to the sound of the smatter of glass on tile. Across the room came a shrill wail, causing all faces to turn toward the front of the room.

"Arlo!" a little girl wailed. "What's wrong with Arlo?"

The teacher swiftly crossed the room to where the girl stood, her finger tapping on the habitat. "Wake up, Arlo, wake up, Arlo."

Inside, the bearded dragon's jaw dropped open, his fat tongue graying against the glass. Arlo was gone, a hand-me-down from someone in the community who no longer wanted a lizard as a pet when a baby was on the way. The class had had had him only a few

months, and it had taken a while for their teachers to persuade them to stop carrying Arlo around wrapped in fabric from the art shelf, as if he were a doll.

Eugenie held back in the arc of the room, leaning in the entry or exit, depending on which way you looked. Four steps and she'd be on the paved walk that led to her car with damaged cargo. She watched her daughter, holding the now-crying girl, saying, "Arlo's gone, honey."

Several children crowded around, wanting to look at whatever everyone else was seeing, no matter how terrible they felt doing so.

"We should put him with the beetles," Poppy proclaimed.

These children were used to offering solutions to problems, their own consequences when a punishment was due. Her daughter's day was often spent asking, "How do we make this right?"

"No, no," she said. "The class will decide what to do about Arlo. Let's have an emergency class council."

Poppy was not the leader of *that*, Eugenie sensed. But one day she might find herself running the lab at the local university. Perhaps. This room was full of absorbent minds, all raw with energy and potential. They dutifully returned the racks to the cart, still out in the sunshine, and Laura wheeled it all back to the car, whose front end puckered in the late afternoon light.

Eugenie gave her daughter a dry kiss on the cheek and wished her well with all of this. She and Laura would get into the car and drive two hours north to the cabin soon. She did not tell her daughter of her decision to retire. It wasn't time for that yet. For now, all she could do was pull breath after breath deep into her diaphragm — every time she closed her eyes, all she could see was that fawn, now in sharp focus, as it scrambled across the highway, one of its back legs already broken, and the sound as she clipped it sent it skittering into the loamy bank littered with wildflowers, finally across and at rest.