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TARANTULA FIRE

- Winner of the 2010 *Prism Review* Poetry Prize -

-for Jeff

A boy far away experiments with paralysis,
using tiny doses of tarantula venom.

The sky won't hold a kite today
so the man from over the hill

asks permission. He wants
to set his fields on fire.

Thousands of disguised beetles
line my windows.

They are never what I think they are.
He wants to stem the cedar,

and burn before the nests are made.
This is a small farmhouse

and the barn in the yard is decades dry.
The spider immobilizes her prey

and this is what draws the boy to her.
I don't know what I'm agreeing to.

There are seeds waiting in the soil here
that can't crack open without fire.

He tells me the large trees go unscathed.
Without my yes he cannot move.

He implies the neighbors to the south and east
are ready to burn. I am tired

of making decisions. The tarantula breathes
through book lungs made of thin sheets

of tissue folded into pages. My own breathing
has been ragged of late.

The deer and leverets will flee and return
when the ground cools.

I stand on my doorstep ready to say
light this valley, or don't.

The tarantula's blood is not true
blood, and her heart is a slender tube.

I light matches and shake them out
to smell the sulfur; only burning

keeps the understory at bay.
Frozen, I have to vote

for equilibrium. I'll stand in the road
when fire overtakes the hillside

and mark the woods emptying themselves.
The boy is moving into the future

on the venom. He will
make medicine out of fear.