

Tarantulas



Earth Tigers and Bird Spiders

Prevailing over Amazon floodwaters that displaced it, a tarantula skitters across the surface in search of a new home. Shy, fragile, virtually harmless, tarantulas just can't shake their horror movie image.

By RICHARD CONNIFF
Photographs by MARK W. MOFFETT

Somewhere up the Amazon, a big pink river dolphin breaches the surface with a pneumatic venting of its blowhole, then glides off humpy and slow through the placid brown water. A flock of parrots brawls homeward overhead. The setting sun lights up the sheaves of tall grass on the riverbanks, into which we have nosed our boat for the night, and squadrons of mosquitoes wing down to join us for a drink.

Our expedition in search of tarantulas is traveling the upper Amazon on a long, thin bathtub-toy of a riverboat, painted ocher and green. An open-sided white cabin runs the length of the boat, and the ceiling is hung with clear plastic bags holding live snakes, lizards, scorpions, and, above all, large, hairy tarantulas. We make our bunks on the benches below. This is Peru, in the sort of terrain where an early adventurer, P. H. "Exploration" Fawcett, thrilled his readers with reports of a monstrous black tarantula that "lowered itself down at night on the sleeper beneath, and

its bite meant death." As it happened, Fawcett later vanished in the jungle. We somehow live to tell the tale.

Tarantulas are by and large timid creatures. Like almost all spiders they are venomous, but they rarely bite people, and the medical literature does not contain a single reliable report of a death from the venom. The fear of tarantulas is so wildly exaggerated that our guide, a highly regarded tarantula expert named Rick West, interrupts any discussion of his favorite subject with a slightly defensive assertion: "Tarantulas are kind of boring," he says.

We humans, on the other hand, are genuinely scary. Besides West, our gang consists of a writer, me, with an interest in animals humans commonly deem loathsome; a herpetologist

RICHARD CONNIFF's *Spineless Wonders: Strange Tales from the Invertebrate World* will be published this fall by Henry Holt and Company. Photographer MARK MOFFETT is a biologist at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology.

whom we have learned to locate in the jungle at midnight by his habit of belching like a frog (the frog, he says with unabashed precision, would be *Hyla boans*); and an entomologist who aspires through study and personal Zen to achieve the worldview of an insect (walking one night under the green vault formed by a tangle of feathery ten-foot-high ferns, he exults, "I feel like a flea on a bird's back").

By coincidence, all four of us are large. We are bearded. We are hairy. On appearance alone we are capable of frightening strong men, sensible women, and small children. We can empathize with the spiders we have come here to study. When we visit a remote village seeking tarantulas, the effect, West observes, is about what it would be if a Viking horde were to descend on a North American backyard asking to see the earwigs.

But there is method to our madness: The Amazon rain forest is one of the richest habitats in the world for tarantula species, many of



AVICULARIA PURPUREA

Slipping under a homespun silk sheet, an Ecuadorian purple tarantula prepares to sleep by day. At night the spider, shown life-size, will wait on a branch for breakfast to come blundering by: an insect moving from rain forest floor to tree canopy.

them unknown to science. When we play our flashlight beams up the tree trunks at night, we can spot them camouflaged as lichenous pink star bursts on the mottled bark, poised for some unsuspecting insect or amphibian to come in range. When we tread softly, we can find them waiting at the mouths of burrow holes all over the forest floor.

As a newcomer to the subject, I have a two-fold interest in tarantulas. First is a question I contemplate as I lie in my berth with the spiders just overhead: Since tarantulas pose no plausible threat to humans, why does the merest glimpse of these creatures rile up so many primordial terrors? The question has immediacy because I am meanwhile killing a dozen little vampires every time I toss or turn. How is it that the mosquito can give us malaria and yellow fever and seem like a mere nuisance, while tarantulas give us nothing worse than the wilies and yet get typecast, in the words of the 1957 film *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, as

"every unknown terror in the world, every fear fused into one hideous night black horror?" Considering how well we have succeeded as a species, human beings can be plain dumb about recognizing real enemies in the natural world. It would be a question to sleep on, if anyone were getting much sleep.

Instead, we spend the night out in the rain forest pursuing the second question: What, in fact, is a tarantula, and how do these splendid creatures live in the wild? There are about 800 known tarantula species in the world, and they inhabit every continent except Antarctica. In this hemisphere they range from Argentina to Missouri and from remote rain forests to the deserts of the American Southwest.

THE NAME TARANTULA comes from a cult in Taranto, Italy, where the bite of a spider served as pretext for Dionysian revels of frenzied dancing. The cult gave us a good dance, the tarantella, rooted in bad biology: Taranto has a kind of black widow spider, whose bite can be highly toxic. But the cult arose around a much larger wolf spider, which looks dangerous though its bite is harmless. In the popular mind, the term tarantula has since come to mean almost any big, hairy spider.

For researchers it now refers not to wolf



spiders but to a separate family, the Theraphosidae, mostly big, always hairy, and often with grooves on the carapace arranged like spokes around a dimple at the center. They can be formidable spiders, living more than 20 years and growing to the size of a dinner plate.

If size is part of the tarantula's scary image, it may also be a blessing. Tarantulas are too big to stomp underfoot, the common human response to lesser spiders. I started the research for this story mildly disliking spiders. But watching tarantulas in Peru, and later in the American desert and at home, where I acquired a tarantula as a pet, I began to see that spiders can be lovely: the velveteen fur, the plush cat feet, the high, arched legs moving in delicate coordination, the subtle pink and brown and black colorations, the fingerlike weaving of the spinnerets laying silk.

One day I watched two tarantulas mating, and it had all the ferocity and passion of a tango. Gingerly their front legs touched; then she sidestepped, and he followed. With his pedipalps, the leglike appendages at his front end, he beat a tattoo on the ground, a declaration of interest. He began to caress her, drumming his pedipalps on her carapace. Gradually, face-to-face, they twined their front limbs together like the fingers of two hands in velvet gloves.

They pushed one another up in the reared-back position of both love and war. The male hooked his front legs over her fangs, and with his second set of legs bent her backward. Then he reached under to transfer the sperm from his pedipalps to the epigastric furrow at her midsection. The dance ended with the male scrambling safely out of reach. In moments of postcoital *tristesse*, a female will sometimes kill the male, a handy source of protein for her newly fertilized eggs.

No one looks more closely at tarantulas than Rick West, who keeps 2,000 of them alive in the basement of his home, plus another 3,000 preserved specimens. He has been studying them without pay for most of his 44 years. He is a pure enthusiast, earning his living as an inspector with the Society for the Prevention of

Cruelty to Animals in Victoria, British Columbia. He holds no academic degree, but museums and government agencies routinely consult him. Tarantulas are a subject on which informed opinion is quite rare, and sooner or later all roads seem to lead to West.

Except that at the moment, no roads do. West is searching for burrows near the Río Yarapa, ankle deep on a soupy trail through the rain forest. "Pretty wet," he remarks dismally. He is pale and freckled, with close-set blue eyes, a red beard, a mournful manner, and a cracked, comical worldview.

On a high spot he finds a likely hole with a litter of desiccated insect parts nearby and starts to dig. Tarantulas are solitary creatures, and a single featherweight spider has dug this foot-deep burrow using only its mouthparts. West, who weighs 240 pounds, spends ten minutes hacking with his machete into the gluey red earth. He looks up, breathless and glowering. "It's abandoned," he announces. A toucan passes overhead, and the sight fills West with fond longings for civilization. "God," he sobs, "I miss my Froot Loops."



MESAPHOBEMA VELVETOSOMA (OPPOSITE)

Like the smallest house spiders, tarantulas have no internal skeleton. Adults grow out of their rigid skin about once a year (opposite), rolling over and struggling for hours, like a hand trying to wriggle free of a tight-fitting glove. Forlorn as an abandoned building, the lower half of an old skin (above) cradles bits of digestive tissue, surrounded by leg and jaw holes.

In Southeast Asia one tarantula species is known as the earth tiger, for the speed with which it lunges from its burrow. Some tree-dwelling species eat young birds in the nest, according to the imaginative reports of early explorers; hence the name bird spider.

When West says tarantulas are boring, he means in part that they don't use any fancy tricks to get their food. A tarantula cannot leap 25 times its body length to seize its prey, as some spiders do. Nor can it construct elaborate webs or hurl a sticky droplet at the end of a silken thread to lasso a passing insect. Exploration Fawcett to the contrary, tarantulas never lower themselves from the ceiling on strands of silk. "They're sit-and-wait predators," says West. "They don't do much."

Their venomous fangs are located at the front of the carapace, at the ends of two furry, fingerlike mouthparts known as chelicerae. Most spiders bite with a pinching movement, like the grip of human thumb and forefinger. But tarantulas bite straight down, enabling them to take on larger prey. A large ground-dwelling spider can sometimes kill a small rattlesnake or a fer-de-lance, one of the deadliest South American snakes. But crickets, beetles, and other insects are more typical prey.

One rainy night West pointed out a tarantula just inside the mouth of its burrow in the undergrowth, a home that looked as cozy as Mole's House in *The Wind in the Willows*. A giant cockroach, three inches long, entered the tarantula's neatly cleared forecourt, an area West calls the arena, and the spider began almost in slow motion to turn. Tarantulas sometimes stretch out strands of silk like a doormat to amplify any disturbance and announce the arrival of an intruder. Like other spiders they also have extremely fine sensory hairs on their legs. These hairs, called trichobothria, are set in pits with nerve endings on all sides, to locate the source of even the slightest vibration. The tarantula stepped out from its burrow, then lifted two front legs to touch the cockroach gently, almost affectionately.

Range rovers, male Mexican blond tarantulas roam the Arizona desert in search of mates. In early fall so many are on the prowl that roads near Tucson become spotted with arachnid roadkill.

Meanwhile, females—each carrying from 75 to 2,000 unfertilized eggs—stay put in the burrows, some species emitting a pheromone to attract a mate.

"It's as if she tastes it, to determine what it is," West whispered.

Then, in a blur, the spider latched its feet onto the roach's far side, flipped it onto its back, and planted fangs in the relatively soft membrane of the underside, near the head. It dragged its victim into the burrow. The roach twitched briefly, then went still. The spider's fangs continued to rise and fall, pumping in venom. We could hear the spider's fangs and serrated teeth begin to click like lobster picks.

Spiders cannot eat solid food. Instead, they pump digestive fluids into their prey. Then they suck up the liquids. Another night we watched a tarantula gradually open a gaping red hole in the belly of a small bat. West nudged the spider, which was perched on the trunk of a palm tree, into a better viewing position. "They're very single-minded about food," West said, when the spider made no attempt to escape. The spider was supporting its own weight and the bat's on a sheer vertical

patch of glossy green bark. We got close enough to study its plush footpads with a magnifying loupe. Tarantulas can move nimbly on vertical surfaces because each hair on their feet branches out into hundreds of tiny bristles. "If you were to look at this bark under a scanning electron microscope," said West, "it would appear like giant cracks and craters. So it would be easy for those hairs to find a place to hold on." When an insect annoyed it, the tarantula lifted a leg and shook it like a dog, as if oblivious to the normal laws of gravity.

With the bat clutched underneath, the spider began to rotate. Dewy strands of silk emerged from the spinnerets at its hind end and wrapped around the bat's leathery ears and over its eyes, which had started to ooze.

"As the tissues dissolve, the limbs will come apart," West explained, "and the silk holds it in a neat package." The bat carcass lifted and fell with the slow pumping of the fangs. "At the end of the night the only thing left will be

the wings, the bones, and some hair in a big pellet mixed with silk."

THE TARANTULA'S ABILITIES as a predator partly account for its gruesome reputation. In Southeast Asia one tarantula species is known as the earth tiger, for the speed with which it lunges from its burrow. Some tree-dwelling species eat young birds in the nest, according to the imaginative reports of early explorers; hence the name bird spider. In Central America tarantulas are called horse spiders because of the mistaken idea that their bite can cause a horse's hoof to fall off.

But the wildest mythology of the tarantula as archfiend is a product of Hollywood science fiction. In the 1955 film *Tarantula*, for instance, a desert town faces a hundred-foot-tall, cattle-eating, house-crushing tarantula. Clint Eastwood plays an Air Force pilot who saves the town from hairy doom by dropping



APHONOPELMA CHALCOIDES

Superspider

"There are spiders of marvelous bigness . . . bigger than a man's hand," marveled Spanish explorer Fernández de Oviedo in 1535. He may have been describing the South American goliath birdeater, shown life-size in a cut-away view.

Resting beneath a tropical dry forest, the female tarantula's huge body is sustained by four book lungs (color-coded in blue), named for their slender folds. The lungs add oxygen to the blood, pumped by a long, primitive heart (magenta). The nervous system (yellow) is concentrated primarily in the leggy front segment; the rear is crowded with the digestive tract (green), egg sac (beige), and silk-producing glands (purple).

THERAPHOSA BLONDI; PAINTING BY CHRISTOPHER A. KLEIN, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC ARTIST

Airborne defenses

With a flick of a hind leg, tarantulas of the Western Hemisphere defend themselves by launching tiny hairs bristling with microscopic barbs. Once imbedded in the attacker's skin or eyes, the barbs cause a maddening itch that can persist for months.



Early warning system

Sensitive to the slightest vibration or wind, pivoting hair follicles on the tarantula's feet and lower legs alert it to approaching danger. The message is vital: Although they have as many as eight eyes, tarantulas have very poor vision.



Venomous message

Hollow fangs deliver venom produced in adjacent tiny bulbs. No human is known to have died of a tarantula bite—burning and swelling generally last a few hours—but a venom dose can kill a small animal. The fluid may have medicinal use in treating blood clots.



Male delivery system

Male tarantulas are equipped with specialized palps, hook-shaped appendages on the short feeding arms near the mouth. When ready to mate, males weave a web and deposit a drop of sperm on it. The sperm is then drawn up into the bulb-shaped tips of the palps, which deposit it into the female.

Little cat's feet

Flanked by protective tufts, needle-sharp retractable claws enable tarantulas to climb walls. Underneath, velvety pads of hair cushion the weight of the spider—and create eight buoyant pontoons that enable some tarantulas to walk on water.



napalm on a spider “more terrifying than any horror known to man.”

The sorry truth is that tarantulas are mere animals, vulnerable, like other predators, to the natural order. One afternoon West called us over to see one of the spiders he had collected. She was lying on her back as if dead. Then, with an eerie, trance-like motion, her body began to swell and contract. A tiny split appeared on her flanks, where her eight legs were socketed into the edge of the carapace.

All spiders have an external skeleton, which they must shed as often as four times a year when they are growing. To tear apart its old exterior, the spider forces blood out of its bulbous abdomen and, like Popeye flexing his muscles, pumps it over and over into its extremities and into the area under the carapace.

West pointed to the silken mat she had prepared. “That’s to prevent ants and centipedes from attacking her while she’s in such a vulnerable position. Normally she would be underground, and the mouth of the burrow would be silked to keep out predators.”

The tarantula was almost finished with her molt. Her top and bottom had spread apart like a biscuit rising in the oven. She began to draw out her new limbs, shrugging off the old skin. “See the bend in that new tibia, how soft it is?” said West. “It’s just like rubber. There. Everything is loose. She’s got her legs out.” The spider and her shed skin, on which she now lay, looked like complete duplicates, except that where the old exterior was shabby, she now wore a glossy gray velvet coat.

“It’s one of the most energy-consuming things they do,” said West, who sat to one side like an intern in a maternity ward, attentive and a little tired, conscious that the patient was doing the real work. “Sometimes if she doesn’t get enough nutrients, she won’t have the energy to untangle herself, and she’ll die, half in, half out, trapped in her own skin.”

ATARANTULA can be an irresistibly rich source of protein. Among their known predators are certain species of storks, owls, lizards, and snakes. But the most impressive are huge *Pepsis* wasps called tarantula hawks. Not long after we returned from Peru, I headed out to Arizona to see what tarantulas are up against.

As in the science fiction film, tarantulas roamed the desert. But they were small and gentle enough that I could cradle them in my



Mating means a tangle of 16 legs—and possible death. The ritual begins when a male finds the silk-draped burrow of a female and strums the silk strands (far left). If she emerges agitated, he calms her by stroking her legs (left). The spiders grapple until he secures her fangs and bends her backward, pushing his sperm-filled palps into her reproductive slit. Mission accomplished, the male—in this case *Aphonopelma iodum*—runs for his life. Females, on rare occasion, will devour their mates.

APHONOPELMA SPP.; MARK W. MOFFETT WITH THOMAS R. PRENTICE



A frog in its throat, a young Peruvian pinktoe shows why tarantulas are a major predator of South American tree frogs: The spiders build nests among tree leaves, then wait for the inevitable leaf-hopping amphibian. The strategy may also yield a bird or bat dinner.

AVICULARIA URTICANS



Queen Mary was, in truth, the perfect pet. . . . She had warm eyes, yes, but eight of them. . . . I began to think, a little smugly, that the relationship of dog and master staring into each other's eyes was just another narcissistic mammal thing.



BRACHYPELMA SMITHI

palm without risk. Most were males, out wandering at dusk and dawn in a desperate search for a willing mate. Oblivious to the mundane business of eating, they had shriveled away to little more than legs and sex drive. The wasps generally ignored them, preferring to hunt down the more robust female tarantulas in their burrows. The aptly named tarantula hawk is about two inches long, with veiny, rust-colored wings and a metallic blue-black body. Its lanky, articulated legs end in hooked claws, for grappling with the tarantula. The stinger at the end of the female's abdomen can be up to a third of an inch long, and a government entomologist who is a connoisseur of insect stings told me that it is as impressive as it looks. "The *Pepsis* wasp sting," he said, as if savoring the memory, "is kind of. . . profound. It's not like things that make you swear and say bad things about somebody's mother. These things, when you get stung, you might as well lie down and scream. Why not? It takes your attention off the pain."

Patrolling among the saguaro and mesquite, the wasp finds a tarantula burrow and teases the guard silk at the entrance, possibly imitating a male tarantula's opening serenade. If that fails, the wasp will actually enter the burrow to draw out its prey. The first time I saw this happen, the tarantula erupted out of

her burrow and reared back in the classic posture of attack: front legs up for the strike, pedipalps elbowed back, fangs flicked out, a blaze of orange hair visible just underneath like a gaping maw. The spider reminded me of some silent-movie sorcerer, body bent back in a malevolent curve, arms arched high overhead as if to sling forth bolts of evil magic.

The wasp's bold strategy is to slip directly under the venomous fangs and plant its stinger in the tarantula's soft tissue. The effect on the tarantula is immediate paralysis. The wasp then drags it off to bury as a macabre nursery for its offspring, laying a single glistening white egg on the victim before covering it. When the egg hatches, the wasp larva will dine on the living tarantula, avoiding the vital organs at first so its immobilized food supply will remain fresh for a month or more.

THE PATH FROM FEAR of tarantulas to sympathy and even affection may be a peculiar one, but I'd found in my own family that it was surprisingly profound. My children had dubbed our six-inch Chilean rose hair Queen Mary, and my wife, who is generally dismayed by the creatures with whom I associate on the job, cooed over the tarantula from the start. Queen Mary was, in truth, the perfect pet—she ate only crickets and never bit the mailman. These are traits that have begun to make tarantulas increasingly popular as pets—so much so that officials have had to regulate international trade in Mexican redknee tarantulas, a showy spider, caught in the wild. In 1993 a California man was convicted of smuggling 600 of them, with an estimated street value of \$100,000, into the United States.

But Queen Mary's value was far subtler than that. She had warm eyes, yes, but eight of them, in a tufted tubercle at the front of the carapace. I began to think, a little smugly, that



Tarantula breeding is a business with real legs: Every year at the National Reptile Breeders' Expo in Orlando, Florida, collectors pay as much as \$150 for spiderlings (opposite). Buyers are lured by the giant specimens, but the biggest tarantulas, which can live more than 20 years, don't reach full size for a decade.

the relationship of dog and master staring into each other's eyes was just another narcissistic mammal thing. A tarantula's strange and placid life was a way of seeing into another world. Watching Queen Mary bound us to her as if with a silken knot.

I didn't realize how strong the bond had become until it became necessary for my family to pack the spider in a deli container and ship her to me overnight in the field, for purposes of research. When I phoned home the next night, the first words I heard, in an anxious tone I myself seldom elicit even when I am out in some godforsaken corner of the planet, were: "How's Mary?"

She was fine. The search for what makes other people so fearful of tarantulas took Queen Mary and me finally to the Stanford University Medical Center in Palo Alto, California. A psychiatrist named C. Barr Taylor was treating a patient for arachnophobia, the

fear of spiders. It can be a disabling phobia, with symptoms ranging from anxiety to an unwillingness to enter whole areas of one's own house. But Taylor had promised me that the patient would be handling a tarantula, every arachnophobe's nightmare, after just an hour or two of exposure therapy.

The therapy was remarkably simple, a gradual introduction to the reality of spiders. First, Taylor showed the patient a drawing of a gourd shape, roughly corresponding to a spider's body, then a drawing with two legs added, and then all eight legs. "Ugh. . . it gives me a creepy feeling," said the patient, a translator named Tina. She looked away, then back again until her anxiety slowly eased.

Taylor identified the spider's legs, head, and abdomen, and the ritual naming of parts began to demystify spiders. The two of them moved on to a dead household spider, then a live one, and ultimately to Queen Mary, in a clear plastic box.

"Oh, yuck," Tina said. She dropped her head forward to avoid looking. "Oh! That's real science fiction."

"OK," said Taylor. "Let's look at it in the box and identify the body parts."

It was about then that I noticed the wide eyes and trembling hands of a medical-center press person at the far end of the table.

The leading theory about arachnophobia is that most humans have a biological propensity to be alarmed by spiders. At some point in our evolutionary past, spiders presented a serious enough hazard that the star-burst shape or eight-legged walk got coded into our genes as a threat. "The way it moves," said the press person uneasily, after Taylor had eased her into the patient's seat, "it's like there's this place in my brain . . . way back there." She'd already been through the first steps of therapy, but her knees knocked at the sight of a live tarantula in front of her.

What seems to happen with arachnophobics, said Taylor, is that they've never gotten past the alarming image. "They've never paid attention to spiders. And when they pay attention in conditions of safety, they get past the phobia. The brain is looking for the threatening stimulus of the particular spider, and as it goes through the checking process and doesn't find any, the fear goes away."

The press-office woman, a 47-year-old named M. A. Malone, turned out to be a classic tarantula phobic. When she was a child, her two older brothers had tormented her by sending their hands creeping spiderwise across the dinner table. As a treat, when she was about six, the boys took her to the movies. Then, in the dark, they slipped away. The movie was *Tarantula*, and when the hundred-foot-tall monster appeared over the mountain-top, with Clint Eastwood nowhere in sight, the two brothers pounced on Malone from the row behind. Part of her psyche had never quite come back down from the balcony ceiling.

Tentatively, Queen Mary set one foot on her hand, and Malone took a sharp breath. The tarantula climbed up into her cupped hands, which sweated and shook. "I'm amazed," Malone said. "I'm fascinated. I'm waiting for it to bite me." She kept her eyes locked on the spider, which did not bite. Her trembling subsided. "Wow, just incredible," she said. "I wish my brothers were here." After 45 minutes, she was still holding Queen Mary, a little piece of eternity in the palm of her hands.

BUT THE SCARY IMAGE of tarantulas is everywhere, as if, in the heart of our unnatural cities, we still need the thrill of ancient fears. At the end of our time in Peru, Rick West and the rest of our gang of Vikings had piled into a pickup truck to visit a tarantula collector on a dirt road 30

Name your phobia and it probably applies—deep in a cave in Oaxaca, Mexico, home of one of the world's rarest tarantulas. Blind and almost hairless, with long, spindly legs, this Mexican cave tarantula was so startled by human presence that it ran up the arm of an assistant to caver Peter Sprouse and bit him on the hand. Says the photographer, "The poor guy—we kept yelling at him: 'Don't hurt it . . . it's extremely rare!'"

miles outside Iquitos. At about 28 miles, the truck died in a geyser of steam from the radiator. We hiked the rest of the way in, turning off onto a swampy trail. Clouds began to darken the sky, and distant thunder resonated beneath the sonar pinging of a frog, and the high *tu-who* of a rail. We met a woman short several teeth who was carrying a string of small fish and eating wild grapes. It was another 20 minutes, she said, to Nilo, the collector. We heard the roar of rain nearing, and the winds began to blow up among the trees.

Nilo turned out to be a friendly, enterprising man in his mid-20s. He lived with his wife and three children in a thatched hut, next to a small farm plot. He eked out a living by gathering tarantulas for a dealer back in the city, and he led us out into the downpour to demonstrate his technique. In one hand he balanced a machete by the blade. In the other he carried a stick with a sharpened ice pick at one end.

It took him about ten minutes to excavate



SPELOPELMA REDDELLI

the first tarantula burrow, hacking out the clay with angled slices. When the tarantula was finally cornered at the bottom, it made a desperate lunge, and Nilo gigged it through the carapace. He held the tarantula up for display, and it wriggled on the spearpoint, its milky blue blood leaking from the wound. He would sell it in the city for about a dollar, with fifty or a hundred other tarantulas killed in the same way and preserved in alcohol.

Our truck would not start again, and we spent that night in and around it with assorted live tarantulas, which seemed utterly innocuous by now, and a live coral snake in a clear plastic bag, which took some getting used to. All night people woke up from their bad dreams to ask, "*¿Dónde está el naca naca?*" or "Where's the damned coral snake?" We tied the bag to the handle over the passenger door, where the entomologist found the direct eye contact disconcerting, then tucked it into the glove compartment, until someone concluded

that the glove compartment probably had not been designed to be snake-tight. Then we heaved it with considerable relief onto the muddy road outside, until it occurred to us that we might now step on it in the course of our nocturnal wanderings.

Three days later, when we finally got to the airport, entrepreneurs were selling souvenirs to other tourists in line. A man named Lucho came up to offer me tarantulas at ten dollars apiece, pinned out in handsome glass boxes. I thought about buying one. It was the perfect image of the tarantula embedded in our genetic memory, the monster whose bite meant certain death. But the preservative had destroyed the natural colors, and the spiders, tarted up like Halloween knickknacks, all looked greasy and dog-eared. I had seen how lovely they could be in real life.

"Thank you, no," I said, and to a stranger in line, I added, "Tarantulas are kind of boring, don't you think?" □