A Bear Story

by Chris Sheehan

In the spring, my father would dress for class in a bear costume and chase students around campus. He would teach his students how to tuck their knees to their chin and cover their heads. Then he would roll them as if they were a log, as if he was looking for food underneath them. This was the final exam, though sometimes at night, in the backcountry, he would hang raw meat from the pine trees in camp, and when the black bears came—this was the Marble Mountains where often problem bears were relocated—he would play with them. Sometimes there would be five bears in camp, rolling around with my father and licking his face, before the low-hung meat was dragged off into the dark night. I wasn't around when a bear dragged my father into the night and buried him with sticks. It was just the other night Karen and I were on our honeymoon in the Marble Mountains. We had a fire and wine, no guns, a little rain, thunder. I was telling her my Grizzly story, how the bear dragged my father from his tent late at night, how my father had found himself cleaning up the Valdez spill, sleeping with a .38—how my father woke with his head in the bear's jaw, how he let the bear drag him into the forest, how he kept himself limp, how easily the bear lay down next to him. We turned in early, fucked, said nice things to each other. It was still light when the bear came into camp. We watched him tear apart our packs, leaned against the near fir tree, then shit by the fire. After a while, he lay down at the head of our tent. He slept the night with us. Eventually, we slept. In the morning, we watched him eat our food, just close enough to see the different colors striated along the length of the gummy-worms. Then he was gone. We were ten miles in. We had a Power Bar with little incisor holes in it, some saliva. At the trailhead, Karen said, Your father couldn't've shot a bear.