

Crumbling Expectations

I stood behind the counter ringing the bell for myself. My father had cancer and wrote two drafts of a novel called *Crumbling Expectations* about a Lake Michigan resort owner whose resort falls into the lake. I spent my childhood in Michigan and remember going to the resort. My father told me that boatsmen prefer oceans to the Great Lakes, and that some spots have ice all summer. The resort owner tries everything to save his resort, while neglecting his marriage (and having an affair in the barn loft) and destroying old social/business relationships (and his relationships with his aging regulars). I remember my mom saying the sex scene might be too much for me. My dad said I had read worse. (I read from my parents' shelves; Kundera, Winterson, and Auster were my high school peers. I didn't realize that Kundera was funny, or that Winterson was coy, or that Auster was Kafka. I often think now that I will never be as smart as when I had read only those books.) It was colon cancer. In the last scene, the resort crumbles into the lake and the exhausted resort owner, letting it go, embraces his wife. I saw this as a metaphor for the novel as a whole: my father abandoned it, healed from surgery and chemo, embraced his wife. That is, the book defeats itself for the things that make books worth having. I thought this thought and, as it were, crumbled into a lake: I tried to write myself into the story — I tried to talk myself into it, the idiom would go, as I had decided that talking to myself was the best way to learn to be a writer. Language existed, unendingly, one just had to join it. (I despised Auden with his *if I could tell you I would let you know*. I could tell you, and if I couldn't, I would let you know.) (When I told the first teacher I respected that I couldn't articulate anything, he told me that I could *articulate like a motherfucker* and that that was part of the problem.) I walked along the river with a book by Kundera / Winterson / Auster under my arm. The river was below our development. You could tell it by its lining of trees. I put myself at the counter, put the story in Washington state, where I lived, not in my father's Michigan, and

rang the bell for myself. The resort was an inn in the mountains, outside of a small town called Denton, or Denton Creek. There was a woman upstairs who played piano, Isabelle, whose husband, Masau, was a geologist out doing field work in the lake's intricate system of caverns. Ores in the cave walls glowed, and one glowed in the shape of someone's face. The old hermit, Wolfe, took Masau into the grottoes in his rowboat. Wolfe had moved into the inn after his cottage had been swallowed by the lake, which was expanding, despite drought. I had uncovered my father's manuscript in the attic while looking for sheet music for Isabelle. I imagined her looking out the window as I ran the lawn mower over mole hills, which burst. I imagined a moment when we would all crumble into the lake, and someone would reach out an oar and then. And I will leave the manuscript on her pillow (her marriage is no good, abusive in that invisible way that every relationship which is not True Love is). My father's father died when my father was a boy, as did my grandmother's father. Two years ago, in Manhattan, my dad and I shared a hotel room. The shower curtain in the bathroom had a strong plastic scent. During chemotherapy, he said, he couldn't take the smell of plastic. I remember being embarrassed by the weight he gained, by the hair he lost. When I overheard my grandmother say he had told her there was beauty everywhere, even in winter, I thought she was talking about me. I don't think he ever told me there is beauty everywhere, even in winter, but he was reading a book of poems by one of my professors, and he marked his page with a matchstick, and he set his water glass by the bed. I jerked off later thinking of a character in a Paul Auster novel who jerks off in a hotel room while his mentor sleeps. I didn't realize a book is itself an embrace. I quote back to my father now words he has written but never wrote.