In Memory of Peter Mettier

Oh honored lady, he is not here.

He's drowned in the Dells, as I do fear,

'Twas at Lone Rock as we passed by,

That is where we left him, your sweet pinery boy.

–"The Pinery Boy" (folk song)

It's a strange thing when you realize, years later, that you might've had an interesting life. The humdrum concerns and quiet evolution of past selves sum to an unprecedented and non-archetypal history—an oddly-shaped fingerprint of your acutely personalized experiences and journeys on this earth. It is worth collecting and telling the younger generation at family gatherings or late-nights at the pub, and perhaps writing down for posterity, though I'm neither important nor interesting enough that the world would care.

Such were my thoughts when I remembered the summer Peter Mettier died, a summer that drifted like many others in the lazy river of my youth, melding into the flashes and colors of brief sojourns in unfamiliar places—each with its own familiar monotony—and hibernating in the recesses of my memory until I awaken and examine it with new eyes.

I was fresh out of high school, and a friend of a family friend referred me to a summer job at a waterpark. I hadn't yet developed a sense of personal ambition, so I accepted the offer and on Memorial Day weekend drove out from Oshkosh to head to the Dells, a pair of towns with less than 3000 residents each. The name "Dell" comes from the French word for the nearby gorges on the rapids of the Wisconsin River, immortalized in a folk song (mandatory in middle school music class) as where William the Pinery Boy drowned. It would be a completely unremarkable place if it weren't for the 20th-century entrepreneurs who used the land to build

theme parks, resorts, casinos, and every kind of smaller attraction, from magic shows to wildlife parks to river tours on these amphibious vehicles called “Ducks.” When school is out, droves of families arrive from neighboring states in rickety minivans for a holiday half-dreaded by the parents, expected for a year by the kids. I was one of those kids once, and part of me wished that working where so many happy memories were made would resurrect the innocent eagerness of childhood and infuse my secret dread of the future with a simple, lively optimism.

Their official title for me was “cash control intern,” which meant in theory that I was to learn various areas of finance operations such as inventory management and auditing procedures; in practice, I sat in a poorly-lit room filling out spreadsheets, and at their request, I would run errands around the park. In my first week, I was tasked with collecting pool test records. Dehydrated because I had been afraid of making a bad impression by asking for a drink, I ran in a lightheaded fervor to the maintenance room, where the LED ceiling lights were so bright it made my ears ring. There were two gray file cabinets in the two back corners, and given no further instructions, I opened a drawer and began digging.

“Hey! Are you supposed to be here?”

It was an older man’s voice, but suave, soft, and never hoarse, with a notable Upper Midwestern accent. Thinking it was a manager, my heart raced and I immediately slammed the drawer closed and turned around.

A very tall figure stood in the doorway, cast as a silhouette by the sun (somehow brighter than the LEDs), but as he approached my anxiety eased.

"I take it you're new, hey[1]?" He was no more than fifty, though the sad, weary look on his face made him seem older. He had graying, wavy dark hair that went below his ears, sunken grey eyes, a beard of dark gray[2] stubble around thin lips a shade too red, all on a slim face with angular features—he must've been handsome when he was younger. "Peter," read his nametag on the teal polo that was the official uniform of us low-level employees, who were mainly other American youth or international students on J1 visas. I wondered how someone his age ended up working such an entry-level job, but it also meant he couldn't fire me.

Peter found the test records for me and said before leaving, "You seem like a good kid, and you're still young, ya know. Don't just waste away here. Seize it…go out there and do something, hey?"

We weren't let out most days until after it was dark. Some of the employees would go to one of the three bars in town; others (especially if they were underage) to their accommodations—hotel rooms on the outskirts of town—to drink and watch television; if it was a particularly long day, you would go straight home and collapse on your bed, waking up just in time for the next workday.

I found it hard to make friends with the other Americans, maybe because they were all far more extroverted, maybe because I have an accidental talent of becoming invisible in social gatherings, ending up as a detached observer watching the others talk. The international students were easier to meet—I think we felt equally out of place. At work, my main lunch companions

[1] A dialectal interjection that I prefer to transcribe as "hey?" rather than "eh?" because, though the pronunciation is somewhere between the two, the latter seems either passive-aggressive or stereotypically Canadian, neither of which describes Peter.

[2] The spelling is intentional. As my friend wrote, "Grey and gray are two very different colors. Put simply, gray is the color of uniformity while grey is the color of wisdom and calm."

were a Thai girl in glasses and a lanky Finn, both from universities in their respective countries who wanted to improve their English and see the United States. When someone would organize a company-wide outing to drive go-karts or play laser tag, we'd go along as a trio. But for some reason, maybe a cultural-linguistic barrier, we never met of our own accord outside of work, and I never saw them again after the summer.

Most nights I liked to walk downtown and watch the passersby. There were few children at this hour, and it gave the gimmicky buildings (medieval castles and wild west saloons), dilapidated gift shops (which all sold the same T-shirts and fudge), and family restaurants an almost eerie feel. Groups of late-20s/early-30s adults on friends' holidays or girls' weekends roamed the streets drunkenly, laughing and chatting loudly. Two teenage lovers strolled hand-in-hand and whispered in each other's ear.

One night, I passed Chef Giorgino's Italian Ristorante, which had a painted statue outside of a fat man in a toque and handlebar mustache (presumably the Chef himself) with a speaker on his mouth. Every 3 minutes and 12 seconds, he said, "Come-a try my famous ravioli, bring along-a your whole family" or another of five or six recorded lines. Under a streetlamp overlooking the Riverwalk, a lone figure paced back and forth. I figured it was a drunken man and was about to turn away, but the cool of the night gave me an energetic, vigorous alertness that prodded me to examine further.

"Peter?"

He gave such a start he practically jumped, then said, eyes still wide, "Oh it's you… Hello, Jamie." He patted down his tattered jeans and adjusted the collar on his leather jacket. "Sorry, it's just I have to be careful who I talk to, ya know?"

I didn't know, but nodded.

His face relaxed for a second, then his eyes and mouth widened halfway. “Why aren’t you with the others? You know, drinking, um…partying?” He brought a cupped hand repeatedly to his mouth to demonstrate, then did an awkward little dance.

I said I guessed it wasn’t really my thing.

He tilted his head as if contemplating my words, then looked at me. “You know, this Saturday we’re having a club at this lady’s house. Wonderful…a writer, journalist. How does that sound, hey?”

He wrote an address on a notecard taken out of his pocket and handed it to me. “It’s at two o’clock. I think you’ll like it.”

It must speak to my absolute boredom in the days I was off from work that I decided to go to Peter’s “club.” It was an hour’s walk, but back then I had time. The house was along the artificial Lake Delton on the other side of town; a quaint, if a bit antiquated, pastel-yellow two-story. This certainly assuaged concerns about my safety, so I took a deep breath and stepped up to ring the doorbell.

A woman in her sixties in a light blue dress opened the door.

“Come in, come in. You must be Jamie.” Her face was round, with short, curly light gray hair. She extended a freckled arm to shake my hand. “I’m Mrs. Zimmerman, but call me Mrs. Z. We were afraid you wouldn’t come—ah, don’t worry, we’re just getting started.”

We entered the living room of the house, where three antique-looking cushioned wooden chairs and a sofa sat around a rectangular coffee table. There were three bowls on the table, filled with mini pretzels, fruit salad, and puppy chow[3], and a pitcher of iced tea with a floating lemon

[3] A sweet snack made of plain Chex covered in chocolate and peanut butter and dusted in powdered sugar, which every kid who grew up in the Midwest is sure to get at their friend’s house. Here is a good recipe.

slice. On the two side walls of the room were dark wood bookshelves, filled from the ceiling to the floor with well-worn volumes, some of which must've been hundreds of years old. There was a mahogany upright piano on the right wall nearest to me. The room ended in sliding glass door, which appeared newly renovated and opened to a balcony overlooking the lake. Little terracotta pots of basil, rosemary, chives and other herbs lined the floor along the glass door. A sunray shone in and landed on the coffee table.

Peter came through a door on the right wall that separated the bookshelf and the piano, carrying three decorated porcelain plates and three glasses.

"Good to see ya, Jamie." He wore the same leather jacket as that night, but he was freshly shaven and seemed much more composed. He smiled, perhaps the first time I'd seen it, a subtle, fragile smile.

I didn't know how many people I was expecting at the club, but no one else showed up. We all sat down—Peter on the sofa—and I began my (at this point) well-rehearsed introductory courtesies, feigning interest in financial operations to explain why I was in the Dells. Mrs. Zimmerman seemed to see through it and quickly lost interest. She didn't probe further into my auditing work, and at my first pause turned to grab a battered leather-bound book, not much larger than a psalter, with faded golden stripes on the spine but no indication anywhere on the exterior as to its contents.

"Now that's well and good, Jamie, but a young person mustn't be stuck in worldly matters. You must educate your soul and understand the human spirit. Only then will you be rounded and ready to effect change on the tides of history."

She opened the book and began reading, her gentle, conversational voice transforming into a firm resonance that beckoned anyone nearby to divert all attention to listening intently, the

strict poetic meter and occasion rhyme that no longer works ("…her tears / …her cares", a slightly awkward and unsatisfying couplet) reminding of the wide chasm of years that the words survived and traversed.

I was so entranced by the sound of the lines that I retained little of what they actually talked about. But one passage stuck out and stayed with me all these years, which Mrs. Zimmerman told me later was Keats (or maybe Byron, I don't quite remember):

And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,

And she forgot the blue above the trees,

And she forgot the dells where waters run …

Later that afternoon, Peter recited in a soft and almost graceful voice, far more intimate than my terse conversations with him up to that point:

Success is counted sweetest

By those who ne'er succeed.

To comprehend a nectar

Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host

Who took the Flag today

Can tell the definition

So clear of victory

As he defeated – dying –

On whose forbidden ear…

His voice trailed off, and he coughed into a closed fist. Mrs. Zimmerman watched until he regained his composure and then finished for him with a smile:

The distant strains of triumph

Burst agonized and clear!

"Thank you…" Peter said weakly. "I've been thinking about that one lately…why, why are they purple, hey? And triumph—is that really the last thing we…or he, rather, will hear?"

"Dickinson says so much in so few words, but it also leaves us with that many more questions," Mrs. Zimmerman said— I wasn't sure if it was directed more towards Peter or to me. "And she goes to show that you don't need to be famous and mighty in your lifetime to have a great impact on future generations."

Peter gave a half-hearted "mm-hmm" and then turned away from me, his voice suddenly hushed, "You know, Mrs. Z, with all these folks in town for the summer, I wonder if he's gone—Barkovich, I mean. Gone up north again, crossed the border."

"Perhaps he may think to stay instead. One blends in far easier amongst a crowd." Mrs. Zimmerman too became hushed. "Any news from Glacial Lake?"

"The casino's reopened now. The new management…I can't suss out their loyalties. Didn't change the name, you'd think they would after so much bad press, but maybe they like the publicity, hey?"

"Have you observed anything strange at the park, now with the influx of visitors?"

"Lotta big kids, college kids this year—I thought all the cartoon animals meant we were for little ones…None that look like Bark's goonies, but who knows with him…" Peter chuckled, a sharp but soft laugh, staccato and quickly subsided. It felt alien on him while it was there. "Still gotta stay vigilant, ya know. But you, Mrs. Z, how's the paper?"

"Quite well as of late. We've set up a couple new distribution sites around the county, and I spent yesterday discussing partnerships with local businesses. I hope I don't come off as hasty or rash in saying this, but I do believe old Barkovich has forgotten about us, if the past four months of peace is anything to go by…"

I felt that I had accidentally become invisible again, with an added sense of guilt for listening in on a conversation not meant for me. I was trying to decide whether to leave when Peter, as if suddenly remembering I was there, looked at me cautiously and stood up to say, "Well, looks like it's time to go, hey? Sorry, um…see ya next week."

I hadn't read poetry since 11th grade English, but the memory of the three of us sitting in that sunny room lined with its imposing, almost mystical bookshelves; of the unfamiliar comfort of Mrs. Zimmerman's antique chairs and coffee table; of reading timeless words so removed from the day-to-day of business expenses and waterslides—it all held such an otherworldly, strangely enticing allure. When I returned home, I could barely believe Mrs. Zimmerman's house was a real place, or that reciting poems in a circle of listeners was something people actually did. So I returned the next week, and this time they had no hushed conversation but gave me some books, which I read as I had nothing else to do on weeknights. And because I like routine, I came again the third week.

The topic changed each week, but it was always similarly ethereal, similarly distant from my work: modernist literature (Peter hated Joyce, but Woolf and Proust were favorites—"What do ya mean, hey? What are you doing?—you could die tomorrow and you'll…you'll have never read Proust") and translation from classical languages (Mrs. Zimmerman knew Ancient Greek and Latin, as well as some Sanskrit and Pali—"Do keep the manuscripts, Jamie. I believe my renditions of Sappho are quite unlike what you'll see on the market nowadays") were among those I remember fondly.

On a workday after our third or fourth meeting, I heard a frantic knocking on the door of my office (the dimly-lit control room with a constant hum of machinery). I looked up from my spreadsheet and saw through the porthole window that it was Peter, teeth clenched and eyes wide and baggy. When I let him in, he spoke in a rushed whisper:

"Listen Jamie, I…I can't tell you everything, but I'm going away for a while. Management knows…if anyone else asks, tell 'em…um, tell 'em I'm back in Minnesota for a, uh, family situation, a commitment. Got it, bud? Good…good…stay safe, hey?"

He patted my shoulder and hurried out the door. True to his word, I didn't see him the rest of the week. And probably for the best, no one asked where he was.

That weekend, I turned up at Mrs. Zimmerman's house as usual (she left the front door open on Saturday afternoons for us). She was alone at the bench of the upright piano, playing a gently free-flowing, if ever-so-suggestively heavy, tune.

"Delighted to see you as always, Jamie." She pointed to the yellowed score on the piano. "Clara Schumann, Romanze in A minor. It's a shame she isn't played more—Robert would be nothing without her."

Still playing, her voice lowered. "But you're probably wondering why Peter isn't here today…"

She continued until the music reached a half cadence, then paused and took a deep breath. "I suppose you should know…as this isn't a rare occurrence, perhaps it would do you good to understand the roots of his strange behavior…

"About three years ago, Peter was a policy advisor and analyst for the presidential campaign of a Mark Dupointe, whom he then believed was the spiritual successor to Fighting

Bob[4]. But the overheard conversations of higher-ups in the campaign piqued his curiosity, so one night he stayed late at the office to dig through files. It was thinly veiled information—whoever did the bookkeeping was quite rash. Donor money was being funneled into an organization headquartered not far from here, two miles outside of town.

"Sensing that he was on the trail of something big, Peter drove to the address and found the corporate site of Glacial Lake Casino and Resort. He was aggressively turned away by the guards, and subsequent inquiries through the mail went unanswered. Peter decided there was little more he could do on his own and tipped off all the information he had to several newspapers. At that point, I had recently moved to the Dells from New England to start an independent paper, as I'd always wanted, with a friend in the area. Given our proximity to Glacial Lake, we decided to take up the story, and it seemed we were the only paper to do so.

"We found through records and insider interviews that Glacial Lake Enterprises, headed by John Barkovich, held legally and ethically questionable investments in offshore fracking and arms sales to paramilitary groups, among others, and had a history of avoiding taxes. In the course of our investigation, Dupointe lost by a landslide in the primaries and fell into obscurity. Nonetheless, our story reached regional headlines, and the state announced further investigation. Soon after, Peter and the paper received threats of blackmail and worse from Barkovich himself. This, combined with seemingly no progress from the state, made Peter double down and come to me regularly with tidbits he'd dug up about Barkovich or Glacial Lake. I decided to offer Peter a job with our paper so he could investigate full-time and publish updates on the story. However,

[4] Nickname of Robert La Follette (1855-1925), Governor of Wisconsin and U.S. Senator. Known for his reformist and anti-corruption efforts, he was a leading figure in the Progressive Movement and ran for President as the Progressive Party candidate in 1924. Arguably the greatest politician from Wisconsin, he remains a paragon for modern-day progressives and reformers.

the role proved too much for him. It took over his life—he never took a break, drank heavily, and passed out on multiple occasions in the office. He was accosted by people connected with Barkovich when he went near Glacial Lake, which made him perpetually nervous.

"We decided a few months in that it would be best for him to step down. After some time spent in recovery, Peter found a job at the waterpark so he could stay in town while continuing the investigation part-time. Not long after, the casino closed down and the people involved seemed to disappear. Peter persisted, however, claiming to find traces of Barkovich and others in town, leaving sometimes for weeks to trace a clue, unwilling to stop until justice surfaced and the former Glacial Lake Enterprises owned up to its wrongdoing."

She now looked directly at me and said in a gentler voice, "All this is to say, Jamie, that Peter has had it rough, but he's well-intentioned. Excuse him if he is a bit abnormal or eccentric at times, but know that he is doing all the good he can."

As if nothing had happened, Peter reappeared the next week with nothing more than a "good to see ya, Jamie, hope you had a fun weekend", and our Saturday seemed to return to usual—Mrs. Zimmerman tried to explain to us the *Bhagavad Gita*, reading and translating directly from Sanskrit.

One afternoon in July, I was walking across the waterpark on an errand when I saw an EMT van with its lights flashing beside one of the tidepools, now vacated, and a crowd gathered in a semicircle around it. Peter stood by the van, soaking in his teal polo and khaki shorts.

He was talking to the head EMT, a woman in a navy polo. "The poor kid was at the deep end…it was so packed, you know. And he was washed under by the tide…nobody took notice. I

was cleaning the side deck. I told the goddamn lifeguard"—he pointed to a terrified teenager in red standing at the edge of the circle—"told him, 'A kid's down there, we need to go save him, hey.' He says, 'Where?' So I press my button to call the EMT, sounded the alarm. Then I just jump in and dive to the bottom, pulled the poor kid out."

The crowd had gradually dispersed and gone on to other rides. The family thanked him profusely and asked him to accompany them on the way to the county hospital. The boy didn't make it—one of those terrible tragedies on a family vacation. It always struck me as the most unjust cosmic irony: These people ought to be receiving a reward they saved long and earnestly for, but cruel fate spun it in such a senselessly vicious direction.

When Peter came back from the hospital, his eyes were puffed and red, and (if my memory isn't making it up) I saw the now-drying trail of a tear along his cheek.

"Lord, what did that kid even do, hey? His poor folks—ol' Job had it easier, at least his kids were grown…" He paused, then said in the same soft, intimate voice I heard in our first Saturday with Mrs. Zimmerman, "There's no justice, is there? That's not how things work on this side, is it? A failure, hey…a failure…that's all you'll be if justice is all you care about…Poor, poor kid, I hope he's somewhere alright…"

We stood by the empty tidepool for a while in silence, and we couldn't find it in us to focus on our work for the rest of the day.

Looking back now, I believe that was Peter's breaking point.

Already taciturn at work, he became mute unless absolutely necessary, and he wore the same sad, weary face, his eyes always staring somewhere into the distance. He didn't show up for two Saturdays in a row at Mrs. Zimmerman's house, and he was gone from work in the week

between, but this time without any forewarning. We suspected he had some urgent clue to investigate and tried to carry on reading.

One evening after his second Saturday absent, I was in my hotel room exhausted after a particularly sweltering day when there was a knock at the door.

I opened it to see Peter, hair and beard disheveled, jeans torn and soiled, leather jacket covered in a layer of stains and dust, a nervous hastiness about him. Without a greeting, he stumbled into the room, shut the door, peeped through the door's spyhole, then turned to me and began stammering a string of incoherent words, of which I remember a few phrases:

"…I can't stay anymore…John, he, they're onto me…my time here is up…I'm going to Mrs. Z's. Then I'm on the run."

He said good night and opened the door to leave, and when I offered to walk him back (thinking he was drunk) he lifted his hands in protest.

"Don't…you're young, your life's ahead, you've got plenty of time yet. I'm old, I shouldn't entangle you in my mistakes. Let me…I know where I'm going, hey?"

He walked out alone, and I watched as he disappeared down the corridor.

The next day, August 6th, he still wasn't at work, but I didn't think much of it because it was such a large park. It was one of the occasional days I got out in the afternoon, and I returned home through the downtown, absentmindedly looking at the pavement. As I heard "Dinner special for the kids-a: lasagna, chicken, or-a pizza," I saw a line of emergency vehicles in my peripheral vision—two police cars, two ambulances, and a fire truck, their sirens no longer on. A small group of onlookers gathered, at a distance. I approached to investigate, and the rest of day was a blur.

They found him in the river, where he must've been for hours before a tourist saw a figure floating and called 911. Mrs. Zimmerman joined us at some point, and we sat on a bench in silence as the sun set over the Riverwalk. She invited me to dinner at her house; it was spaghetti Bolognese. Afterward, we went to the living room, the first time I'd been there at night, and we didn't have much to talk about, so we read—I a Brontë novel and she the *Complete Poems of John Donne*. She drove me home, and I stayed up because tomorrow was Saturday. In my head, the poem from that first afternoon rang repeatedly:

> *And she forgot the dells where waters run,*
>
> *And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;*
>
> *She had no knowledge when the day was done,*
>
> *And the new morn she saw not…*

She was initially adamant that he was murdered. The coroner found alcohol in his system, but no sign of having been assaulted. She filed a police report and named all the people she knew were involved in Glacial Lake, but it was eventually dropped.

I spent the rest of the summer quietly, working most days, occasionally wandering downtown at night like I used to. I still went to Mrs. Zimmerman's house on Saturdays. Sometimes we discussed books or art or music, but it was brief and I had little to say. It often ended in speculation about what happened to Peter. They snuck up and pushed him in while he was on one of his early morning riverside walks. He got in a taxi to leave town, but the driver was one of Barkovich's own. He was escaping north, but they caught up with him at the casino and left him in the river to float downstream.

Other times, she doubted her first guess and wondered if might have been an accident. His past run-ins made him paranoid, and he still drank too much. Perhaps Barkovich had forgotten about them, but Peter was still troubled by it and fell in the river in an anxious, drunken

stupor. But that was a terrible thought, worse than murder, for it meant that Peter died for nothing. And Mrs. Zimmerman explained:

"Had circumstances been different, Peter would have done great things. But his parents, working-class French immigrants, left him little more than his name and the steadfast spirit he needed to survive in his Minnesota mining town. He was able to win a scholarship to a liberal arts college, though knowing no one, he could only work at humdrum jobs, waiting and wishing for his moment to make a big impact. Nonetheless, he was a great man…No, the world cannot have cared so little about Peter Mettier that it allowed him to die an unremarkable death."

As August drew to a close, I went off to a university two states over. I wrote and telephoned her, but it became increasingly infrequent and we eventually lost contact. I was in New York, then San Francisco, then Houston for work, and the summer faded in my memory as the underground river of time ferried me across stages of life, new obligations and aspirations at the forefront of my vision, far brighter and more vivid than chapters of the past.

I stopped by the Dells for the first time in over a decade, on the way to a cousin's wedding in La Crosse. The waterpark has expanded and built several new thriller rides, all of which frightened me by their descriptions alone. The downtown has hardly changed, but Chef Giorgino's closed and was replaced by an organic foods café. The town has long since forgotten about the events of that summer; it had already forgotten for most part by the time I left for university.

I took a stroll on the Riverwalk, and on a new wooden bench there was a metal plaque that read, "In memory of Peter Mettier."