MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 12 ISSUE 3
THE VALLEY REVIEW

CAMELLIA SINENSIS

ISSN 2372-0999 $12.00

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review was founded by Elizabeth MacDuffie and Alexandra Wagman. We are a non-academic affiliated magazine committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

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FRONT: "Your 2333- An Embryonic Study" by Christina Gusek
BACK: "The Sin Eaters" by Sean Greene

Printing:
Paradise Copies, Northampton, MA
Typeface: Gill Sans, Libel Suit (Ray Larabie)

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Special thanks:
Mark Alan Miller and Justin Pizzoferrato and Sonelab, Abandoned Building Brewery, Broadside Books, Big Red Frame, Topatoco, Sierra Grill & Building 8 Brewery, Corsella Butcheria, Park Hill Orchard, Straw Dog Writer's Guild, Matt Waugh, Sean Greene, Les Derailleurs, Electric Eyes, Michael Goldman and Hammer & Horn Productions, and all of our sponsors. Our sponsors deserve great thanks - please visit them and let them you know you appreciate their support of the arts!

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Vol. 12 Issue 3, September 2018, first printing. ISSN 2372-0999 (print) ISSN 2372-1200 (online)

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in memoriam: Melton M. Miller, Jr.

I am here now, writing this piece for *Meat for Tea*, thanks to the man my father was. Writing not in rebellion or in reaction against, but with gratitude to him (as well to my mother, who died in 2011). I fully realize that not everyone can say this. I don't take it for granted. It's not that the poetry I now grapple to write, the experimental music and theater I've been devoted to for most of my life, or my choice of career (librarian, now retired) were what he had in mind. My father didn't direct his sons toward how to make a living, or pass judgement on who we dated, cohabited with or married. We've had our life-path twists and turns, some that he no doubt viewed with chagrin. And I suppose we're not done yet with making our mistakes, though we can no longer tell Dad about them. (At least not in person, quite.) I know that, when he was in middle age, he would have been happier if rock music had never entered the house, though it found its way in late. He was nonplussed by my early interest in the work of John Cage, and perhaps became more interested because it was clear that I was determined, over decades, to pursue it. And there is the point. Dad was deeply interested in the people his sons actually were and became, not who they thought he should be. He and my mother both shared this commitment, which extended easily to our partners (long-time and short-term). And of course this was equally true for his grandson. I heard him say more than once how amazed he was with how things were turning out for us. Who'd have thought any of it would happen?

I don't really know why this was true about my father, when it's apparently not so for so many parents. Perhaps it came from how his life changed, in completely unexpected ways, when he and my mother met and began dating in high school. Their family backgrounds were significantly different – blue-collar/academic, to put it simply. Finding himself in my mother's world, he then found *for himself* theater, classical music and choral singing, the vision of a career as an engineer, and ultimately a deep commitment to teaching and learning at UMass/Amherst. Those teaching decades had many stresses, but underlying all was what we call "paying it forward." His earliest years couldn't have hinted at the flourishing to come, and his dedication was helping college- and high school-age human beings to find their flourishing.

Now my brothers and I join the millions of millions in being, suddenly, our family's oldest living generation. We are packing the photo albums (my god! how many cubic feet?), rediscovering the stuffed animals, puzzling over the virtual heaps invisibly marked *Cherish* and *Discard*. (Thanks to poet Tom Daley for that.) We will manage it, of course. And who are we now, when the only Home to go to is where we already live?

David P. Miller

***

In celebrating the dedication of this issue to my father, I join my loved ones in exploring the connection between him and this wonderful magazine, this devotion to what too many people disregard. We're among the many who have, or will, talk about their connection with Dad. Perhaps he helped them overcome personal obstacles to academic success at UMass, or they worked with him to bring community theater to the stage, or they received food and human contact through his volunteering for Meals on Wheels. Given these and other examples of his dedication to service, it is fitting that this issue of Meat for Tea is dedicated to him.

Sadly, this honor takes place in the context of grief. How do we make sense of a life that has ended? For me, it includes trying but failing to know *the* story of my father. Like an old book with its binding in shreds, pages torn or missing, there is a lot we can only infer; alternate endings to an old man's life. As we "Miller boys" clean out his condo, deciding what to do keep, donate, or throw out in the semi-chaos of inertia-disruption, we keep watch. We don't want to confuse my father's life with something to discard.

My parents collected all sorts of things, books and records, yes, but also *knick-knacks*, *tchotchkes*, *gimcracks*, *objets d'art*, *curios*, *bric-a-brac*, and the more refined, but far less interesting, *finery*. Dad would be amused by the notion that synonyms are like siblings, with a similar capacity for rivalry. But he'd retreat at the mere thought of hearing the long list of words that might stick to his decades of stuff. So maybe just three, Dad, okay?: If words were the things themselves, the things discovered while cleaning out his closets or drawers, *furbelow*, *flummery*, and *bibelot* would be in the *keep* pile despite their tiresome rivalry for the title of "most essential," most misunderstood, most deserving of extra bubble-wrap.

Fortunately, we boys shared our family life much more generously than this. Our parents, with all their imperfections, never treated us as mere ornaments, or worse, as nothings, as furbelows or flummeries. As all good parents convey, usually without words, they knew us as bibelots, as having inherent beauty and worth, despite how much we messed up. And so there was and *is* nothing to fight over.

Writing from this space of grief, which for me is sometimes sharp but mostly a cloud of absence, I'm more aware than ever of how much I learned from Dad about pragmatic generosity, his desire to *be of use* -- to borrow a phrase from Marge Piercy. I doubt it took him more than the briefest of moments to decide to subscribe to this magazine, because for him, that option was the only one that said "keep me," that wasn't tossed out without further thought, that wasn't complete nonsense. Is this the idealizing fantasy of a grieving son? Perhaps.

Am I *sure* this is how he felt? No. I *do* know that I can barely imagine a world where the reverse holds true.

I love you, Dad, and I miss you. Thank you.

Paul

***

Dad spent 12 days in the hospital before he died. Most of the time he was in intensive care, but for a while he was strong enough to be moved from the ICU to a ``regular'' room. During those three or four days he was the same as always, the burden of his exhaustion notwithstanding. ``What I want to know,'' he said with humored assertiveness, ``is when I am going to get *out* of here.'' Although the actual language he used was ever-so-slightly rougher than that, he was not angry. Scared, perhaps, but not angry.

As we had for years, Dad and I talked about books. This is how it would go: He would tell me which book he was reading, and then say something about its subject. This time around the book was ``American Lion,'' and Andrew Jackson was a vicious man.

I arrived in Sarasota eight days before Dad died. I slept in the room that was both his bedroom and study. I'm sure many people would understand me if I told them that the room felt quite still in those days, stiller than it would have felt if Dad were alive and just off running errands. After he died it felt like I was inhabiting a museum -- one of those museums set inside the house of an historic figure or family from the 18th or 19th century, in which everything is stationed where it had been, and tourists are roped out of at least a quarter of the square footage. In this case, there was no rope.

As a civil engineer, Dad was a methodical thinker. But I wasn't aware of the extent of Dad's organizational sensibility until last month, when my brothers and I travelled to Sarasota to box up his belongings. I found some interesting things in his room. I discovered a handwritten inventory of 77 pieces of my mother's jewelry. The list was enumerated; Dad had numbered little stickers and stuck them to their corresponding boxes or pieces of jewelry.

He collected rare coins -- many of them had not been circulated. He listed those, too.

Dad's favorite authors were Ellis Peters, Laurie King, Isabel Allende, Willa Cather, Sue Grafton, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and David McCullough. I found a list of 53 books he read, probably within in the last five years.

One of last physicians to consult with Dad asked Dad what he had done. ``I taught engineering.'' Later, it occurred to me that during that interview, had he more energy, Dad would have volunteered something like a final testament expressed with a broad brush: He grew up in Burlington, Vermont; he was married for 57 years; he was on the University of Massachusetts faculty for 33; he and his wife moved to Sarasota in 1997. It would not have surprised me because, starting about 12 years ago and seemingly out of nowhere, he began telling me stories about his life: growing up, the days in graduate school in Lafayette and our parents' marriage. In Sarasota, I discovered that he had type set a work of fiction my mother wrote, probably in the 1940s. In 1999, I transcribed diaries two of my great-grandparents -- a married couple -- had written starting in 1900. One of my parents put the transcription in a file folder.

Were the list making and the preservation Dad's hobby? Or did he do those things with an ideal in mind -- out of respect for Personal History?

I don't know, but I do know that he did them within the quiet of his room.

Dan Miller

***

As the last of four sons - "the baby brother" - I am also the last to write down my feelings on dad's life and passing. As in my life, here, too, I am aware of a hidden benefit of being the youngest. For example, by the time I started to develop into my own as a young person, my parents had already "seen it all" - making a strange position of smooth sailing in tough pre-teen and teenage waters. I think I actually got away with a lot of mischief and shenanigans (Io, I cannot confess actually doing much that would be considered *trouble,* but if I did, my parents were largely inured to whatever I could cook up by that point. Not to say they didn't care or were neglectful! So, how can I add much to what has already been said? My elder brothers have, yet again, paved the way.

This isn't entirely true, of course. While I share similar memories, my experiences were also naturally my own. Dad, and mom, had a strong instilling in individuality, as mentioned by my brothers. An acceptance for our personal choices. This is paramount.

I dropped out of college after a year. Well, I "took a year off" with the understanding that I would re-enroll after. I could live at home, rent-free, as long as I held a full time job, and could do with my income as I saw fit, save for keeping my car on the road. My spare time (focusing on recording engineering and writing music) was all mine. To my surprise, as the year was winding to a close, a nibble from a record label in the works and an intership at a studio that was looking to become an actual paying position, albeit part time, I anxiously approached dad about not returning to college. "Your mother and I have been discussing this," the father who I understood to be a strong advocate for higher education said, "and we think you should continue to pursue what you're doing."

His support - their support - led me down the path to a career in recording occasional professional musicianship, and studio ownership. I cannot imagine a way to express properly the gratefulness I feel for having the opportunity to develop into *myself* in such a way.

I could go on and on, but the brothers above already said most of what I wanted to say, and probably better than I could. So, the one thing I want to last relate is a lesson that dad taught me very early on that has stuck with me to this day. "Don't dilute your argument" he told me, regarding some conversation where I was adding unneeded information to my narrative in trying to make a point. Just one sliver of the kind of insight that he clearly instilled in anyone he ever talked with.

Love you, dad.

Mark Alan Miller

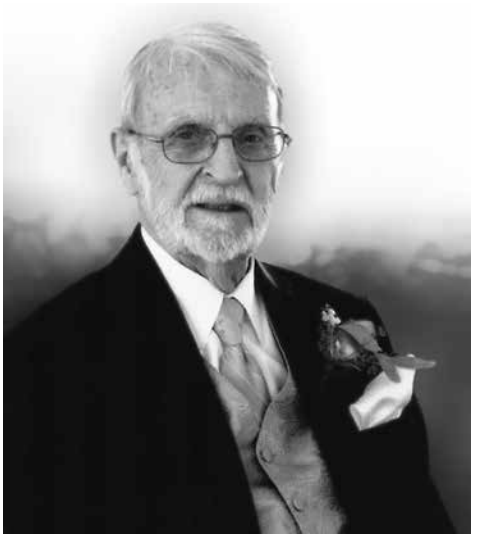
***

Melton Miller, by the Book

I didn't have to learn to love Melton Miller. From the time I first met him and his wife Dorothy 30 years ago, as I began dating their son Paul, I found in him a kind, easy-goingness that I recognized in my own father, and an instant acceptance into the Miller clan. I would see Melton from time to time during the holidays out in Western, Massachusetts, then less frequently when he and Dorothy moved to Sarasota, Florida, but our fondness for one another was always there. It wasn't until after Dorothy's death, though, when Melton had more time to turn to read, that we made the discovery, much to our delight, that we had much of the same taste in books. And that became our real bonding. While I often read deeply and widely in one subject for a long time, Melton had a wonderful range as easy-going as himself. He lured me into the early days of weather forecasting (*Isaac's Storm)*, the Dust Bowl (*The Worst Hard Time*), the escape of Martha Washington's enslaved woman, Ona Judge (*Never Caught)*, the *real* story of the Pilgrims (William Bradford's *Of Plimoth Plantation),* though he lost me at the making of the Panama Canal. We read *Cadfael* Mysteries, *The Scarlet Letter, Lincoln in the Bardo, Sing, Unburied, Sing*. He was the only other person I knew who'd actually read and loved *Moby Dick*. Melton usually alternated

between fiction and non-fiction, but when he fell head over heels in love with the writings of Willa Cather and Isabel Allende ("my girls," he fondly called them), he lingered in their books a long, long time. It was Melton who introduced me to my own literary love, author Jill Lepore, when he sent me his copy of her *Ben Franklin's Sister.* Now all of Lepore's books reside on my shelves. In the last days of Melton's life, he asked Paul to go to his home and find the book he was currently reading – *Revolution Song* – and to make sure that I got it. He was certain I would like it. He was right, of course, though I can hardly bear finishing it, knowing no further books will be shared. I miss Melton Miller most now when I pick up a title, hear about a book, that I am sure, he too, would love. Remembering his love of words, a good read, his deep appreciation of literature, it feels touchingly appropriate for him to be remembered in *Meat for Tea,* a literary journal. May the afterlife of Melton Miller, and of all of us who love reading, be overflowing with books.

Catherine Sasanov



Melton M. Miller, Jr
1933-2018

Melton, Dan, Mark and Dorothy Miller.
Patty the dog.

waiting for patricia

Jane Yolen

It was a shorter wait than expected
though a longer one than wanted,
with conversations
hinted about
for far too many years.

It was a shorter trip than wanted,
but a longer one than planned for,
a death between us, a burial,
changing the route
of visitations.

It was a faster goodbye than thought of,
a fonder one than needed,
both in our cocoons
seeking butterflies
of wisdom.

A harder leave than needed,
a better trip than hoped for,
friendship made the stronger
by the fallen bridges
crossed.

quiet

Jane Yolen

The house is quiet, visitors long gone,
back to their noisy homes.
I walk through the space where laughter
had parked for the weekend.,
where rambling stories clammored,
songs climbed the stairs
to hang out in the minstrel gallery.
Where dead memories for a moment
came alive. You whistling for birds,
explaining coding, telling a tall tale
that could have been true except
for your roar of laughter at the end.
The house is not just quiet now,
it is silent. But, now used to it,
I sleep in the cotton of its arms
as I once slept in yours.

after

Jane Yolen

After the EMTs came and pronounced.
After the family returned.
After the ritual dinners and speeches.
After the ashes.

After the toasts were made.
After the hosts were thanked.
After the friends went home.
After the ashes.

After the visit to the grave.
After the tear ducts dried up.
After the house was still.
After the ashes.

Then I truly knew you were gone.
That there was only after.
That all I had left
Was the story of our love.

And the ashes.

two political double dactyls

Jane Yolen

Higgelty Piggelty
See two dictators
Deciding the fate
Of our poor fading earth.

Kim in his posturing
Nuking and duking
And Trump always telling us
What he is worth.

Higgelty Piggelty
Poor Michael Cohen he
Sends up smoke signals
to old White House friends.

No answers coming he
dodges soft bullets
but we expect blood bath
when his story ends.

michael goldman's body
Michael Goldman

A happenstance vehicle
which runs mostly on its own
mechanics too complex
not to oversimplify
so he cruises around in it
generally unaware
of how well
it suits him.

michael goldman's heart
Michael Goldman

Barely noticeable
though it obviously
is working continuously
nearly silently
not wanting
to attract attention
not jumping
to react
just subtly stirring
to let him know
it's not missing
a beat.

michael goldman's mind
Michael Goldman

Like a geometrical network
all its facets have facets
look as close as you want
there's always more.
He looks at his mind
and it soon becomes unclear
if he is looking at his mind
or if his mind is looking at itself
Just exploring this question
can occupy it
for long stretches
leaving him
with nothing to show for it
so he has been trying
to ignore his mind
has decided its fancies are
little more than self-serving
pre-occupations
He's going to use his mind
instead of letting his mind
use him.

michael goldman's soul
Michael Goldman

Is probably connected
to everyone and everything
but it's a bit too close
for him to get a good look at it
And then if he ever did
it's possible he would be staring
down the infinite
which might be more than a little
disconcerting
so he takes the easy road
opening the aperture to his soul
only in occasional little peeks
so as not to frighten others
not to mention himself
His soul
is in no apparent hurry
seems content to remain
in the dark woods of his subconscious
until it is absolutely certain
it's safe to show itself
in broad daylight.

in memoriam

Gretchen Rockwell

on Barbara Graff's "Cinderella Doesn't Live Here Anymore"

It took the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan,
that is, *the King of the World*, twelve years to end
construction on the tomb that has been called
the teardrop on the cheek of time. The Taj
Mahal, that is, *the Crown of the Palace*, or more
simply, just *the Crown*, was built in memory of
his wife Mumtaz after her death. After the death
of her mother, Cinderella cried three times a day
over a hazel branch which eventually grew, and birds
nested in its branches, and we know how this story ends.
The Taj Mahal with its fine chips of gems and marble inlaid
in marble looks different every day, depending on the sun
or the moon or the midnight sky, the stones gleaming in a new
light. Sometimes it flushes warm and ivory in the afternoon,
sometimes it is ice-white and remote under a moon that only
highlights its melancholy splendor. I walked through it once,
through the cavern at the center where the casket rests, muffled
feet mandated so the carved stones stay intact. For each night
of the prince's ball, Cinderella was blessed not only with slippers,
but with a splendid dress thrown down by a mourning dove: a
gorgeous gown as golden as the sun, and as silvery as the moon,
and as inky and gleaming as a night full of stars. During the daytime,
ashy and pale, she scrubbed the floors, the kitchen, the clothes, the—
never mind. The point is, no matter the story, no matter the end,
there's always a stain, there's always a dress, there's always a girl
and her grief. Cinderella cried over a broken branch of hazel and
watered by tears, it grew, painfully slow, to yearn upward to
the unreachable, the shape of absence woven in the twigs that
curl like questions under a full moon. Things are never made
right the first time around. All tales agree on this. Hazel trees,
it's said, can bear fruit in as little as four years—that is, one
third of the time that it took to build the Taj with its beautiful
gleaming dome, which is shaped like the shape of a hazelnut:
that is, the shape of loss and what results from it, the only
thing the bereft have left; that is, what we make of our grief.