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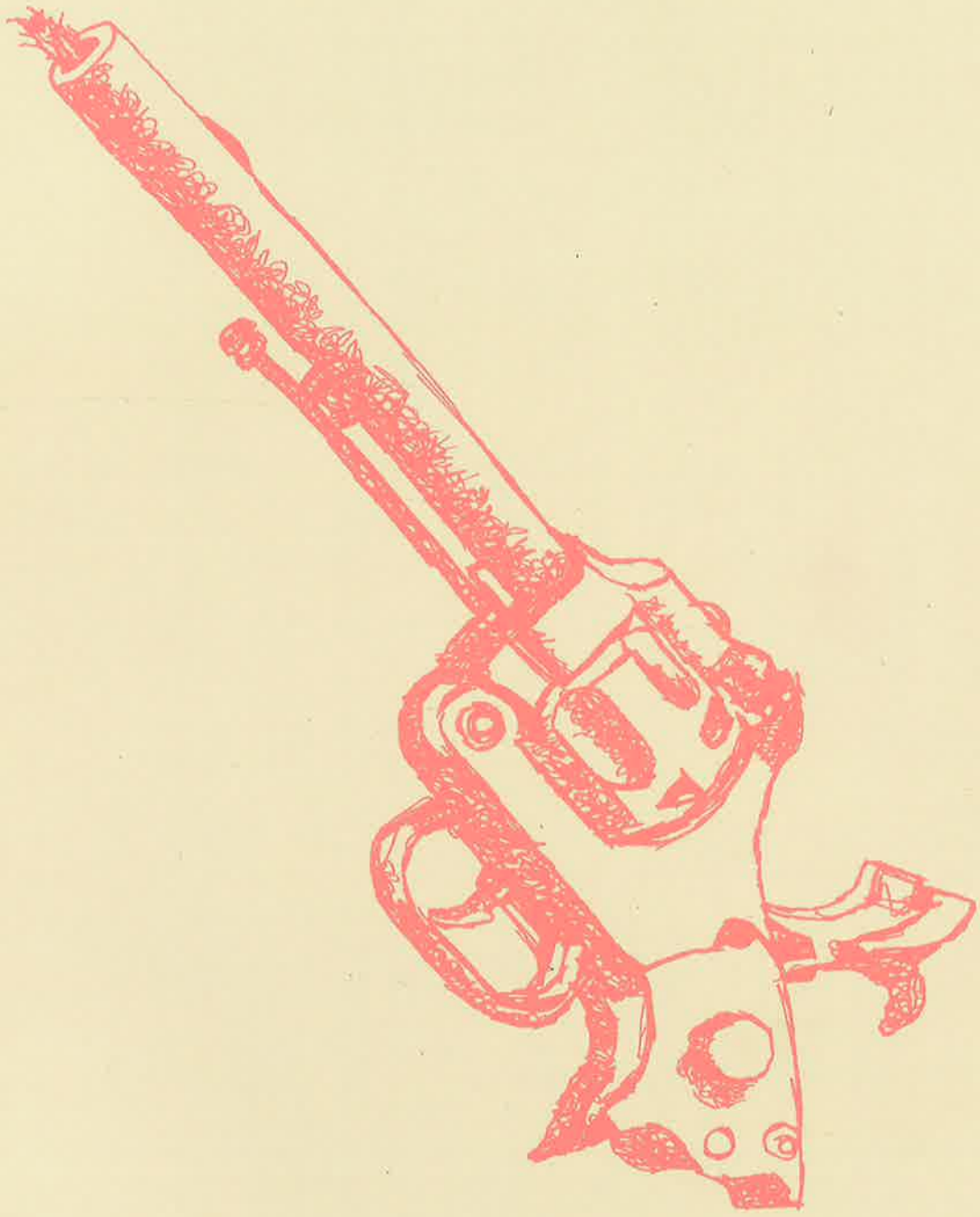

something I found in a gutter
outside Texas homecare in
Streatham one Sunday morning.
for Julie 1997

LONE STAR VOLUME 2 ISSUE 2 APRIL/MAY 2003 U.S. $4.95

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ON-LINE: CALENDAR OF RECOMMENDED EVENTS
perlamagazine.com

liz ward ***the mesquite line*** (details), 2002

VALLEY VENISON *Dorothy Richardson*

Venison steak
1 lg. can Pet milk
1 jar Pace hot sauce
Salt
Flour
Shortening

Marinate pounded venison steaks in Pet milk and Pace hot sauce for at least 4 hours (overnight is fine). Lift out meat. Let it drain fairly well before dusting with salted flour. Fry in hot fat, trying to judge doneness so as to turn one time. Make sauce or gravy from marinade, using another skillet. For variety, add garlic salt and ground cumin. This is especially good with Mexican food. Add Tabasco is you want it hotter.

james h. evans ***hallie's hands***

Wild grass and gasoline—that's the aroma of lost Texas to me. Lost because so much, known proportionally to so few, now is fragmented and developed. If you breathe South Texas air deeply from an open car, road dust mingles in your nose with dry grass, pollen, grease, soil, manure. Dirt roads remind me of following ant trails, and collecting flint rocks. Open pastures should all have body imprints—Texas snow angels—their blades bent by observers of cloud shapes. I was one of the lucky ones; I grew up, in spurts, building hay forts in barn lofts, trying in vain to ride cows, feeling the sting of wild berries on my hands, picked for my grandmother's homemade pies and preserves.

Today I still count myself lucky that my own family divides its time between country and city. Yet we all—as a collective whole—have lost a great deal in our search for efficiency and modernity, basic sensory experiences that could be right at our fingertips if we allowed them to reenter. Being in the country feels like walking back in time, a reminder that you don't need a gourmet kitchen to cook well. Your kids don't need brainy toys to learn. On a rural road, my daughter learns her colors from flowers that wave like parade bystanders on the roadside. She picks one, comments, "Mama, this one's blue, but it smells like it's pink."

In an old wood house in South Texas, my daughter lies on a screen porch, sipping juice and watching birds dart and swoop beyond the screen. Twice recently, a butterfly has been caught in the screen porch. Both times, she's pointed at it, and we've studied its wing spots, cupped hands around it, walked beyond the screen door and witnessed its flight away.

She, like most young children, loves to be outside, to study the grass and leaves that sway in the wind, as if they remind her of a place she's been before, and she's trying to put her finger on when and where. After a rain, when I can't find her, she's deep in a mud puddle somewhere, letting it mush through her toes, examining prints, painting her body, hoping I'll walk by so she can push me in, too.

And inside the country house, on a small gas range, we cook. Muffins, cookies, tacos, bean soups, quick breads, corn breads, mashed potatoes, meat loaf; easy comfort foods, many that remind me of my grandmother, a professional homemaker.

My grandmother used to make mashed potatoes for my sister and me, on the gas range in her yellow-tiled kitchen. We'd eat at a brown linoleum table nestled in the only alcove of the room, amidst piles of newspaper coupons and crossword puzzles, an overstuffed bread box, coke bottles waiting for ten-cent redemption, a small television airing "The Price is Right." I strain to remember as I make mashed potatoes for my daughter: did my grandmother peel them all the way? I can see her hands, brown and wrinkled, yet soft, even pillowy, to the touch. Her fingers were elegant with

age, with swollen knuckles, deep creases, thick white nails—self-filed. A dinner ring imposed where her wedding ring used to rest. What ever happened to her wedding ring, I wonder. I wish I had asked her. I was still too young, the last time I spent with her, to speak to her through the eyes of a wife. Wet strips of peeled potatoes flopped across the top of her hands like messy wallpaper as she aimed for the kitchen counter. I think she peeled the whole thing. Did she use milk or cream? Hers were smooth, beaten to translucent peaks. Then she'd pull out the metal blades of the beater, one for me, one for my sister, and we'd run tiny fingers down their sides, shoveling small buttery piles into our mouths. She stood at her sink, yellow-rubber-gloved arms sunk with sudsy dishes in a porcelain basin, as we licked the bowl. How much butter? I ask her memory. Horseradish? Fresh garlic? All of the things I add now in my attempt to get her flavor and texture back.

Now my daughter and I regularly visit our friends Dorothy and Travis, a ranching couple in their eighties, some of our only rural neighbors. Each time we visit, Dorothy retrieves a treat she's been saving for my daughter's next appearance: A packet of construction paper, a plastic bird pinwheel, a purple picture frame. We sit on an oak-engulfed patio at sunset and hear stories of horseback rides beneath trees dangling with snakes, Travis' cattle work, quail hunts, Dorothy's church activities.

Dorothy is famous, among those who know her, for her cooking, although she'll deny this. One day during a recent visit, we talked baking, and she passed on a cookbook, full of good bread recipes, she said. On inspection, the meat section also revealed Dorothy's own recipes for cabrito, quail, dove, and venison. Dorothy has confided before that she can never eat venison without remembering the summer day, many years ago, when a game warden unexpectedly stopped by their home for lunch. "I was serving venison stew," gasped Dorothy, "and we didn't have a freezer back then!" (deer season had ended months before).

Beyond bread and Dorothy's game recipes, the cookbook's pages mesmerized. A soundbite—a mouthful—from Texas past, preserving voices and wisdom from homemaking sages. Though no mashed potato recipe graces its pages, a good tip does: "A little vinegar or lemon juice added to potatoes before draining will make them extra white when mashed." And throughout the book, I heard my grandmother talking, answering questions I didn't even know to ask: "When boiling corn, add sugar to the water instead of salt. Salt will toughen the corn," "The freshness of eggs can be tested by placing them in a large bowl of cold water; if they float, do not use them." Or, "When cooking vegetables that grow above ground, the rule of thumb is to boil them without a cover." "To avoid tears when cutting onions, try cutting them under cold

josie seeligson © 2003

james h. evans ***hawk***

running water or briefly placing them in the freezer before cutting."

Some of the advice is quaintly outdated for today, like how to best grate cheese. Most of us grab packaged grated cheese in the refrigerated section. Yet many tips, sprinkled among hand drawings of cheese balls, pickle jars and gravy boats, are nostalgically fascinating. "Keep ants out of your pantry by filling cracks with petroleum jelly or sprinkling red pepper on floors and counter tops." Or, "To save money, pour all leftover vegetables and water in which they are cooked into a freezer container. When full, add tomato juice and seasoning to create a 'free' soup." And a favorite, "A gadget that works well for decorating sugar cookies is an empty plastic thread spool. Simply press the spool into the dough, imprinting a pretty flower design."

josie seeligson lyle © 2002

The book is a fabulous collection of old country recipes and advice. Just make sure you have Crisco in your cupboard. Right away we made a moist oatmeal cake and have big plans for multiple versions of chicken and dumplings, Meat Loaf Muffin Surprise and Super-Duper Biscuits. Not everything was in my realm of interest. Home-jarring dill pickles seems a daunting, arcane task, and I flipped quickly, aghast, through the section on molded gelatin containing things like tuna and Dream Whip. But like a good thrift store junkie with no plans to buy everything, I delight there are so many nostalgic items to sift through.

In addition to comfort foods, this little tome archives comforts by preserving not only recipes but also voices. Of the Shakespeare Club members, Dorothy says, "What society a small town has—this was it. They were a study group that met at night, so that their mothers could watch their children. Now they're all old ladies like me, watching their grandchildren." These ladies compiled recipes of their own grandmothers, mothers, friends—matriarchs of cooking and all things domestic, many likely gone. This book reminds us that when modern life becomes a mess, some basic advice, perhaps some cream gravy, may help.

And remember that sensory experiences don't have to meet sensibilities. One day, driving down a dirt road, my daughter hung her head out the car window like a dog. Told to be careful, she protested with glee, "I'm eating the wind! I'm eating the wind!" and chomped her mouth open and closed like a fish catching particles in a current.

"What does the wind taste like?" I asked.
"It tastes like salt," she said.
(chomp chomp)
"And peppa!"

The Shakespeare Club Cook Book;
Nixon, Texas 1970

Reprint presented by United Methodist Women of First United Methodist Church,
400 North Franklin Avenue;
Nixon, Texas 78140-0020

Reprinted 2002 by
Morris Press Cookbooks;
Kearney, NE 800-445-6621
www.morriscookbooks.com

James Evans' first book of photographs, **Big Bend Pictures**, designed and edited by D.J. Stout with an introduction by Robert Draper, will be released by the University of Texas Press in Spring, 2003.