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*** AMERICAN ***

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ON COLLEGE FOOTBALL

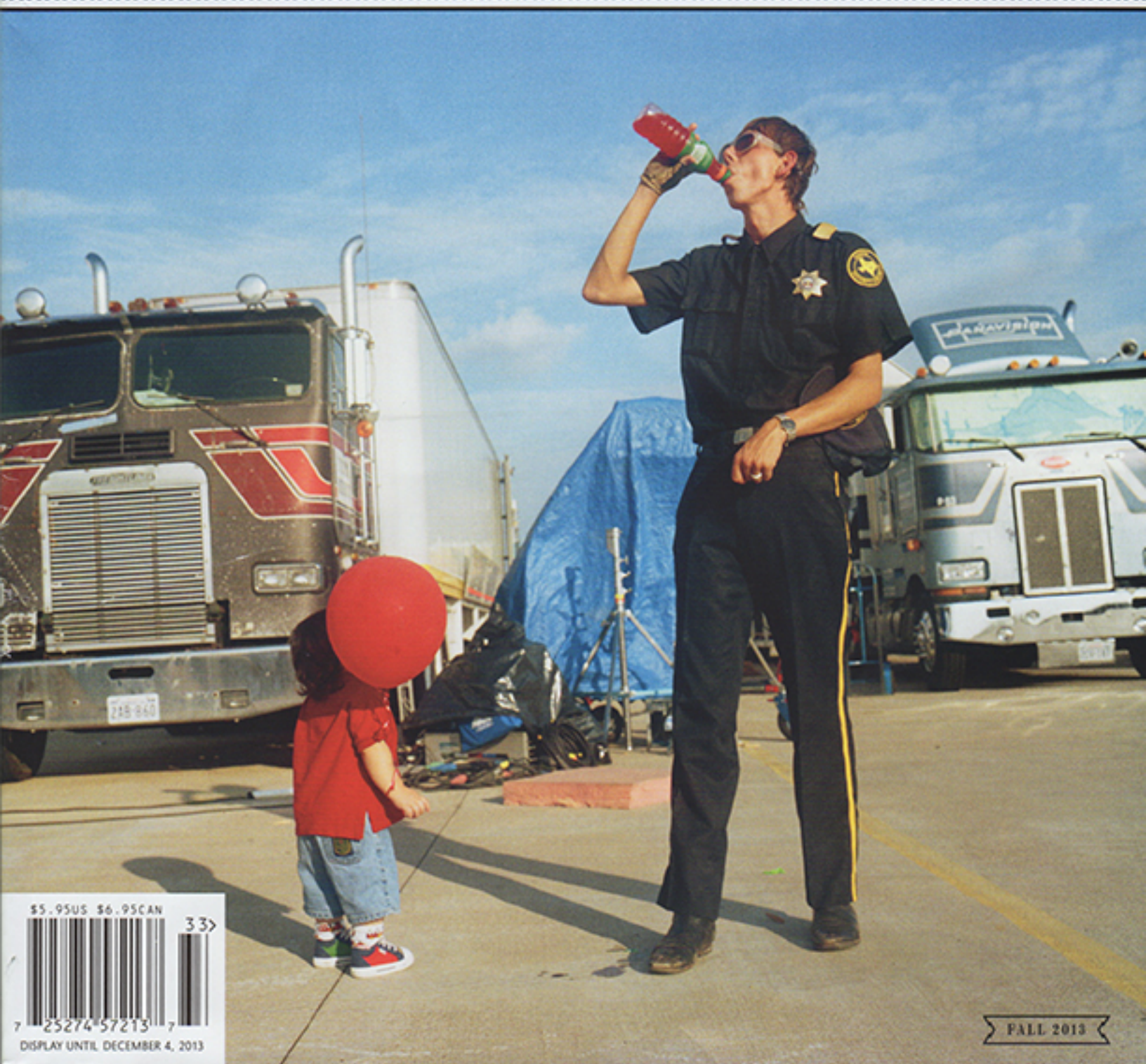
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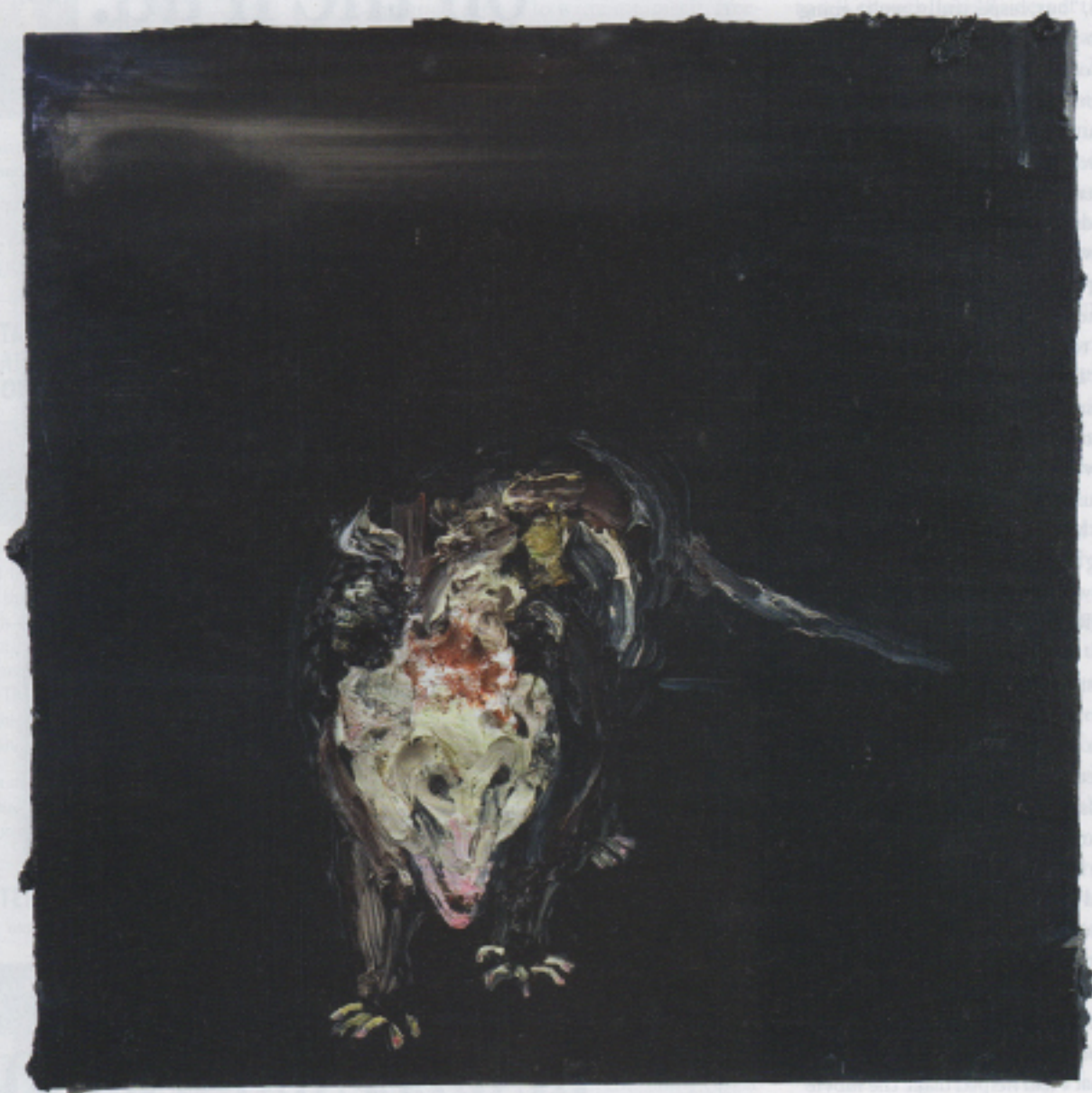
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FALL 2013

BAKED POSSUM

BY CHRIS OFFUTT



Before entering the realm of food preparation, I'd like to make absolutely clear how much I love possums. They live the way I feel most of the time—a nomadic living fossil, a loner unable to tolerate company except during mating season. Fortunately for them that occurs every six months. Possum, opossum, how do I love thee? Let me count the ways!

You have opposable thumbs!
 You are the only marsupial in the entire Western hemisphere!
 You will eat darn near anything!
 You have a prehensile tail!
 You act in movies when the script calls for a rat!
 You have over fifty teeth!

You are immune to rattlesnake venom and rabies!

Possums are the oldest surviving mammals in North America, having successfully defended themselves in the most absurd way possible. When scared, they bare their teeth in a hiss, self-induce a temporary comatose state, and emit a stench that smells like rotting meat.

This response to attack has kept the species alive and unchanged for 75 million years.

The following recipe for Baked Possum is from *More Than Moonshine*, by Sidney Saylor Farr, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1983. The book is divided into nineteen sections with an extensive index. When her mother fell ill, Miss Sidney dropped out of school in seventh grade to take care of her nine younger siblings. She married at age fifteen and attained her high school degree through correspondence courses. She eventually wrote several books, worked as a librarian at Berea College, and edited *Appalachian Heritage* for fourteen years.

The primary ingredient for this recipe is of course American Opossum, which most folks know as roadkill. Possums are not available in stores or at organic farms. You can harvest a possum with a dog and a shotgun, but you run into the problem of breaking your tooth on a pellet lodged in the meat. Possums are inherently "free-range," which means they are the ultimate scavengers, willing to eat all manner of garbage. Ideally you will trap a possum and keep it alive for a week, feeding it a steady diet of roughage to clean out its system. They're not easy to trap. They like trees, and have the habit of changing dens every few days to foil predators. Experienced possum seekers carry a small mirror to hold beneath the animal's nose to check for life. If the glass fogs, your possum is playing possum.

Before we begin preparing the possum for baking, I'd like to relate two highly personal stories about possums. One is quite sentimental and the second has a squeamish element, so I will lead with the sweet and kind.

As a young man I lived on a dirt road in a three-room cabin allegedly built by lesbians. It had eight-inch walls with heavy insulation, double-hung windows, twelve inches of insulation in the ceiling, and a woodstove that threw heat like the gates of Hell. During snowstorms, I'd build a big fire, clamp the lid shut, open the doors and windows, and sit by the stove, watching snowflakes enter the house and evaporate in mid-air. The moisture was rough on my books, but the experience was among my finest. Not many folks can lay claim to an indoor blizzard without the risk of freezing to death.

My nearest neighbor was Jerry Jerrell, who lived in a house he'd built with his wife. Jerry and Sherry had each been married before, and referred to themselves as "forced homebodies" because they couldn't go to

town without running into an ex. He ran his own flooring business and she cooked at a jail. Jerry was uneducated, claiming to have read just one book in his life, a guide to scuba diving, despite never having lived near the sea. He was also one of the smartest people I've ever known, curious about the world and knowledgeable about nature. He could read the woods like a newspaper. His capacity for compassion was so deep that he once lured me into ten hours of labor, shoveling grain into a handmade cart, and towing said cart two miles for unloading. As I rested afterward, Jerry explained that the five-foot mound of grain was intended as food for the wild ducks, soon to migrate past his house.

Jerry's A-frame house was pale blue, trimmed in white scallops like rickrack on a dress, calling to mind a fancy cake. The interior was outfitted like a ship with catwalks, thickly coiled ropes, and portholes to nowhere. One long narrow shelf held a taxidermied possum. It was not a professional job. The cut in the gut zigzagged off-center and was poorly sewn, the hide stretched over a crude form. For two years I ridiculed Jerry for keeping a stuffed possum on a highly visible shelf. Jerry just laughed and called me "Awful Offutt," saying I'd never understand. One day I asked him point-blank why he had it. "To keep me humble," he said. "Even a lowly possum needs love."

A year later I moved away. A few years after that, Jerry died. Another year went by and I visited his wife, Sherry. She took me around back to show me the stump where he sat before falling over dead. It was a hard moment for each of us. Not too many people knew him and it was important to Sherry that I see the precise spot where Jerry had taken his last breath. We both looked at the earth. Early autumn leaves were beginning to turn, a few yellow poplars blowing in the breeze. I waited, listening for a sign of him but hearing only a distant chainsaw. Sherry and I were both stoic, concealing our emotions with tense control, a kind of testament to Jerry, who always laughed, never complained, and scoffed at crybabies. I told her goodbye and she walked me to my truck. She asked me to wait a minute, went into the house, and came back with the possum. "Jerry would want you to have this," she said. As I took it, we hugged each other, the stuffed possum between us, its stiff fur pricking our faces.

I still have that possum. I keep it on a highly visible shelf. When visitors inquire,

I tell them it keeps me humble.

All that sappy pabulum notwithstanding, the other personal possum story is somewhat less than savory. A possum's penis is bifurcated on the end, creating the myth that it copulates by inserting the twin forks into each of the female nostrils. Lending credence to this belief is the habit a female has of breathing into her pouch to oxygenate a litter of fifteen extremely tiny fetuses. At one time, people thought she gave birth by sneezing out her babies. As a child I heard that males had a bone in the penis that was considered lucky by gamblers; that young people keep it as a love token, a talisman given to the object of desire; that older gentlemen of the hills kept one in their hat, using the tapered point to pick their teeth after meals.

I have long wanted a possum baculum.

Lest any reader suspect my interest in acquiring a penis bone is remotely prurient, I hasten to explain that I am merely attempting to add to a burgeoning collection. My Uncle Hank was an expert in penal reform and traveled the country inspecting prisons and recommending changes to benefit the inmates. In the 1970s he lived in Alaska. He developed a friendship with the warden of a state penitentiary who bestowed Uncle Hank with an exotic gift upon his departure for the lower forty-eight. The present was the petrified penis bone of an arctic walrus, tipped fore and aft with sculpted ivory from the tusk. Uncle Hank carried it back to the University of Indiana, where he used it as a pointer in the classroom, delighting in the secret joy of aiming a baculum at the images he projected during slide-show lectures. Many years after he died, his wife, my beloved Aunt Jane Offutt Burns, presented it to me. Thankfully the walrus baculum now resides prominently in my house. The rest of my uncle's archive is in the Hank Burns Criminal Justice Media Collection in the Newton Gresham Library at Sam Houston University in Huntsville, Texas. The presence of a walrus penis bone in his collection would be hard to explain to scholars.

Originally used by the Inuit people as a weapon to kill baby seals, the larger end depicts a snarling polar bear complete with bared teeth and open mouth. The smaller tip is a seal's head. The carving is precise and lovely, clearly performed by an accomplished artist who painted the mouth red and the eyes black. A dark band of baleen, a keratinous protein from a whale's mouth, separates the

ivory from the bone. The walrus baculum weighs three pounds. It is fifteen inches long, slightly curved, dark brown, and chipped from use.

The Inuit called the bone an "oosik," a term which has now entered popular usage. The only other animal with a word specific to its genitals is a bull, endowed with a "pizzle," used as a whip in olden times. A dried pizzle served as a dandy walking stick for gentlemen. On the subject of etymology, the word "baculum" is Latin for "little rod." It is also the root word for traditional French bread, called a "baguette" due to its shape. Interestingly enough, a professional actor named Scott Bakula performed off-Broadway in a 1985 show called *Three Guys Naked From the Waist Down*. I leave the reader to make the obvious connections, along with the same tenuous coincidence of a penal scholar owning an oosik.

Not to put too fine a point on this narrative, but Reykjavik, Iceland, is host to a phallogical museum that offers nearly three hundred phalluses from ninety-three different species, including one lifted from a rogue polar bear. The publicity brochure refers to itself as "probably the only museum in the world to contain a collection of phallic specimens belonging to all the various types of mammal found in a single country." (I admire the restraint shown by using the word "probably.") Incidentally, a whale penis is the largest, and no discussion would be complete without mentioning the unique ability of whales. They are able to achieve erections at will, as readily as a man lifting his hand, and are the only mammal with this ability. This explains the lack of pornography marketed to whales. They simply don't need it!

All of this is a long-winded, around-the-barn journey to avoid relating an incident a few years ago in which my wife's dog killed a possum that made the mistake of venturing into our backyard. Due to scheduling, I was unable to perform the necessary surgery on the spot, and my wife refused to let me store the dead possum in the house. I slid the corpus into a plastic bag and hung it high enough on the fence to prevent the dog from applying further damage. Unfortunately I forgot about the project for two days, during which climate change presented a severe heat spell.

At this time, my sons were still in high school. We lived in town, with the backyard facing an alley where visitors parked their vehicles. A buddy of theirs came in the

back door asking about the terrible smell. I thought perhaps it was a mouse trapped in the walls until my wife went outside and began yelling. I joined her and we realized the stench emanated from the bag on the fence. Other teenage boys were in the house by now, four or five in all, arriving to play videogames and eat pizza. My son rather gleefully explained the existence of a penis bone to his friends, and my only choice was to harvest under everyone's scrutiny. I put on yellow dishwashing gloves and slid a paint mask over my face. Outside I spread a plastic tarp on the ground and opened the bag. The smell was horrendous, and I realized the respirator attached to the paint mask was broken. My eyes began watering but I couldn't wipe them due to the gloves. I gently tipped the bag and poured out the liquefied remnants of the possum amid swirling bones, cartilage, and fur. I glanced at the window. My wife was gone but several boys watched in awe. I used a stick to spread the mess about, hunting the baculum.

In ancient times, people sought to divine the future by examining the entrails of creatures through the art of augury. I felt as they must have, at least the apprentice augur, who was in over his head and feared disappointing the master. I found the skull and scapula and ribs readily enough. My stomach began churning. I breathed through my mouth to guard against the smell but became afraid that rotting microbes would lodge in my lungs. Surprisingly, as I sorted through the possum entrails, I began to see the future—I'd fold the tarp, carry it to a dumpster, remove my protective gear, enter the house with great chagrin, take a shower, and wash my clothes. The final prophesy was that of telling my sons and their friends that the possum turned out to be a female. All of this came true. Many years later I learned that the possum is one of the few mammals that lacks a baculum, along with humans, chimps, and dolphins. My entire backyard project was therefore an utter waste of time, and embarrassingly ignorant to boot!

Alas, I still lack a baculum.

In *More than Moonshine*, Sidney Saylor Farr includes a chapter entitled "Meats: Game and Tame." She recalls her father hunting groundhog, rabbit, and squirrel. If the season was not good for game, he brought the less desirable possum to the table. She adds: "Possum meat is strong and gamey, and elaborate methods of cooking had to be used to make it palatable." ♣

BAKED POSSUM

1 dressed possum
1 tablespoon butter
1 large onion
1 cup breadcrumbs
½ teaspoon chopped red pepper
Dash of steak sauce
1 hard-boiled egg, chopped
Salt to taste
Small amount of water
1 or 2 sprigs of sassafras root

Dress the possum or have it done for you. For the stuffing: Melt butter in frying pan and add onion. When onion begins to brown, add chopped liver of possum and cook until tender and well-done. Add breadcrumbs, red pepper, steak sauce, egg, salt, and water to moisten mixture.

Stuff the possum with the mixture and sew up the opening. Put in a roasting pan, add 2 tablespoons water, and roast in moderate oven (300–350 degrees) until meat is very tender and a golden brown. Baste the possum frequently with its own fat. When it is done, take from oven, remove stitches, and put possum on a hot platter. Skim the grease from the drippings and serve gravy in a separate dish.

To add flavor, slip a sprig or two of sassafras root down into the stuffing between the stitches after you have sewn the possum up.

Serve the possum with baked sweet potatoes and green vegetables along with cornbread and coffee or milk.