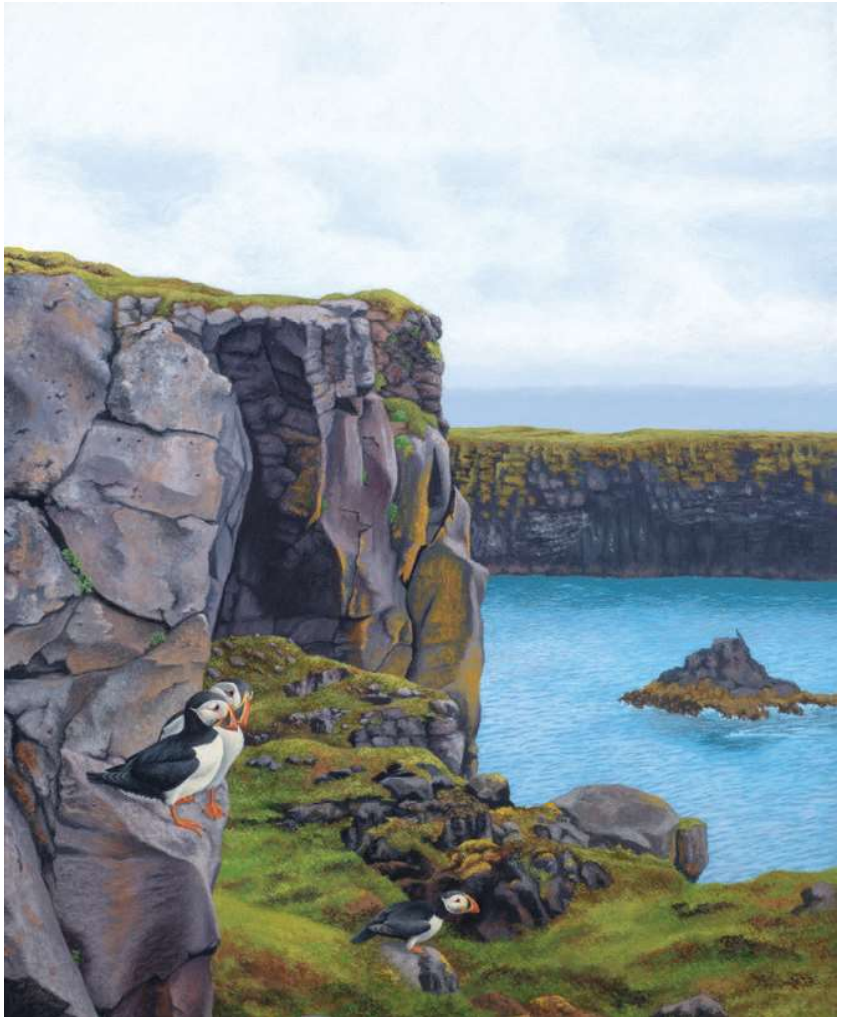
ANDREA JOHNSON

Icelandic Puffins, 2018
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

JOHN GIFFORD

The Flavors of Home

Appreciation for the food traditions of our ancestors

Last October I was photographing the autumn colors along a creek in northern Michigan when I noticed two boys in chest waders plodding upstream. One had a spear in his hands.

"Catch anything?" I asked.

"Not yet," said the eldest, a boy of around fourteen. "But there should be a couple in this pool."

Now their mother appeared. She stood back and watched her sons work the stream. Members of the local Ottawa tribe, whose fishing rights here are secured under the 1836 Treaty of Washington, the boys held a special permit allowing them to hunt salmon with a spear. Spearfishing is a cultural tradition for the Ottawa and fascinating for an outsider to observe. As I watched them scan the water, the boys' confidence was apparent. They seemed certain this tiny pool, a mile upstream from the creek's confluence with Lake Michigan, held a salmon. Their expressions were bright and expectant as they slipped through the water, searching, spear at the ready, moving deeper into this cultural tributary, closer to their heritage, nearer their destiny, like the salmon themselves. At last, patience and persistence rewarded the boys as they flushed two ten-pounders from beneath a waterfall. One fish escaped downstream, a flash of speckled gold in the clear running water.

A cloud of orange and yellow leaves, dry and brittle and suddenly separated from their season's duties to the trees, showered the stream where only a moment ago the salmon had swum. Their landing on the surface was soft and silent, producing an autumn collage as if to mark this moment for my lens. The leaves funneled into an eddy and swirled round and round before lodging on a midstream rock, where gradually their colors would fade and decomposition would begin, a return to the earth from which they'd emerged.

The other fish, the mother told me, would be filleted and eaten.

The eldest brother, the one who'd handled the spear, was proud of his catch. He stepped out of the stream, spear in one hand, salmon in the other, hoisting the fish by the tail and smiling as I snapped a few photos. Afterward, he showed me cell phone pictures of salmon he'd taken in previous years from this same creek. Some of these fish were quite large. One, an enormous king salmon with a kype jaw, seemed the very essence of wildness and independence.

John Gifford is the author of *Red Dirt Country* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), a collection of essays on nature and the environment. His work has appeared in *Notre Dame Magazine*, *The Meadow*, the *Los Angeles Review*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Atlantic*.

I tried to imagine its arduous journey from the depths and safety of Lake Michigan to the shallow bay along the coast and, finally, its infiltration of this tiny waterway, fighting the current, fighting exhaustion, struggling against riffle and run as it ascended the narrowing stream, compelled by evolution and instinct even as the rest of the world seemed to drift lazily past, indifferent to the salmon's inclinations. For many, the sight of such a large and impressive fish, even a photograph of one, might easily engender thoughts of recreation and sport. Would such a fish even take a fly? What would the pull of a thirty-pound salmon feel like? My friend simply swiped to the next image, seeing these organisms not as diversion or sport, but as sustenance. The salmon were a vital source of protein to help his family get through the long northern Michigan winters. They were testament to a way of life, to tradition, and even a form of resistance . . . against time and conformity.

I admired the way these young brothers embraced their heritage as they hunted for their food. There was a proper way to go about this—one that respected both the fish and the environment, and also the dignity of their forebears who'd spearfished before them—and I thought they'd displayed it in taking only one salmon from the stream. Had they been so inclined, they might have easily circled back downstream to pursue the fish that had escaped. It couldn't have gone far. Wondering why only one spear had been used among two hunters, I inquired of the boys' mother and was told that the younger lad, who was perhaps eleven or twelve, wasn't allowed to handle the spear. His mother told me that he didn't yet know how to stick the salmon in a way that would avoid damaging the valuable fillets. His older brother was trying to teach him. The young boy's tutelage would involve many more such hunts before he was allowed this privilege. I admired, too, their technique and strategy. It had been perfected over the years not only on salmon, but on walleyes as well, and handed down through generations. It was refreshingly simple and effective. These boys required no supermarket nor even a boat in order to secure dinner. They knew how to find food. They were survivors. And with no intermediary involved in getting the salmon from stream to table, they could take satisfaction in knowing exactly how and where their protein had been sourced. It was a radical departure from the way most of us obtain our food. I think this is what impressed me most. The boys were of an age at which they might easily have opted to go "fishing" or "hunting" on their phones. Instead, they had made the effort to participate in the actual experience, a pursuit that keeps their culture alive, especially today, during the digital age, at a time when we're bombarded with countless distractions. Although the boys must have enjoyed the hunt, or at least the excitement and anticipation of the pursuit, it couldn't have been easy. But I think that's the whole point.

Watching the boys hunt salmon called to mind a visit to British Columbia five months earlier. I'd traveled to Clayoquot Sound, on Vancouver Island's remote west coast, to photograph some of the wildlife species dependent upon the area's wild Pacific salmon. I saw plenty of bears and eagles, along with, to my surprise, numerous salmon farms. These floating factories seemed entirely incongruent with their wilderness surroundings, and seeing them revealed the extent to which society has drifted away from the foodways of our ancestors. Today, relatively few of us produce our own food. We live in a culture that emphasizes, as much as anything, convenience, so much so that the vast majority of us rely on others to produce the fare we consume. And the demand for these foods is strong enough that we've now infiltrated some of our planet's most sacred spaces in order to produce them: our wilderness areas.

Gazing out at the salmon farms from my guide's boat, I felt a tinge of guilt and frustration. These floating factories were simply out of place there in the Canadian wilderness. As far as I was concerned, they shouldn't have been there. But there they were and I was part of the reason why. I eat salmon. I enjoy salmon. I choose it regularly. But I produce none of my own salmon. The factories were there to do it for me. But at a price. The cost is what I was struggling with.

My visit to British Columbia gave me a new understanding of today's global aquaculture industry, one made possible by the world's growing demand for protein, especially seafood. The paradox here, and the tragedy, as I learned, is that when salmon are farmed in the same habitat that supports their wild counterparts, the latter are ultimately jeopardized.

Most of the Clayoquot Sound salmon farms that I observed are owned by Cermaq, a subsidiary of the Mitsubishi Corporation, which is Japan's largest trading company. Cermaq produces around 180 thousand metric tons of farmed salmon each year. Why? Because the demand is there. Modern society is defined as much by hyperconsumption as über convenience. When these realities convene and multiply, they do so exponentially. Suddenly, profitability becomes the catch of the day, which is why open-water net-pen enclosures are so widely used in commercial aquaculture, not only here in Canada, but around the world. Proponents insist they're an economically viable means of large-scale salmon production. Perhaps so. But they're also detrimental to wild stocks. These net-enclosed facilities concentrate tens of thousands of salmon in restrictive, highly unnatural confines. This results in equally high (and dangerous) concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus effluents, which often contain antibiotics and pesticides. Such discharges can lead to algae blooms and hypoxic zones that threaten fish and undermine entire ecosystems, including environments that are sustained on the nutrients derived from wild salmon, such as the coastal temperate rainforests of the Pacific Northwest. And today's changing climate and warmer seawater temperatures magnify these challenges.

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Five months after my visit to Vancouver Island, as I watched two Ottawa brothers hunt salmon in Michigan, a massive fish die-off was reported at Cermaq's Clayoquot Sound operations. Media reports blamed an algae bloom. More than two hundred thousand farmed salmon were lost while yet another threat was dealt to the area's already beleaguered population of wild Pacific salmon, which are reeling from logging and other habitat degradation and, in recent years, low populations of returning fish.

Recalling what I'd seen in the British Columbia wilderness, and curious about the health of Great Lakes salmon populations, I contacted Michigan Sea Grant and asked if Lake Michigan's salmon were under threat from commercial aquaculture. I was told that only a few years ago the Wolverine State had considered the possibility of commercial net-pen aquaculture in Lake Michigan, but that the proposal was met with a great deal of resistance from local sportfishing groups. For now, it seems unlikely that commercial salmon farming will occur in Lake Michigan.

One potential solution to the dangers of open-water net-pen salmon farming that's being practiced in places such as Norway, Chile, and British Columbia, is land-based closed-container aquaculture, in which farmed fish are isolated from wild stocks. This prevents the possibility of interbreeding, escapement, and disease transmission between disparate populations. Opponents are quick to point out the expense of establishing such operations. In light of this, a wholesale shift away from conventional aquaculture production to more sustainable and safer land-based systems seems unlikely anytime soon. But what's the cost of losing wild salmon, a fish of tremendous ecological and cultural significance?

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After my experiences in northern Michigan and British Columbia last year, and in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, my wife and I have considered the possibility of producing some of our own food. Like most Americans, our own food traditions have been diluted and altered and in some cases severed by only a few generations of modern conveniences such as grocery stores, restaurants, and today's culture of hyperconsumption and convenience. These traditions are, for us, agrarian. Our ancestors managed gardens and orchards and fields of crops. But what do we know of gardening?

Additionally, as city dwellers, our available space for food production is at a premium. We have almost none. Ultimately, we decided the best we can do for now is to raise an herb garden. Considering that our grandparents produced a significant portion of their own fruits and vegetables from their gardens, our tiny plot of basil, mint, cilantro, rosemary, and sage isn't much of an undertaking. What it is, I think, is a commitment, albeit a minor one, to employing our hands and heads and hearts in feeding ourselves, even on an infinitesimal level. These savory plants aren't going to produce much in the way of sustenance or, given the current pandemic, peace of mind, but there is some satisfaction in stepping out your back door and twisting off a sprig of mint—that grew on your property despite your lack of horticultural experience—for your tea, or plucking a few basil leaves for your pasta or pizza, or grabbing a handful of cilantro to chop and incorporate into your enchiladas. But watching them sprout from the soil of our windowsill planter boxes, and delighting in the fresh, invigorating scents of cilantro and mint, is to flash back in

time, is to watch again my grandmother doing these same things, is to smell and taste and savor the flavors of home. And this is as hearty and appetizing a reason to produce even a fraction of our foods as any I know. Beyond this, at the very least, we'll have some seasoning for our store-bought, but wild-caught, salmon. With any luck—and maybe a little extra space—perhaps we can build upon our success and next year try growing tomatoes or peppers or okra. We have so much to learn. But given the already tenuous link to the food traditions of our ancestors, which time has a way of eroding more and more each year, we have so many reasons to learn.

ANDREA JOHNSON

Nightfall Salinas, 2020
Oil on canvas, 72 x 36 in

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