



Painting for John

BY BOB WHITE

When our friend John Gierach passed, he left us nearly a year's worth of columns to ease us into a world without his voice.

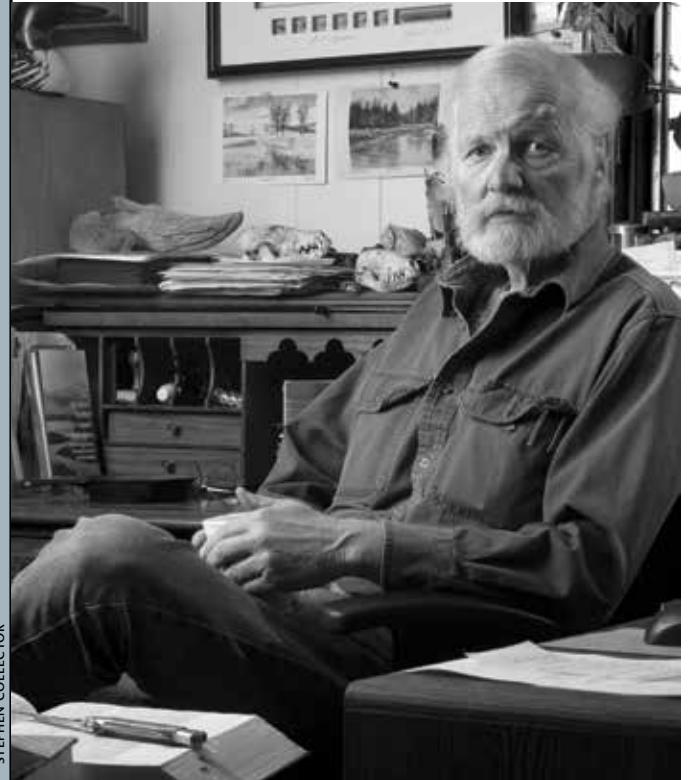
While it's wonderful that we've had his thoughts and insights in these past few issues of *TROUT*, it also means that, sadly, there's a finite and shrinking number of paintings for me to render for him. Because John's last column is about getting ready for spring, I've been asked to write and illustrate the winter issue, saving the last of his columns for the appropriate season.

In 1987, the editors of *Fly Rod & Reel* contacted me about illustrating a short story written by a fellow named John Gierach, whose work I had occasionally seen in *Fly Tyer*. A few years later, after Lee Wulff's tragic death, the editors at the magazine asked him to write the closing column, and he suggested that I illustrate it. Our first regular column together, "The Sporting Life," was published in March of 1992. Twenty-nine years and more than 160 collaborations later, *Fly Rod & Reel* sadly closed its doors. Fortunately, Kirk Deeter, the editor of *TROUT*, offered us a home, and our column, "Convergence," debuted in October of 2017. In all, we've collaborated on nearly 200 columns in, perhaps, half a dozen magazines.

I always wanted a brother, but it wasn't in the cards. When John and I partnered on the closing

column for *Fly Rod & Reel*, he became the big brother I'd always wanted.

A decade older and centuries wiser, John was always there to help. He guided and mentored me, answered my silly questions without laughing (though his eyes sometimes gave him away), and, like the wonderful big brother he was, knew that the highest compliment he



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could give me was to occasionally ask for my advice — and then listen with genuine interest.

There's a reason this column isn't titled “Painting John Gierach.” Though many of the earlier paintings showed a distant figure in a brimmed hat that could easily have been John, there was never an expectation that I'd render a portrait.

John's work and his life have touched a lot of people in very personal and often profound ways. Anglers around the world—most of whom had never met the man—were deeply moved by the honest and powerful truth in his words.

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When I'm asked, “What was he like?” my stock reply is, “If you've read his work, then you know the man.” I've often heard it said that reading John's work is like sitting around the campfire with a good friend. He would have liked that.

Upon seeing the first painting I did for John after his passing, “Crossing Over—Blackfoot River,” my friend Alan wrote, “When I zoomed in on the painting and saw the unmistakable profile of John's face in the bow, I instantly choked up. Something about this image finally cemented the reality of his passing.

The first Gierach book I bought was *The View from Rat Lake*. I was mostly reading Schwiebert, Sparse Grey Hackle, Dana Lamb, etc.

At that time, I was also deeply into the Beat Generation and sometimes had a hard time relating to the old-money, private-water-on-the-Beaverkill, cocktails-at-the-Anglers-Club, Payne-on-the-hood-of-the-Bentley school of fishing literature. About three pages into *Rat Lake* I remember thinking, here it is... this is Kerouac in waders.

There have been very few constants in my life, but his singular voice has been one of them. At some point in the last 20 years fly shops stopped smelling like mothballs and cigarette smoke, and the pursuit of fly fishing became unrecognizable to me.

But there was still a constant flow of Gierach. His words remain, as do the little brook trout streams in the hills, where fishing a dry upstream on a light bamboo rod is the right thing to do. John's spirit and his message live on in his words. Nothing at all has changed.

I've rendered more than 200 images for John over the past four decades. These are some of my favorites.



“ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD”

This painting shows John on the upper Colorado River and is a simple composition of a simple man quietly contemplating the headwaters of a mighty river—one that grows in volume and stature as it moves toward its terminus. The title of the column, “All the Time in the World,” caused me to pause, and I wondered if it was, perhaps, a cryptic acknowledgement of his mortality.

We believe we have all the time in the world, but our worlds are limited to the time we have left in them. Our heroes seem immortal, until they're not.



“CLOSE TO HOME”

“**I**n anticipation of our 100th collaboration in *Fly Rod & Reel*, John suggested we spend a few days fishing together on his home water, and that I produce a painting of his favorite stream. We fished together for three days, and I took hundreds of photographs of him and the river. On our last afternoon, as he played the final fish of the trip, I captured this image. After landing and releasing it, he waded to shore and waited for me to join him. As I crossed, I noticed a beer can caught in a recirculating wave beneath the deadfall, and while wading over to it, I stepped on a large smooth rock and went down, completely submerging my camera. The battery died and the circuitry shorted, but the final shot had been saved to the memory card. The image was safe, and the painting was rendered.

John thought I intended to do a painting of the river, with perhaps a distant, nondescript fisherman surveying the water ahead of him—as I had done many times in the past.

This was the first painting I did for him that might be considered a portrait, and, as a humble individual, he was a bit sheepish—perhaps even embarrassed—to be the focal point of my work. Years later, he told me that he’d begun to feel better about it after one of his friends, upon seeing a print of it in his living room, commented, “Dude... that’s you!”

One of the most valuable lessons I’ve learned as a guide is that the time spent watching the water is infinitely more important than the time spent fishing. How often have I walked right up to a stream and cast my fly to where I thought a fish ought to be? Plenty. How often have I spooked a good fish that would have made itself visible had I patiently waited a few moments before rushing in to cast? More than I’d care to discuss.

It’s been my experience that the best fly fishers are those who patiently wait and thoughtfully watch the water. John was one of those. He was never in a hurry to make his first cast and always seemed to catch the most fish with the fewest casts.

“EVENING RISES”



“CROSSING OVER—BLACKFOOT RIVER”

Rivers are transformative; they bring us to places, and they take us away from others.

When we’re in a river, the water envelops and moves past us, as certain and relentless as time. When we’re floating on one, it’s often reflective of life: it can be a slow, gentle glide, or a tumultuous, white-knuckled ride through dangerous currents.

I won’t claim these thoughts to be original. The River Styx, or any of other legends and myths, given to us by the ancients about death, come to mind.

All these thoughts, and some more personal ones, were on my mind when I contemplated how to illustrate the first column for my friend after his crossing.

I hope it was a slow and gentle glide.



“ONE LAST LOOK—MUSKY”

This painting was created as a tribute to John’s first big musky: a fish that took him a lot of time and effort to catch. He had joined our annual Northwoods event, Musky Madness, for three years before catching his bellringer—a beautiful fish of nearly 50 inches. I knew the instant it was in the net that I’d paint it.

John was to spend the day fishing with our son, Jake, and I’d float behind them with my friends, Mike and Josh. We’d be far enough upstream to rest the water, but not so far that we couldn’t catch up if a good fish was tagged.

John was typically upbeat about the day as we launched, but Jake was nervous. This was his first time fly fishing for musky... and in a boat with John Gierach. His predicament wasn’t lost on either of us, and John and I smiled at one another in acknowledgment.

Jake asked, “What should I remember?”

“Do everything perfect, all of the time,” I said, “and never lose focus, because if you do, you’ll have an eat and you’ll miss it... and you’ll relive that moment forever.”

John took the ever-present notebook out of his shirt pocket and jotted down my advice, which I took as a compliment.

Later that morning, I watched John’s boat slide past a rocky point and hover off the eddy it created. Jake was in the front of the boat and hit the spot perfectly, remembering to figure-eight at the end of his retrieve. After a polite hesitation, John’s fly slapped down just a few inches from where Jake’s had landed. John walked the fly back to the boat, and the first sweep of his figure-eight yielded nothing, but the second met resistance and he strip-set like a man who’d never caught a trout in his life.

I’ve rarely seen John beam so broadly, but I noticed that there was both joy and humility in his smile. He recognized that Jake had made the same cast just minutes before, but for some reason the fish had chosen to strike his fly.

“Mucking fuskies.” Jake said under his breath.

John smiled and reached for his notebook while the guide posed for a photograph with the fish.

“LOW AND CLEAR”

We were on the St. Vrain when John turned to me and said, “The more I fish, the less important the fish become. That’s not to say,” he continued with a grin, “that occasionally, I don’t enjoy catching a big fish, or even a lot of fish. What I mean is that over time, what’s become important to me is sharing a day on the water with a good friend, fish or no fish.”

“The water I fish has also become a big part of the experience,” he continued. “If you’re lucky enough to have a stream or river nearby that you fish often and know intimately, revisiting it is like calling on an old friend.”



John’s words struck me as profound. I also noticed that while he offered the profundity, his eyes never left the water; he didn’t want to miss seeing a flash or a rise.

“I hike up here on snowshoes late in the winter,” he continued. “On clear and sunny days, when the snow is deep and the river is drifted over, I build a fire in the woods for coffee. Then I walk out over the stream and listen to it through 10 feet of snow.”

Someday, I’ll paint that scene: John kneeling in the snow over his home water, head cocked, listening for spring.



“PUMPKIN SPOTTING – DUSK ON HALLOWEEN”

Occasionally, John would throw a curve ball at me with an essay that defied a clear image to describe it. I think he enjoyed this for several reasons. First, he didn’t like to be thought of as just another fishing writer—one who only writes about exciting trips and big fish. And secondly, I think he took delight in challenging me.

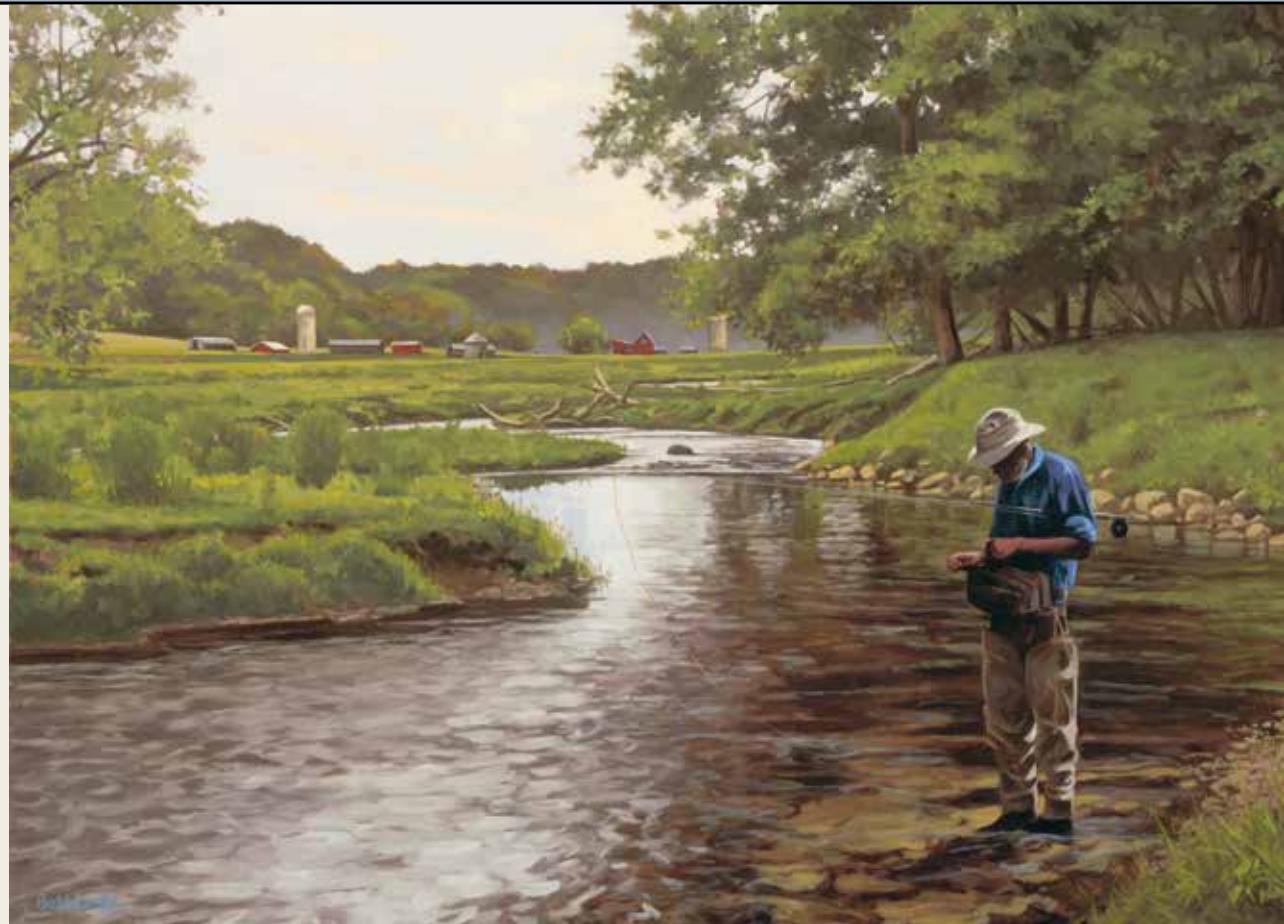
“What the hell?” I asked aloud after reading his story about Halloween pranksters who placed jack-o'-lanterns along a famous trout stream in Colorado. “How am I supposed to illustrate this?”

I thought a lot about pumpkins that afternoon and recalled my admiration for a series of paintings that Jamie Wyeth rendered using them as a motif, particularly the one titled *Pumpkin Head*. It seems that one of the requirements

of being elected to the National Academy of Design is to give the Academy a self-portrait. Jamie didn’t want to paint a self-portrait and rejected the idea—just as John rejected being pigeonholed.

Well, I thought, if a bit of rebellion was good for Jamie Wyeth and John Gierach, it’d be good enough for me, and the image began to take form in my mind’s eye. I decided to paint a local Midwest trout stream decorated with pumpkins for Halloween. I wanted to copy Wyeth’s sneer on the Jack-o'-lanterns, but since John hadn’t mentioned it in the story, I added them later, after publication.

The National Academy of Design was furious with Wyeth’s painting and rejected it. I hoped that the readership of *TROUT* had a better sense of humor.



"HAZY DAY IN THE DRIFTLESS"

Even though John grew up in Minnesota, I think it's safe to say he was introduced to the treasures of the Minnesota Driftless by our mutual friend, Mike Dvorak.

The timing for our first trip with Mike was perfect: the hatches would be at their peak and the rivers low and clear. And, it would have been perfect... if it hadn't started to rain. As we drove south from the Twin Cities, multiple thunderstorms pummeled the area with up to nine inches rain. Tornadoes touched down to the south of us, and Decorah, Iowa, was flooded for the second time in as many weeks.

Every river we crossed was swollen beyond its banks, and ran the color of a latte. Still, Mike, who'd organized the trip, remained positive—even upbeat—about the fishing. We were told that the tributaries to the larger rivers are, for the most part, spring-fed and remain fishable even after the severest deluge. Mike's dog, Moose, seemed to buy it, but John and I remained guardedly skeptical.

The first day we fished a meadow stream born from two spring creeks. While a bit off-color, it fished well. The larger of the two tributaries was clear, and it fished like a dream. We leapfrogged up the stream, trading water as

good friends do, and we all caught fish—some surprisingly large, given the size of the creek.

And so, the week unwound. The weather cleared and the rivers dropped. Minnesota poet Larry Gavin joined us, and we all enjoyed a wonderful day of fishing together on Pine Creek. The day was humid and hazy when I snapped some photographs of John thoughtfully selecting a fly. In the moment, I had no idea that those shots would eventually be used as reference material for this painting, or that it would grace the cover of his next book.

John fell in love with the Driftless, making the trip an annual pilgrimage for many years. The lay of the land, the rivers, the fishing and the people all seemed to resonate with him. The total experience was exactly what he loved, understood and appreciated.

John's path in life and mine seem to have paralleled one another's in many ways. We were both born in Illinois, moved to Minnesota, and then the Zeitgeist of our generation drew us to wild places with trout—him to Colorado, and me to Alaska. At the time, neither of us realized what lovely fishing we'd left behind in order to find ourselves in distant lands. With Mike's guidance, we'd found our way home.

John, Mike, and I all contribute our respective crafts to *TROUT*, frequently in the same column. Several years ago, the editor of the publication, Kirk Deeter, invited us to join him at his family's historic cabin in Michigan, on the Baldwin River. I looked forward to spending time with friends, and revisiting the Michigan woods and the streams where I'd learned to fly fish for trout. Unfortunately, a family matter came up, and I had to cancel at the last moment.

My friends had a wonderful time, and as it turns out, John wrote a nice essay about the experience, which was later published in *TROUT*. While I hadn't been on the trip, I didn't have any problem illustrating the scene. As a young man, I'd spent a lot of time in the area, and had deeply etched memories of waiting for evening hatches along Michigan trout streams. I imagined John sitting in the gloaming, listening to tree frogs and spring peepers, and watching dusk turn the leaves into curtains of animated stained glass.

"SPRING PEEPERS"



I love to paint skies, and since a description of the weather was always included in John's writing, he provided me with plenty of inspiration to do just that. My illustration for his recent essay, "A Small River in Wyoming," was the last painting I did for him while he was still alive.

In the story, John writes about a fishing trip with his old friends Ed, Vince and Doug. After a day or so, he's feeling under the weather and picks the next day's stretch of water because it's the ideal spot for an ailing fisherman.

It was, he writes, "a short stroll across the meadow from the cabins, easy wading as long as you don't get too eager, with a grassy bank to lounge or nap on—in the sun or the shade of cottonwoods, depending upon whether you're having chills or hot flashes."

As he sometimes did, John snapped a few photographs and sent them to me with the column as reference material. The sky was dynamic and fun to paint, and it was easy enough for me to imagine him resting on the shaded grassy bank, watching the river roll past.

"CLOUD DANCE OVER A SMALL WYOMING RIVER"



"FIREWOOD"

This may seem like an odd image to include in this article, as it has nothing whatsoever to do with fly fishing, the pursuit of fish or the environs in which they live.

This is a rendering of the wood pile at the Alaskan fishing lodge where I guided for nearly two decades. It was a familiar sight, as I stopped there on my way to the floatplane every morning to gather a sack of firewood for my shore lunch. I painted it for myself, as a memento of those times, never intending to sell it.

John admired the painting as a simple, yet essential, element in a guide's day, and I suggested that someday he write an essay about firewood so that we could use it.

It took a few years, but one day I received a column, titled, "A Simple Life," and upon reading it, realized that he'd finally given me the opportunity to see a favorite painting published.

John liked to say that there was only one instance in his career as a writer when he wrote an essay specifically for an illustration, and I know he'd appreciate seeing it included in this column.

"METAMORPHOSIS"

The image that leads this column was particularly challenging for me to paint because it brought back so many memories of fishing with John. While the memories are welcomed and treasured, the process of painting them seemed like a final admission of the reality of his passing.

While I've painted John countless times, it's always been at ground level, as if we were sharing time on the water. This painting is from a very different point of view. I chose this elevated view because my intention was to render the scene from John's perspective, as he watches from above, measuring my progress down the river.

The sun is low, and the shadows are long. There are many miles to go before my float is finished, and the front of my boat is empty. 

