10. Landscape

Painted for Miss Bernice Lock, dear little girl friend of Elizabeths, from a Master piece by Mrs G. B. Cooper – Wishing you both the best that life can give.

Ever your friend.

—Emma Cooper, August, 1935

A meandering stream flows toward you through a grove of trees in the middle distance. On the right are more trees, closer, with silvery bark suggesting poplars or birches, but birches don't grow well in Oklahoma, so the scene probably is not from Wheeler Park, that regularly-flooded patch of weeds lying in a South Canadian River oxbow. The stream banks are flat; rich floodplain soil nourishes ankle-high grass. Leaves are green but tinged in places with brown, so the season might be late summer or early fall. Clouds are wispy, thin, against a hazy light cerulean sky; except for certain colors, the day could easily be one of those special September ones, hot, still, rich with August growth. Cicadas could be chirring, a metallic rising and falling, but the sound is only in your mind, put there by a childhood in the southern plains, because this scene is made of paint.

Some of the trees lean, seemingly as if pushed by the wind, but they're not bent like they would be in Oklahoma, with branches, especially the smaller and thinner ones, curving to the north as hair blown by a hot southern breeze, a continuous breeze, day after summer day, year after year, that sometimes turns strong, but never lets up, at least while you're growing, so shapes you the same way it shapes everything in this part of the world. Instead, a few tilt to the left, and others to the right, but those in the distance stand erect—a population of generic plants reflecting the range of behaviors and politics found among Depression-era men. If the tilting is not from the wind, it must be from their earliest experiences, something in the environment where they emerged from seeds that sent them searching for the sky in different directions. But the trunks are all about the same thickness, so they must have been built from seeds that settled on the floodplain after a cleansing deluge twenty years ago when this river of paint boiled over its banks and carried bird nests, coyote pups, and centipedes, or whatever fauna and flora resided in that part of the world, or that part of a mind, down toward the Gulf when the floodwaters came, or else down to some other imaginary ocean.

In the far distance, hazy, ill-defined blue-gray could be another tree line, evidence for the far upstream reaches of this tiny river, a place to look for its origins, some clues to the nature of its beginnings, an explanation, with underlying causality, for a community that now looks serene, but hints at an unknown future—a place where the water will go, off to the lower left, to a place

that perhaps is so undefined it could be constructed, like a future made instead of found. With your mental binoculars, you study that distant tree line, thinking that except for those blotches that look like the leafy tips of branches it could be a wall of dark clouds coming in from the west. But as you focus, squinting to clarify the image, it becomes evident that there are indeed branches to be seen, so yes, those are trees instead of storm clouds, but both having the power to completely alter your environment—the storm in a matter of seconds; the growing trees in a matter of decades. Storms come from an ocean that begins on the continent's far edge; but where do trees come from? If you know what to look for, they will tell you, eventually; your eyes become ears and your knowledge becomes their voices.

When you multiply their image times the distance, though, suddenly those trees five miles away become trees a half-mile tall. You gently lower the binoculars, letting them hang down against your chest, and start thinking about how the way we draw our origins changes the impact—imagined or real—of events and places. They must be somewhere in the past, these giant trees, because they are upstream, closer to the origin, than those nearby. What would we be like today if, like this stream that can never return to where it began, we'd started our time on Earth among trees that were a half-mile tall? How big around would a tree have to be in order to reach two thousand six hundred and forty feet into the sky from a land so flat you can see places it would take you a long day to reach on foot? Would we have spent our fairy-tale youths running around those trunks, or staring up into the branches, promising some day to climb up there as far as little yellow birds could fly?

At your feet, off to the left, is a plant that looks like yucca, but all you can see are the top blades, tall radiating spikes of what resembles some succulent monocot but cannot be one because such species don't grow alongside streams. Turn to the right; there, at the base of those poplar-like trees are the right kinds of grasses, maybe, although their inflorescences are too thick, too fuzzy, even in the impressionistic light, to be real grasses. Cattails, you think, because no grass that tall has large heads; those look like cattails, but again, cattails don't grow in such places. In the distance, beyond the trees, the land is flat, low, and the color there looks like dead cattails, exactly the right shade of dark sandy brown, or off-goldenrod, with hints of vertical spaces. In the same way you recognize your child by some combination of posture, gestures, proportions, far across the playground, your default conclusion is that there's moisture in the ground beyond the trees, and consequently a marsh, with snails, and wrens, and blackbirds, but this dead-cattail color says it's the wrong season from the one you decided it was just by looking at trees.

So it must be spring; maybe late March, not late August or early September, else the cattails, if that's what they are, would be grown up sea-green, color #2E8B57 on our information age list of names and official color and hue designations. Different colors in a landscape lead you to different conclusions; thus parts of this scene are easy to understand but the whole is a conundrum, more than the sum of those parts because of their unnatural combination, producing emergent properties that cannot be described either accurately or completely but can be discussed at length, if not endlessly. Are the images you interpret as cattails really ones of the mind, or do they originate in actions of someone who had no inkling of how such a mix of colors and shapes would connect with nerve endings yet to be constructed by DNA not yet assembled by two young Oklahomans buried in the depths of a depression so great it needed a capitalized adjective: "Great"?

But it can't be March because there are two dragonflies on that spiky plant that looks like a yucca but isn't, or at least can't be, because dragonflies and yuccas don't mix, ecologically. Then

you look again, this time more deeply, and the things you called dragonflies evolve into simple white reflections on the water, glimmers that tell you they're wings but are not, glimmers that act like wings for reasons you cannot fathom, or maybe for no reasons at all. What looks like reality, indeed what looks like it is intended to represent nature, has so many inconsistencies that it can't be nature at all, but an imaginary, surreal, picture of an occupied planet. We're seeing a forced interpretation of what the world is really like—who lives together with whom, when they co-exist, what roles they play, and what kind of evidence we might be able to gather if we go searching for historical explanations of puzzles, clues to solutions, or hints about ways to prevent something from happening again. No wonder some folks believe that dragonflies are really fairies, or vice versa.

The place is deserted. No people walk the banks of this stream, nobody labors in the nearby fields digging or cutting or harvesting or planting, no animals, either wild or domestic, singly or in herds, predator or prey, walk, or graze, or lurk, or slink, behaviors depending on their sizes or roles or immediate needs. Only those white elongate blotches that might be dragonfly wings, or, alternatively, reflections off water, hint at the presence of animals. But the plants tell a story without talking. They stand in groups: two, close by, on the left; three, also near, on the right, although it's possible two of the three are just separate shoots from the same trunk; fifteen, a little further away; five in a clump beyond those but on the left; ten or eleven, it's hard to tell exactly how many from this far away, straight ahead. Like a place you visit again and again, the trunks seem to be repeating this tale, begging you to listen and understand what they're telling you: we're new, as trees go, and we're all about the same diameter.

Don't you know what you're seeing?

Don't you understand what the landscape is saying?

Don't you understand the larger lesson, the timelessness of these observations, the overriding generalities manifested in the highly specific?

Don't you know that your eyes are functioning like ears; your brains giving substance to our voices?

No; you don't; so here it is, the story, our history, laid out in plain words: if you know what to look for, and how to interpret your visions, then you can see ghosts. The ones who lived here before, they are gone, washed to the sea. We all came here about the same time. We started from seeds left over after The Deluge. The waters came and stripped everything clean. Then the clouds drifted away, having done their damage, and the sun warmed the wet mud, and the crabgrass started there, quickly, sending out those runners, grasping, competing with neighbors, lying flat, reaching, always reaching and going as far as they could reach and going while the sun got hotter and hotter, and steam started coming out of the ground, and sandpipers landed and walked along the banks, poking for worms, defecating out parasite eggs, then flew off without stopping to somewhere far in the north. Crabgrass is like a Devil; it comes and takes whatever space is there for the taking; an idle mind, like idle mud, is a perfect place for crabgrass. But even one runner suddenly makes the world a little more complex than it was before, and casts a tiny ribbon of shade where once was only hot clay, a break, caused by the Devil, in homogeneity delivered by a "cleansing" Deluge—the tiniest hint of this timeless contest between good and evil.

We came from far away, from as far as you can see and farther, where the valley was scoured, and we were carried here, by the floods. Then we were dropped. All around us there were others, including, obviously, the crabgrass. Here's some homework: Act like a modern, not

a Great Depression Era “dear little girl” in Emma Cooper’s words. Do a Google® search using the word “crabgrass” and you know what you’ll find? No? Well here’s what you’ll find: Crabgrass Killer; Crabgrass Killer Strategy; When to Apply Crabgrass Killer; Herbicide; Get Rid of Crabgrass; Organic Crabgrass Control; How to Kill Crabgrass (with pictures); Killing Crabgrass; Homemade Crabgrass Killer; Frequently Asked Questions about Crabgrass Killer; Crabgrass Killer Concentrate; Annoying Crab Grass—you get the picture. Nobody loves crabgrass. Nobody wants anything around that casts even a sliver of shadow, introduces even a tiny bit of difference, into a world cleaned by water. Something that does that must be killed. Thus merchants of death make a living by cleansing our yards of the Devil.

Actually crabgrass comes in several forms; different species, scientists call them, of the genus *Digitaria*. *Digitaria veluta*—velvet crabgrass, is a Class A Noxious Weed. It’s quarantined, prohibited, controlled, and killed. Its relatives are equally disdained: *Digitaria sanguinalis*—large hairy crabgrass; “sanguine” means either happy or bloody; so we have an interesting question: why someone would name something “happy,” or “bloody,” or “happily bloody,” officially, as in *sanguinalis*, but then call it hairy for the common folks? The answer must be in color: some crabgrass gets red, sort of like blood, at times, or in places, especially out in the sun, a ruddy, healthy, complexion back in the days when it was okay to be outdoors during the summer. *Digitaria ischaemum*—smooth crabgrass.

Why is some crabgrass hairy and some smooth? That is a question for Charles Darwin. “Why” questions are always ones for Charles Darwin, or his mental descendents, now numbering in the thousands, people of all kinds striving to explain why something happened in the very distant past and maybe will happen in the just-as-distant future, why things are the way they are today, and why there is a connection between things that happened in the distant past and things that happen today, or will happen tomorrow. We see no crabgrass in this scene; all we see is evidence that something happened long ago, and because of what we know today about how the world operates, we are able to re-construct the sequence of events between back then and right now. The Deluge cleanses; Devil crabgrass appears because clean mud is hot; the Devil makes shade; shade changes the scene; shade represents an opportunity; opportunity produces diversity, eventually; and now, after all that time, we are looking at a “Master piece,” all because of the Devil, all because of something to be killed, if what you read via Google® is correct.

But the other question is for you, and it’s a relatively easy one to answer: do you know what crabgrass does to make it worthy of such disdain, quarantine, control, assassination, and prohibition? Here’s what it does, the behavior that gets it killed: it goes where others can’t, and won’t, go, like that hot barren bank, the place that now looks so lush but that was stripped clean after the Deluge. There was nothing, except, of course, crabgrass seeds, looking around, saying, if seeds could talk to themselves, hmmm, a wasteland; perfect! So they sprouted; their roots and shoots went digging and grasping and stretching out for any sustenance, any opportunity to make their places in the world. Nobody watched; nobody was there; nobody cared about what happened out on the hot mud. Then crabgrass runners cast little shadows, and more runners cast more shadows, until there was no longer just uniform barren hot clay, but a little bit of complexity, a little diversity. The Devil brought diversity. It was a long way from anyone’s yard; nobody cared if The Devil caused diversity far away from the city because the diversity was not in anyone’s back yard and nobody was there to see it happen.

Nobody was there, that is, except another species’ seed, one that needed just a little shade, just a tiny bit of protection from the elements—just a chance, but a different kind of chance, from crabgrass. So before long there was a second species of grass, living with The Devil, and

this second species also made shadows, and added still more diversity to the stream bank. Then a third came along, carried by a coyote, stuck on its fur; and a fourth passed through a goldfinch, dropping into the little community as the bird moved through the land; and a fifth blew in, carried by a tuft of parachute on the dry wind. We arrived not by coyote, goldfinch, or wind, but by time. When the time was right, when there was enough complexity, diversity, the right combination of shade and sunlight, we trees sprouted. We'd been there all the time, watching The Devil crabgrass, then the others, before something inside us said: it's time; make your tree. If you believe this story is a parable, you're right.

We made our trees, all starting at about the same time, and we know, because this memory is embedded in our genes, that we could easily die, also at about the same time by the actions of those same kinds of waters that cleared the land for that Devil crabgrass. But while we're here, we will slowly change this scene. Below the land, below those flat banks and mysterious cattails that cannot be what you believe them to be, below where you cannot see except by knowing what's really down there, our roots extend far beyond where you think they should be, vastly far beyond, in fact, and in an interaction with Earth that is far too complex for you to understand. But knowledge will give you vision, let you see structures, and processes, and history, where others see only oil paint on board, and this knowledge also allows you to imagine other structures, and processes, and history, some of them maybe not true, hidden in the landscape. We will block the sun. The Devil crabgrass will die because it cannot compete forever with perennial grasses that put down deep roots, and work hard all their lives, and produce seeds on schedule. You see, there is a morality tale in this landscape, a metaphorical morality tale told in the language of plants.

Then Mrs. Cooper painted our picture. She says she copied it from a masterpiece—a "Master piece"—but nobody knows what this masterpiece is, or where it's located, what museum has it guarded night and day, or who was the artist, the person who put a title on it, maybe something like *Scene Along a River*; that sounds like a good title. Mrs. Cooper gave her knockoff masterpiece no title. But she did have it framed, then wrote an inscription on the paper that covered the back. The paper is now brittle, and torn through the inscription. You can see a corner of the canvas board, the back of it, through the tear. Mrs. Cooper was Bernice Locke's best friend's mother. She didn't know how to spell "Locke," but she knew how to paint trees. She could have done a better job of painting trees if she'd actually studied trees, but then very few people, especially artists, study tree anatomy. Maybe if she'd really known what we looked like she'd have made us look true to our form instead of tilting at mysterious angles inconsistent with Oklahoma wind.

Why did she pick this neighborhood, this wild place, to capture with oil on board? Nobody knows why artists choose subjects, especially not-so-famous artists now long dead, artists who leave no diaries, no conversations confirmed in letters, no contracts, no tangible evidence of their lives on Earth except oil and pigment mixed and arranged on a piece of board and given to friends and acquaintances who ask for them, or accept them gracefully even though not really wanting them, or knowing what to do with them. Did she *like* this place? Did she make up a place that she thought she would like, that she thought someone else would like, perhaps Elizabeth's "dear little girl friend"? Did she try to actually copy this long lost masterpiece exactly, or did she take some liberties with the scene? Did she know there were chiggers in this scene?

She must have known about the chiggers; you can't live in Oklahoma, anywhere in the vicinity of Wheeler Park, and not know about chiggers. So you look at the masterpiece and see

another kind of masterpiece, some might say an ultimate one, the handiwork of God, the Supreme Artist. Chiggers, ticks, mice with their fleas and tapeworms, and moles with their own kinds of fleas and tapeworms, all producing more ticks and chiggers and beetles and mice and moles and fleas and tapeworms each according to its own kind down there in the real dirt that's out there somewhere but it reflected in our minds as we look at Mrs. G. B. Cooper's painting for that deal little girl friend of Elizabeth's. You can bet the family farm, safely, that nobody involved in the production of this imaginary landscape turned into oil on board ever considered the evolutionary history of ticks and chiggers.

Ticks suck blood. Walk through those woods, through that tall sandy-colored grass you thought might be cattails but were the wrong color for the season and you feel a tickle on your ankle, moving up your calf. Lift up your pants and there, above the white socks, is a tick; a scene from the 19th Century contains a living representative of the Mesozoic. How did we get from a gift to that "dear little girl friend of Elizabeths" to blood-sucking ticks, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever ticks, chiggers, almost-microscopic beasts of the field reproducing each according to its own kind? The answer is an easy one: when you know what to look for in a masterpiece, even one that's not a real Masterpiece as defined by the critics and auction houses, you see all the parts, all the possibilities, all the history, all the ideas, all the implications, the relationships, the decisions about where to put this stroke or that, the reactions of each part to another; you see a map, a guide to some familiar yet unfamiliar place: a scene like, but not really like, any other scene, a mixture of shapes that tells a story, has a unique narrative, one you've heard before but not exactly in the same way.

So you see ticks and chiggers and mice, and all the things that eat mice, and all the evolutionary history of ticks and mice and trees and grass, the lifting up of mountains, the weathering away of mountains into plains, rain that falls through eons, the lightning that starts far-off fires, big dark clouds, blistering sun, driving sleet, quiet snow. So you hear the rustling in the grass, the soft knocking of leaves against one another, the wind, thunder in the distance, rain hitting the water, crows calling, warblers trilling, crickets, frogs, cricket frogs, and once in a while, from somewhere, the coyotes. So you feel the sharp edge of grasses, the rough and smooth places on bark; the gentle current in that stream, slime on rocks, mud, a crawdad pinch, sticks, your hair blowing, raindrop landing behind your glasses. You smell smoke from somewhere, wet grass, an indistinct flower odor, something rotten, something unidentifiable. So you pluck a grass stem and chew; it's sweet; you never expected it to be sweet. The fact that its sweetness sticks in your mind, and the next time you see grass made out of oil on board, the taste returns.

The smoke smell also is nothing more than a memory evoked by having been here before, "here" being anywhere with a seemingly-familiar combination of plants, water, terrain, with haze on the horizon, the evidence for fire. But this one has some reason to think of fire. Low, far away on the horizon, there is a small splotch of red, a warning, and shapes that are geometric, shapes of things like men make. There is a city in the distance; you can see only the tops of buildings, and their outline is indistinct, almost impressions, but nevertheless correct impressions. The river comes from a far-off city. Embedded in this idyllic pastoral scene is a hidden story: something flows out of civilization, no matter how far away, how distant either in time or space, something always flows from a city out across the land, bringing molecules, and words, and making images and ideas from them, and even though we see otherwise, and believe otherwise, the true picture, the deepest meaning, comes from that city. In her picture-gift to that "dear little girl friend of Elizabeths" Emma Cooper has told a meta-story: nothing is what it seems to be, not the land, not

a marriage, not children, not history, not causality, not the roles we lay on nature, and certainly not a life cut short by cancer.

The individual parts, viewed separately, look familiar, "normal," non-mysterious, almost boring. The parts assembled convey a very different principle: if you can truly understand what's in a picture—all the techniques and decisions that went into making it, the choices of what to use and where to put the things you've chosen, the colors, the implied history, the inferred future derived only from knowledge of the past, and the symbolism, both intended and produced by either accident or your own experience, then you can perhaps begin to understand an increasingly complex world, a world in which the definitions of "planet" and "human being" change almost daily. Perhaps if you can truly understand what's in a whole picture, a painting, then you can start to understand how combinations of the commonplace can produce surrealism, perhaps even the kind of surrealism that Bernice, that "dear little girl friend of Elizabeths" would recognize immediately, instinctively, for example:

> Atomic weapons ensure peace. There is plenty of food for all humans who will ever be born; the main explanation for hunger and poverty is distribution. A "war to end all wars" can indeed be fought and won, and after it's won, there will be no more war. Hollywood Communists are more of a threat to our nation than the fanaticism promulgated by a House Un-American Activities Committee or a Senator Joseph McCarthy. You can solve the social problems caused by ethyl alcohol if you prohibit its manufacture and sale. Skin color is a true indicator of intellectual ability. The solution to an energy shortage, potential or otherwise, is to simply drill for more oil.

Bernice picks up a book, settles into her chair in the living room, and begins to read. The book itself, the tangible item, is calm and serene; its contents, once understood, observed from a knowing perspective, become imaginative and mysterious. She looks up at Emma Cooper's landscape painting. It is calm and serene; its contents, once understood, observed from a knowing perspective, become imaginative and mysterious, telling stories that exist only in one's knowledge and experience. Sometimes those stories are true, sometimes not. She knows the difference.

She doesn't know how or why she is able to distinguish between the true, the false, and the illusionary, but she does. Maybe this talent is inborn; maybe it's a product of that itinerant childhood in lower Oklahoma City, dragged from tiny frame rental to tiny frame rental, often crawling with rats and roaches, sometimes leaving behind a favorite doll as collateral because her fiery Pentecostal father couldn't keep a "cleaner and presser" job or pay the rent on what is now, by all measures, housing of marginal quality, soon slated for dozing because it lies in the path of an interstate highway that also exists, so far, only in someone's mind. Her husband gets a job in Louisiana; she's pregnant; they move into a small stucco house in Houma. She hangs the painting over the mantle and studies it every day. Maybe it reminds her of Oklahoma. More likely it reminds her that the commonplace can produce surrealism, that the familiar, when combined in unusual ways, can tell important stories, some true, some not.

Thus she acquires a small book of poetry. The child to come will be able to understand the words, the inflections, in her voice before it can understand the painting, but eventually he will study Emma Cooper's "Master piece" too, in a way determined perhaps by his genes, or perhaps by that same cleaner and presser a couple of generations back, or perhaps by the combination of nature, nurture, and the experiences of his parents. Bernice flips through the pages of this book

she's bought for the child now moving in her body. *Jonathan Bing*, she thinks; that's a good one, a lesson in the handling of authority. Or what about *Dan Dirk of Dowdee*, the posturing pirate? Posturing pirates are commonplace in her husband's line of work. Maybe the little fishes who want to be a puffin's friends instead of its food, colleagues instead of prey? Art, on the wall above her mantle; literature, in her hands; an actor's voice, with meanings far beyond the words, those are the weapons with which she will fight ignorance, bigotry, hatred, and violence of a world about to welcome her first born.

Painted for Miss Bernice Lock, dear little girl friend of Elizabeths.
from a Master piece by Mrs G. B. Cooper – Wishing you both the best that life can give.

Ever your friend.

The painting is signed on the back: "E Cooper 1935 Aug." Bernice and John were married on September 1, 1935. The painting was obviously a wedding present; it hung on the wall above the fireplace in that small, stucco house in Houma, Louisiana, where I was born. It now hangs in my home office; I study it every day.