

PROFILES

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Thomas Joshua Cooper risks his life to photograph the world's remotest places.

BY DANA GOODYEAR

Cooper's project "The Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity" documents a three-decade attempt to traverse the perimeter of the Atlantic basin—an exile's long search for home. He says that the process creates a "peculiar kind of ecstatic joy."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS JOSHUA COOPER

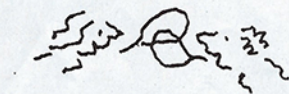
For thirty-two years, Thomas Joshua Cooper has been working on a project that he calls "The Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity," a collection of some seven hundred black-and-white photographs that he makes from remote, forbidding, largely unpeopled, all-but-forgotten outcroppings, on five continents and at both poles, along the perimeter of the Atlantic basin. He sets his camera in places with names like Cape Frigid on the Frozen Strait, the Lighthouse at the End of the World, Finisterre—places infused with human awe of the unknown and with the yearning of explorers embarking on a journey from which they will likely not return. "I thought maybe I could learn something by standing on the continental edges of the source of Western civilization and trying to imagine, with my back to the land, what happened when the carriers of the culture went over the edge of the map," he told me. Another time, he said, "Emptiness and extremity are what I was searching for, with the firm belief that it'd kill me or transform me."

Part Cherokee and part Jewish, Cooper was born in California and has lived in Scotland since the nineteen-eighties. In images that are romantic and psychologically severe—the angular grandeur of rock and the terror of the ocean, befuddled by clouds, fog, and breaking waves—the "Atlas" documents an exile's search for home. He looks for what he calls "indications"—rocks or wave patterns that form arrows, pointing him in the right direction—and avoids horizons, preferring pictures from which there is no clear escape. "He is part of the conceptual-art tradition of artists traversing space to create sculpture," Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and a champion of Cooper's since the early nineties, told me. "He is also one of our greatest formal photographers. He captures the *motion* of the environment, which is near-impossible to do." In late September, the "Atlas" had its debut, at LACMA, in an exhibition called "The World's Edge." At Cooper's request, the show opened on the five-hundredth anniversary of Magellan's departure for his trip around the globe.

In Cooper's photographic epic about exploration, colonization, migration, and homecoming, he is both narrator and protagonist. "In making the Atlas pic-

tures, I may unintentionally become the first person in the world to circumnavigate the boundless coastal perimeter of land-surfaces harbouring the entire Atlantic Ocean," he has written. He says that a senior cartographer of the "Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World" once told him that he was the first to see many of these places and, because of global sea rise, would likely be the last. "In the life of your children, most of those edges will be underwater," he told me.

Seventy-three, tall and lumbering, with fair hair turned white and a goaty scruff of beard, Cooper is a kisser of hands, who calls both men and women "sir." Like a kindly adult out of Roald Dahl, he's often enthused to the point of inarticulacy. People he admires are "absolute gobsnack-ers." He expresses happiness with rapid claps; moved, he thumps his chest with a closed fist; when truly overwhelmed, he says, "Fu-u-u-u-uck." From the outset, Cooper was unfit for the physically arduous task he assigned himself, which requires that he spend months at sea in small craft, hurl himself from dinghies onto slick rock faces, inch along cliffs, dangle over abysses. He has fallen into quicksand; tumbled from peaks; sailed into a cyclone; been shot at, searched, and detained; had his dinghy swamped among hunting leopard seals. "I get seasick," Cooper told me. "I'm frightened of water—I can't stand this shit. In fact, I don't really know how to swim. I swim like a rock." He is blind in his right eye, and his glasses fog. In books, which he publishes upon completing segments of



his itinerary, he thanks the chiropractors who help patch him together at the journey's end. He thought the "Atlas" would take seven years; it has taken more than four times that long.

Mentally, though, Cooper is unflinching. "I'm an invisible person, never had an audience," he told me. His work, when it has been seen at all, has mostly been displayed in small galleries and group

shows. "But I'm unstoppable," he said. "I can't do anything but make things." In setting the parameters of his project, Cooper made a series of vows: to work exclusively outdoors, to make only a single exposure in each place, and to pursue his vision at the expense of all else. "It wasn't melodramatic," he told me. "It allowed me to realize that, whatever it cost me to get to a place, I was willing to pay the price. If I said to myself, 'I am already dead,' then I had nothing to worry about. I'm free. I no longer have any fears. Only the joy, the peculiar kind of ecstatic joy of making things at the point where nothing else is left."

"I trespass whenever possible," Cooper told me, walking by a "No Trespassing" sign and approaching a rusty, broken-down barbed-wire fence. It was a sunny morning, on a palisade overlooking the Pacific, part of a twenty-five-thousand-acre ranch at Point Conception, in Santa Barbara County. As a coda to the "Atlas," Cooper had decided to make a series of photographs along the coast where he was born, on a three-week road trip between Oregon and Tijuana. (The Pacific pictures will be exhibited at Hauser & Wirth, in Los Angeles, in late October.)

Cooper clutched his camera, wrapped in a dark cloth, as he stiffly traversed the fence. His wife, Kate Mooney, who has practical gray hair and a deflationary wit, choreographed. She researches and helps plan Cooper's voyages, and serves as a living compass for her directionally challenged mate. "Right foot, right foot, left foot, over," she said. "The next piece of barbed wire, and then over again. Well done." He walked down a path to the eroded edge of the cliff. The ocean below was marbled like a steak. A train whistled in the distance, and Cooper turned to wave. "Heart-beat, heart-beat, heart-beat," he said.

Cooper's camera, a five-by-seven-inch field camera, is a wooden box that was built in 1898. He refers to it as his "baby" and says, "She and I are going to go into the fire together." In recent years, the materials required for the "Atlas" have become increasingly scarce. He has bought the last of the film developer that he prefers, the last of the fixer, and the last of the paper. "Analog photography's disappearing," the artist Richard

Learoyd, who uses a homemade camera obscura, told me. "You have to change and adapt to that. He doesn't adapt."

Working with an old, unwieldy instrument slows Cooper down, which is a primary intention of his process. Awkward, fragile, heavy (the rig, including tripod and film, weighs some sixty pounds), the camera has been lugged to the literal ends of the earth. "There are areas in South America where they see me with the camera and tripod and they say, 'Oh, you're the Yank that does the impossible shit,'" he told me. Made from nineteenth-century wood, the camera is particularly vulnerable to the influence of salt water. More than once, protecting it has threatened to kill him. I have the distinct impression that this is how he'd like to go. "Death or picture," he likes to say.

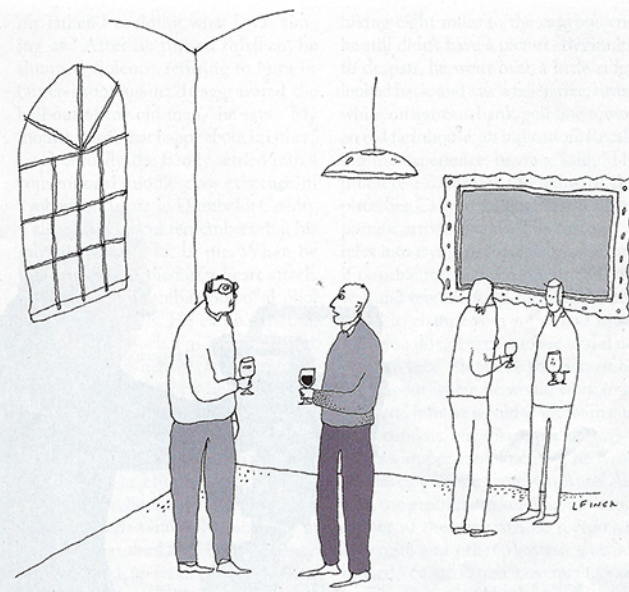
At Point Conception, Cooper established the tripod where the dirt began to fall away and disappeared under the dark cloth to check the composition. He frames his images from the outside in. "My whole practice is edges," he says. "Edge of the world, edge of the picture, edge of land and sea." I heard muffled laughter: he liked what he saw. Emerging, he closed his eyes and began muttering to himself. Later, he told me that he was asking for a blessing. "I refuse to take anything from anyone or anything, ever, so I ask permission," he said. "Then I feel less like a thief." (Repeatedly, he told me that he does not "take" or "shoot" pictures. He says, "You shoot something, it dies. You take something and you're usually taking it against the will of the thing that is being removed.") With his eyes still closed, he depressed a plunger, initiating the exposure, a minute and thirty seconds long.

A man in olive-green work pants and a matching shirt approached with a clipboard. "Ranch security," he said briskly. "Sir, I need you to pack it up and leave immediately."

"Could I have one minute?"
"No, you need to leave now."
"I'm really sorry. You couldn't give me a minute?"

"You're not supposed to be here," the guard said. "It's posted. You don't even have permission to be on the property photographing."

Cooper began to wheedle, stalling. "I didn't mean to bother anybody," he



"So, what inspired you to study engineering, get married, find a job, move to the suburbs, have a couple of kids, and grow old?"

said. "Come look at what I'm looking at. Come look—look, look, look, look. Give me one minute. Have a look."

The guard was steadfast, miffed. "It doesn't matter whether you're photographing for the Blue Room or the Lincoln Bedroom at the White House," he said. "You need to respect private-property rights. There's rules." Cooper didn't move. "You know, I'm about to lose it, sir," the guard said. "I'm going to call the sheriffs and you're going to get a twelve-hundred-dollar fine."

Cooper waited a moment longer, as the exposure finished, and then said, "Thank you very much! Would you like to look? It's not much, but it might make you smile." The guard remained unsmiling. "I'm not trying to be silly," Cooper said. "We're from Scotland."

"You're Scottish?" the guard said, almost under his breath. "So am I." Cooper apologized again; the guard apologized for doing his job. Then he asked about the camera. He, too, was an "analog redneck," he said. He offered to carry

the camera back to the car. "I'm Scottish-Chickasaw, believe it or not," the guard said. "I was born in Oklahoma."

"I bow to you, sir," Cooper said, bowing. "That's where my grandparents are buried."

By the time we left, he and the guard were singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," which was written by a formerly enslaved member of the Choctaw Nation, and making plans to see each other in Los Angeles, at the opening of Cooper's museum show.

When Cooper was six, his family moved for two years to the Standing Rock Reservation, in South Dakota, where his father, Duahne, or D.W., was employed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. His mother, Nancy Roseman, was known on the reservation as Fancy Nancy, because she ordered dresses from San Francisco. At Thomas's bedtime she recited poems in Japanese and Mandarin, languages she had learned as a child, when her father, a



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naval officer, was stationed on the Yangtze. She and D.W., who was one-sixteenth Cherokee, met in Honolulu; he was also an officer in the Navy, and they married under a sabre arch. Cooper says that D.W. was at Pearl Harbor, served in numerous major naval battles in the Pacific, and fought in Korea, but still, upon discharge, was not permitted to use the rest room in many places in the United States.

Life at Standing Rock was a child's fantasy. Weekly, the Lakota elders told the children stories; at the end of the sessions, one of them would talk about vision, fiercely pronouncing upon the difference between "the eye that sees and the seeing eye." Thomas was white-white, a towhead with a patched eye. As the lone cowboy, being chased by his Indian friends, he learned stealth. On his right hand, he bears a scar, which he says he got when he was inducted into the Oglala

Sioux and given an Indian name, Tecumseh. When I asked Thomas's brother, David, who is younger by twelve years and works for the Forest Service in Chico, California, if he, too, had an Indian name, he laughed. "Thomas definitely likes to romanticize, and that's wonderful," he said. "I've got a lot of friends that are Indians, and I wouldn't blend in."

Some years ago, Mooney made a Cooper family tree, starting with Reuben Cooper, a Portuguese Jewish metal merchant who came to the United States in the seventeenth century. At some point, the Coopers married into a Cherokee family in the Southeast. "The Coopers are so intermarried—that's the polite way of putting it—that they have their own genealogist in South Carolina and North Carolina to make sure they're not intermarrying again," Mooney told me. The Cherokee part of the family was forced west, to Oklahoma, on the Trail

of Tears. After making the tree, she says, "I thought it was such a load of rubbish that I made Thomas take a DNA test." The results were surprising. "The Rosemans and the Coopers believed themselves to be entirely different, one better than the other. It turns out that both were part Cherokee, part Jewish."

Even now, the only places Cooper will not trespass are lands belonging to indigenous people. In making the "Atlas," he has retraced sections of the early explorers' journeys: enacting a twenty-four-hour vigil that Magellan made before leaving Portugal; standing in the spot of Columbus's first landfall in the Bahamas. But embedded in the work is a critique of what Cooper calls the "conniving, disruptive, venal, and murderous" impulses of colonization, the slaughter that followed in the explorers' wake, or that they themselves perpetrated. In a moody, scumbled photograph called

"Erasure"—The Beginning of Conquest and Destruction, Native America Loses the European Cultural Battle," Cooper shows the beach in Veracruz where Cortés commenced his Aztec campaign. Obliterating sea foam bisects the image: the time before and the time after.

"These guys went into the unknown willingly, and they suffered for it," Cooper says. "They have to be despised, but to insist that you can do something that nobody has detailed before you—Jesus Christ, that's admirable. I'm amazed by Magellan, because he was a superior sailor. Agog at Drake, who was a serious S.O.B., because to have survived the Drake Passage is incomprehensible. Ultimately, though, it's all bad. Drake creates the opportunity for globalization and the homogenization of culture at the great expense of anything that is extreme and unbending."

Among the very few pictures of the United States in the LACMA show are two relating to Cooper's Cherokee family: a river they crossed in their journey west on the Trail of Tears—where Cooper fell into a sinkhole and lost his boots—and the Oklahoma homestead of his father's tribal grandparents. Patrick Lannan, the president of the Lannan Foundation, which has funded the majority of the "Atlas," says, "There's an indigenous sensibility. His pictures evoke a memory of a world that hasn't been harvested yet. He admires the explorers, the risks they took and all of that, but he also recognizes what they brought with them. His feet are in both worlds."

Moving on from Standing Rock, Cooper's family made its way to D.W.'s next job, tending an elk herd for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on a preserve in Wyoming. Nancy and D.W. lived in a one-room cabin, while Thomas and his sister, Leslie, shared an Army-issue pup tent. D.W., whom Cooper describes as "more or less nonverbal," hunted for the family's food, bringing Thomas with him. "If it takes more than two bullets, you're a bad shot," D.W. told his son. "If I miss, we don't eat," Cooper says. "He was really spare, and that sparseness had an effect on me." Cooper's father trained him on a .22 at six, a shotgun at eight, and a range rifle at twelve. "I was blind as a bat, but I always knew where the target was," Cooper says. "It confounded

my father. I could hit what I was aiming at." After he turned thirteen, he shunned violence, refusing to hunt or target-shoot again. "It aggravated the hell out of my old man," he says. "My mother wasn't that happy about it, either."

Eventually, the family settled into a conventional middle-class existence, in a suburb of Arcata, in Humboldt County, California; Cooper remembers that his mother baked a lot of pie. When he was sixteen, she died of a heart attack, brought on by a combination of alcohol and sleeping pills. He can barely talk about it still. "Fuck, I'm a kid," he said. "I tried to give her mouth-to-mouth." Nancy was not yet forty, and rumors of suicide dogged the family.

After her death, Cooper left home, scrapping together odd jobs in sawmills. He enrolled at Humboldt State University, where, he says, he befriended the painter Morris Graves, helping him in the garden at the Lake, Graves's home and studio deep in the redwoods. At that point, Cooper wanted to be a poet, and thought he'd make a living as a rural postman, writing in the afternoons. After taking a photography course, to fulfill a graduation requirement, he asked Graves if he knew any artists making photographs. "The art is in the thinking and the feeling and the seeing and the making," Cooper recalls Graves telling him. "Not in the medium."

Graves introduced Cooper to the photographer Imogen Cunningham, who hired him as a studio assistant. (She made a portrait of him: a young man with a pouf of ciderly blond hair, intent but faraway.) Cooper says that when he applied to graduate school for photography, in New Mexico, Graves wrote a recommendation, in the form of an acrostic that spelled A-R-T-I-S-T. He was admitted, in the fall of 1970, and promptly got suspended, for punching a teacher who made fun of him.

During this period, Cooper briefly worked as a substitute teacher for eighth graders at a barrio school in San Luis Obispo County. In his art work, he was flummoxed, hating everything he made. One day, a friend drove him past an old apple farm. A hand-painted sign read, "See Canyon." Cooper told me, "I thought, I'll make pictures here. If I can't start in See Canyon, then I'm fucked." He set out on April Fools' Day. After

hiking eight miles to the canyon's end, he still didn't have a picture. Beginning to despair, he went over a little ridge, looked back, and saw a fallen tree, silvery white, on a stream bank, pointing toward an old farmhouse: an indication. Recalling the experience, he once said, "The predictive nature of the name of this place, See Canyon, taught me several important artist's lessons. The first was to relax into trying to see a place, be at ease if possible in the place, but attend to it well and very carefully. Secondly, be prepared to change your mind and to see what you do not expect to see or did not want to see." He made the first of his vows about where he would work (outside) and how he would work (with austere economy, one image per site).

As Cooper experimented, he wrote a series of solicitous letters to Ansel Adams, the preeminent landscape photographer of the time, whose pictures of Yosemite and other Western sites solidified a conservation movement. Soon, he began to visit. "He tucked me under his wing," Cooper says. "The deal was, if I arrived at five, it was drinks. If I arrived at seven, it was dinner. I had to do the dishes after dinner, and I always had to spend the next day helping him in the darkroom. It was itinerant for a while. Being fed was a good deal. Being offered a drink was a better deal." He slept rough, in a sleeping bag outside Adams's house.

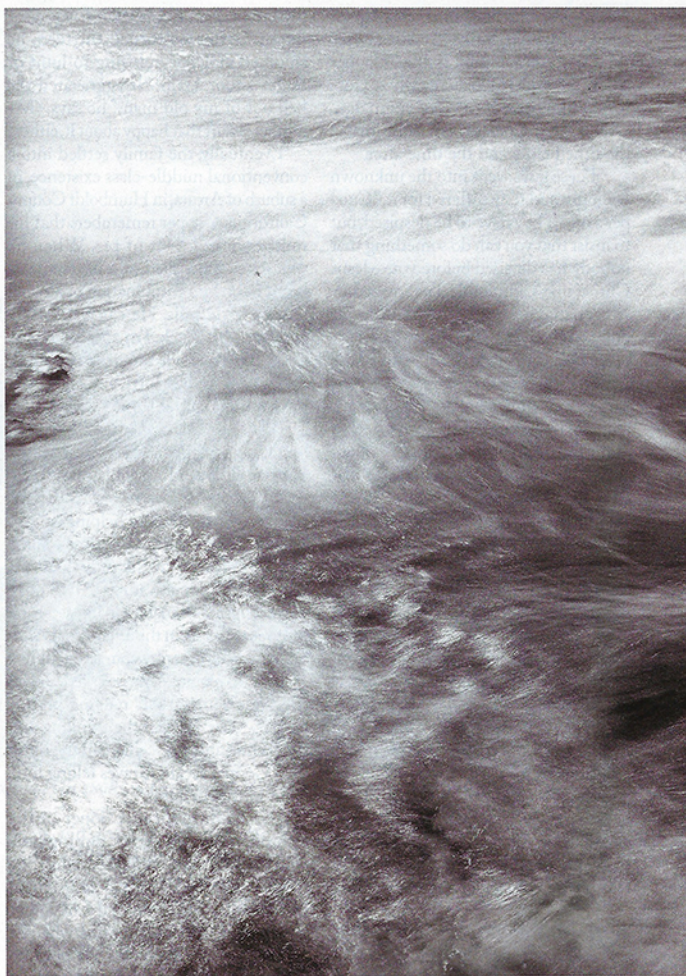
Adams encouraged Cooper's work, but thought that his camera, a 35-mm., was limiting. A few years earlier, Cooper had bought his five-by-seven camera, in Arcata, from the elderly son of its original owner; it had been sitting on his mantel, a provocation. When he presented it for Adams's approval, Cooper recalls, "he said, 'It's perfect, it's perfect. This is the biggest camera that a normal person that's interested in the rectangle can carry.'" In a letter to Adams from 1972, Cooper reminisces about showing him pictures of "the natural world as I felt it." Adams, he writes, told him that he was "on his way."

Despite the mentorship, Adams, a populist who made beautiful pictures to encourage tourism to the national parks, is not the father of Cooper's project. According to Richard Leary, "Adams was chasing his own version of the photographic picturesque. It was a

language that was understood, and he was using it. With Cooper, he's not using the language of the picturesque—he's using the language of discovery and abstraction." Darius Himes, the international head of photographs at Christie's, says, "You look at most of Cooper's pictures and don't know where you are, and it's definitely not a place you want to go visit."

"I saw the picture over Kate's shoulder," Cooper said. "She probably saw it right away." We were at Rincon, a beach south of Point Conception, where Cooper had spent the previous hour moving pieces of whitening driftwood around on the sand, like an elephant burying bones. Mooney was sitting on a bench, with her eyes closed, face tipped toward a hazy sky. "Thank Christ—I was starting to worry," Cooper said, when the image revealed itself. "It's always there, you just have to be patient." He trudged past the bench and into a copse of cypress trees, whose branches looked like upswept umbrellas on a windy day. There was a John Deere tractor, which he avoided, and a downed tree trunk, which attracted him. "My pictures are not about the specifics of geography," he says. "They attempt to be about what it's like to stand in a very specific place."

Cooper has lived in Scotland since 1982, when he was hired to establish the photography department at the Glasgow School of Art, where he is still on the faculty. He met Mooney, a silversmithing student seventeen years younger than he, playing table tennis in the yard outside the photography building. Mooney says, "He invited me to see his collection of daguerreotypes, and I moved in." Cooper's experience of the courtship was more tormented. "I was thunderstruck," he says. "She was young, sweet, and didn't want an old dog around." He contemplated leaving Scotland for good, returning to America. Hoping for clarity, he took his camera to northwest Scotland and stood in the sea. "I was in the water about an hour, and I thought, O.K., fuck this, I can't figure out what else to do. Finally, I saw this picture looking toward Scotland, and thought, I know what to do now." That sea picture, empty of humans but charged with human emotion, began the "Atlas" and his relationship with Kate. "So the 'Atlas' and



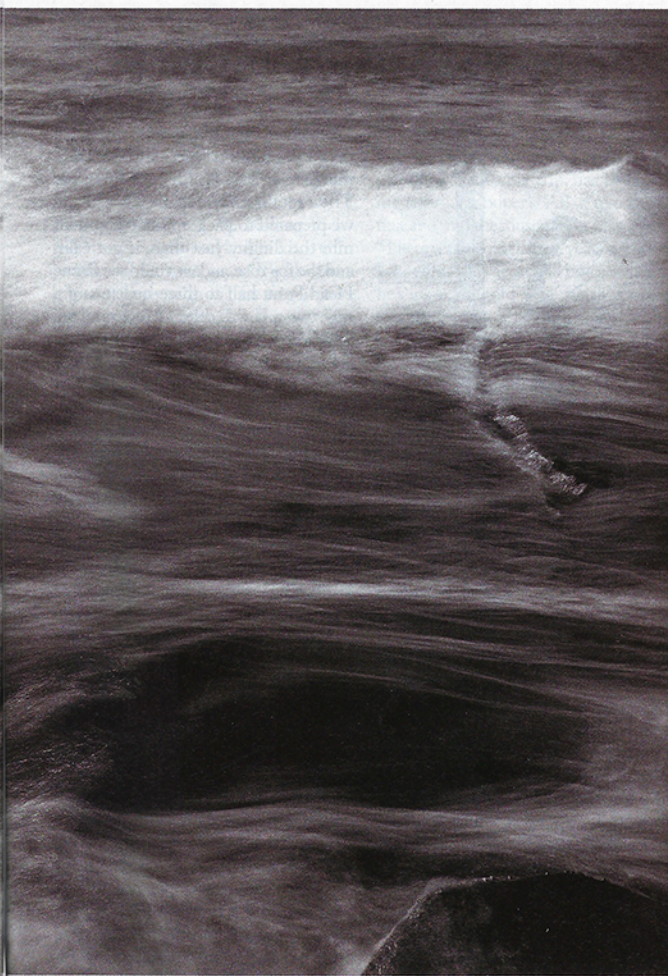
"My whole practice is edges," Cooper says. "Edge of the world, edge of the picture, edge of

my dear sweetheart are entirely intertwined," he told me.

Cooper and Mooney have two daughters, Laura Indigo, who is twenty-four, and Sophie Alice, who is twenty-one. When Laura was two weeks old, Cooper left their home, in Glasgow, on a long voyage, setting a pattern that would persist. "I missed the entirety of my children growing up," Cooper told me. "I was in the field for eighteen years."

As an undergraduate, Cooper had come across Theodore Roethke's poem "The Abyss," and it stayed with him:

"How can I dream except beyond this life? / Can I outleap the sea— / The edge of all the land, the final sea?" In the early two-thousands, he began making excursions to what he calls, after Roethke, the Far Field: the extremities of continental Europe and Africa, looking west, toward the setting sun and the unknown. "The cardinal points are always, historically, metaphors," Cooper says. "West is the area of promise for Westerners—follow the sun. The allure of the north—it's the gate to Heaven, as native people say. The fear of the south starts with Captain



the land and sea." In Brazil, a wave nearly swept him off a cliff as he pressed the shutter.

Cook. The east is always behind you; you know where you came from."

With the support of Harry Blain, a London gallerist, Cooper engaged Jason Roberts, a polar explorer, who has also produced expeditions for David Attenborough, and headed to the northernmost point in Europe, the Svalbard archipelago. Roberts told me, "I was, like, What the hell do they want to take some guy to this place for? Do they seriously know how complicated and costly it is?" (Cooper's trips can cost upward of three hundred thousand dollars each.) By now,

Roberts has guided or overseen numerous expeditions for Cooper, to the frozen ocean of the North Pole—where storms press the pack into "screw ice" and the wind forms sculpted ridges called sastrugi—and to the parallel universe at the extreme south. "I would always send pictures to his girls, saying, 'Your bonkers father, look at what he's doing now. He's at the North Pole, to take one photo. Then he'll go all the way to the South Pole to take one picture,'" Roberts told me. "It's really quite funny to take a lot more photos than he ever takes."

Listening to Cooper's plans, Roberts often thought, "Dude, you don't like sailing boats, so why the fuck are we sailing to Antarctica?" On one trip to the South Pole, he and Cooper were caught for three weeks in a blizzard on the continental ice shelf. According to Cooper, as the snow persisted, the camp filled up with scientists, sportsmen, and explorers, and jokes started to fly about who would get eaten first. "I'm the only fat person in the God-damned crew," Cooper told me. "They're all looking at me and smiling slightly lasciviously." The wind was blowing sixty to eighty miles an hour, a whiteout. Travelling to the mess tent and the latrine required hooking in to ropes. After thirteen days in the tent, Cooper, feeling stir-crazy, decided to go out and make a picture. "I figured it would take six people," he told me. "Two to hold me, two to hold the camera, and one to hold the dark cloth. I stood facing into the wind and made a picture of whiteness—it's nothing but pure white."

"You might say he's a madman, but you have to respect him for dedication," Roberts says. "I would have given up a long time ago if I was that uncomfortable." But, he allows, "when things go bad, he can be a moody bugger."

Several years ago, at the North Pole, Cooper broke through the ice, with a thirty-five-pound tripod on his back. One edge of the rupture held, and he heaved himself out of the water. Afterward, he returned to the spot to make his photograph: a white ice field, riddled with melt holes, like a sweater ravaged by moths. He said, "I'm up to my neck in the Arctic Ocean and I thought, Well, fuck, if I go down, that's the end, no one will know. Bye-bye! I got out, and I made the picture, which is how I solve all my dilemmas."

Not everyone, of course, believes that a photograph is worth dying for. In 2008, Cooper undertook an arduous journey to a place whose name, he felt, was summoning him: Prime Head, at the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula, north of Exasperation Inlet, Cape Disappointment, and Cape Longing. He engaged a captain, Greg Landreth, and his wife, Keri Pashuk, to take him on a fifty-four-foot motorized sailboat called Northanger. (He might have paid closer attention to that name.) From the start, there were tensions. Cooper recalls that Landreth



"It's a good deal. You're getting twenty more teaspoons of sugar for a quarter."

greeted him by saying, "Any mistake you make is likely to kill someone. You're a green, unproven man, and I can barely stand to be in your company." Conditions were dangerous, and Cooper had laid out a daunting itinerary: seventy Antarctic sites in seventy days, with Prime Head as his ultimate goal. Landreth says that it was his responsibility to stay alert to all present and future conditions to keep them safe. Cooper, on the other hand, he said, "would stay in his cabin, sequestered, till it was time to go and take his photo. Then off we'd go and land on this horrific wave-swept platform and he'd do his thing, and then he'd disappear again and not want to be noticed or bothered."

They sailed through the austral summer; autumn lasted a week, and winter hit. Supplies ran low. Prime Head is surrounded on three sides by what sailors call "uncharted dangers," places in which, according to maritime custom, potential rescuers are not expected to respond to a Mayday signal. For three weeks, they maneuvered slowly toward Prime Head up the Bransfield Strait, a waterway between the South Shetland Islands and the Antarctic mainland, clogged with brash ice and calving icebergs. The

final two weeks they spent in the twelve-foot-long dinghy, towing Northanger and depth-sounding as they went.

According to Cooper, Landreth refused to proceed, causing Cooper to invoke his rights as the charterer to commandeer the boat. (Landreth strongly disputes Cooper's account. "I'm the owner of the boat," he told me. "I certainly would've noticed.") "He went colossally berserk, and he said, 'I'm putting you off,'" Cooper told me. "I said, 'Great, where the fuck are you going to put me off? We're seventy-five miles from the nearest research base. It'll take us three weeks to get there, and by then we could get to Prime Head and back.'" Finally, Cooper says, Landreth relented. They were in a freezing fog, but Cooper could see on the map that nearby was an uncharted island, and he wanted it. Landreth allowed him to chart the island, which he called Catherine Island, in Kate's honor. Catherine Island is one of three previously unidentified Antarctic locations that Cooper mapped on the journey to Prime Head; another is LISA Rock (an acronym of "Laura Indigo Sophie Alice"), a protrusion near Cape Herschel that is said to have sunk five boats. He submitted both to the

U.K.'s Hydrographic Office, in the hope that they would be considered, as he says, "new knowledge."

At Catherine Island, Cooper conceded that he had to abandon Prime Head. "The wind is up and the fog is up and I can't see thirty feet," he told me. "I said, 'This is as far as we can go.' The captain said, 'Thank Christ,' and we prepared to pack up the equipment into the dinghy. Just then, it got calm and the fog rose, and we could see Prime Head Point half to three-quarters of a mile away. It was calm as fuck, and we said, 'We have to try this,' and we made a dash for the headland." Facing a two-hundred-and-fifty-foot ice wall, Cooper saw bedrock, the thin black line that means the great ice continent is melting, and felt his heart leap. He made his picture—"Uncharted Dangers, Clear"—at the end of a sea ledge, in a survival suit, chest-deep in the Antarctic water. He believes that he was the ninth person to set foot on Prime Head, and that Landreth was the tenth. More people have stood on the surface of the moon.

Laura recalls that when she and Sophie were little they would paint their father's toenails before a trip. He'd come home thirty pounds lighter, fish white, with flakes of pink polish still at the tips of his grown-out, crabbed nails. He'd empty his pockets of shells and rocks and other things found at the edge of the Atlantic—and, later, perfumes from duty free—before disappearing into the darkroom.

Until Cooper develops a negative, he is not exactly sure what he will find. Once, he discovered that a whale had breached during an exposure, while his eyes were closed. He excluded the picture from the "Atlas"; animals are beside the point. Another time, he realized that he'd accidentally marred the negative, resulting in a flamelike black presence at the edge of the image. That one was a happy accident, as the picture was made at a place in Tierra del Fuego called Cabo del Espíritu Santo.

Printing requires total concentration—fifteen hours a day, a week per print. (Mooney packs him lunch.) From contact sheets, Cooper makes eight-by-ten study prints, which help him to decide which to enlarge. Working in darkness, he adds light by overexposing, and inhibits it chemically, an idiosyncratic

variant of the rigidly scientific developing system codified by Ansel Adams. (Govan, the director of LACMA, says that comparing Adams's printing process to Cooper's is like comparing Bach to Glenn Gould.) Then Cooper immerses each finished print in selenium- and gold-based toners, layering reds and blues. Even those who have watched the process up close find it baffling. Richard Learoyd, who worked as his studio assistant for a time, says, "It's like having somebody with big fat fingers trying to make a watch. It's like a walrus trying to post a letter in a letter box." Cooper throws out most of what he makes. Patrick Lannan told me that one six-week trip that the foundation funded, at a quarter of a million dollars, yielded eighteen images. One of the things Cooper hates most about photographs is that they can be infinitely reproduced.

Cooper dedicates most of his books to the hearth-warming triad of wife and daughters. But Laura says that she knew intuitively, even as a girl, that the work had nothing to do with them. When she mentioned this to her mother, Mooney replied, matter-of-factly, "He's looking for his mom." The book LACMA produced for the exhibition contains a stoic epigraph by Mooney—"There is no exploration without exile"—and a searing essay by Laura on the painful condition of being left behind. I asked Laura what she saw in her father's work. "I see someone that's very lost," she said. "The pictures are his loss for words."

"Let's go forward," Mooney said. "Rincon, Mugu, Dume." On the seat beside her was the "California Atlas and Gazetteer" and a blue binder she had prepared for the trip, labelled "Capes of California." We headed south along the Pacific Coast Highway. "This looks like the end of the earth," Mooney said, as we neared Point Mugu. "We must be going in the right direction."

At Point Mugu, a conical hunk of rock where car commercials are often filmed, Cooper set up on a crumbling asphalt promontory, with one toe of the tripod hovering midair. It was late in the day, and the surfaces were beginning to glisten. Scallops of white surf surged against the pocked foot of a rock covered in seagulls. He scared the birds away, asked permission, and opened

his mouth—A-ba-ba-ba, wordless joy.

There was only one more stop on the day's itinerary, at Point Dume, in Malibu, where Cooper and Mooney were having dinner with Michael Govan, who had arranged a place for them to stay the night. Govan, who helped conceive the Capes of California trip, has been trying to bring Cooper's "Atlas" to completion and into the museum for many years. "There was a point fifteen years ago when I thought, 'This artist will be known after he's gone,'" he told me recently. Cooper, too, has been straining to finish the last stretch of his Atlantic journey, as both his health and the coastline have deteriorated. For nearly a decade, he has been trying to get to Zenith Point, the northernmost spot on the Canadian mainland. In 2012, he was poisoned by his antinausea medication, which prevented him from urinating for four days; near death, he was treated at a hospital on Saint-Pierre, a tiny French island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and then medevaced home. In 2014, bad weather got in the way. In 2015, bad luck. Cooper's plan for the six-week excursion covers nearly six thousand miles and involves a single-engine airplane with skis and tundra treads, man-pulled sleds, and guns to fend off polar bears. At the moment, it seems, everyone has decided that it is too expensive, that Cooper is too old, and that he cannot be allowed to die in the frozen north alone with his camera. It's not clear that he agrees.

At Point Dume, Govan's wife, Katherine Ross, had organized dinner and



was waiting at the house. First, though, Cooper wanted to see the point. By the time we arrived at the beach, the sky was smudged, a seventies-eyeshadow palette, bruised mauve to midnight blue to ochre. Feathery smoke-colored clouds drifted past a crescent moon. Mooney coughed. It had been a very long day, and she was nursing a flu.

But Cooper could not resist. "This

is a weird thing to be doing, but I think I am going to do it," he said. "See if I get lucky." He addressed the moon—"Oh, you're a pretty one. Strange; soft penumbra of your light"—then spoke to himself. "Now we see the impossible!" he said. "Hooray! Oh, crazy old man. Crazy, crazy Stupid Bastard Syndrome. Oh ho ho." He said the exposure would probably take two and a half hours. Mooney grunted (the dinner, her flu). Oblivious, Cooper said, "We may end up making it three."

He set up his tripod in the sand, flush with the concrete bumpers of the parking lot. He took out a negative and blew on it, to clean dust off and breathe life in. He hit the plunger, and the waiting in the dark began.

The parking lot was empty except for one other car, at the far end. When I walked past it to use the bathroom, I heard a man inside screaming, "Whore! Whore!" I speed-walked back to the group, and the car pulled around after me. The windows were down and cacophonous music blared. The driver, sweaty and amped, got out. Seeing Mooney and me, he yelled "Whores! Get off my beach." He approached Govan, and spat in his face. "How motherfucking stupid to try to shoot the fucking moon!" Cooper stood facing the tripod, protecting his baby.

The man returned to the car, backed up, then drove into Cooper's legs. Cooper growled and held his place. The man pulled backward a few feet and then hit him again. I tried calling 911, but the call dropped, and then, because my hands were shaking, so did the phone. The third time he approached, Cooper stood steadfast, body between the madman and his camera, eyes on the moon and the sea. Death or picture. He howled, "No-o-o!" Finally, the man drove away. When he was gone, Mooney pointed at the sky. "There's no moon now," she said wryly. A dark cloud had blotted it out.

When a sheriff's deputy showed up, twenty minutes later, he was incredulous. Why hadn't Cooper moved out of the guy's way? Cooper said, "He was trying to knock the camera over, and he had to kill me to do that." Mooney said, "You have to wonder who is more insane." Cooper's picture of Point Dume—"Unexpected Dangers," a variation on a theme—is black with a harsh white flare. ♦