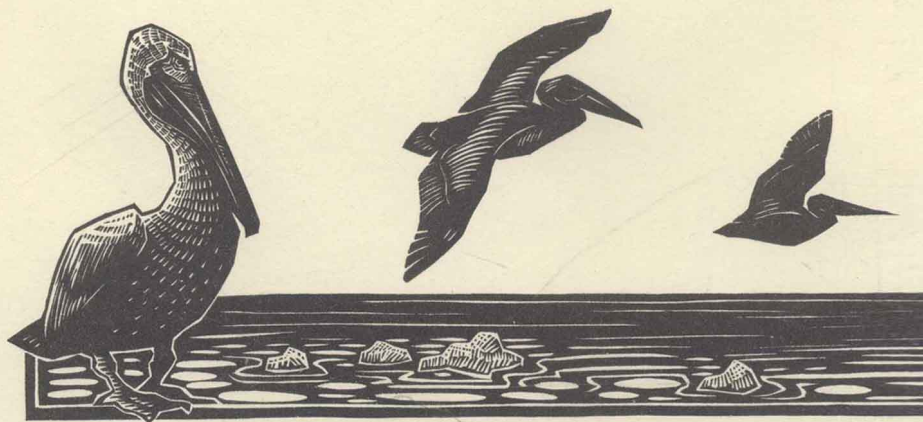

A NOVEL BY
PAUL THEROUX

with woodcuts by David Frampton

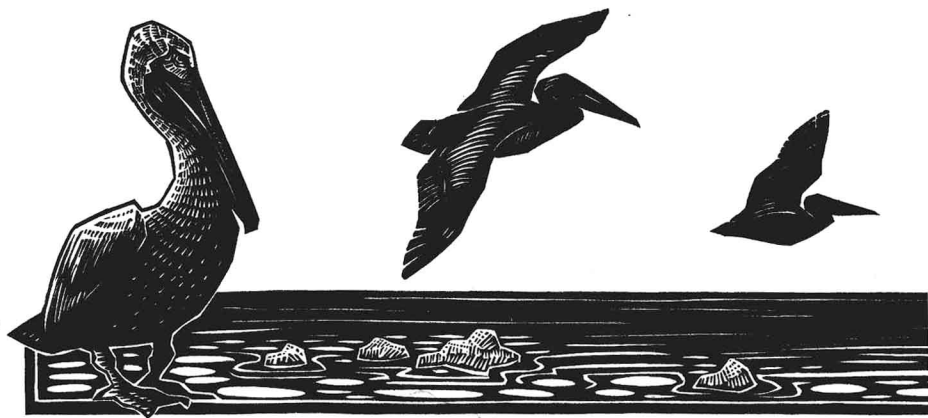
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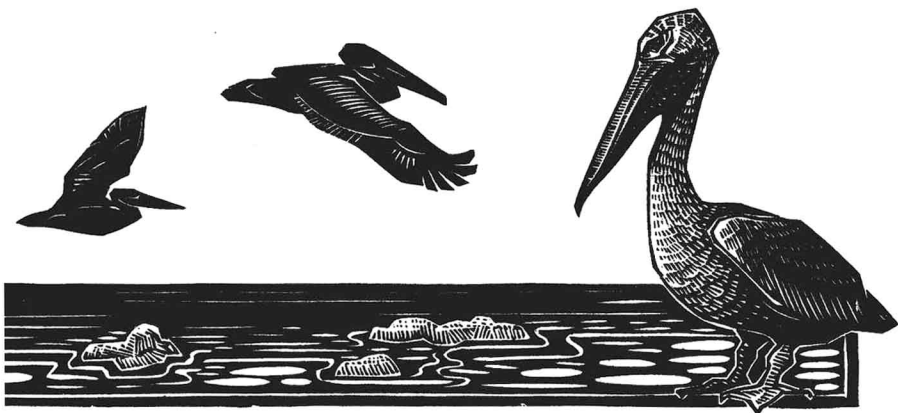
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THE
MOSQUITO
COAST



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To “Charlie Fox,” whose story this is and whose courage showed me that the brave cannot be killed. With grateful thanks for many hours of patient explanation and good humor in the face of my ignorant questioning. May he find the peace he deserves on this safer coast. *Naksaa*.

P. T.



I
BANANA
BOAT



1

WE DROVE past Tiny Polski's mansion house to the main road, and then the five miles into Northampton, Father talking the whole way about savages and the awfulness of America — how it got turned into a dope-taking, door-locking, ulcerated danger zone of rabid scavengers and criminal millionaires and moral sneaks. And look at the schools. And look at the politicians. And there wasn't a Harvard graduate who could change a flat tire or do ten pushups. And there were people in New York City who lived on pet food, who would kill you for a little loose change. Was that normal? If not, why did anyone put up with it?

"I don't know," he said, replying to himself. "I'm just thinking out loud."

Before leaving Hatfield, he had parked the pickup truck on a rise in the road and pointed south.

"Here come the savages," he said, and up they came, tracking across the fields from a sickle of trees through the gummy drizzling heat-outlines of Polski's barns. They were dark and their clothes were rags and some had rags on their heads and others wide-brimmed hats. They were men and boys, a few no older than me, all of them carrying long knives.

Father's finger scared me more than the men did. He was still pointing. The end of his forefinger was missing to the big knuckle, so the finger stump, blunted by stitched skin folds and horribly scarred, could only approximate the right direction.

"Why do they bother to come here?" he said. "Money? But how could it be money?"

He seemed to be chewing the questions out of his cigar.

It was mid-morning, already too hot for Massachusetts in May. The valley looked scorched from the dry spring we were having, and the shallow ditches were steaming like fresh cowflap. In the furrows that had been torn from one field's end to the other, only tiny palm plumes of Wonder Corn were showing. Not a single bird twittered here. And the asparagus fields, where the men were headed, were as brown and smooth as if the green scalp of grass had been peeled off and the whole baldness steamrolled.

Father shook his head. He released the brake and spat out of the window. He said, "It sure as heck isn't money. These days a dollar's only worth twenty cents."

Beyond Hatfield and Polski's house, and at the top edge of the valley trough, were leafy battlements, some as pale as lemonade froth and others dark bulges and beetle heaps of bush, and stockades of bursting branches that matched my idea of encircling jungle. A few hours before, when we had woken up, the ground had been covered in glitter beads of cold dew. I thought of it as summer ice. I had breathed out clouds of vapor then. There were pouches of cloud in the sky. Now the sun was up high, filling the valley with light and heat that blazed against those men and made them into skinny demons.

Maybe this was the reason that, though I had seen the men before — the savages, in that very place and close enough to notice the way the sun left black bruises on their leather-brown skin — the sight of them had alarmed me, like Father's finger.

"This place is a toilet," he said as we entered Northampton. He wore a baseball cap and drove with his elbow out the window. "It's not the college girls, though they're bad enough. Look at Tugboat Annie over there, the size of her. She's so big it would only take eleven of her kind to make a dozen. But that's fat — that's not health. That's cheeseburgers." And he stuck his head out the window and hollered, "That's cheeseburgers!"

Down Main Street ("They're all on drugs"), we passed a Getty station and Father howled at the price of gas. TWO SLAIN IN SHOOT-OUT was the sign on a newspaper stand, and he said, "Crapshhets." Just the word *Collectibles*, on a storefront, irritated him. And near the hardware store there was a vending machine that sold ice by the bag.

"They sell ice — ten pounds for a half a buck. But water's as free

as air. Those dingbats are selling water! Water's the new growth industry. Mineral water, spring water, sparkling water. It's big news — water's good for you! Low-cal beer — know what's in it? Know why it keeps you thin? Know why it costs more than the regular? Water!"

Father said it in the Yankee way, *wattuh*.

He cruised around, getting grumpier, until he found a meter with time left on it. Then he parked and we walked back to the hardware store.

"I want a rubber seal, eight feet of it, with foam backing," Father said, and while the man went to get it, he said, "And that's probably why gas is so expensive. They put water in it. You don't believe me? If you insist there's morality in merchandising" — but I hadn't said a word — "then maybe you'd like to explain why two-thirds of government-inspected meat has substantial amounts of cancer-inducing nitrates in it, and junk food — this is a proven fact — has no nutritional value whatsoever —"

The hardware clerk returned with a coil of rubber and handed it to Father, who examined it and gave it back.

"Don't want it," he said.

"That's what you asked for," the man said.

Father made a pitying face. "What are you, working for the Japanese?"

"If you don't want it, just say so."

"I just said so, Jack. It's made in Japan. I don't want my hard-earned bucks turned into foreign exchange for the sons of Nippon. I don't want to bankroll another generation of kamikazes. I want an American length of rubber seal, with foam — *Do you work here?*" And he cursed, because the man had walked away and begun serving another customer.

Father found the rubber seal he was looking for at a smaller hardware store on a back street, but by the time we got back to the pickup truck he was having fits over what he wished he had said at the first hardware store. "I should have said 'Sayonara,' I should have made a scene."

A policeman had his hands clasped over our parking meter, resting on it, with his chin on his fingers, like a goldbricker leaning on a shovel handle. He looked at Father and sort of smiled hello, and then he saw me and chewed his lips.

"Shouldn't he be in school?"

“Sick,” Father said without breaking his stride.

The policeman followed Father to the door of the pickup and hooked his thumbs in his gun belt and said, “Hold on. Why isn’t he in bed, then?”

“With a *fungus* infection?”

The policeman lowered his head and stared at me across the seat.

“Go on, Charlie, show him. He doesn’t believe me. Take off your shoe. Give him a whiff.”

I jerked at the laces of my sneakers as the policeman said, “Forget it.”

“Don’t apologize,” Father said, smiling at the policeman. “Politeness is a sign of weakness. And that’s no way to combat crime.”

“You say something?” The policeman clamped his jaw and hovered. He was very angry. He looked cautious and heavy.

But Father was still smiling. “I was thinking out loud.”

He said nothing more until we were back on the Hatfield road.

“Would you really have taken off your shoes and showed that cop your healthy toes?”

“You asked me to,” I said.

“Right,” he said. “But what kind of a country is it that turns shoppers into traitors and honest men into liars? No one ever thinks of leaving this country. Charlie, I think of it every day!”

He kept driving.

“And I’m the only one who does, because I’m the last man!”



That was our life here, the farm and the town. Father liked working at Tiny Polski’s farm, but the town gave him fits. That was why he kept me out of school — and Jerry and the twins, too.

Later in the day, fixing a pump by the side of a field, we saw the savages again.

“They’re from the jungle. Migrant workers. They didn’t know when they were well off. I’d have traded places with them. They think this is paradise. Should never have come.”

Father had invented the pump for Polski a year ago. It had a sensitized finger prong like a root in the ground, and when the soil dried out, this nerve-wire activated a switch and got the pump

going. Father, an inventor, was a perfect genius with anything mechanical. "Nine patents," he liked to say. "Six pending." He boasted that he had dropped out of Harvard in order to get a good education. He was prouder of his first job as a janitor than his Harvard scholarship. He had invented a mechanical mop — you held it tight and it jiggled across the floor, then squeezed itself dry. Using that mop was like dancing with a headless woman, he said. He called it The Silent Woman. What he liked best was taking things apart, even books, even the Bible. He said the Bible was like an owner's guide, a repair manual to an unfinished invention. He also said the Bible was a wilderness. It was one of Father's theories that there were parts of the Bible that no one had ever read, just as there were parts of the world where no one had ever set foot.

"You think that's bad? It's anything but. It's the empty spaces that will save us. No funny bunnies, no cops, no crooks, no muggers, no glue sniffers, no aerosol bombs. I'm not lost, like them." He pointed at the savages. "I know the way out."

He touched the different parts of the pump with his fingers, like a doctor examining a baby for swellings, and still he talked about empty spaces and savages. I raised my eyes and saw them. They seemed to be creeping straight out of the wilderness he had just described. We watched them making for the upper fields, and though I knew they were only going out to cut more asparagus, they looked as if they were searching for some fingers to chop off.

"They come from the safest place on earth — Central America. Know what they've got down there? Geothermal energy. All the juice they need is five thousand feet underground. It's the earth's bellybutton. Why do they come here?"

Across the fields they went, the savages, hunched over and flapping. They had huge shoes and tiny tucked-down heads, and as they passed by the woods they scared the crows and started a racket of caws. The birds flew up like black gloves jerked from a line, rising backward and filling out their feathers with each wingbeat.

"No TV where they come from. No Nipponese video-crapola. Pass me that oil can. Up here, nature is young. But the ecosystem in the tropics is immensely old and hasn't changed since the world began. Why do they think we have the answers? Faith — is that what you're saying? Is faith just playing 'Come to Jesus' in A-flat?"

He locked the wrench over the threads of the protruding pipe,

then poked the spout of the oil can at the pipe joint and squirted. With both hands he freed the pipe, and he sighed.

"No, sir. Faith is believing in something you know ain't true. Ha!"

He put his short finger inside the rusty trickle in the pump housing and pulled out a brass valve and a gush of water.

"You can't drink the water where those savages originate. It's got creatures in it. Worms. Weeds. They haven't got the sense to boil it and purify it. Never heard of filtration. The germs get into their bodies, and they turn green, like the water, and die. The rest of them figure it's no good there — spiders big as puppies, mosquitoes, snakes, floods, swamps, alligators. No idea at all about geothermal energy. Why change it when you can come here and go to pieces? Give me the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Have a Coke, watch television, go on welfare, get free money. Turn to crime. Crime pays in this country — muggers become pillars of the community. They'll all end up mugging and purse snatching."

The water was now pouring out of the pump, and the inside circuits ticked and measured.

"I'm not going into Northampton again. It's too upsetting. I'm sick of meeting people who want the things I've already had and rejected. I've had every dollar I've ever wanted, Charlie. And don't mention education. That cop this morning was educated — that Truant Officer — and all he wants is what they have on TV. I wouldn't send that guy out for sandwiches! I've had all that — what people crave. It doesn't work, and it's irritating to hear it praised ignorantly."

He grinned at me.

He said, "It's an imperfect world."

Now he was grinning at his cut-off finger.

"What are the Russians doing while those people are watching TV? They're conducting some very interesting experiments with water. They de-gas it, bubble everything out of it, including oxygen and nitrogen. When they've flattened it they seal it up in Mason jars, like preserved peaches. Put it aside for a while. Then, when they use this water on plants, they grow two or three times as fast — big healthy monsters. Beans climb off their poles, summer squashes like balloons, beets the size of volleyballs."

He motioned to the water.

"I'm just thinking out loud. What do you think? You figure there's something wrong with the rain? Say something."

I said I did not know.

"Figure someone ought to talk to God about rethinking the weather? I tell you, Charlie, it's an imperfect world. And America's in gridlock."

He cupped his hand under the spurting pipe and raised it to his mouth. Then he slurped it. "This is like champagne to those savages."

Smacking his lips he made it seem wonderful stuff.

"Things you and I take for granted, like ice. They don't have it in their country. If they saw an ice cube, they'd probably think it was a diamond or a jewel of some kind. Doesn't seem like the end of the world — no ice. But think about it. Imagine the kind of problems they have with no proper refrigeration."

"Maybe they don't have electricity," I said.

Father said, "Of course they don't. We're talking about the jungle, Charlie. But you can have refrigeration without juice. All you need is suction. Start a vacuum going and you've got refrigeration. Listen, you can get ice out of fire."

"Why don't they know that?"

"No way," he said. "That's what makes them savages."

He began putting the pump back together.

He said, "Must have all kinds of diseases." He gestured with his wrench in the direction the men had taken. "Them — they've got diseases."

He seemed both fascinated and repelled by them, and he communicated these feelings to me, telling me something interesting and then warning me not to be too interested. I had wondered how he knew these things about the men he called savages. He claimed he knew from experience, from living in wild places, among primitive people. He used the word *savages* with affection, as if he liked them a little for it. In his nature was a respect for wildness. He saw it as a personal challenge, something that could be put right with an idea or a machine. He felt he had the answer to most problems, if anyone cared to listen.

The crows returned to the woods, speeding toward the treetops, then circling warily and plunging to roost.

I said, "Are those men dangerous?"

"Not as dangerous as the average American," he said. "And only when they get mad. You know they're mad when they're smiling. That's the signal, like dogs."

He turned to me and smiled broadly. I knew he wanted me to ask him more.

“Then what?”

“They turn into animals. Killers. Animals sort of smile just before they bite you.”

“Do those men bite?”

“Give you one example. Know how they do it? Kill you? I’ll tell you, Charlie boy. They hollow you out.”

Holler ya out was the way he said it, and when he did I felt as if my scalp was tugged by a hundred sharp claws.

“That’s why it would take courage to go there — and not ordinary gumption, but four-o’clock-in-the-morning courage. Who’s got that?”

We worked outside until the sky turned the color of flaming Sterno, then started home to supper.

“Admit it,” Father said, “this is better than school.”

2

THAT NIGHT I opened my eyes in the dark and knew that my father was not in the house. The sense of someone missing is stronger than the sense of someone there. It was not only that I didn't hear his whistling snore (usually he sounded like one of his own original expansion valves), or even that all the lights were out. It was a feeling of lonesome emptiness, as if there was a mummy-shaped hole of air in the house where my father's body should have been. And my fear was that this unpredictable man was dead, or worse than dead — hollowed out and haunting the property. I knew he was gone, and in a worried guilty way — I was thirteen years old — I felt responsible for him.

There was no moon, but even so it was an easy house to search, because there were no locks. Father disapproved of locking doors. I say disapproved, but I mean he'd threaten to hit us for it. Someone behind a locked door was up to no good, he said. He often shouted at the bathroom door, "Don't barricade yourself in!" He had grown up in a small fishing town on the coast of Maine — he called it Dogtown — where door locking was unknown. During the years he had spent in India and Africa he had kept to the same rule, so he said. I never knew for sure if he had been to those places. I grew up with the belief that the world belonged to him and that everything he said was true.

He was big and bold in everything he did. The only ordinary thing about him was that he smoked cigars and wore a baseball cap all day.

I looked first in the bedroom and saw one figure lying there on the brass bed, a humped-up sheet on the far side — Mother. I was sure he was gone, because he always hung his overalls on the bedpost, and they were not there. I went downstairs and through the rooms. The cat was sleeping on the floor like a tipped-over roller skate. I paused in the hallway and listened. It being spring, there was a powerful odor of lilacs and dug-up dirt, and a soft wind. There was a torrent of crickets outside, and one frantic cricket trapped inside making fretful chirps. Except for this cricket, the house was as still as if it lay buried.

My rubber boots were right inside the door. I put them on and, still in my pajamas, I set out along the path to look for my old man.

We were surrounded by plowed fields. The edge of each field was ragged with woods, left as windbreaks. The corn and tobacco had begun to sprout, and though it was easier to tramp between the furrows, I stuck to the path, with my arms in front of my face to keep the branches away. It was not the branches I hated, but the spider webs strung across that snagged on my eyelashes. These woods were full of marshy pools, and the sound that night was the spring peepers, the little slippery frogs, shiny as fish lures, that made such a warbling. The trees were blue and black, like towering witches. Where was he?

I had left the house feeling wrapped in darkness, but the farther I walked the less dark it seemed. Now the land was muddy yellow. Some trees were ash-colored and the upper parts picked out like iron thorns, and the sky was heavy gray. One cloud was the shape of a loaf of bread, and I guessed that the moon was behind it because it had a bright oily look, as if it hid a mill town in the heavens.

After a while I wished that I had not left the house in such a hurry. Was someone behind me? I turned around sharply to confront the smirking skulls on barkless trees or the reaching finger bones from dead branches. That was one fear. My other was that I would step on a skunk and get sprayed with the stink. Then I would have to bury my pajamas in a hole and go back to the house bare naked.

The woods thinned out. I could see single trees against the sky and another row in front of a yellowish field. A pile of boulders told me where I was. This high point had been left because it was impossible to plow. It was narrow and it rose up at the end of the woods, giving the whole thing the look of a ship. From the side, in daytime,