

# OMAN, SHUKRAN

BY BEN DOUGLAS

**The road drops from the mountains** to a village on the coastal plain. Adobe buildings crumble into the dirt from which they were made, shouldering lean-tos of plywood and wire. Dreadlocked goats stagger sun-drunk from the roadway, eyes rolling and dags swinging. Scrawny cats glare and stalk from rubbish heap to garbage can, carrying fish heads to some secret place for later consumption.

On every second building, as in every hamlet and shanty, satellite dishes sprout like alien fungus. Brand-new cars are parked beside homes collapsing into dust.

It is two hours before noon. I had hoped to meet the fishers with their morning catch, but there are more goats than people on the streets. On the waterfront, old men lie in the shade of palm-roofed shelters while boys play soccer by the water. My nostrils are insulted by the stink of the red tide, an algal bloom that is choking the Omani coast. Flat and dull, this is the Arabian Sea, at the edge of the mighty Indian Ocean.

In the concrete building of the fish market, three men in *dishdasha* stand over a dozen sharks, cloudy eyed and inert. Reef sharks, netted a mile off the coast, to be sold to dealers in Dubai. Their fins will be sliced off and sold for Asian soups and the unguents of apothecaries, their blood spread on crops, their flesh devoured. Bloated and leaking blood, sandpaper hides dry, they lack all grace and menace. I leave, planning to return for the afternoon catch.

I follow the coast south on a new highway, the unblemished macadam stretching ahead. The sea lies a half mile to my left, mountains a mile to my right.

Where the highway curves against land's edge I turn off on to a pebbled beach. I walk a hundred yards to a headland, where I peel off my clothes and dash into the sea. The water is pungent, bathwarm and crimson against my white nakedness. There are no waves to catch.

These odorous, languid waters, bloody with the algal tide, are an anomaly in a country where the sea is normally clear and clean. It is eery to swim in, the water viscous and briny, visibility less than

a foot. In a cupped handful of seawater, red motes jostle and twirl.

I walk back to my truck past fishing boats beached like whale bones. Beyond them hulks the carcass of a sea monster, a skate or ray or shark or some amalgam of the three, six feet long and heavily dead. Dark fluid weeps from its eyes, its gills like stab wounds. Blunt spines of bone rise from ridges along its head and flanks. It seems a creature from another age, from another world.

I drive back to the village. The fish market is now full of men, *dishdasha* folded above their knees to avoid the blood and brine. I am late and have missed the best pickings, the *hamour* and kingfish. All that is left are barracuda, stacked like silver logs on the cement while the men haggle over their quality and price. One old man with a leather face fringed with threads of white beard tries to convince me to sample his wares, which are smaller than the other vendors' and are pushed to the back of the room. *La, shukran. Beshoof. No, thank you. I am just looking.*

I walk back outside. I am washing the gizzards and scales from my boots when the old man finds me again, grasping my shoulder and pulling me towards a utility with a cooler box on its tray. Beside it stands a large man sucking a cigarette through a magnificent moustache. In a soft voice the old man tells me that this man has trevalla, two for four and half *rials*. The fish are well sized, eyes clear, flesh firm. I pay, and we all shake. *Shukran.* The old man guides me back into the fish market. He takes the trevalla from me and hands them to another man, sitting on a bucket with arms sleeved in gore. With a series of practised machete strokes he beheads and guts and cleans the fish. I pay him 300 hundred baisa for his troubles. He takes the money, folds it, removes his baseball cap, places the money inside and replaces it on his head. *Shukran.*

The old man walks with me outside to my truck. He speaks no English, I the sparsest Arabic. I try to give him money, which he rejects with mock indignation. We both smile. We shake hands. I promise to return his kindness if ever I can. *Insha'Allah*, he whispers. *God willing. Shukran.*

# PIG STICKER

BY MARA WOLFORD

**She lived with her son** in a room of the dilapidated property owned by her sister, who had moved to town years back. Her husband had left and remarried because she was a bad wife. In Indonesia, marriage is team effort. Not much romance is involved, or at least not for long. A man will earn what he can; a woman will keep hearth and home and watch over the children. She refused to cook, and her children ran the streets filthy for too many years. It sounded like post-partum depression coupled with mild neurosis to me.

Each day, she sat sadly out the front of her room, before a table proposing coffee packets, cigarettes and noodle cups that nobody needed. She told stories about her husband dying in the tsunami. He was playing cards in town, in fact, with his new wife's family around him. I kept my distance. Her sister was an old friend, but that friendship extended no further.

Soon, things began disappearing: an old iPhone, a camera, all my kid's clothes hung out to dry. The secret is never to say too much about these losses. I cross her son wearing my son's clothing, and simply ask him to return to his room, change and return the clothing. Now I know where the all the rest has gone.

As he does this, his mother burns with a shame and hatred directed at me that I am unsure what to do with: We are both single mothers raising sons alone. Her family supports her financially and mine does not. My status as a single mother is acceptable in my culture and hers is not. Her son never attends the school that was paid for by his auntie, and he steals. My son goes to school every day, which was paid for by his auntie, and my son would become familiar with Sharia law for theft if that ever occurred. I bust my arse everyday for a buck, but she is above working her land like the neighbor-ladies do. I don't feel much compassion.

Next morning, I search for the legrope I keep for my kid in my board bag, to put it on the board my friend Anton lent my son. It's gone as well. I sigh and head to Anton's place to borrow a replacement.

As I pass her room, she rises from her chair: she's been waiting for me. In her hand, she tends the blue legrope I had sought for. She says it was

a gift from someone and she's giving it to me. I laugh. She holds it towards me, as she backs up in the direction of her door. I tell her to just give it back. The neighbors' attention has been drawn to the conflict. These people have watched over me for 25 years, they sense I'm in danger.

I enter her room after her. I'd thought maybe she wants to return all of the stolen goods in private and save face. Face is very important in Indonesia, and I would allow her this. Blinded by the sudden transition from daylight to darkness, the moment my eyes adjust, I see a six-foot pig lance held at my abdomen. I bellow a warning out the door.

Neighbors come running. Church has just let out and the street is busy. "Don't come in the room, I just need witnesses," I whisper. I look at her and tell her she doesn't want to do this, to just stop now. Her eyes are spinning in their sockets and I suspect she's having a psychotic episode. I probably look like Beelzebub to her, so logic isn't going to work. The 15cm forged-iron spear of the lance is pushed against my gut and I am backed up to a wall in her limited quarters. The tabletops are covered in stolen electronic equipment, for all the witnesses at the door to see.

I know I have one chance. I grab her spear and thrust it skywards, and trip her legs out from under her. She falls to the ground in a mass. I pass the spear out the doorway to my witnesses. I pick her up by the neck, and pin her against the wall in a double-V grip. I want to kill her. I want her dead. She is a useless, crazy woman.

She gasps, I can feel her spinal cord stretching. The crowd at the door say nothing. They want her dead as well. Her eyes roll back and I drop her to the ground. I walk out of the room.

The neighbors ask me to press charges and get her out of their home, but her sister, my old friend, who has long dealt with her misery, tells me that if her crazy sister goes to prison it will be even worse for everyone than it already is.

I know she speaks the truth because this is Indonesia, and the rules here are unique. It takes many years to work these rules into your personal logic, as it does learning to live with untreated folly in your proximity, and six-foot spears.