

Casey Charles

Bless Me and Two Other Poems

↪ Bless Me ↪

I regret it now. The guide I did not hire. The CD for sale in his hand.

Fear drove me to the air-conditioned shop, the armor of dark museums,

archives where I survive. I regret it now. Seated before this screen.

Bless me father, for I have run from the offer of Africa's music.

What made me think I could find a brother in the shallows of Watamu?

made me think I could marry in Malawi, come out in Kamphala?

Up country at the goat feast, I knew I could only be your friend.

Bless you Deus, for taking me to the empty schoolhouse.

Omari, Guy, Emanuel. The men I met, hoping. The men I undressed
at night alone. When we stood beside the donkeys at the road's fork,
words fell to dust between us. I knew I could not hug you.

Bless you Omari, for shouldering my pack to the dhow.

After we circled ancient turtles, they took us to the grill to wait for kingfish.

You told me about your girl in Bahia. Too rough to snorkel,
we swam in white caps, shared urchin stings, thigh-to-thigh on the sand.

Bless you Emmanuel, for the pain you gave me.

I held back my eyes as you headed down the jetty to the dhow.

In your stories, men in suburbs drank beer and set fire to couches.

That night silent on the terrace, we agreed the breeze was a miracle.

Bless you Guy, for the seat you took on the bus. Next to me.

↪ Passing through Lamu ↪

The breeze sings through seashells,
my hammock sways to the vibes,
a gentle push rocks me into fantasy—
caresses on a roof where shirt tails sail,
sugar ants invade, where flies alight
the bleached day bed.

Omari, back from unrigging his dhow,
back from tacking through tradewinds,
wet from a cool shower, eats chapati,
turns the volume up on a clang of chimes,
kisses me, straddles my stiff middle
age. His father shark, baba papa.

Omari wants off the island,
wants to go with me. South
to Mombasa, Pangani. America.

He doesn't care about my scars,
my wrinkles, these yellow teeth.

He'll find a way to cool my medicine.

In Malindi, he will find the finest beads,
cheaper always on the mainland.

He will take me there, to hidden shops,
join me on a seaplane to Watamu,
sail the catamaran to our coral reef;
banners of angel fish will greet our gaze.

In his hold, Omari has fins, masks. He will bring them.

He knows the place to body surf at low tide,
knows the turnoff north of Kibokoni

where herons nest in the baobab trees.

He brings two cups of chai up from the kitchen

and we plan our trip to Zanzibar.

↳ **Generator** ↲

We have power for only an hour

here on the island of Unguja.

When the sundowners are done

and mosquitoes hover hungry,

the story of paradise falls into blur

until the generator rumbles

like thunder on the mainland.

One hour of light in the curtained night

the engine offer me, one hour to read histories

of the Omans, curse of the slave trade

that hides behind the smile of guides

who walked us through ruined prisons offshore,

where urchins sting the soles of swimmers.

One hour to learn from wrinkled print

the wisdom and folly of brokered ages.

Slowly the fan blade closes its circle.

The pitch of blindness strands me

behind draped nets as I think back

to the string of candles on the road north.

Glowing mangoes. Palm weavers.

I clutch the pillows to my empty chest,

fear in my ears the frequency of malaria,

succumb to slumber, dreams of porters

who knock at night to massage my burn.

Author Bio

Casey Charles teaches in the fields of Renaissance literature and queer studies at the University of Montana. In addition to a nonfiction book entitled *The Sharon Kowalski Case: Lesbian and Gay Rights on Trial* (University of Kansas, 2003), Casey has published *Controlled Burn* (Pudding House, 2007), a poetry chapbook. Most recently Casey is the winner of the 2010 Washington Square Award for poetry from New York University.

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