

THE SPEED OF OUR LIVES

GRACE C. OCASIO

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THE SPEED OF OUR LIVES

by Grace C. Ocasio

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BlazeVOX [books]

131 Euclid Ave

Kenmore, NY 14217

Editor@blazevox.org



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BlazeVOX [books]

blazevox.org

Introduction

Unpredictable Lives and Radiant Voices

Grace C. Ocasio's *The Speed of Our Lives* is a compelling collection of poems, which is grounded in history and a sense of place. She faithfully captures the spirits of these characters. The four sections of *The Speed of Our Lives* reveal glimpses into the lives of historical figures from American history from the 17th Century to the 20th Century. This volume of poetry speaks with clarity.

For example, here is the first stanza from the seventy-line poem, "Matoaka, One Who Kindles (Also Known As Pocahontas):"

I have stood here many times at Werowocomoco,
flicked my tongue in delight at the water.
Above the water, my hands soared,
moccasined feet danced on flat land,
etched the figures of my father, Powhatan,

It is evident that Ocasio has read widely and transforms her insights into memorable poetry.

However, Ocasio is serious about her craft. Like the Harlem Renaissance writer Jessie Redmon Fauset's, Ocasio explores the extreme complexity of the characters she has chosen to include in her book. Yes, Ocasio takes on race, social issues and relationships without tiptoeing across the page. Like Rita Dove's poetry, *The Speed of Our Lives*

explores subjects skillfully with attention to form, such as blues poems, kwansabas, minute poem, sestina, couplets and sequences. Like Sharon Olds' poetry, *The Speed of Our Lives* is daring and subtle at the same time. Like Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry, *The Speed of Our Lives* sings with grace and poignancy. Throughout this collection of poems, Grace C. Ocasio reports furiously.

So this is the book that will keep Ocasio's readers engaged. If one wants to know how a book can transcend unpredictable lives of characters and radiate voices, then step into *The Speed of Our Lives*, walk, read and listen. This is that kind of book: full of intellect and intensity.

Lenard D. Moore
Associate Professor of English
Mount Olive College
August 31, 2013

I Sheroes

RUTH, THE MOABITRESS

How does one imbibe
the breadth
of Ruth's act?
How she inched away
from her people,

Moabites,
genuflecting
in another direction
toward the ripe plains
of Bethlehem.

Ruth of people
who seared
their children.
Upon departing Moab,
she tilted her eye

toward Naomi.
And she slid
her hand
into Naomi's,
sized the length

and brevity
of her fingers.
What must have sprang
from her mouth?
A selah of a sigh

as she brushed
Naomi's fingertips,
glided
toward the palms
of her hands,

thumbed
their threadlike grooves.
As she cleaved
to Naomi,
she must have stalled,

receded one checked
moment,
revisited inhaling
charred flesh,
recalled how it blew

away before she realized
she should keep walking,
dust swirls shaping
with each step
she took.

MATOAKA, ONE WHO KINDLES (ALSO KNOWN AS
POCAHONTAS)

I have stood here many times at Werowocomoco,
flicked my tongue in delight at the water.
Above the water, my hands soared,
moccasined feet danced on flat land,
etched the figures of my father, Powhatan,

and my brothers. I swing my tattooed arms, arch
them at the sky. My neck glistens with white beads.
Listen, now, as I wail a tune. Witness how I bend
into wind, consider how my fists stir
this great river. The mighty Powhatan has fallen.

He rolls and tumbles, tumbles and rolls
in his deep, death walk. He rises now before me,
pumps his arms as though rowing
a boat, shakes worse than a doe.
His teeth stab his tongue. And I turn away

ashamed to embrace what his actions tell me.
When I turn back to him, he is gone.
I raise my arms and press my palms
against the sky. Do you hear me? I, a woman
warrior for my people, slap treaties

from your hands. I hurl beans in your eyes,
those of you who sought to barter
away my people. I, who am Matoaka, ask
you why you sacked my father's village.
Wasn't it enough that I draped my skin

in your petticoats, bodice, and lace,
paraded myself before your king
and your poet, Ben Jonson, who gawked
at the hue of my flesh? How I wish
I had taunted you, disemboweled your vowels,

skinned your consonants, cast your words
away, syllable by putrid syllable, shoved them
into firewood, stirred them until they
exploded into flame. I remember
John Smith's eyes, how they drifted over me.

He didn't know I mocked
his loose gaze. I'd pretend
his eyes were targets my arrows' points
would pierce and shatter into tiny shards.
And what of my husband, John Rolfe?

When I first met him, my eyes ran,
prowled around his head, his shoulders,
his feet, until they were satisfied.
Although my heart did not guffaw
with glee, it did not lie down, either.

I decided then I could stride to his love,
prop his love on all sides of me
like pillows. Now I shift in the wind,
shake out my bird-nest thick black hair,
heavy as hemp, that swings to my knees.

I wrap my mantle about me, sing
of werowances who strung bows
at my father's command, sprang over gullies,
scoured the woods for uttasantasough.
Into this bay, I nestle myself and breathe

in my ancestors' sighs, groans,
and screeches. My left palm plants itself
on the ground and listens for whispers
of my mother's and my grandmother's
and my great-grandmother's and my great-

great-grandmother's words and hears them all—
a waterfall of sound rising into the crevices
of my body. I tingle from scalp
to toe. As my ancestors' words gush
through me, I am what you did not know,

what you did not wish to know, this tapping
on a tree trunk, the patter of feet trampling leaves.
If you do not hear me, you will dream
of yourself drowning, become as untethered
as a pebble among many grains of sand.

Notes

- 1) Werowocomoco-Powhatan's village
- 2) Powhatan-paramount chief of local Algonkian-speaking tribes during the time of Jamestown settlement
- 3) Werowance-chief
- 4) Uttasantasough—Algonkian word for English