

# THE SPEED OF OUR LIVES

GRACE C. OCASIO

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*Buffalo, New York*

THE SPEED OF OUR LIVES

by Grace C. Ocasio

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# 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 17<sup>th</sup> Century to the 20<sup>th</sup> 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