



Matoaka, One Who Kindles (Also Known as Pocahontas)

Grace Ocasio

Charlotte (NC, United States)

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 now
I had taunted you, disemboweled your vowels,

skinned your consonants, tossed 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' sigh and groans
and screeches. My left palm settles
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 sound 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