



Luci Tapahonso

Tsaile April Nights

*Earlier today, thin sheets of red dirt
folded into the dark mountain
blown up from the western desert floor. You know,
the whole, empty Navajo spaces around
Many Farms, Chinle, Round Rock. Later, light rain
slanted into the valley. The female paused for an hour or
so. She sat and watched us awhile,
then clouds of mist waited until evening and left. The
male rain must have been somewhere over the mountain,
near Cove or Beclabito, chasing children and puppies
indoors. But here, the quiet snow will move in
a newborn breathing
those first new nights. The lake is frozen,
a glazed white plate suspended in the dark. I long to hear
your voice. Hushed, deep murmurs in the cold quiet,
and low laughter echoing in the still. I like to sleep with
piñon smoke. The cold dry air chills my skin, my breath.
Stories descend into the dark,
warm, light circles. Oh these nights. My blessed bounty of
dreams.*

— Blue Horses Rush In

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1953
- * Native American poet and short story author
- * Writes in both English and Diná (Navajo)

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Luci Tapahonso

Biography

Luci Tapahonso, a Navajo woman from Shiprock, New Mexico, has received much critical attention and acclaim with the publication of her most recent two collections of stories and poems, *Saanii Dahataal: The Women Are Singing* (1993) and *Blue Horses Rush In* (1997). With Tapahonso's critical and popular success have come comparisons of her works to those written by such acclaimed Native American women writers as Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich. Though Tapahonso shares with Silko and Erdrich a powerful and distinctive female voice, she has an unique vision and with that vision, her own story to tell.

Tapahonso was born on November 8, 1953, to Eugene Tapahonso, Sr., of the Bitter Water clan, and Lucille Deschenne Tapahonso of the Salt Water clan. Raised on the largest Indian reservation in the United States, Tapahonso learned English as a second language after her native tongue, Diná (Navajo). After attending Navajo Methodist School in Farmington, New Mexico, and Shiprock High School, Tapahonso entered the University of New Mexico. There, Tapahonso began to devote much attention to her writing as she was encouraged and influenced by Silko, who was, at the time, a faculty member at the University. She received her B.A. in English in 1980, and her M.A. in creative writing and English in 1982. Tapahonso has subsequently taught at the University of New Mexico from 1982 to 1989 and at the University of Kansas.

Tapahonso published her first two collections of poetry, *One More Shiprock Night: Poems*, and *Seasonal Woman*, in 1981. Her early works are characterized by themes of heritage and female strength. Tapahonso begins *Seasonal Woman* with a poem about nursing her daughter, Misty Dawn. In this poem, "Misty Dawn at Feeding Time," Tapahonso uses the imagery of physical nourishment to relate the importance of passing along to one's children the cultural nourishment necessary to ensure the continuity and vitality of one's heritage. Tapahonso's daughters, Misty Dawn and Lori, figure prominently in her poems, as do other relatives and ancestors.

Tapahonso writes her poems and stories in English peppered with Diná, but has originally conceived and/or performed many of her works in her native tongue, only translating to English when the works are to be published. In her preface to *Saanii Dahataal*, Tapahonso explains how the translation from Navajo to English, and indeed from performance to the written word, can alter the effect of her poems and stories: "Many of these poems and stories have a song that accompanies the work. Because these songs are in Navajo, a written version is not possible. When I read these in public, the song is also a part of the reading. This is very much a consideration as I am translating and writing--the fact that the written version must stand on its own . . ."



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Tapahonso's practice of translating her poems from Navajo to English preserves many syntactical structures that are uniquely Diná; thus, her works maintain a distinctly Navajo pattern of speech. This is perhaps most evident in one of her most popular poems from *Saanii Dahataal*, "Hills Brothers Coffee." The poem is about her uncle, who does not know English. In the sections of the poem where the uncle speaks, Tapahonso preserves the Navajo syntax: "Some coffee has no kick. / But this one is the one. / It does it good for me."

Blue Horses Rush In, Tapahonso's most recent collection of poems and stories, begins and ends with poems about the births of her granddaughters. In "Shis," the author relates the birth, naming, and growth of her granddaughter Briana Nezbah Edmo. The poem is simple, sensual, and bright, expressing the joy Tapahonso finds teaching Briana, "She-Who-Brings-Happiness," songs and words in English and Diná. In "Blue Horses Rush In," the final poem of the collection, Tapahonso writes of the birth of Chamisa Bah Edmo. This poem is powerful and rhythmic, articulating the author's appreciation of birth as a vehicle by which the Navajo culture is maintained and continued:

Chamisa, Chamisa Bah. It is all this that you are. You will grow: laughing, crying,
and we will celebrate each change you live.

You will grow strong like the horses of your past. You will grow strong like the horses of your birth.

In the birth poems, in the humorous stories, and in the chants and prayers within Tapahonso's works, a voice emerges that both appreciates and respects traditional Navajo stories and humor. At the same time speaks a writer who will use the narratives she has heard throughout her life as a foundation for the creation of new prayers, stories, and poems that recognize the vitality of present day Navajo culture.



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