



**‘We are made of our own songs, prayers and stories’: Luci Tapahonso**

*The original texts of Luci Tapahonso’s poems have been reproduced here by the author’s generous permission. The translator thanks the author for kind permission of translation into Italian, besides the University of Arizona Press, The University of New Mexico Press and West End Press for their kind assistance with copyright clearance. In November 2016 I met Luci Tapahonso at Victoria University of Wellington, where she engaged in a creative conversation with another extraordinary woman, Māori writer Patricia Grace. Tapahonso’s voice was a mere pleasure to listen to, her poems are deep and enchanting, though the truth they reveal is so ‘hard to take’. I was fascinated by the amalgam of mysticism and realism in her writing and telling, by the melodic beauty of her native Navajo idiom and the tragic irony about American contemporary and past history. The spirituality inherent her poetry is rooted within Navajo myths and ceremonies as well as in the idea of the feminine as a source of power and balance in the world. (Antonella Sarti Evans)*

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*who were you?*

who were you that night  
after all the beer you drank that long winter day

who were you?  
angry at nothing and everyone

you drove too fast for the winding canal road

swerving to the very edge  
where darkened weeds shivered in your rage

I followed you

my pleading a hardened ache  
you took the night in shreds

white clouds of breath hung in between screams  
the terror of a sudden billow of dust

not into the ditch      no

but the pickup spun and stopped crosswise  
on the road    fading yellow light spilling out  
dust and brakes causing dogs



to bark with a hoarse urgency  
frozen mud glistening

crumbling as you stumbled  
through cold, stinging bushes  
and how did you fall

did you slip on a transparent beer bottle?  
(They catch the sharp light of the moon  
and at a certain angle, even the stars)  
or did you slip on a rock  
flat and round  
slick with winter frost?

who were you that night?  
who were you that night dying in angry drunkenness?

hard, winter stars  
motionless in  
the crisp dark night  
the moon, the white moon

*chi eri?*

chi eri quella notte  
dopo tutta la birra che bevisti in quel lungo giorno d'inverno

chi eri?  
arrabbiato per niente e con tutti

guidavi troppo veloce sulla strada tortuosa del canale

sterzando secco sull'orlo  
dove erbacce scurite tremarono della tua rabbia

ti seguì

la mia supplica un dolore indurito  
facevi a brandelli la notte

nuvole bianche d'alito sospeso fra le grida  
il terrore di un'improvvisa nuvola di polvere

non dentro il fossato no



ma un testa-coda col pick-up che si ferma di traverso  
sulla strada luce gialla sbiadita si riversa  
sulla polvere e i freni fanno abbaiare i cani

d'aspra urgenza  
fango gelato che brilla

sbriciolandosi mentre inciampavi  
nei freddi cespugli acuminati  
e come cadesti

scivolasti su una bottiglia trasparente di birra?  
(Catturano la luce netta della luna  
e delle stelle ad una certa angolatura)  
o scivolasti su una pietra  
piatta e tonda  
sdruciolosa di gelo invernale?

Chi eri quella notte?  
Chi eri quella notte a morire arrabbiato e ubriaco?

stelle dure invernali  
immote nella  
notte scura e pungente  
la luna, luna bianca.

*Pay up or else*

Vincent Watchman was shot  
in the head February 12  
because he owed 97c at  
a Thriftway gas station.

While he lay dead,  
the anglo gas boy said  
I only meant to shoot out  
his car tires and scare him.  
He fired 2 poor shots -- one in the head,  
one in the rear window and  
the police cited him for  
shooting a firearm within city limits.



Meanwhile, Thriftway officials in Farmington expressed shock.

It's not company policy, after all,  
to shoot Navajo customers who run  
overflows in the self-serve pumps.  
This man will definitely be fired.  
There is no way that such an action  
can be justified, the official said

while we realized our lives weren't worth a dollar  
and a 24-year-old Ganado man never used  
the \$3 worth of gas he paid for.

*Paga oppure*

Vincent Watchman fu ucciso da un proiettile  
alla testa il 12 febbraio  
perché doveva 97 centesimi ad  
una stazione di servizio Thriftway.

Mentre giaceva morto,  
il ragazzo dell'Anglo Gas disse  
volevo soltanto sparare  
alle gomme e spaventarlo.  
Sparò due miseri colpi -- uno alla testa,  
uno al finestrino posteriore e  
la polizia lo citò in giudizio  
per aver usato un'arma da fuoco entro il perimetro urbano.

Nel frattempo, i funzionari della Thriftway a Farmington espressero il loro shock.

Non rientra nella politica della società, dopo tutto,  
sparare a clienti Navajo che mettono  
più benzina del dovuto alle pompe dei self-service.  
L'addetto sarà certamente licenziato.  
Non c'è giustificazione alcuna per un atto  
simile, disse il funzionario

mentre noi capimmo che la nostra vita valeva meno di un dollaro  
e un ragazzo di Ganado di 24 anni non usò mai  
i 3 dollari di benzina che aveva pagato.



*Hard to take*

Sometimes  
this middle of the road business  
is hard to take.

Last week in Gallup,  
I was in line at Foodway  
one checkstand open and  
a long line of Navajos waiting  
    money and foodstamps in hand  
    waiting to buy food and pop.  
My turn and I fumble  
dropping the change  
    Sorry, I say, sorry  
    The cashier looks up smiling  
    first smile in 20 minutes of Navajo customers  
    Oh—that's okay. Are you Navajo?  
    I swear, you don't have an accent at all!

She's friendly too quick and I am uneasy.  
I say to the people behind me  
*Ha' 'at'ii sha'ni?*  
Why is she saying that to me?

We laugh a little under our breaths  
and with that  
    I am another Navajo  
    she doesn't greet or thank.

My change is dropped in front of me  
    and we are not surprised by that.  
Merle Norman offers a free make-up job  
    just the thing for a new look  
I say to myself and stop in  
for an appointment.

For 15 minutes, I wait for a saleslady  
then I ask for an appointment outright.  
    Just a moment, she says,  
    someone will be with you shortly.

I wait some more while the salesladies



talk about a great hairdresser,  
General Hospital and Liz Taylor.

So I just leave, shortly is too long,  
seeing as I'm the only customer in the place.

I guess I can do without a new look  
but this kind of business  
sure gets hard to take.

*Dura da incassare*

A volte  
questa faccenda di strada  
è dura da incassare.

La scorsa settimana a Gallup  
stavo in fila a Foodway  
una sola cassa aperta  
e una lunga fila di Navajo ad aspettare  
soldi e buoni pasto in mano  
ad aspettare per comprare cibo e bevande.

È il mio turno e goffamente  
mi cade il resto

Scusi, dico, mi scusi  
La cassiera alza lo sguardo e mi sorride  
il primo sorriso in 20 minuti di clienti Navajo  
Oh – non fa niente. Sei Navajo anche tu?  
Giuro, non si sente!

Diventa amichevole sin troppo presto e mi sento a disagio.  
Dico alla gente dietro di me  
*Ha' 'at'ii sha'ni?*  
Perché mi dice questo?

Ridiamo un attimo sottovoce  
e così divento  
un'altra Navajo  
che lei non saluta né ringrazia.

Mi fa cadere il resto davanti  
e la cosa non ci sorprende.

Merle Norman offre una seduta di trucco gratis



che buona idea un nuovo look  
mi dico e mi fermo a prendere  
un appuntamento.

Per quindici minuti aspetto la commessa  
poi chiedo un appuntamento direttamente.  
Solo un attimo, mi dice  
verrà qualcuno fra poco.

Aspetto ancora un po' mentre le commesse  
parlano di un famoso parrucchiere,  
dell'Ospedale Generale e di Liz Taylor.

E così me ne vado, fra poco è troppo tempo,  
essendo l'unica cliente lì.

Credo di poter fare a meno di un nuovo look  
ma questa faccenda di sicuro  
è dura da incassare.

Translated by Antonella Sarti Evans

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**Luci Tapahonso** is a Native American poet originally from Shiprock, New Mexico. She has taught American Indian Studies at the University of Arizona in Tucson and Creative Writing at the University of New Mexico. Tapahonso is the author of several children's books and books of poetry and short tales, including, *Sáanii Dahataal Le donne cantano* (1993, the only book translated into Italian to date, *Blue Horses Rush In* (1997), *A Radiant Curve* (2008) and many more. Her original Navajo work includes songs and chants designed for performance, also for this reason, her English writing is strongly rhythmic. The poems translated on NEKE are taken from the following collections: 'Who were you?' from *A Breeze Swept Through* (1987); 'Pay up or else' and 'Hard to take' from *Seasonal Woman* (1982).

**Antonella Sarti Evans** is a widely published translator and author. She is currently a Teaching Fellow in Italian with the School of Languages and Cultures at Victoria University of Wellington. Her literary translations regularly appear in national and international journals. She is specialized in New Zealand literature and has translated works by Janet Frame, Patricia Grace, Robin Hyde, Vivienne Plumb, Hone Tuwhare, Apirana Taylor and Maringi.



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Luci Tapahonso with Patricia Grace (left), Dame Luamanuvao Winnie Laban and Antonella Sarti Evans (right)  
vZ 606, Victoria University of Wellington, 2016



Luci Tapahonso reading her poetry  
Hunter Council Chamber, Victoria University of Wellington, 2016