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The Moaning Nature of Cambodia

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The executioner, cord coiled
round his shoulder, stares while we eat
in silence. Then *Mi Kwohl* appears!⁸
Everyone falls over laughing!

“*Ta* Gold is lucky! *Ta* almost
travelled to the white bones village!”
I feign not knowing what they mean
and keep stuffing myself with rice.

¹*Mi Khowl*: Khmer, meaning “cow with short horns”—the female of my team.

²*A Mahp*: Khmer, meaning “fat guy”—the male of my team.

³*Proloeung*: Khmer, meaning “my soul”; this was, at that time, my name for my son. Every time we moved to a different camp I would give him a different name—this was part of our “cover.”

⁴them: my son pointed to his invisible companions, the elves, with whom he had been playing and who had consequently rendered him invisible to me, even though, in reality, he had been right there in front of me earlier in the afternoon.

⁵Old People: the Pol Pot clique, and their sympathizers.

⁶evidence: first, I had lost a water buffalo entrusted to me, then she had eaten a large area of rice shoots.

⁷feast: this was a kind of “last supper” provided for people before they were executed.

⁸*Mi Kwohl* appears: she, too had been hidden by the elves. I suspect that she had been nearby all that time, but was being ridden about by an elf, therefore invisible.

THE MOANING NATURE OF CAMBODIA

for Carolyn Forché

The sugar palms moan; the banyan trees wail;
forests, mountains cry for an ideal leader;
the Great Lake trembles, fearing oil prospectors;
for the generation of roosters is back.

Neem trees are scared of rural development,
science, progress; wildlife will vanish for sure.
Sewage fouls the environment—no way out.
Oh, Cambodia, my beloved motherland!

Oh Fish King, carps, *chhlang*,¹ *po*,² *krapeat*!³
Little fish stop bubbling, *chhlogn*,⁴ *ros*,⁵ *pra*⁶—
eels and frogs shall find no more water!
Oh, my lugubrious Khmer people!

Khmers had struggled for peace, but when war ended
not a one found land on which to grow their rice.
They found no lakes or rivers in which to fish,
while children cried *lé, lé* for a clump of rice.

To cook, they even had to buy their firewood.
They elected a leader but got a caesar!
They served the Party, hoping to get a hut;
when the Party won, Chinese owned the houses.

When Vietnamese fought each other, the King
fled, and called Khmers to help the V/C kill Khmers.
Fleeced survivors, blind and lame, prayed for God's help
to free each other from chains, shackles and stocks.

May the souls of the slaughtered low together,
plead that God assign us a Boddhisattva
to incarnate as the master architect
who will rebuild justice in our cursed land.

¹*chhlang*: a variety of river catfish.

²*po*: a larger variety of carp with black scales.

³*krapeat*: a slender, scaleless fish, two meters in length, with a dorsal fin running the length of its body.

⁴*chhlogn*: a small fish, about the size of a smelt, which lives in river mud and in rice paddies.

⁵*ros*: a carp with white scales.

⁶*pra*: a catfish with a particularly large head.

Translated by Ken McCullough