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The Loss of My Twins

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Then I burned three sticks of incense. Facing the Father of Life
I raised both my hands over my head, praying to God
crying out for the Truth
before the revolving ember.

I cried out for the Truth: “Why are my people
always mistreated living in a broken homeland.
Who has cursed this little nation?” I cried out for
Peace for my people.

¹*Gautama*: Buddha’s family name. Legend has it that when Buddha was travelling through ancient Cambodia, which, at the time, was uninhabited, he stopped and sat in the shade of the *thlok* tree for his noon repast, which consisted of food from Heaven (the *thlok* is a fruit tree which bears fruit resembling kiwi fruit—but this is not what He was eating). While Buddha was eating, a big lizard came down the tree and begged for food. Since the lizard could not talk, it merely gestured with its forked tongue. Buddha gave the lizard some of the magical food and said that the future inhabitants of the land would always, like the forked tongue of the lizard, have two sides to everything which came their way; for example, they would never bathe in pure water—it would always be mixed with mud, they would never live in houses—there would always be some sort of shack attached, they would always wear some sort of peasant garment along with their highest fashions. (He was referring here specifically to the *krama*, the traditional coarsely-woven checkered scarf which serves many purposes.)

THE LOSS OF MY TWINS

Deep one night in October ’76
when the moon had fully waxed,
it was cold to the bone;
that’s when my wife’s labor pains began.

I searched for a bed, but that was wishful thinking;
I felt so helpless. Two midwives materialized—
one squatted above her abdomen and pushed,
the other reached up my wife’s womb and ripped the babies out.

What a lowing my wife put up
when she gave birth to the first twin.
“Very pretty, just as I’d wished, but those fiends
choked them and wrapped them in black plastic.

“Two pretty girls . . .
*Buddho!*¹ I couldn’t do a thing to save them!”
murmured my mother.
“Here, *Ta!*”² the midwives handed the bundles to me.

Cringing as if I’d entered Hell,
I took the babies in my arms
and carried them to the banks of the Mekong River.
Staring at the moon, I howled:

“O, babies, you never had the chance to ripen into life—
only your souls look down at me now.
Dad hasn’t seen you alive at all, girls . . .
forgive me, daughters, I have to leave you here.

“Even though I’ll bury your bodies here,
may your souls lead me, your mom, brother, grandma
to a safer place, to a good safe world.”

¹*Buddho!*: God.

²*Ta*: colloquial for “Old Man”—used pejoratively.