

12 short stories

When the sky turns
upside down



Memories of Laos

by Douang Champa and Dokked



Douang Champa's
published work
includes:

- More than 60
short stories
and novels. In
anthologies: 'Kui
kin Sao-Kao Poo
Saay'; 'Thale Sivit';
'Bo Baan Ko
Horm'; 'Nao Jai';
'Fa Mai'; 'Luem
Sanya'(all of these
were published
together with other
Lao writers during
the years of 1972-
1975);

- A stage play
'Horn Kin Boua
Deng' - Sweet
Smell of Red Lotus
(1985).

- 'Fa Peen' - When
the sky turns
upside down
(Collection of
short stories) 2003.

- 'Hak Dok' -
Because of love
(Collection of
poems) 2006.

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When the sky turns upside down

12 short stories by Douang Champa and Dokked

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Introduction

The voices represented in this volume of short stories carry with them a history of struggle, clarity and, ultimately, growth. Growth above all: the struggle of women to continue to find their rightful place in Lao society; and clarity because, like many of the characters (female or male), there is always a sense of purpose at the end of every struggle; a voice that shows us how life experience can strengthen our resolve and point us in the direction of a more meaningful path. The authors, Douang Champa and Dokked, have lived full lives. They have witnessed extensive changes in Laos. They have survived difficult periods of hardship and political uncertainty and they have experienced life outside their homeland, only to return more determined than ever to let their words speak for generations of Lao people who are inspired to discover their voice, their meaningful path.

As two of Laos' senior contemporary writers, Douang Champa and Dokked approach their stories with an unblinking stare. It is common for readers to label them as social critics. But to do so would be to unfairly categorize their unique approach to fiction; to put boundaries on their writing when there should never be any. These are short stories with a sense of purpose; deserving of further questions and discussion. Though the bulk of their work was written many years ago, Douang Champa and Dokked are acutely aware of the responsibility of fiction writers today; a responsibility requiring, as V.S Naipaul said, "fiction to go deeper."

To read Douang Champa's work one should be prepared to step into a world where characters are often confronted with the difficulties of spontaneous decision making. Where sudden choices can dramatically reshape lives and bring about unexpected, though positive, change. When Douang Champa takes the characters to the point where they have to act, the results are not only dramatic, but also straightforward, satisfying and often unabashedly humorous.

Douang Champa's stories confront change without being afraid of change. In this sense, her writing is really a reflection of what she herself went through as a woman who chose a writing career when it was rare for women to even attend High School. Many of her early writings were hidden from the public eye because Lao women simply didn't write in the

fifties. This theme of “shielding yourself from the truth” can be seen in “Looking back” and “Are girls mere flowers?” Like Douang Champa herself, the female characters are acutely aware of their role in Lao society, but you also get a sense that they are willing – and able – to challenge that role and go against traditional conventions. Is it a bold move for Keomany in “Looking back” to leave her fiancé and focus on her dancing career rather than run the family market stall as her future mother-in-law wishes her to do? Is Dokmai hostile and careless when she slaps Ai Vongphet and flees her aunt’s house never to be seen there again (though now happy in her role as a village school teacher)? The truth springs out in these characters like the author that emerged from the society that was trying to constrain her skills as writer. Shielding oneself from the truth cannot be a permanent existence. A satisfying conclusion for the writer and her readers.

The theme of self-deception is perhaps strongest in “That Sunday morning” where no character is spared the writer’s watchful eye. The husband’s philandering takes its toll on the family – and indeed they could be seen as the most affected by his behaviour – but even his young mistress, Vimarn, plays a key role in forcing reluctant women to take a hard look at their reality. *The depressed wife, expecting more supportive advice on how to get rid of the nightclub prostitute, would go away from Vimarn feeling disappointed.* Douang Champa leaves few rocks unturned in this story. Feelings of disappointment can be

corrected and Douang Champa addresses that point in no uncertain terms. We have to stand-up for ourselves. Self-pity – such as the wife angrily resorting to gambling in order to get back at her husband – is a weakness that the author does not shy away from. We either take back our lives or we fade like the brown leaves scattered over the yard in the story. When the children get involved, Douang Champa tears the roof off the family home for all of us to look inside. This issue of “keeping the family secrets inside the family home” is universal. To confront it in Lao fiction written in 1971 was truly ahead of its time (if not risky and extremely controversial).

Because of her own personal history and struggle, Douang Champa can intelligently present female characters who are easy to identify with. She doesn't ask us to feel sorry for them; only to understand that all women have the capacity to live full lives and make choices that are right for them. In “My sister” we are transported to that simple roadside stall in Attapeu – a setting not unlike many throughout Laos – where we observe a single mother and her daughter living fulfilled lives, earning money from their skills as independent businesswomen. When the truth emerges at the end, you know that gender equality can – and will – exist in Lao society if Douang Champa has anything to say about it.

Dokked's stories are full of choice as well. Some of her offerings, like “Rain”, “Help, Help” and “Far from home”,

take us to the brink of hopelessness – all is lost – and then they either reverse course just enough for the characters to continue their survival, their independence, or they succumb to the brutal realities of their situation. Dokked's stories are not grim in this sense, they simply ask questions and then let realistic conclusions play themselves out.

In "Rain" the fantasy of choice pushes the desperate soldier to think about committing a heinous crime. When he doesn't act on his fantasies we are left with the question, who are the ones committing the atrocities? Who are the ones robbing their lives of truth?

When Dokked wants us to climb into the minds of her characters, her first person narrators are often purposely unreliable – delusional, lost, frightened. In these natural human flaws, these vulnerabilities and imperfections, is the emotional bridge that ties us to the story. We can accept that the characters aren't perfect, but can they be trusted? It's upon this edge of uncertainty that we are encouraged to read on. In "The girl that I would love", Dokked uses the diary entries of the young, confident university student, Phusone, to guide us along. Diaries are personal, the writer is the reader. So when we're let in, given access to private material, this voyeuristic opportunity is compelling. We only learn about Phusone's interaction with Nuntawone through his diary entries. Can we trust his observations? Is this a love blind, deluded student

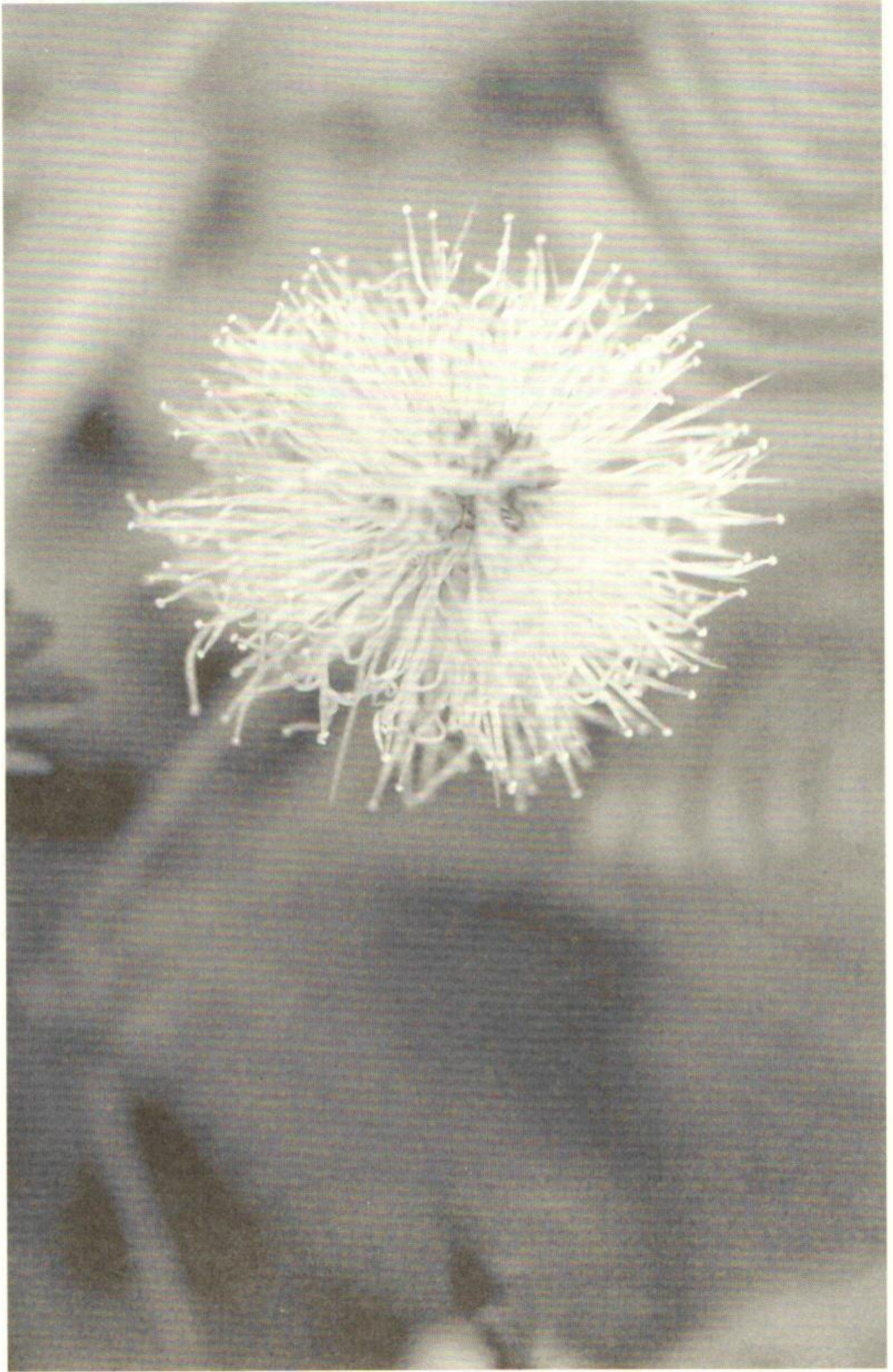
chasing an unattainable girl? Is Nuntawone arrogant or just focused and driven: a liberated young woman with her own dreams and desires? Dokked allows us to search for clues but don't expect neat, easy answers, for this is what means to be an author who lets fiction observe life.

Douang Champa and Dokked take us on a fifty year journey through Lao fiction. Their contributions to the literature of the country will influence aspiring Lao writers for generations to come. To quote "Looking back", we should really applaud them.

Bjorn Turmann

Douang Champa





Are girls mere flowers ?

Once inside the gate of the compound, Dokmai started thinking about her housework.

Her daily routine was nothing complicated. She had been doing it for years and she wasn't tired of it at all. Every morning she steamed the sticky rice and prepared breakfast for the family. She did this in order to be able to get an education. Being related to the lady of the house (whom she called Aunt), Dokmai only asked to have a roof over her head in exchange for easy housework. She was very grateful.

Housework was indeed easy in her aunt's home. It wasn't like the village where Dokmai grew up; where water had to be carried long distances from a faraway well; where she had to pound rice husks until she was exhausted and fetch firewood from the forest. Here, she had both charcoal and electric stoves, tap water, and lots of fish and meat stocked up in the fridge. Her aunt always bought plenty of food just in case people turned up and were invited to stay for lunch or dinner. Dokmai only had to cook a few dishes and put them on the table; something she had done for the family for three years. Dokmai was happy, content even. She had come to live with her aunt to attend Year 6 - the last year of

primary school. After completing primary school she went on to attend a Teacher Training course for one year. Now she was teaching at a primary school. She was proud that she was able to earn an income and save enough to send some money home to her mother. A small amount of cash meant a lot in her village and it was appreciated by her family. Living with her aunt she really didn't have to spend much at all. She only had to buy her teacher's uniform. There were plenty of hand-me-downs for her to wear, such as silk and cotton skirts and blouses from Eui Viengsavan, her aunt's daughter. Dokmai didn't like most of these clothes though, as they were too bright, the designs too modern.

"Don't wear these clothes at home, people might get confused", her cousin would tease her. *Who would confuse me with Eui Viengsavan?* Dokmai wondered. Eui Viengsavan was tall and beautiful and she had lovely skin with just a hint of dark complexion. With modern cosmetics and fine clothes she could look like a real noble princess.

"Dokmai, you are naturally beautiful and pure," Ai Vongphet, a nephew of her aunt's husband from Vientiane, once told her. Vongphet often stopped by to visit the family. Sometimes he stayed for dinner. Many times Dokmai had to receive him when the owners of the house, both parents and daughter, were out.

"You should call before you come, sir" Dokmai would remind him. She usually had a lot of housework to do. She couldn't just sit there and entertain him.

"Don't worry. You are the host, too. I never thought of you as an outsider." With each visit, Vongphet made a point of trying to catch Dokmai's eye when he spoke to her, making

her nervous. On one particular visit, she had to sit with Ai Vongphet for a long time. She began to feel very confused. *Is he courting me?* Eventually she offered him some sweets and left him there to read a book by himself while she returned to the kitchen to prepare a pot of stew. Vongphet came in and stood at the doorway. Leaning against the door, he smiled and stared at her flirtatiously. "I knew I'd be lucky enough to taste your cooking again this evening. This is my idea of a good wife." He continued his confusing courtship. "I'm afraid we can't escape destiny."

That night her uncle and aunt and their daughter, Eui Viengsavann, came home very late. Ai Vongphet stayed for dinner and talked to Dokmai throughout the evening, making her blush.

After Vongphet left she kept thinking about his sweet words. Sometimes she fell asleep still thinking about them. Vongphet was the first man to court her in this way. He praised her for her appearance, her natural beauty. A beauty that didn't need extra help from cosmetics.

Once home, Dokmai always thought about preparing the evening meal. That was her daily routine. But, one night something unusual was happening. Something bigger than a family meal. *What is this?* She wondered, looking at what was going on. Inside the kitchen there were bags of food and vegetables scattered all around and several female relatives were cooking and preparing food as if there was a big function.

"Ah! You have come at last, Dokmai," her aunt called out, anxiously. She quickly gave Dokmai instructions about the food they were having for. "The fish *laab* still needs to be

mixed, the fish are already cut up on the tray over there for the sour soup. The roast pork is done, just arrange it on a nice plate and put it on the dining table. The spring rolls are wrapped, they only need to be fried.”

Dokmai was still confused as to the occasion, but she didn't dare ask her aunt or anyone there as everyone was so busy with the preparations. Viengsavan appeared in the doorway of the kitchen already dressed up beautifully for the party. She drew attention to herself by asking loudly, “How do I look in this outfit?” More of an announcement than a question.

“Goodness!” one of her cousins remarked. “This is just for the engagement, what will you look like on the wedding day?!”

The engagement! Dokmai silently exclaimed. She hadn't realized that Eui Viengsavan was getting married so soon. She had never seen Eui Viengsavan interested in anyone in particular, although many men had come and gone. She thought Eui Viengsavan would take a long time to choose her partner. *Well it's not too long before I find out who this lucky man is.* Dokmai thought to herself. Dokmai began to mix fish *laab* wanting to make it as delicious as possible. If the dish was a success, the groom's family would praise the bride's family for being great cooks, and the status and honor of the bride would be enhanced.

At six o'clock, the sound of many cars arriving was heard inside the front yard. The hosts greeted the guests and the lady of the house, her aunt, called out to the girls to bring drinks for the guests. It was crowded and there were lots of people still arriving. Finally all the dishes were placed on

the dining table. Dokmai washed her hands and wanted to go out and take a look at the groom. Perhaps he would be Ai Khamsing or Deputy Director Karbkeo, she thought; or Ai Paul, a half French, half Lao man. As she looked out, all she could see was the back of the couple sitting side by side. She couldn't guess who the groom was so she went further into the dining room to get a better look. He looked like...
Ai Vongphet!

* * *

It was late. All of the guests had gone home; the household was quiet again. Dokmai didn't want to stay in the crowded kitchen with its smell of leftover food and the pile of dirty dishes in the sink. She was exhausted and the emotional shock of seeing Ai Vongphet was unbearable. Feeling dizzy, she dashed outside to the garden to get some fresh air. In the coolness among the trees she felt some relief. But she also felt like running far away from this place, from this man, Ai Vongphet, now engaged to Eui Viengsavann! Ai Vongphet who a few days ago had been praising her, flirting endlessly with her in the kitchen, courting her! He'd insisted that he would come to talk to her about something important. *Oh! Is this a bad dream I'm having?* Dokmai thought to herself. *How could this be true?* She covered her face, sobbing, tears falling into the shadows of a tree. She cried so much that she thought there would be no more tears to shed ever again. *You stupid girl, Dokmai! You have been blind for a long time to believe that Vongphet could be in love with you, that he had eyes only for you!*

"Dokmai!" a familiar male voice spoke. She felt the

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