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Simply and hauntingly powerful

When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge—a

Memoir. Chanrithy Him. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000. 330 pp.
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Perhaps not since Anne Frank's diary has there been as stirring an account of a young girl's efforts to survive and thrive in a world torn apart by terror as Chanrithy Him's *When Broken Glass Floats*. In the mid-1970s, when American children were watching "Laverne and Shirley" on television, practicing piano, playing Little League Baseball or grinding through schoolwork, thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of Cambodian children were rising each morning at dawn for a breakfast of boiled leaves and a full day of exhausting toil in Khmer Rouge rice paddies and labor camps. These children, many of whom were starved or worked to death, form the ensemble cast of Chanrithy Him's memoir of the life she and her family had thrust upon them during the Pol Pot regime.

Now a medical researcher in Oregon studying Post-Traumatic Stress disorders among Cambodian survivors, Him intimates in the book's introduction her own lingering trauma and that of the four members of her family of twelve who came through the killing fields and camps. Her history takes her family from difficult times through times of utter horror, relentlessly taxing the imagination and tearing at the heart of the reader until the last page: first she loses two infant brothers—to circumstances likely avoidable in better times. Then her father is executed, hands tied behind his back, with sharp blows to the head with a garden hoe. Soon another brother, then a sister dies. Her mother, despite months turning into years of privation, holds the family together under the most unmanageable of circumstances until she too succumbs to starvation, with its accompanying edema and dysentery.

It is estimated that perhaps more than 2,000,000 Cambodians died in the few short years of Pol Pot's power—up to a fourth of the population. As in all cases of genocide, the numbers themselves are too great or abstract to comprehend, and numbers alone generally fail to move human beings to action and strong policy. Him's book takes the reader out of the numbers game, however, by providing representative samples of just a few of the mass of victims. Those few become very human and real to us in the process.

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(Chilling First-Person Tales From Cambodia cont'd.)

Him's style is to state facts directly and to understate emotions, in such a way that resonates truth without recourse to hyperbole and rhetorical flourishes. The most figurative aspects of her account arise from her sprinklings of Cambodian folk sayings, folklore and superstitions, of the sort that still find modern Cambodians sacrificing cigarette butts and Cola cans at the grave of Pol Pot, to invoke his blessings to win the lottery (*New York Times*, June 23, 2001). During the transition from plenty to poverty, for instance, Him's father encourages her not to be picky about food. "There comes a time when a grain of rice sticks on a dog's tail, and everyone will fight for it," he explains (52).

On another occasion, when her brother, Tha, becomes mortally ill, her parents are told by a "spiritual adviser" that he cannot urinate or speak because "Tha has peed on someone's grave" (39). When food is nearly non-existent, and Him herself becomes ill, she cries out for fried fish with tamarind paste. "These are foods her father would ask for," declare her onlookers, who then determine she is possessed by his ghost (112). The title of the book itself comes from Him's wiser older sister, she also to perish, explaining to Chanrithy that broken glass floats when evil is winning over good, but that "soon *klok* [a type of squash] will float instead, and then the good will prevail" (23-24).

Throughout Him's narrative, the reader senses her sadness, but also her graciousness and gratitude, and commitment to do what she can to help Pol Pot's victims and to try to prevent similar situations within the extent of her power. This account is a significant contribution to that end. She ranks with Anne Frank among sensitive, adolescent observers of the worst that humanity has offered. Him's memoir is simply and hauntingly powerful. Born in a country where literacy was once a death warrant, her writing reminds us what reading can do to preserve those institutions most likely to protect the human spirit, mind and body. Read the book—it is well, well worth the time.