

EXPRESS BOOKS

Fast-moving memoir of a late-'70s Cambodian girlhood

WHEN BROKEN GLASS FLOATS

By Chanrithy Him

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Anyone who ever bitched because the swimming pool was cold or because her Candies were the wrong color, who cheated on her homework and refused to eat her peas, can now truly, absolutely, and rather quickly learn the meaning of remorse. During a single afternoon spent curled up with this fast-moving memoir of a late-'70s Cambodian girlhood, the middle-class American mind reels back to every privilege it ever had and mocked, each luxury it sucked up and forgot. For these are tales of normal life gone quickly nuts, a shattering parade of slaughter and starvation, mind control and malaria, values melting away in the middle of a country about which we, back then, knew nearly nothing.

Born in 1965 to smart and ambitious parents, Chanrithy Him (now living in Oregon) cherishes early memories as plush as those of any girl in, say, Tarzana. Surrounded by siblings, she watched TV in the family's ample house, gorged on French bread and paté, and adored her select Phnom Penh school. She was barely ten when the Khmer Rouge took power and launched its plan to overturn Cambodia's social order. In a child's clear language, Him recalls Phnom Penh abruptly emptied: hordes stripped overnight of possessions, streaming into remote labor camps. Who had ever heard of killing fields?

Anyone who ever swiped her mom's pocket change will plunge into suicidal guilt over Him's pulsingly intimate family scenes in which parents and siblings risk death for each other's survival. Some of them—many—do not survive, and we see in unrelenting detail the journey of each toward death. This is not fiction, so its images of rats and crickets eagerly gobbled, of swollen-to-bursting bodies and dysenteric sludge do not tie up into a neat conclusive bow. Instead they slash and poke like successive bits of the glass to which the author alludes in a poem from which the book's title came.

Poetry, sometimes clumsy but poetry nonetheless, tiptoes pluckily through these pages. A wound bleeds like "a steady red river breaking loose." Khmer Rouge soldiers wield "waves of rifles." After the surviving siblings at last reach relative safety in 1979, one sister weds, and Him records a sad song that wafts from the makeshift bridal chamber: "Excited . . . on this honey night I regret my body. . . the bee has taken the sweetness . . . so this is love." It lends melody to brutality, reminding us that one of history's darkest disasters is, at the same time, the story of a girl.