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Sharp, wrenching memories of a survivor

When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge

By Chanrithy Him

W.W. Norton & Company.

330pp. \$29.95

Reviewer: MICHAEL THOMAS.

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THE STORY of the Khmer Rouge's brutality has been many times told. Twenty years after Pol Pot's regime ended, Cambodia still struggles to confront and reconcile the enormity of Khmer Rouge crimes. Unfortunately, the Cambodian government's farcical efforts are not helping.

Rather than focusing on Khmer Rouge rule between 1975 and 1979, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen wants to widen any investigation to address the 30 years between 1970 and 1999. "That means all those involved in the war crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes of genocide would be subject to trial," he says. Conveniently for Hun Sen, this mandate will *ensnare anyone* he wants it to, will endlessly delay trial of those he decides to protect and will divert attention from his government's failings.

Denied the opportunity for justice through legal means, victims of the Khmer Rouge must find their own peace. Many never do. One study found that half the Cambodian refugees living in the United States suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. As a researcher for the Khmer Adolescent Project, a continuation of the study into post-traumatic stress disorder in Khmer Rouge survivors, Chanrithy Him heard others recount memories she had suppressed. Unable to keep her memories bottled any longer, Him wrote them down. Sharp, honest, wrenching, they recount hunger, death and callous disregard.

Like countless others, Him lost her home, was forced into the countryside where insects and roots became daily fare, watched her family die. She survived long enough to end up in a Thai refugee camp. There she reunited with the remnants of her family. An uncle who had escaped Cambodia sponsored Him's family to the US.

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(Sharp, wrenching memories of a survivor cont'd.)

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Hunger became the daily enemy. Much of the book describes Him's ceaseless efforts to supplement the rice gruel she and others subsisted on. As her family slowly starved, Him's mother began missing meals, leaving her share for her children. For a while she survived by begging food from neighbours who had little to spare.

"Can life be worse than it already is?" Him writes. "This question becomes a mental game, a way of throwing down an emotional challenge to myself: It can't be any worse. It can't be any worse. This is enough. They can do no more."

It did become worse. The family moved again, rations were cut, work orders remained the same. Remembered behaviour provided small mercies, as when someone struck up a conversation in French, reminding everyone of better times. But those mercies combated neither starvation nor disease. In labour camps, water supplies quickly became polluted. Dysentery struck Vin, Him's youngest brother. While the other family members huddled together for warmth, Vin had to sleep alone. He cried through the night: "*Mak* (mother) . . . *Mak*, please let me sleep by you. I'm cold. I'm cold, *Mak*. Let me sleep with you for one more night."

Vin's health worsened and he was sent to a hospital. He waited with hundreds of other breathing corpses. No one provided medicine or food. Vin died of malnutrition and dehydration. Him survived, eating silkworms, tadpoles, toads, centipedes, rats, scorpions and pigweed, pulling fish heads from the rubbish tip. "*Koon* (child), *koon*, help me catch crickets. I can't run," an old woman begged. "Just two crickets a day, I can survive."

The book's title comes from a Cambodian proverb about good and evil. Good, symbolised by *klok*, a type of squash, and evil by *armaeg*, shards of broken glass, are thrown into the river of life. "Now, *klok* sinks, and broken glass floats. But *armaeg* will not float long. Soon *klok* will float instead, and then the good will prevail."

When Broken Glass Floats doesn't analyse events. Him does not step outside her own experience. She does not question or explain the Khmer Rouge's murderously insane ruralisation program. Him writes in an intimately personal manner. Her story reads much like a diary, sometimes becoming so personal it feels like trespassing.

Him's is one of 10 books on the Khmer Rouge regime published in the last four months. Two more are due soon. Most are personal accounts of the suffering inflicted by the Khmer Rouge. That so many books appear now should not cheapen their worth. Every person who survived the killing fields has a story worth hearing.