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Beautifully told story

When Broken Glass Floats:
Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge

CHANRITHY HIM. Norton, \$23.95 (288p)
ISBN 0-393-04863-2

Published: February 28, 2000

Born in Cambodia in 1965, Him lived from the age of three with the fear of war overflowing from neighboring Vietnam and suffered through the U.S.'s bombing of her native land. However, thanks to her loving and open-minded family, her outlook remained positive—until 1975, when the Khmer Rouge seized control and turned her world upside down.

(According to a Cambodian proverb, “broken glass floats” when the world is unbalanced.) Armed with a nearly photographic memory, Him forcefully expresses the utter horror of life under the revolutionary regime. Evacuated from Phnom Penh and shunted from villages to labor camps, her close-knit family of 12 was decimated: both parents were murdered, and five of her siblings starved or died from treatable illnesses. Meanwhile, the culture of local communities was destroyed and replaced with the simple desire to survive famine. Yet for all their suffering throughout these years, the surviving Hims remained loyal to one another, saving any extra food they collected and making dangerous trips to other camps to share it with weaker family members.

Friendships were also formed at great risk, and small favors were exchanged. But by the end of the book, Him finds herself surprised when she encounters remnants of humanity in people, for she has learned to live by mistrusting, by relying on her own wits and strength. When the Khmer Rouge were overthrown, Him moved to a refugee camp in Thailand. Today she works with the Khmer Adolescent Project in Oregon. This beautifully told story is an important addition to the literature of this period.