

(BIG WEEKEND)

Evil's triumph

When Broken Glass Floats

By Chanrithy Him

(W.W. Norton, \$29.95)

Review: Hal Colebatch

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IN CAMBODIA, “When broken glass floats” means when evil triumphs over good. Evil seldom had a more complete triumph than in Cambodia during the years after American withdrawal from Indochina and the collapse of the anti-communist regimes there in 1975.

This is the story of a small girl, Chanrithy Him, growing up in the Khmer Rouge killing fields when her life, and the lives of everyone around her, depended on the whims of psychopaths and armed children addled by a blend of Parisian café existentialism and Marxism.

Of her family of 12, five children survived. Since they had been relatively prosperous city dwellers, used to medical care and other amenities — which also made them the group particularly targeted by the Khmer Rouge — they were lucky any survived.

They were in Phnom Penh when, in April 1975, the Khmer Rouge took the city and made the population, including lost infants and amputees trailing saline drips, march or crawl into the country to be remade.

Stragglers were shot or beaten to death, as might be anyone on whom the eye of the liberators fell. When people were found still cowering in bomb shelters from the recent Khmer Rouge shelling, hand grenades were thrown in and the shelters sealed.

Chanrithy Him's father seems to have been a resourceful and heroic man. Without him none of the family would have survived the first few hours. Chanrithy Him was nine years old and had just seen her first pile of mutilated corpses and severed limbs.

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She recalls the evacuation in poignant fragments: "Amid this mass of people is a little boy, about three, in gray shorts and a shirt. He cries at the top of his lungs. He is being moved along by the crowd while his little hands are raised in the air, shielding himself from the people passing. As we move forward, I no longer see him. But his cry still pierces the air, and I think of him and his little bare feet."

Her recollections of the evacuation are a kaleidoscope of the doomed: "I notice a sobbing couple fighting against the crowd, trying to wrestle their way back into the city. They look dressed up, as if they've just come from an office. Pleading for mercy, they implore the soldiers to grant them passage to their home to retrieve their children."

These were the city people who, after liberation, were going to be transformed into new and purified human beings by agricultural toil. For them this death march was the merest beginning.

The basic facts are, or should be, well known: with liberation accomplished, being literate or wearing spectacles marked one as an intellectual and attracted a death sentence. So did the bourgeois crimes of "looking happy" or, conversely, of weeping for murdered loved ones. So did a child failing to call its parent "comrade", or listening to music.

In order to save bullets the Khmer Rouge beat Chanrithy Him's father and a group of other men to death with hoes, a common practice which one progressive Western commentator at the time said made economic sense.

Up to two million of a population of seven million died between 1975 and 1979. Children were assembled to watch illicit lovers chopped to pieces alive. Babies were disposed of by being sawn apart with the sharp edges of palm branches. Then there was a cholera epidemic along with ordinary starvation. Sexual relations, having been banned, became compulsory when the liberators realized they were running out of children.

After a while the revolution turned on its own and later in the Cambodian countryside, when the layers of city-dwellers' skeletons were being excavated for gold teeth, the diggers had to tunnel through a tangled layer of the skeletons of the young liberators, dressed in black pajamas. Almost paradoxically, a handful of Chanrithy Him's family survived because they risked death to help one another. I recall one respected American-Australian academic remarking complacently at the time that such people were experiencing "status deprivation" and, with heavy sarcasm, that these city-dwellers "probably felt they were better suited to more intellectual pursuits."

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After the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge by Vietnamese forces in 1979, Chanrithy Him got to the Thai border and then to America in 1981. She now works for the Khmer Adolescent Project, studying post-traumatic stress disorders among Cambodian survivors.

This is a book everyone should force themselves to read, both as a gesture of respect to millions dead and because there is some truth in the saying that those who do not learn from history may eventually find themselves repeating it.