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It's often the innocent who suffer the most

***When Broken Glass Floats***

**By Chanrithy Him**

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**By Michael Phillips**

In an old Cambodian proverb, good and evil are thrown into the river of life. When darkness triumphs, evil (symbolized by a life-giving squash) into the murky depths below. For Chanrithy Him, glass was very much floating during her childhood in '70s Cambodia, when seven members of her family were murdered by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. In this memoir, written nearly 20 years after she fled to the Pacific Northwest, Him focuses on what it took for her to survive in a world where it seemed glass would float forever.

In 1976, Him was 11 years old. She had already seen her younger brother die of an easily treatable disease, been bombed out of her comfortable middle-class home in Phnom Penh and watched as her father was, hauled off with the rest of the village's men by the revolutionary army. She later discovered that her father had been forced to dig his own grave and was then put to death for being an "intellectual against the revolution." After her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, the atrocities and losses only escalated.

Him chronicles the way the Khmer Rouge imposed its agrarian revolution on Cambodia, forcing men, women and children into labor camps that eventually became the infamous "killing fields." In the camps, laborers were lucky if they were rewarded with a half cup of gray, watery rice a day. Millions died from starvation and disease alone. The Khmer Rouge tried to tear apart any connections with history the revolution began year zero. *Angka*, or "the organization," became one's mother, father and God. In one particularly brutal account of what this could mean, Him witnessed a young couple beheaded by a garden spade. Their crime? Loving each other without *Angka's* permission.

**(Continued)**

***(It's often the innocent who suffer the most cont'd.)***

In the midst of such terror, Him managed to survive through the support of her family and even through some of the *Angka's* soldiers, who would smuggle her food. Him was able to find people who were willing to risk everything to help another person—a sign of humanity in a regime out to destroy it. There are few books that give a refugee's point of view as clearly and passionately as Him's. Her book is further proof that in any war, from Cambodia to Kosovo to Iraq, it's often the innocent who suffer the most.

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

" 'My beautiful girl,' he says to me as his lips quiver into a small smile. 'I have to go away with these two men for a while,' " Ms. Ung writes of that crushing moment.

For Ms. Him, the losses came more quickly. Two weeks after the family arrived in her grandfather's village, her father and her two uncles were taken away in oxcarts for what was called orientation but what was really execution. She remembers the men of her family sitting around a table for breakfast the morning of their departure.

"Though together, they seem alone, like strangers who have never met," she writes. "Their stillness sends a strange air through the house, a sadness so heavy that it radiates like thick smoke, choking me. Suddenly I feel lonely."

Other losses followed, most painfully the unnatural deaths of their mothers. Ms. Him was told that her sick mother had been thrown down a well while still alive; Ms. Ung's mother and younger sister were shot in a field by Khmer Rouge soldiers. The authors tread lightly where their own emotions are concerned, concentrating instead on describing the grim task of survival, especially the task of finding food in a starving country. Ms. Him describes the taste of roasted mice. Ms. Ung tells how her mother was beaten when she tried to buy a black market chicken to give to a sick child. Once, she remembers, a poor man in the village killed and ate a stray dog. He was executed by the Khmer Rouge for his failure to share the dog meat with the rest of the community.

Ms. Him and Ms. Ung describe the general joy that greeted the Vietnamese soldiers who invaded Cambodia in 1978 and dislodged the Khmer Rouge from power. Eventually each made her own way to refugee camps in Thailand and to the United States. Ms. Him has worked in a clinic that studies traumatic stress disorders among Cambodian survivors; Ms. Ung is national spokeswoman for the human rights group Campaign for a Land Mine-Free World.

Neither of these books provides an overall history of the horror inflicted by the Khmer Rouge, part of a wider horror brought on by that peculiar 20th-century urge to remake human societies in a new image. The historians will one day write of the overall nature of that effort, the way it linked societies otherwise as different as Ethiopia under Mengistu Haile Mariam, North Korea under Kim Il Sung and Cambodia under the secretive chieftain Pol Pot. For now, these books by two intelligent and morally aware young women tell us what it was like to struggle to survive while others played out utopian dreams above them.

~ **RICHARD BERNSTEIN – New York Times Book Review**