
DISCERNING LIFE FROM NIGHTMARE

When Broken Glass Floats:
Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge
By Chanrithy Him

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By Katy Hatten
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In an author's note, Chanrithy Him claims to have photographic memories of her childhood from as early as age three. Such claims usually make me at least a little dubious. But after reading her powerful memoir about surviving the Khmer Rouge regime, I not only believe her, I fully trust the authenticity of her voice.

From the start, Him's narrative is amazingly vivid, laced with sensory details such as the first loud rumbling noises that awake her when she is four. That was the night the Viet Cong invaded Cambodia — the beginning of the war that devastated her middle-class urban family. Him was 10 years old when the Khmer Rouge took control of the country and relocated everyone into labor camps and communes in the countryside.

Through a present-tense child's voice, we learn about the fight for daily survival in a war that ravages a loving family with ten children. While captivating, this is not an easy book to read, as one might guess by the topic. It is filled with the unspeakable horrors the Khmer Rouge unleashed on its people as it attempted to eliminate intellectuals and the middle class. Many of the scenes can be overwhelming in their brutality, yet none are gratuitous or embellished. Him's father was executed and in one of the most heart-wrenching scenes of the book, she witnesses the death of her mother from starvation and disease.

Only five of the ten children survived.

Yet through all of the horrors, one never loses the sense of the deep love, hope and strength of this family. In the end, it is this love and loyalty to each other that help Him and her siblings survive and start a new life in Portland, Oregon.

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Him now lives in Eugene, Oregon, where she works for the Khmer Adolescent Project, studying posttraumatic stress disorder among Cambodian survivors. It was while interviewing fellow Cambodians for a federally funded research project that Him's own memory of a childhood consumed by war awakened in the form of nightmares. Her job as a researcher of posttraumatic stress disorder served to help Him confront her own past.

"There are times when I've denied my own memories, when I've neglected the little girl in me," Him writes in the preface. "There would always be a time to grieve, I told myself. I pushed down memories in pursuit of important things. Education. Medical School. I wanted to make a difference in the world, to do good deeds, fulfill a child's wish...."

In this memoir, Him honors the memory of her lost family members and fulfills her own promise to make a difference in the world.

When Broken Glass Floats is just one of several recent books on experiences under the Khmer Rouge. Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* also was released last year and tells a very similar childhood story of survival as Him's. I read the two books back to back and thought Him's memoir stood out for its quality of writing and effortless ability to evoke the deepest of emotions.