



Voices  
from the  
Gaps

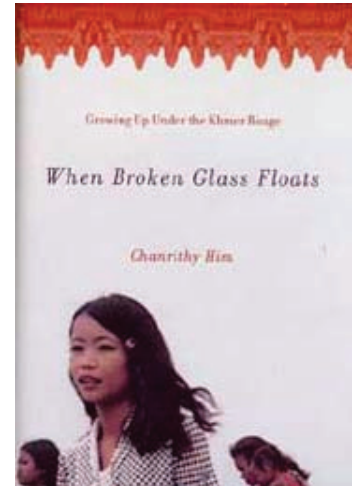
# *When Broken Glass Floats* Chanrithy Him

Imagine being lost in the dark. Not only are you lost, but you are tied up so you are unable to move, unable to control what happens around you. You are starving and your family is dying one by one without you near. Your ears are filled with the screams of the suffering around you and your body is filled with the screams of your own flesh wanting, needing nourishment. There is death, disease, pain, and hunger all around you and you can't do anything but try and survive. This is the tale that is told in Chanrithy Him's *When Broken Glass Floats*.

The title of her book is a Cambodian proverb; "when broken glass floats" is a time when evil triumphs over good. Him takes her readers from beginning to end of her experience growing up in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. She begins with her life as it was before the invasion, bringing the reader through backbreaking labor camps and death-ridden villages to the sometimes-abusive refugee camps. These camps were places where refugees like the survivors of her family were prepared for a much-awaited trip to America.

*When Broken Glass Floats* is not only one woman's tale of a torturous life experience, but also a history lesson and epitaph to her family and the people of Cambodia. Her purpose for writing this book is made very clear in the preface. She writes to remember, to speak for those without voice, and to bring what justice she can to the people of Cambodia.

Throughout the memoir she remembers her family's deaths and reminds the readers of what she lost in them, putting her personal touch on a story that concerns her culture as a whole. This personal tone is complemented by the use of newspaper excerpts as epigrams. Drawn from popular publications such as the *New York Times* and *The Economist*, these excerpts appear at the beginning of various chapters throughout the book.



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*Reviewed by Tina Avent*



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The epigrams are used to ground Him's personal account with historical news reports of the political events surrounding her family's life in Cambodia. Although most of the epigrams are news reports, Him uses one excerpt from the *New Internationalist* to describe a concept called "Year Zero":

*Year Zero was the dawn of an age in which, in extremis, there would be no families, no sentiment, no expression of love or grief, no medicines, no hospitals, no schools, no books, no learning, no holidays, no music: only work and death. (Him 226)*

This description summarizes Him's experience living under the Khmer Rouge. Him also includes annotations of various Cambodian words and customs. These annotations allow this text to speak to all cultures and share Him's memory and knowledge of the Cambodian culture. For example, she explains one of the Khmer Rouge's threats called "the kang prawattasas, the wheel of history" as:

*The wheel of time or change. The Khmer Rouge often used such terms to threaten us, to force us to follow their rules, their revolution. If we didn't follow their rules, the wheel of history would run over us. This could mean punishment or death. (Him 14)*

The explanation of Cambodian custom and language allows this text to connect even the most distant reader to the traditions of Cambodian people and the violent history of the Khmer Rouge. This history includes images of unimaginable labor demands made by the Khmer Rouge. These images give a new perspective to the idea of what the human heart and mind can survive.

*When Broken Glass Floats* is a memoir that allows the reader to not only imagine the suffering of the people involved but also feel and experience it through the eyes of a young girl. When she is about twelve years old, Chanrithy is injured working in a rice field with contaminated water. Her foot is gashed open, but she continues to work for fear that she will be punished or separated from her family. Him wrote vividly about her pain:

*The infection ignites like a flame. At night I can't sleep. It becomes itchy and painful. So painful that I scream out at night. Over and over, I call out to Pa. To ease this pain. To stop my tears. To be my doctor. Or just to be here with me. In my mind, he is so close, almost within my grasp. I yearn for his strength. (155)*



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The description of her pain expresses the agony of her wounded foot and the longing she feels for her father. This mix of physical and emotional pain is a large part of Him's experience under the Khmer Rouge. Her ability to survive these extreme hardships is inspiring and humbling.

Him opens *When Broken Glass Floats* with a poem she created to express her need to compose this memoir. This poem shows how powerfully Him feels about her story and the reasons why she composed it.

*When broken glass floats, a nation drowns,  
Descending to the abyss. From mass graves in the once-gentle land,  
Their blood seeps into mother earth. Their suffering spirits whisper to her,  
"Why has this happened?"*

*Their voice resounds in the spirit world,  
Shouts though the souls of survivors,  
Determined to connect, begging the world:  
Please remember us. Please speak for us. Please bring us justice.*

In her poem she reveals her loyalty to those who did not live to see the day that the broken glass would sink and the healing would begin. The powerful image she creates in this poem is expanded and repeated throughout her memoir. Her soul is shouting for a nation between the covers of this book. She is a true survivor and her tale has the ability to move, remind, and educate us all.