WHEN BROKEN GLASS FLOATS

Growing Up under the Khmer Rouge

A MEMOIR

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Worse Than Pigs

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“Cambodia’s Crime…”

Some twelve weeks after the Communist entry into Phnom Penh and the forced exodus on foot of millions of urban Cambodians to distant countrysides, a veil of silence still cloaks the full horror of what has happened—with the worst yet to come in predicted deaths from hunger and disease. The agony and degradation that followed may never be fully known. Tens of thousands are believed to have fallen by the wayside, victims of hunger, thirst, exhaustion and disease, including a spreading cholera epidemic….

Can life be worse than it already is? This question becomes a mental game, a way of throwing down an emotional challenge to myself: It can’t be any worse. It can’t be any worse. This is enough. They can do no more.

In my mind, the words become both a dare and a comfort.

Just as we were randomly squeezed into the train cars, now we’re discharged. Hundreds of us march into a desolate field, rushing behind the Khmer Rouge. Carrying our remaining belongings, we trudge behind them. Children, mothers, and elderly parents hurry past each other. Little children sob constantly as they’re yanked along, scolded to keep up with the moving crowd. We cross one barren field into another, propelled by sheer will.

As we enter a green grove of trees and shrubs, they command some of us to stop. The rest of the group funnel down a path flanked by bushes and trees. Among these people, I don’t see my grandparents, aunts, or cousins. We’ve been so hungry and scared that we haven’t had time to worry about our extended families. But now we depend so much on our immediate family, and in the faces of my mother, my brothers, and my sisters, I feel a sharpened sense of their value which I’ve never known before. For the moment we take refuge near clumps of wild vines that snake around shady trees.

A man dressed in black appears. He’s tall and slender with dark skin and short hair. He looks smart, different from many of the stocky Khmer Rouge peasants we’ve seen. Standing before us, he explains that he’s a leader of Dalaiko village. As soon as he opens his mouth to talk, I’m intrigued by his strange accent. I’ve never heard anything like it, and it almost makes me giddy.

“Mak, how come he talks funny?” I can’t help asking as we follow along, carrying our belongings.

Mak smiles and says, “This part of the country, near Battambang province, speaks this way, in rumen [a drawl].”

“It sounds funny,” I say, realizing there are actually other Cambodians who speak this oddly, in this drawn-out, sing-song way. As grim as our situation is, I find it hard to take him seriously.

“Comrades, this is where you’ll stay,” the village leader announces, standing under four tall shady trees.

I’m shocked. I was hoping to see shelters, huts or beds where we can rest. But there’s nothing except trees, thick woods. It looks like no one has ever lived here before. Green and quiet, it is nature in its naked form. Trees are my wall, the sky my roof.

“Comrades, there’s a pond near here. Right over there,” the village leader says, pointing. His voice no longer amuses me.

A few days later, bamboo, palm leaves, palm thread made from palm bark, and freshly cut trees are brought to us. Shrubs and trees have to be cleared to accommodate the sudden swelling population, hundreds of us accumulating here and in nearby villages in a matter of days. Local people, farmers, and “old people”—natives of the
province who have attained status because of that fact—build the framework of huts, a simple platform on short stilts designed with two rooms separated by palm slats. Each compartment, the size of a small shed, will be occupied by a family. We are assigned to a hut the same size as that of the neighbors beyond our wall, a family of four. On our side, we have nine. *Is this what they mean by equality?*

In a short time, a community of huts springs up amid the forest. Huts appear like mushrooms after a hard rain. Our crude village is a social laboratory, a brutal experiment to test if anyone will survive the Khmer Rouge’s utopian theory.

There’s a mandatory meeting for the “new people.” We assemble in an alley between huts, in the generous shade of a cluster of trees. The village leader orders us to rid ourselves of anything that is of the “American imperialists.” “That includes,” he commands, “watches, gold necklaces, bracelets, diamond rings.” His hand clutches a gray bag in which he’ll collect the goods, disposing of these things for us like a monk demanding that we renounce our sins. “These things are impure, which *Angka* dislikes, and comrades cannot possess them. It’s okay that comrades have had them before, but now *Angka* doesn’t want these corrupt materials around. *Angka* wants comrades to bring these things to me,” he emphasizes.

After receiving our instructions, we return to our hut. Safely inside, *Mak* and my sisters talk quietly among themselves, whispering and frowning. They disagree about what to give to the village leader. I take refuge in the shade of a hut near ours. From where I squat, I observe people giving up their possessions to the leader. He nods as if he is royalty. He has power, control over the smallest detail of our lives.

“*Mak!* Only give him my watch. Don’t give him everything!” Chea insists, grabbing *Mak’s* arm as my mother is about to take a small bag of fine jewelry to the leader.

*Mak* shoots her a sour face. She glares at Chea and softly hisses, “You take it to him then.”

Chea obeys, relieved to end the heated discussion. She surrenders her watch. Whether she has the watch or not is irrelevant. It’s only a matter of time before most of us will die, and it doesn’t matter whether we can measure it, counting down the hours on a wristwatch.

In taking our timepieces, the Khmer Rouge are deliberately stealing the last remnants of our connection to the outside world. Increasingly, the atmosphere in our camp is one of unreality—people squeezed into huts next to each other, all steeped in distrust. We’re constantly uneasy, wondering who might be listening to us. Traditions are being shattered daily. We are shocked to see that we are separated only by a wall from neighbors who have full-grown sons. In the past, parents and grandparents would have clocked over such an arrangement, worrying about how inappropriate it was. But the Khmer Rouge have no use for formal courtesy.

Still, we see glimmers of what used to be. One day my sister Chea is trying to water the meager assortment of plants we’ve been growing in the patch behind our hut. Nearby, our neighbor, the oldest son, busies himself tilling soil.

“Look,” Chea says, observing with surprise that a squash plant had grown bright white flowers. “Is it supposed to be white?”

He laughs. “Mademoiselle, where do you come from?”

*Mademoiselle.* A word clue to the hidden privileges of the past. Chea bursts out laughing, delighted to find a hint of education in another person.

“Parlez-vous français?” she inquires.

The discovery creates an instant friendship. Speaking the same language, they share the same culture. Though the Khmer Rouge can control every other aspect of our lives, they cannot scrub out our minds, polish away our intellect like an empty brass pot. In the
midst of the daily fear of Khmer Rouge village life, it is a delicious secret. And I'm proud and amused to witness it.

Our lives continue to shrink. Less freedom. Fewer family bonds. Food rations dwindle, just as our living space has been steadily reduced to the small hut, a cage really, where my family now resides. The rice rations are five times less than what we were given back in Year Piar, and they continue to be reduced, stingily measured out in a small tin milk can. In time, the quantity diminishes from a few cups of dry rice to only enough to make a thin liquid gruel, which we supplement with pigweed and salt. The first week of our arrival, we receive a few ounces of pork. Then it too diminishes, just like the coarse salt we initially received, from a few tablespoons to nothing.

Even as food rations are cut, our labor demands remain the same. We work long hours in the woods to ready the fields for planting yams and yucca. Every morning a young Khmer Rouge informant sweeps through the village, bellowing bad news: "Time to get up, time to get up. Go to work!" As we lie in our huts, we hear his shrill voice as he approaches. I squeeze my eyes, wishing to pinch my ears shut, too. But if you don't move, he will sometimes poke his face right into your doorless hut. He's only twelve or thirteen, but he carries the cruel clout of the Khmer Rouge.

Once I hear an older woman—beautiful and elegant before the ravages of poor nutrition and field labor—quietly cursing him behind his back. She goes by the name "Grandma Two Kilo," for the weight of dirt she can carry. And in the early morning, I hear her fierce whispers, "You're the one who will be hit by the bomb. I haven't died [slept] long enough. And here you wake me up. You come again, I'll throw something at your head."

Next door, I hear our older neighbor laughing behind the wall. "Grandma Two Kilo, don't be a blabbermouth," he murmurs. "Be careful. Don't be brave."

Malnutrition takes its toll on everyone. Mok's once-lustrous skin and glistening black hair show the signs of starvation. Her eyes are sunken. Her hair is brittle and wiry, and her skin covers her arms and cheeks like a thin, loose-fitting bedsheet, as if her muscles were being eaten away from within. Her starving body mirrors what the rest of us look like.

Just as the Khmer Rouge suck the life out of us, we drain our pond—a small body of water grown murky with a thick forest of algae and water plants. It is peppered with insects, sediment, and other debris. The water tastes of dirt, but it's all we have—the next pond is miles away. So we drink from it, depleting it quickly, our village acting like a giant elephant trunk drawing even fetid water to quench its thirst. In addition, we must use this pond water for washing, cleaning our pots and pans, our clothes. Those who have no inkling of sanitation discard their dirty, soapy water on the bank of the pond. Some water seeps into the clay soil, the rest dribbles back to the pond.

Soon we have a new neighbor. Death has taken up residence here, moving in like a malevolent, unwelcome visitor. Within months rampant illness begins to touch the newest arrivals. This sickness takes many forms, creeping into our lives quietly, stealthily. Like many adults and children, I squat outside my hut each morning to catch the first sunlight, desperate to warm my body, which is now racked with strange intermittent chills. Rocking back and forth, I'm somehow soothed by the rays of the sun, intangible hands that sway me to sleep in a squatting position. A few hours later, my body moves from being warm to burning hot. I wobble to the hut. Up I climb, my body soaked in my own sweat. Then comes the ache and pain, from my legs to my head. I'm delirious and confused. Finally I'm exhausted and hungry. I gradually regain my senses.

So it goes, this strange routine. No one understands what is wrong. But my condition doesn't seem to improve, my extremes of
fear and chill grow worse. I begin thrashing in a delirious stupor. Vaguely, I am aware of what is happening to me, and yet I listen and observe it as an outsider, unable to control the words as they tumble from my mouth. It is odd to be aware of the fact that I am making no sense. Strangely, I begin crying out, demanding, pleading for a food offering. "A bowl of rice with fried fish with tamarind paste!"

Around me, voices murmur, “These are foods her father would ask for!” My father’s spirit has possessed me, they decide. “The ghost is inside her,” someone concludes.

As crazed as the situation is, I feel embarrassed. I can hear who is talking, feel the eyes of onlookers—my mother’s horrified gaze, a neighbor’s well-intentioned suggestion. “Maybe the ghost of your husband is hungry.” My mind absorbs this, but my body refuses to respond.

Mak flies out of the hut, desperately searching for someone, anyone, who will trade her for fish and tamarind. She wouldn’t dare approach the "old people," only the new arrivals. But no one can help. She returns, offering my father’s ghost all that we have—the thin rice gruel. Later Mak complains of a fierce stomachache. Everyone concludes that it is her punishment because my father’s angry spirit has had to go away hungry.

It is sad, but unavoidable. In Cambodian culture, we try hard to please the spirits of our ancestors. Sickness, bad luck, disappointments—all are often blamed on spirits who have gone away unsatisfied. When I pray to Buddha for protection, I routinely pray to my father’s spirit as well. Food offerings are presented as thanks for our good fortune, and as insurance for our continued well-being. My mother is frustrated that she cannot appease the spirit, but there is nothing to be done. Her face bespeaks her anguish, an expression of utter disbelief. "How could one find a fish in this day and time?" she murmurs. Her eyes plead her case. Here, we have nothing to eat. Why do you ask, spirit?

Within a half hour, I feel a physical transformation, as if my body has been raised from the floor of the hut and abruptly dropped. I feel control seeping back into my limbs, which now listen to my brain. My skin seems to open, and I sweat profusely. “What happened?” I ask.

Chea explains that my father’s ghost possessed me, and I can feel her fear. Her eyes grow large as she recounts it. Then Than speaks up, an expression of relief. “I’m glad I’m not Pa’s favorite koon,” he whispers.

The episode leaves me weak, my fever still an unwavering companion. Even when ill, we don’t get anything extra to eat to help nurse us back to health. Pa, whose magic I had depended on, has been taken away from me. Food is scarce and so is medicine. The magic is gone. We don’t even have clean water to drink. The nearby shrinking pond becomes a scar created by us. It’s depleted, polluted, the water evaporating to expose its bottom, a withering carpet of water plants. Unlike the pond, we’re more capable, more adaptable in this survival game. We can make another move, seek water elsewhere, even if it’s miles away. Even if it isn’t clean.

People in the village are now afflicted with severe diarrhea. So rampant is the problem that it defies embarrassment. Signs of sickness are everywhere—staining the fields and stinking in the bushes near the huts. The telltale symptoms are obvious—excrement containing blood and mucus, quickly attracting buzzing flies. Toilet paper consists of any leaf you can grab. The helplessness of sufferers makes them feel ashamed—another form of pain that adds to existing suffering. Sometimes we try to make light of it. Later, when the diarrhea passes, adults mock their discomfort by explaining, “I had a loose bolt.”
When Broken Glass Floats

Others don’t seem to rebound from the parasites that plague us. For more than a week, my three-year-old brother Vin has suffered from dysenteric diarrhea. Every day he soils his few pairs of worn pants and the other clothes that Mak uses to cover him. On the wooden floor of our hut, his little body lies still, disturbed only by the slow, rhythmic motions of his breathing. He lies sideways, wearing only a shirt. He is naked from the waist down—it’s pointless to try to keep clean pants on him, and his tiny bottom is perpetually swamped by flies. We have a new job. Someone must sit near him, fanning the flies away. Thinking back, I remember Pa curing one of my cousins of diarrhea. He would have known what to do. Water and salt, to help with the dehydration. But nothing is available to us. Fanning flies away is the only care we can give him. The only thing we know to do to protect him. Helplessness haunts us.

"Mak . . . Mak, please let me sleep by you. I’m cold," Vin beseeches, his voice small, soft, and sad. "I’m cold, Mak. Let me sleep with you for one more night."

"Koon prob Mak,* Mak doesn’t want you to make your brothers and sisters sick. Please sleep over there, my son," Mak begs.

"Mak, let me sleep with you one more night. Only one more night, Mak. Tomorrow I’ll go to the hospital and then I’ll feel better. Please let me, Mak. I’m cold." Vin cries out once again.

"Mak is sorry, koon." Never before has Mak been so helpless. So apologetic.

This child whom she brought into the world cannot be satisfied. And this raw fact is slowly killing her.

For the rest of us, it is like listening to the soundtrack of a sad movie that has no end. Lying cuddled beside Mak—my brothers and sisters sharing blankets and our warmth when the cool night wind blows, wriggling through the cracks into our hut—I weep for Vin. Our sniffles become a melody in the night as each of us suffers with him. He is only three, but the revolution ages us all. Already Vin can articulate his need, his desperate need to survive.

Long into the night, Vin cries as the chilly December wind blows. It beats the leaves of the tall trees behind our hut, creating a chorus of noise akin to Vin’s shuddering. Even beneath a blanket, I’m touched by this invisible wind.

When the morning comes, Ry gets Vin ready for a trip to the Khmer Rouge hospital, called Peh Preahth Preah, a name left over from an earlier time, which means "Hospital of the Sight of God." It is probably three miles from where we live.

Vin’s pale, shrinking body lies still as Ry wraps him in Mak’s sarong. Sadly he gazes at our mother. Vin’s bloodless lips slowly part. "Mak, I go to the hospital. Soon I’ll feel better, then I’ll come back home. I’ll come soon, Mak."

His words and sad eyes suggest a pensive parting. As small as he is, Vin seems to understand, absolving her, comforting her. His empathy in the midst of his own suffering strikes me to the core. Vin is little, yet so curiously wise. Perhaps it is a wisdom born of a young life that has straddled so much—our life before the revolution, the retreat from Phnom Penh, the life of forced labor. Too much living to cram into too few years. A three-year-old in a boxcar. A three-year-old scavenging for food. He has known so much pain that I can’t bear it. I want to drop to the dirt, fall to my knees to beg Buddha to stop his suffering.

I want so much.

"Yes, koon prob Mak, go to the hospital and you will get better soon. Then koon comes back to Mak," Mak chokes up, speaking the ragged words she knows will not come true.

"Koon comes back to Mak," Vin says, repeating Mak’s phrase as if it comforts him.

* Prob means boy, or man, so koon prob Mak is an endearment used by a mother meaning "my son."
Weeks go by, and Vin is still in the hospital. His condition worsens, Ry reports to us. She is stationed at the hospital taking care of Vin, a role that would otherwise have fallen to Chea and Ra, who are older than her. But they are gone, having already been taken off to a forced youth labor camp. They left a day after an informant leader, Srouch, came by, ordering them to a meeting. They obeyed immediately, like soldiers called up for combat. Their responsibility to our family is no longer relevant. Through no fault of her own, Mak has lost custody of her children—Angka Lua has appointed herself sole parent. With their departure, Ry steps in, taking upon herself a motherly role.

Back in Phnom Penh, at age thirteen, she was slim but strong. Her black silky hair fell below her shoulders, cut evenly. She looked cute, I thought, in her blue miniskirt with her white and blue blouse. When she biked to school, her legs pumped her bike pedals like an athlete’s.

Even then Ry was nursing us, taking care of Chea when she came down with typhoid and a blood condition. Ry was a natural nurse, staying with Chea so Mak could take care of us at home and Pa could work. Though Ra was older, she feared the dead spirits in hospitals. Unlike Ra, Ry wasn’t scared of sickness. Ra was better off staying at home, helping Mak with cleaning, cooking, and grocery shopping.

At fifteen, mature for her age, Ry takes on the caregiving task again. Just as she used to care for Chea, she now stays days and nights with Vin. She works in the hospital, a hall that used to be part of a temple. The floor is dirt, patients lie on slim metal cots. Others are scattered on blankets or plastic sheeting on the floor. It has the atmosphere of a field hospital, scarcely an aisle to walk through. Vin is luckier—because of the crowding, he has been moved to an annex, a nearby building with a wooden floor. He is allotted a narrow space a few scant feet from the nearest patients. Medical scrubs are replaced by the eternal Khmer Rouge uniform—black shirt and pants, a simple scarf. If these hospital “authorities” have a medical education, it isn’t apparent. The only treatment readily dispensed is “rabbit dung,” the term adopted for crude “pills” made from bark and honey. Sometimes people request the “rabbit dung” just for the honey alone, something to fill their empty stomachs. It seems that food, simple nutrition, would cure much suffering here.

Like a mother, Ry feeds Vin his meager food ration. Since there is no one else to administer care, she bathes him, dresses him. She gives him comfort and warmth, cuddling close to him at night. But as hard as she works, he is empty. Every day he cries for Mak, begging Ry to ask Mak to come and see him. Ry passes along the plea, imploring Mak until Mak cries, “Don’t torture, Mak, koon. I can’t walk to the hospital. Mak would if Mak could.”

She speaks the painful truth. Mak’s face and entire body have swollen up, inflated by the fluid building up inside her. Her face is an ugly mask of what it once was, as pale as pigsint with puffy jowls. Her eyes squint out from this fleshy landscape, cloudy and dull. No one knows why this is, what is making our limbs so heavy. My mother has a theory. “We don’t have salt,” she says, shrugging. Before long, she has company. In time, we all get it—the new people. At first it seems like bad fortune, a curse on the most recent arrivals. It takes a while for us to associate this condition with our own starvation. The word is hmmm, swollen (edematous). I too am swollen. My legs. My arms. My face. Suddenly, a simple task like walking feels like slogging through mud. Like Mak and me, Avy and Map also swell up like inflatable dolls, their faces tight and stretched, their legs fat beyond their years. The skin between Avy’s toes scares me—so taut and transparent, it looks as if it will surely burst. Still, she is stronger than me, able to walk to retrieve water. I feel helpless, ashamed, weak by comparison. My strong little sister surprises me.
When Broken Glass Floats

When broken glass floats, it symbolizes the fragility of life. Sickness touches so many lives. Even the ill-tempered "Grandma Two Kilo" is humbled, her tongue temporarily silenced by the sickness, which robs her of the last delicacy of her fading beauty.

One day Ry returns from the hospital to report that Vin is dying. As soon as she spits out the words, she convulses, doubled over with grief.

"Mak, Vin begs for you to see him. He wants to see you one more time."

"Mak can't go, Koon. Mak can hardly walk to get water to drink and cook. Mak cannot walk that far." Her words are slow, without hope or animation. She is beaten down by her own body.

"But Vin is dying, Mak! He asks for you, he misses you. ..." Ry breaks down.

"Koon, did you hear what Mak said? Mak wants to go see your brother, but Mak just can't walk that far." She is too weak to argue. Ry must understand this. And yet the roles are oddly reversed. Ry is like the mother, ordering her child to obey. Mak must be there. Doesn't she understand? Her voice rises again, desperate.

"What should I tell him when he asks for you again? What do I do, Mak?"

"Tell your baby brother that Mak cannot walk that far yet. When Mak can walk, Mak will see him." Her answer is a long sigh.

"But he's dying ..." Ry wails.

"Mak knows, Koon. Tell your brother what Mak said." Her words are slow and steady. Despite what she feels in her heart, her voice never reflects the hysteria of this moment. She is simply too sick to care. Sitting on the floor, her hands clutching a knee, Mak begins shuddering.

"Mak." Map reaches out as Mak releases her grief. It is as if she has swallowed her tears and her screams, letting only thin threads of it bubble up. Her cries are like jagged glass, and we look on in silence. Suddenly Map wails—his cries breaking her own internal spell of sadness. She looks up as if doused with a pan of cold water. Awakened.

"Don't cry, Koon prob Mak. Mak stop crying, stop crying." Mak comforts Map, holding him in her arms.

Avy's tears rush out to join them, streaming down her pale, puffy cheeks. With the swelling, she looks like a crying statue. The tears are there, but the swelling has masked her expression. Her ragged sobs join the chorus, adding to Map's, Mak's, and mine. It is too much for Ry to take. She walks away. Her weeping trails down the alley between the huts until it is a faint echo in the distance. She returns to Vin at the hospital, bringing with her a sad message. I imagine him lying on the floor of the hospital. A three-year-old's heartbroken cries when Ry tells him Mak can't come. In my mind, I cry out to Buddha to help Vin: Preah, please help my baby brother. Please don't let him die—he's only a baby. Please let him live so he can see Mak one more time. Only one more time, Preah ... .

I recall Vin's expression of hope and the words he and Mak exchanged before Ry took him to the hospital: "Mak. I go to the hospital. Soon I'll feel better. I'll come back home. I'll come soon, Mak. . . ." "Yes, koon prob Mak, go to the hospital and you'll get better soon. Then koon comes back to Mak." "Koon comes back to Mak!" A hollow game of make-believe. A gentle parting. A promise that cannot be kept.

Vin dies in the hospital from an illness that is curable. But the world is brutal, indifferent. Drawn and dehydrated, his lifeless body lies naked on the wooden hospital floor—a skeleton of a little boy. When Ry wakes next to him, she leans over and shakes him, begging for a weak answer. There is none. Soon after his death, Ry removes his red knit shirt. Even in her grief, she must think about survival, saving the shirt for Map. It is necessary, a desperate act. His last rite. Her final image of him is of a small, still body wrapped
in a burlap bag, carried away by two hospital workers. They never speak to her, these custodians of death.

Vin is buried at the edge of a hill called Phnom Preah Neak, the Sight of God. It is an impersonal burial in an unmarked grave. None of us are there to mourn. No relatives gather, no monks pray. When Ry brings home this news, no one cries. Not even Mak. To weep is to acknowledge what we can’t accept. Our minds are already saturated with sorrow. Our silence is our last defense.

Mak is numb. Like the sun surrendering to an eternal eclipse, she simply shuts off. I study my mother now, and it is hard to imagine the happy bride, the rebellious student, the determined mother full of gentle smiles and silent sacrifice. There are no rewards in our life. To be alive and walking every day, to live through another day, is its own reward in this horrible world. Already Mak looks old beyond her years. Numbed by suffering, deadened by the death all around us. Too feeble to care.

She can’t even walk less than a mile to see her dying mother, Yiey Srem, who has also been brought to our village. As fate would have it, all of Mak’s side of the family also end up in Daakpo. But there is little joy in this fact. We hardly see each other. Starvation has given Yiey Srem a swollen body much like her daughter’s. My grandmother’s sagging, wrinkled skin is inflated. Oddly, there is a cruel family resemblance in the edema—we are all becoming a tribe of puffy people, all the “new people” in the village. It is a hideous badge, a way to identify us. We become preoccupied with the lack of food. The memory of it is a living, breathing thing. It infects us. It tires us. It is everything.

Now time becomes hard to measure. We mark its passage in terms of who has died and who is still alive. Time is distilled and recalled by death. Before Vin died... After Pa was executed... This is how we talk. Before Yiey Srem’s death, I’m able to walk and see her briefly. Such visits are rare, even though our extended family mem-

bers live close to each other. We have to weigh our desire for such contact against the risk of being punished for exhibiting “family intimacy”—a connection the Khmer Rouge frowns upon. Even while working, we are not permitted to talk with family members. Harder still, we have to sneak visits when we are supposed to be working. And we have to decide whether the energy consumed by walking half a mile should be used instead to find food, for we are all starving.

Angka doesn’t care. It no longer gives us anything. No salt, no meat, and no rice. Every day I search for edible leaves, anything to survive. One day I find weeds beneath a tree, duck leaves Mak calls them. Only a few months ago, these were weeds that were mixed with rice and fed to pigs. Today, they are a welcome food. “Now we are worse than pigs,” Mak mutters, boiling the leafy greens.

This is our routine. During the day we clear weeds from fields of yucca and yams, stacking the weeds in piles. Early the next morning, we scatter the debris, tearing through the piles in search of the small black crickets that scurry from beneath their dark hiding place.

“Koon, koon, help me catch crickets. I can’t run,” Grandma Two Kilo begs. “Just two crickets a day, I can survive.”

Tadpoles, Crickets, Toads. Centipedes. Mice. Rats and scorpions. We eat anything. As we till the earth, we look upon bugs as buried treasure. Our eyes scan the soil, tucking any edible treat in a waistband, a pocket, tied into a scarf. Later the prize is retrieved, skewered on a stick, and stuffed into the fire. Those who haven’t caught anything watch, their begging eyes following each move. We must ignore them, and also ignore what we eat. There is no revulsion. Food is food. Anything, everything tastes good—even the smell of roasting crickets makes stomachs rumble with desire. Yet even the smallest creatures, the rodents, the insects, are becoming scarce. Some days, our meals for the entire day consist of boiled leaves.
WHEN BROKEN GLASS FloatS

Our lives are reduced to a tight circle. Each day revolves around what we can find to eat for the following day. And until it comes, we think about food.

All day. All night.
Hunger owns us.

Chea, seated, with her college friends, before the Khmer Rouge takeover.

Ph. Enlargement of the thumbnail-sized photo placed in a little box with an ivory Buddha that I took with me on my way to the New Camp. This box was all I had to hold on to for comfort when I was in the midst of ubiquitous danger.
Remnants of Ghosts

The Economist
April 16, 1996
"The Real Toll"

A handwritten note is scrawled at the bottom of a document signed by two of Pol Pot's men at Tuol Sleng, the former Phnom Penh school that became the most notorious prison of the Khmer Rouges. It reads, "Also killed 168 children today for a total of 178 enemies exterminated."

The year is 1976. Hunger is constantly on our minds, an inner voice that will not be stilled. Yet the Khmer Rouge lecture us about sacrifice. In a mandatory meeting they tell us that we need to sacrifice for the mobile brigades that are working on the "battlefield." These mobile brigades, they stress, are building padewat (the revolution). We, here in the village, are not worth much since we don't work on the battlefield. We've planted rice, yams, and yucca, yet we get to eat little or nothing of the harvest. Most of the food is sent to the brigades. Later, I learn exactly what "battlefield" means—a place where the only fight is to survive the revolution itself.

Mak's swollen body somehow improves, so she can walk short distances now. Like a vulture sensing a corpse nearby, an informer begins circling our hut. He orders Mak to a meeting. Mak pleads that she's not well yet. But he pounces on her slight improvement. As long as Mak can walk, she must go, he demands. Mak is angry and murmurs to herself, "When I was sick and hungry and couldn't walk, why didn't it [that creature] stick its head in here? Ar'khmaoch yer [The-ghost-take-you-away]!"

Dr. Achilles Tanedo, in a white shirt, with his brother and a friend. He slipped this picture into my hand soon after he said good-bye and wished me good luck. On the back of the picture he wrote: "PRPC—Hospital, 11:30 AM, 11-11-81. You are indeed so nice that the first time I met you I already gave you my sympathy. I really will miss you so much. Please don't forget to write. I wish you the best of everything."