Leaving Battambang, the City of Answers

SOKUNTHARY SVAY

Sometimes what's left unsaid can contain the most power. I recall English teachers emphasizing that students learn to "read between the lines," to see the written words as representations of a deeper meaning. The unearthing of silence symbolizes my personal history. I was born in a Khmer refugee camp in Khao I Dang, Thailand. My family crossed over to Thailand shortly after the Khmer Rouge—the brutal communist regime that reigned in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979—was expelled by a Vietnamese "liberation."

For most of my life, the details of my parents' past in Cambodia and how their lives have been affected by the regime have been a mystery to me. For so long, my parents have been silent about their struggles. In reading between the lines of my family's silence, I am slowly learning where I stand in relation to my three worlds: Cambodia, my parents' homeland; New York, where I grew up; and, Thailand, where I was born. It should be as simple as identifying as Khmer American, but although my parents are from Cambodia, I still feel awkward calling Cambodia home.

My picture of Cambodia consisted of scenes from *The Killing Fields*—

from the historical depiction of the exodus of Phnom Penh to the traditional red scarves worn by the Khmer Rouge—and from my attendance at numerous Khmer weddings. I was introduced to my distant relatives by looking at photographs of their grim facial expressions. Early on, I knew that if I wanted to learn anything about my family's background and how and why they ended up in the United States, I would have to learn it on my own. My limited exposure to Khmers and our homeland, combined with my parents' silence, left me with a strong desire to uncover the truth of our history and experiences.

My curiosity about Cambodia burgeoned in college, where I was eager to discover something new. Hidden in an obscure corner of the library with stacks of books on Cambodia, I pored through Cambodian memoirs published in the 1980s that hinted at what my parents survived. My family was disconnected from this self-discovery. If they sometimes saw books with Cambodian titles in the house, they never inquired about them. One of the first memoirs I read was by Haing Ngor, the Khmer actor who won an Oscar for his role in *The Killing Fields*. When I read his book, I replaced the faces of his parents with my own; I recreated the experience in my mind as though it were my family's story.

Once I had asked my father, "What happened to you during the Khmer Rouge regime?" The result was an evasive but somewhat promising answer: "One day I'll tell you our story and you'll write a book about it." I have been writing about this topic since college.

Although both my brothers did not finish high school, I managed to write my way to a free education. I received an English Literature scholarship that paid for my schooling, and later received a humanities fellowship. Both awards were given to me based on the context of Cambodia, which was the focus of my writing. Poetry, particularly prosody, also became my platform to begin etching out answers or interpretations to my own feelings of displacement. I wrote lines of verse to bring down personal barriers of

silence. I was particularly inspired by U Sam Oeur, the first accomplished Khmer poet both in Cambodia and America who used traditional Khmer poetry to speak about his life.

My mother was married to my father at an early age, and they had Thy, their firstborn son, within a couple of years. Sothea, my second brother, came shortly afterward, but died of dysentery during the regime My younger brother, Jammy, was born later. Writing this is painful because I do not know the full story of Sothea's death or my parents' loss during the regime. When I was born a few years later in the camps, I was born with a birthmark on my knee shaped like my country. Cambodians believe that birthmarks are signs of past lives. My mother must have made some peace with herself when I was born, believing that Sothea was reincarnated in me.

During my first trip to Cambodia in the winter of 2002—my father's third trip and my mother's second since they left Cambodia to make the United States their home—it was a smorgasbord of catching up with relatives, alive and dead, as well as deciding on a bride for my older brother, Thy. My father rented a van for a slew of our relatives to journey in. Seeing the ruins of Angkor Wat is practically a required Khmer pilgrimage. Sadly, most of my relatives, who have spent their entire lives in this country, could never afford to see the temples of Angkor, the ancient city of the Khmer Empire, at its height. The outline of the three-tiered temple appears on everything in Cambodia as a source of national pride, and it's also the emblem on the country's flag. Close to twenty-five of us packed ourselves into a van blatantly marked TOURISM on the side, which I lovingly dubbed the Tourismobile.

But after the weeklong excursion to see the temples, something else on that road trip had more of an impact on me: revisiting my parents' home during the Khmer Rouge regime in the province of Battambang to find the remains of Sothea.

In most cities in Cambodia, the streets are filled with dusty *motos* (motorcycles), bicycles, and small but increasing numbers of hand-me-down Toyotas. We finally reached Battambang, marked by a statue—a deity with several arms—in the middle of the road, remnants of Cambodia's past Hindu influence. We relied on memory to find the shacks my parents called home. The Cambodian countryside can be difficult to navigate since houses are demarcated only by man-made plots or ponds. Past the several-armed deity, most shacks in this area were indistinguishable.

In my father's impatience to find Sothea's burial spot, he stopped the van in front of a roadside restaurant. He flagged a *moto* taxi and then rushed off without a word. Meanwhile, my mother and the rest of us panicked. Worried that he would get lost, my mother instructed her younger brother to go after him on another available *moto* taxi. The twenty-something of us waited on the roadside, scattered outside the tourism van. Within minutes, my uncle returned with my father, who safely found his way back to us but seemed as lost as ever. At this point, we piled back into the van. My mother took over and instructed the driver to take us through different roads in the city until something looked familiar to her.

Finally, my mother asked the driver to stop the van. Our clan jumped out and followed her, perplexed at the story unfolding before their eyes. Walking into the boundary of a person's property, my mother immediately introduced herself to the owner, an elder woman, and began asking questions. My mother spoke from her memory: "I buried my son's body in a spot between two coconut trees." My mother made shuffling motions in her sandals and pink sarong toward the tropical bark. Meanwhile, the resident followed her, just as mystified as we were.

"I think it was here," my mother continued, implying that she wanted to dig up the ground. And then the elder spoke as if channeling from the local spirits: "How are we to know what is left of him? It has been over twenty years. Sometimes our memory changes to fit with our desires. For all we know, the

wind may have blown his bones away along with the rest of the dust in this country." My mother took the hint and dropped the idea of digging up the woman's land.

I took a photograph of my mother at that moment. Her eyes crinkled with pain, drawing her forehead inward. Her face was covered by her *krama*, a traditional Khmer scarf. It was hard to tell if she was protecting her face from the airborne dirt in the road, or if she was holding in the sob that threatened to escape. My father's back was to the camera, hands on his hips. His arm was larger than anything else in the picture, and he seemed determined and yet hopeless at the same time. Oftentimes, I found him falling into silence with a wistful expression on his face. I know that expression so well; it has plagued me as much as his thoughts have plagued him. At that moment I wanted to comfort my parents, but instead I continued taking pictures.

We thanked the woman with *riel*, the local currency, and went on our way. The vagueness of the land and my mother's memory were not grounds for overturning the old woman's property.

On the way back, we hiked Phnom Sampov, the "ship hill" of seven hundred steps. Phnom Sampov, once a torture and prison facility during the regime, is now a home for monks and nuns. After some prayers and a libation, we went inside a cave to burn incense and pray some more. My family and I prayed, not only for Sothea, but also for the souls left to die in that cave.

I snapped a blurry shot of my cousin as he stood near the cave's opening. Light shone on him at an angle, and he appeared to be an apparition in my viewfinder. The blurriness of my digital camera only magnified the spiritual presence of this city within a hill. We eventually fumbled and felt our way out of the cave to an elevated opening. I didn't know until I conducted research three years later that this was one of many caves where victims were pushed to their deaths. The blood that once covered the caves has since been scrubbed off. There were bones scattered where people were pushed off. I

learned that the Khmer Rouge committed such acts to save bullets. Learning that Phnom Sampov was actually a place of death (and enlightenment) was a startling discovery.

Toward the end of the day, we headed back to the local temple, where the entire family sought forgiveness from Sothea, who had been left twice by his family in this land. We bought sticks of incense, soda, and other foods to give as offerings. We inscribed his name on the incense as if without the inscription, our offerings would get lost among those from other families. I snapped a photo of my parents in front of the temple. *We stayed here too, when they first came.* We did not need to call the oppressors by their names anymore, as though doing so would give them power.

Before the night was over, my father revealed his emotions to me; this was unusual. "It was like it just happened yesterday," he said. His tears fell on the ends of his eyelashes. I wanted to ask him right then and there about the entire story. What led up to Sothea's death? What happened from the moment the Khmer Rouge invaded till my family's arrival in the United States? And why are these answers kept from me? But it seemed too vulnerable a moment for him, and I could not exploit the pain he was feeling, not when he had hidden it for so long, kept it so far buried that he had almost forgotten it.

I probably lost my chance to hear that story. But maybe there will be a day when their reluctance to remember will be outweighed by the need to pass on the truth to their grandchildren. When they realize that history will be lost with them, then the importance of submitting to the reality of their events will be even more cathartic than they realize.

When we left Battambang, we left the city of answers. We left Sothea, knowing that these answers were not ours to be found and would be aerated in the dust that fills the roads and the cities of this beautiful and tragic country. We left with reminders of the pain that Cambodia holds, ready to rebury them once more.

My mother had told me that Sothea's last words when he died were "Mother, I'm so hungry. Please find me food . . . Mother . . . I'm so cold now." After which he shut his eyes.

Triggered by some event or smell, I look back on that trip now and then. Being there brought to life all the images and stories that Thy confessed to me in the stairwell of the Bronx building, our first apartment in the States, when we were kids.

Even now I have difficulty calling my brother "Thy," and often revert to "Sothy." After passing his citizenship test, he shortened his name with a lackadaisical air. My younger brother, Jammy, is actually Sokuntharith on his birth certificate (it's common for Khmer children to be named alliteratively). My younger brother and I would often be mistaken for each other on paper. For the standardized tests given in New York City, preprinted electronic sheets with our names would only display six out of the many letters in our names. Finally, my mother dubbed him Jammy, after the lead character in the 1980s TV show *The Bionic Woman*. Like many immigrants, we learned English and picked up American culture through television. Since then, his nickname has mutated into various forms and appearances—Jammy, Jimmy, Jaime, Jim—changes subject to mood and trend.

It has been a little more than three years since my first trip to Cambodia in 2002. In the midst of looking for Jammy's birth certificate in June 2006 (as a favor to him, since he recently moved to another state), I came across papers documenting my family's refugee resettlement when we were accepted into the United States in 1981 under the sponsorship of the International Rescue Committee. Uncovering my family's story revealed a drawn-out saga.

From what I've read in Khmer memoirs, upon applying for relocation, refugees had to go through a very thorough interview process; this included listing past occupations, family members, and so on. In the refugee

documents, my mother's entire family is listed, and in the status section all were claimed as MISSING. The reality of 1981, when the whereabouts of my mother's entire family were unknown, filled me with a grief I'd never known. However, upon closer inspection, the family names brought me solace—my mother had made contact with some family members after her resettlement in the United States and was reunited with many more upon her first return to Cambodia twenty years after she had left.

Often, I think about my family's history of name changing and its relationship to our identity. My father's real name is Pheng Nget, not Chy Svay, as it appears on all of his documents. I was told that the name change was done to protect our family. Before he married my mother, he was in the Cambodian army. In addition to many other things, being affiliated with the prior Cambodian government was grounds for extermination under the Khmer Rouge.

Photos of them at the time of the interview were included in the documents. In spite of these photos, I still have no idea what my parents looked like when they were younger since their wedding and family photos are lost. Without concrete documents or pictures, my reliance on our story and who we are had, up to this point, been verbal. These resurfaced mug shots of my parents' terrified faces, and the outstretched hand of a refugee-camp worker holding an identification number, were a revelation. I was starving for this information, and I brimmed with tears of triumph and relief at recovering something hidden from me. In that picture, my mother is the most beautiful I've ever seen her; she's the age I am now, making this discovery either well timed or eerie, or both. It makes me wonder about the importance of being twenty-five, for her as someone surviving a regime, death, and separation, and for me as someone who has lived a life of secrets and is now unearthing this significant connection. For once, I have something tangible to include in my parents' re-created past, one that has no room for the errors of memory.

However, the discrepancies between my parents' ages, along with my

birthday, did not add up to what I had been told: that there is a ten-year age difference between my parents, despite the paper indicating five, and that my birth date, which I'd believed to be July 31 all my life, was listed as July 21. There have been too many mistakes, either rooted in great coincidence or in incompetence.

These changes point to how our identities are not grounded but floating across borders. With my attempts to learn my parents' past without them, I was left to interpret, re-create, and imagine their scenarios. With snippets throughout the years like a time lapse, I have created a picture of their experience. But that was all dependent on their passive storytelling. And now faced with the bluntness of these documents, I cannot trust that the answers lie here. To do that would be denying the discrepancy between my parents' verbal storytelling and the conflicting facts of these refugee documents. At least they confirmed my father's original name, Pheng Nget. Still, if our names and identities can be stripped of us, what is the value in being attached to these identifiers? More importantly, why has there been silence from my parents about the reasons behind this and everything else they have hidden?

Silence can become a means to an end. In their silence, my parents have kept their truth of Cambodia; in my own silence, I have kept my connection to Cambodia from them. We are hiding behind our aliases, either through fear or through tradition. Where can I begin to draw the lines between my parents' destroyed identities and their current ones? Their documented ages and their real ones? The name changes symbolize how I feel about the nature of my relationship to them, of hiding who I am in an American identity as they hide themselves in their Khmer identity, and of the assimilation through the two letters left behind in Thy's name and the morphing of Jammy's moniker. Ultimately, I feel robbed of permanence in name, in country, and in personal history. When can I begin to trust in my parents and how they display themselves to the world?

In my parents' living room during one of my many trips to the Bronx this past year to see my family, without any prompting, my mother and father disclosed stories from their time in the camps in Thailand. My father spoke about an incident in which some Cambodian refugees were herded onto a bus, believing that they would go to another camp. Upon stopping, the soldiers forced them out of the vehicle and designated a spot for them to walk. They innocently walked to their deaths in an area laden with land mines.

My mother told me that during our family's stay in Khao I Dang from late 1979 to early 1981, the soldiers' trucks would stop every night before a refugee's home. Although the trucks stopped nearby, they never stopped at our home. She said that I was the reason they did not stop at her door, that the noise of a crying newborn prevented any unexpected "visits." My parents calmly told me about their traumatic experiences, and I speculated that the distance of so many years was a factor in their controlled storytelling. Walking to my apartment later that evening, I went over again what my mother said about the soldiers not stopping at her house. In essence, she was saying that *I* saved her life. In that realization, I lost my composure on the sidewalk. *I saved my mother's life.*

After my first trip to Cambodia, I had great respect and appreciation for my parents' every sacrifice and worry. Each decision they made for me seemed to be colored by their experience of living under the regime.

The danger of creating a journey in the mind is that we may keep it so abstract that it has no credibility in reality. I was faced with cultural and familial barriers in my attempt to create a homeland in Cambodia. The books I read about Cambodia dealt with a limited time in the country's history—the Khmer Rouge regime. Because of this limited perspective, I envisioned Cambodia as only a place of death and tragedy.

My trip to Cambodia gave me a broader picture of the country outside of the tragedy. Now, I have images of collapsed and tarnished colonial buildings in my head when I think of Phnom Penh; the countryside is filled with rice fields and coconut and palm trees that provide sustenance to the surrounding residents. I'm convinced that Cambodia has the most beautiful children I've ever seen: round and brown, cherublike faces expressing that joy of simply being alive. I will remember my family's pleasure in Khmer dance, when they fan their fingers in gestures reminiscent of lotus blossoming nearby, as they swing and grin at one another in the dance circle. This is Cambodia to me, a place of my heritage and a wallpapered landscape in my mind.

While the challenges of being bicultural are a pretty common experience for hyphenated Americans, I feel envious. At least there's something more definitive about being American-born. I was born in a country neither of my parents' origin nor of my upbringing. Early on, I knew that nationality—the place of your birth—had something to do with who you are. I knew other children my age who were born in the same camp. Somehow we felt distinct from those born in Cambodia. We weren't just Khmer; we were refugees. In addition to that distinction, we similarly shared conflicted feelings of being less Khmer because of our birthplace and, later on, because we weren't fluent in our native language.

Khao I Dang, the camp where I was born, contained an influx of refugees en route to other destinations. Unlike in other Thai camps, refugees in Khao I Dang were eligible for resettlement in another (or third, as they put it) country. Some who were associated with the Khmer Rouge were turned down for resettlement and repatriation. Eventually the camp closed in 1992, and its residents were moved to another site where they awaited (what many inhabitants felt was a forced) repatriation.[1] The camp's progression embodies my own shifting identity and how our personal truths are impermanent and constantly evolving.

My father and I recently conversed for an hour about family. Eventually, I pulled out the resettlement documents I found and asked him to explain the inconsistency between his own words and the text before him. We spent the next half hour solving the puzzles I created in my mind. As it turns out, my father did not change his name to save the family. He took his cousin's birth certificate and birth date so he could enroll in school (back then in Cambodia, proof of age was required in order to sit for school entrance exams). My mother's lack of a birthday is simply because she forgot her birthday, as did my father who had assumed the birthday of his cousin. My mother's May 5 birthday, as explained by my father, was a date conjured up that my mother could easily remember because of its repetition of fives. Since Cambodia observes the lunar calendar, it is difficult to decipher their actual birthdays. My father told me that on the day he was born, his mother unceremoniously scratched his birthday in chalk on the wall of their home. That was *his* birth certificate.

In asking my father these questions, I challenged the silence in my family. In doing so, I've gained, for the first time, some semipermanent truths. There's no doubt of the atrocities of living under the Khmer Rouge regime, but the uncovering of aspects of my parents' personal history has taken away its mystique for me. I credit part of it to the act of writing. Through writing, I have created my own documentation of my family's history. The realities I experienced through books prepared me and gave me an appreciation of our history, while the unpredictable trip to Battambang, learning about Sothea and the victims of the cave, showed me that stories develop on their own. My parents needed their own time and distance in order to relay their stories. Questioning my father about the documents showed me that I was ready to find the truth in the lines of my own creation, a truth that cannot be contained any longer. Like the three worlds I inhabit—Cambodia, New York, and Thailand—my truth contains multiple realities. Across borders and between the lines of my family history, in my parents' stories I've created a homeland in my own words.