



Never Forget

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August 6, 2009

Once upon a time—1975, actually, in Cambodia—there was a regime so evil that it created an antisociety where torture was currency and music, books, and love were abolished. This regime ruled for four years and murdered nearly 2 million of its citizens, a quarter of the population. The perversion was so extreme, the acts so savage, that three decades later, the country still finds itself reeling.

AT THAT TIME—during the nearly four-year reign of *Angkar* lasting from April 17, 1975, to January 7, 1979—the killing was so random and widespread across Cambodia that death became a near certainty, especially if you were sent to the prison camp known as S-21. While the odds were roughly one in four of dying—and worse depending on your demographic (for instance, adult men died in much higher percentages)—your chance of survival at S-21 was .04 percent. Or put the opposite way, the odds of your death were 99.96 percent.

Before death, though, a prisoner confessed, over and over again, until he'd named sometimes hundreds of "traitors," in order to stop the pain of torture. The man who would soon lose his wife and who, as it turned out, was a mechanic with dexterous hands, had been named and arrested, taken away blindfolded to the place where 15,000 others were sentenced and exterminated in nearby pastureland famously known as the Killing Fields. But then, as fate would have it, he would emerge as one of only seven survivors from the prison camp. He became living proof that somehow surviving the absolute certainty of your own death can be as horrific as murder itself. For in the end, you're the only one left to carry the memory of 15,000 terrors.

THE MAN WAS 44 years old when the body of his wife disappeared, the same age as I am right now. There is no equivalence; this is only a fact. And one other: At this same age, though I have three children, he'd already lost four.

FROM THE BOOK of Atrocities, the evil fable begins like this: Once upon a time, a group of men educated in Paris and steeped in communist ideology had a dream for their homeland. To create a Cambodian society that surpassed the greatness of Angkor, the kingdom that reached its pinnacle under the god-king Suryavarman II in the twelfth century with the construction of Angkor Wat. From the jungles—where their leaders had fled to escape the repressive measures of Prince Sihanouk in

1963—they fought a guerrilla war, led by a soft-spoken, enigmatic schoolteacher named Saloth Sar. These communists, however, did not believe in gods, kings, or culture, as it turned out, but they were good at biding their time. In the vacuum of power left after the eight-year American bombing of Cambodia, they swept east across the lowlands to the capital, Phnom Penh, finally wresting control from the corrupt U.S.-supported regime in 1975. (The premier, Lon Nol, had already fled to Hawaii.) Their first act was to evacuate the city, hurrying the populace under the pretense that the Americans were coming to bomb again, emptying hospitals, setting millions of people—including the elderly, lame, and pregnant—walking on the roads that led to the countryside, a scene of hunger and corpses straight out of Brueghel.

What the Khmer Rouge had in store was a radical agrarian revolution, one with the professed aim of completely renovating society while giving the peasants a better life, of evening the rewards and feeding the hungry, of bringing a rational and utilitarian nation-state into being. At first, without the world knowing their real intentions, they were partially applauded, even by American journalists and politicians. Prince Sihanouk assured Congress that the Khmer Rouge would establish “a Swedish type of kingdom,” and Senator George McGovern believed that the new regime would be “run by some of the best-educated, most able intellectuals in Cambodia.” But almost immediately the Khmer Rouge’s revolutionary pretenses gave way to the sickening irrationality of brutes. In that first spasm of violence, everyone wearing glasses was killed. Everyone who spoke a foreign language was killed. Everyone with a university education was killed. Word was sent to expats living abroad to come home and join the new Cambodia; when a thousand or so arrived on special flights from Beijing, they were killed. Monks, so revered in

Cambodian society and long the voice of conscience there, were killed. Lawyers, doctors, and diplomats were killed. Bureaucrats, soldiers, and policemen, even factory workers (who in the minds of the Khmer Rouge were equivalent to industrialization itself), were killed.

In that first moment, the lucky ones were directed to keep walking to their home villages—some traveled for months this way—where they were sorted, sent to collectives, and worked from sunup to twilight. A person’s worth was eventually measured by his ability to move cubic yards of earth. “To keep you is no profit,” said the executioners to the unworthy before killing them, “to destroy you is no loss.”

THE MAN WHO would survive S-21 but lose his wife—the man named Chum Mey—realized that the troops first entering Phnom Penh were mostly lost boys from the jungle, dirty and ragged with blank expressions, who, within hours of being greeted as liberators by cheering crowds, turned on the masses with their AK-47’s. In the south of the city, they fired warning shots; in the northwest sector, they fired on people. Never having seen toilets before, the soldiers drank from them as if they were cisterns, shat on the floor, wiped themselves with sticks that they left strewn about abandoned houses.

It was April, the hottest month. Fires ringed the city, the roads were so packed you could only progress in baby steps, parents were separated from their children, the sick and old laid themselves down, moaning. The man had his wife and children. At night he went down to the river to get water for them and found himself standing on bodies, and then in the water surrounded by bodies, so thick in places you couldn't drink.

Funny, a repugnant memory such as that clung with an almost humid fondness now, thirty-five years later, for as horrible as the moment was, his family was still gathered about him. When he carried the water back, there was still thirst to quench, voices calling for their father and husband: Here, *Pa!* Here! Terrible things gathered around them, but lying down for the night, he could whisper to his wife: *Is this really happening?*

THE LEADERS of the revolution were designated as Brother Number One (Pol Pot), Brother Number Two (Nuon Chea), Brother Number Three (Ieng Sary), and so on. And they were nothing if not ambitious in trying to build a new society. The Brothers abolished courts and banks. They abolished money and holidays and love.

They abolished time and history, setting everything back to Year Zero. And they abolished the four things Cambodians hold most dear: food, family, village, and Buddhism. Those who hailed from the city were branded with the designation "New People," versus "Old People," who were from the country. New People were those most often badly punished. The entire populace was forced to wear black pajamas, the women Maoist bobs. So secretive were the Brothers that for a year no one knew who was running the country. Until Saloth Sar emerged under his new revolutionary name of Pol Pot, it was as if the faceless godhead *Angkar* decided all.

When it came to song, workers were only occasionally allowed to sing from a menu of revolutionary anthems like "Struggling to Build Dam and Dig Canals" or "Bravery of Construction Revolutionary Soldiers" or "Best Wishes to People in Northwestern Zone." But a jingle secretly murmured by workers at the time spoke the truth: "*Angkar* kills but does not explain."

ON THE ROAD from Phnom Penh during those first days, a Khmer Rouge cadre said to the man with dexterous fingers, who would soon lose his wife: "See nothing, say nothing, do nothing against *Angkar* and you may survive."

I FIRST WENT TO Cambodia in 2002, primarily, as it turned out, to change diapers. My wife had work in Phnom Penh, and thus left with her driver and translator early each morning and returned later each night, while I took care of our firstborn son, who was 2 at the time. Initially, I thought we'd have some cultural moments out in the city, but soon realized that we were destined to spend an abnormal amount of time eating grilled-cheese sandwiches by the pool.

When we ventured out of the hotel, I pushed him in a stroller along the Mekong River, drifting with the hordes to the center of town, to a park there, where under a brutal sun, in the sticky, soaking heat, one could ride an elephant for a dollar. With

son in arms, I climbed a rickety metal ladder, sat warily on the huge beast (his legs were chained to each other), and one with the pachyderm now, we lumbered the circumference of the park while my son, in silent panic, clutched me like a snake-spooked chimpanzee. Everyone—the mothers clutching their own babies, the fathers hand in hand with their daughters—pointed and smiled at us.

Back at the hotel, we ate our sandwiches, swam in the pool, went to bed. We understood nothing, of course. Our ignorance was willful. We tried to sleep but couldn't. I lay awake, remembering all the smiles in that park. Why had everyone been smiling? It made me suddenly paranoid. Was there something I hadn't known about that elephant, that park, that set of operators? Was the joke on me? And if so, what was the joke?

Or had they merely smiled because they could?

I WAS TO HAVE one afternoon to myself in Phnom Penh, after my wife had completed her work. I scoured the guidebook—the Silver Pagoda, Wat Phnom, a drink at Le Royal—but got stuck on S-21, the famous prison camp located in a former school called Tuol Sleng. Even Lonely Planet couldn't bring itself to recommend a visit to the site, which had been turned into a museum. Here's what it said:

“Altogether, a visit to Tuol Sleng is a profoundly depressing experience. The sheer ordinariness of the place makes it even more horrific: the suburban setting, the plain school buildings, the grassy playing area where today children kick around balls, rusted beds, instruments of torture and wall after wall of harrowing black and white portraits conjure up images of humanity at its worst. Tuol Sleng is not for the squeamish.”

So that's where I went.

IT WAS SILENT when I arrived, and I was trying to gauge that silence at the same time that I was guarding against it, with the same active ambivalence I've had visiting other holocaust museums and concentration camps. The mind glimmers with trepidation: How bad will this get? Which is another way of asking: Just how deep and dark goes the human animal? And: Am I willing to participate, even if just bearing witness? Which itself is a defense: *bearing witness*. After all, we are the animals, too, bearing witness to our accomplishment.

Tuol Sleng had all the Gulag charm of any nondescript cement-block three-story building complex blooming with mold, humidity stains, and the sickening presence of evil in the unwashable blood marked into the umber-and-white-tile-checked floor. People, tourists like me, moved through the old school in ghostly ministrations—as if the guards of yore—and in the background, seemingly far away, came the low rustle of the city.

S-21 had been directed by a man named Kaing Guek Eav, whose revolutionary name was Comrade Duch (pronounced “doik”). Once a teacher of mathematics, he'd first

been conscripted by the Khmer Rouge to run a jungle prison camp, where he'd studiously refined his ideas about torture, and was then put in charge of S-21. It was here that he condoned "living autopsies" (the slicing and flaying of victims); that he demanded the extended use of torture to obtain confessions (including near drownings, the removal of toe- and fingernails followed by a dousing of alcohol, electric shocks applied to genitals, suffocation with plastic bags, and forcing prisoners to eat human excrement); that he ordered the murder of at least 15,000 people, who were taken to the Killing Fields and shot or bludgeoned (with iron rods, shovels, and axes) and then dumped into mass graves. Operating from 1975 to 1979, S-21 became the most infamous of 196 such prison camps the Khmer Rouge established throughout Cambodia, primarily because so many of its prisoners were the purged party loyal—and because Duch's methods were so stunningly brutal. In 1979, when the Vietnamese drove the Khmer Rouge from power, they happened upon Tuol Sleng because of the stench of rotting corpses.

Now Tuol Sleng was a museum—and perhaps the most potent symbol of the Khmer Rouge's dystopia. As I crossed the courtyard, the leaves of the palm trees and banyans shifted benevolently in a breeze, and detaching the scene from its history, one might have imagined this courtyard at a swank hotel in Honolulu: pleasant, tropical, hushed. But instead of someone taking drink orders, there was a billboard posted with security regulations. They began with their own warm welcome:

1. *You must answer accordingly to my questions. Don't turn them away.*
2. *Don't try to hide the facts by making pretexts this and that. You are strictly prohibited to contest me.*
3. *Don't be a fool for you are a chap who dare to thwart the revolution.*

FROM THE BOOK OF ATROCITIES: THE WAY THEY KILLED, PART ONE. PRISONERS WERE HOOKED up to a pump and IV line and had all of their blood drained for use in the hospitals. According to witnesses, the breathing turned to gasps, then wheezing, until the victim's eyes rolled back in his head, leaving only the whites. Bloodless, the corpses were then thrown in pits.

AT TUOL SLENG, you drift from room to empty room. Here stands that iconic rusted frame of a bed, used to bind prisoners. (6. *While getting lashes or electrification you must not cry at all.*) Here the bolts that helped shackle up to fifty prisoners at a time, in holding cells, the bodies laid out on the floor like soon-to-be-gutted tuna. (7. *Do nothing, sit still and wait for my orders...*) In some rooms are photographs of the very same rooms, taken by the Vietnamese on the day they discovered the prison camp, a decomposed body left on the bed, a slit neck bled out in nearly black puddles. There are shackles and metal boxes that once held excrement for feeding. There's a map of Cambodia on one wall, made from 300 skulls, and barbed wire on the upper balconies, put there, after a rash of suicides, to keep the prisoners from jumping. But it's the empty eeriness of the rooms that fills the imagination; the tranquility that calls up the shrieking opposite. (8. *Don't make pretexts about Kampuchea Krom in order to hide your jaw of traitor.*)

Located on the first floor of the middle building are some of the most famous death masks in the world, those black-and-white photographs taken of living prisoners upon admission to Tuol Sleng. And yet the captured already know they're dead. (10. *If you disobey any point of my regulations you shall get either ten lashes or five shocks of electric discharge.*) The fear and resignation, the dark epiphany that the flashbulb brings—some have already been beaten, some have babies clinging to them, some stand unflinching, in their last moment of public dignity before Duch's men have their way—is made more poignant by the fact that they are trapped inside an unsolvable koan. Their confusion is writ large beneath their defeat. What they're about to confirm, during the hours and days of interrogation that will soon follow, is that there are no right answers. That they have become victims, as one visitor put it, of an “irrational radicalism” or, more plainly, of an absolutely absurd universe, one in which the sanctity of the body is torn down again and again to a diamond-hard point, void of ideals and emotion, where ultimately dying becomes less painful than living.”

AMONG THOSE WHO died under Duch were members of the Khmer Rouge's own Standing Committee (caught in the spin cycle of Pol Pot's ever increasing paranoia, more and more high-ranking officials were thought to be turncoats) and at least eleven Westerners: four Americans, three French, two Australians, a Brit, and a New Zealander. How any of them ended up at S-21 in the first place must be seen as a horrifically random act of cosmic bad luck. In the case of two American men who were sailing from Singapore to Hawaii, they mistakenly ended up in Cambodian waters and were apprehended by Khmer Rouge patrols.

Besides these special cases, the killing at S-21 was indiscriminate and nearly complete, including the equal-opportunity elimination of laborers, teachers, factory workers, artists, monks, diplomats, cyclo drivers, and on and on. When one thinks of the loss of life, one wonders again at those who made it out alive. One way was this: The Party, in imitation of Mao's cult of personality, decided it needed portraits of Pol Pot, and two of the prisoners happened to be painters. Thus they were offered the chance to paint for their lives. (On the list of those to die, next to the painter named Vann Nath, Duch had scribbled the words: *Leave for using.*)

Meanwhile, the prison camp needed a good mechanic, and in the case of Chum Mey, the man who would lose his wife, he knew how to fix things, and his turn to die coincided with a broken sewing machine used for repairing the guards' uniforms. And so the spinning wheel's needle landed on the sliver-wedge that bore their names—and that's how they lived.

THE WAY THEY KILLED, PART TWO.

TO MAKE LOVE out of wedlock meant certain death, and a boy who had just reached puberty, who was confused and desperate, was caught in the act with a water buffalo. The next day everyone from his collective—from the youngest to the oldest—was gathered. The boy was paraded before the crowd, strung up, then

taunted, tortured, and killed. As odd as the case sounds, survivors of the Khmer Rouge recall public executions—full of redress and mockery, disembowelment and cannibalism—as being a part of the daily schedule. “Better to destroy ten innocent people,” was another saying, “than to let one enemy go free.”

A VISIT TO S-21 leaves an inconsolable feeling. It rides with you in the taxi back to the unreality of the hotel, through the streets of Phnom Penh, buzzing with markets and families, with the ramshackle grandeur of golden stupas and crumbling colonial architecture. And yet somewhere still behind it, one rearrives at the skeleton: the images just after the Khmer Rouge took the capital, a city drained of all human life, the colonial buildings empty and echoing, the pagodas ransacked and used to hold grain, piles of television sets and radios, burnt cars and all other machines of modern life strewn in the streets, twisting columns of smoke rising from the wreckage. Behind the normalcy of today, even the veneer of progress, lurks that desolation (*...it is still happening*).

In my case, the aftermath of a visit to S-21 left me with (a) a suffusion of paranoia and (b) a feeling of utter futility. It was the futility that stuck with me, though, the gut-wrenching realization that somehow the Khmer Rouge had gotten away with their experiment and that they had razed a country of its lawyers and leaders, intellectuals and activists (all those who might have had the expertise and wherewithal to hold them accountable for their crimes). By “smashing” (their word) the populace, by pathologically replacing the individual with the collective (and making sure that the collective knew how to do only one thing: grow rice), they’d instilled a paralysis and fear that had so far, thirty years later, saved them from retribution. They’d effectively lobotomized their own country.

It was astonishing, really. In the annals of the century’s great crimes against humanity, the Nazi leadership had been tried—and many of them executed—in fairly short order, as had the Japanese war criminals. Guilty parties convicted of genocide in Rwanda, Iraq, and the former Yugoslavia were imprisoned and in some cases executed. Those responsible for apartheid in South Africa were subjected to a truth commission, which at least demanded confession and supplication.

Meanwhile, after being forced from power, the Khmer Rouge leadership set up on the border of Thailand, in the jungle stronghold of Pailin. From there, Pol Pot and his minions carried on their killing (including taking the lives of Western backpackers visiting the Angkor Wat temple complex) and tried to muster a second revolution. (It was said that between ordering the murder of his top lieutenants, Pol Pot, who was never pursued as a criminal, enjoyed Cognac, Pringles, and reading *Paris Match*, a French celebrity rag.) During this time, the Khmer Rouge continued to occupy Cambodia’s seat at the U.N. and receive foreign delegations in the jungle. The regime was so deeply entrenched that even the United States couldn’t cut final ties until 1991, a decade after learning the worst about it. Meanwhile, a number of high-ranking Khmer Rouge leaders were invited back to Phnom Penh and given villas by the government.

The mystery to me, and many others, was also a pique: What was the exact purpose of all this accommodation? And more: When was someone going to pay?

NOT LONG AFTER returning from Cambodia that first time, I had coffee with an editor in Manhattan. As happens at such meetings, an air of false importance hovered over the proceedings as we discussed “big stories” that seemed to have been overlooked by the media, even though we *were* the media. When I brought up the untried Khmer Rouge leaders, pointing out the 1.7 million dead from nearly thirty years ago, his eyes glazed. Yes—but no: More than that, he wanted to talk about Hollywood. “What people tend to miss,” he said, “is that George Clooney’s much more than an actor.”

THEY DID NOT believe in gods, kings, or culture. In fact, it’s fair to say that in spite of their communist doctrine, they believed in very little at all except a very dark, dominating kind of nihilism. They abolished schools, sport, toys, free time. They banned words like *beauty*, *colorful*, and *comfort* from the radio. They forced all children 7 or older from their parents, placing them in packs called “mobile units” to help with the rice harvest. (It was a “vagrant life,” said one survivor, “like that of a plant floating in the ocean.”) They abolished happiness, as it was their supreme belief that in order to purge individuality, the people must be made to suffer, and having suffered, would be void of dreams and expectations. That is, without minds of their own, they’d be perfect revolutionaries.

THE KHMER ROUGE were so busy killing people, they didn’t mince words. Here are a few of their sayings:

“He who protests is an enemy; he who opposes is a corpse.”

“*Angkar* has [the many] eyes of the pineapple.”

“Hunger is the most effective disease.”

IT’S STILL HAPPENING, PA. You’re an old man now, and it is still happening. The thugs have turned out the nearly 2 million residents of Phnom Penh, and as you walk along that road with your whole family, and as others lie dying, as others are shot and beaten and literally steamrolled (one body you see has been mashed to the thickness of a pancake, oozing clear syrup and viscera), your youngest contracts a high fever, then diarrhea.

You bury her one night in a heavy rain and keep going.

Sometime during that death march, the soldiers demand that all the mechanics identify themselves. You are guileless and want to please in order to save your family. They assure you that your family will be safe, and when they pull you from the line, you look back once at them. Then you are sent to the city, where you begin that first month repairing the boats they use to transport Khmer Rouge soldiers up-country along the Mekong. Your next assignment is two years in the capital, scurrying through ghostly streets, going from abandoned house to abandoned house, retrieving and then fixing, by your count, 40,000 sewing machines—40,000

broken belts and bobbins—all of which go to the factories where the women work, making the same black pajamas that you will be wearing on the day your wife disappears.

THE WAY THEY KILLED, PART THREE.

IF SOMEONE required killing, it was common practice to kill their children. If a parent died of starvation or disease, the children might also be killed. At the Killing Fields, babies were held by their feet and smashed against a designated tree, the Baby-Smashing Tree.

Duch would later admit, while explaining why he ordered the death of so many children, that those that came to S-21 with their parents were seen as dangerous agents, potential enemies of the state who would ultimately seek revenge for the death of a parent. “You must pull the weed at the root” went the saying. Or: Kill now before you, too, are killed.

EVERYONE HAD A THEORY, real or half-baked, about why it had been nearly impossible to bring the Khmer Rouge to justice. For some, American guilt rode high on the list. That is, the Americans were loathe to reexamine the sordid details of their eight-year secret bombing of the country—which killed somewhere between 150,000 and 500,000 civilians—and were unwilling to accept their role in the destabilization of society that led to the rise of the Khmer Rouge. For others, the prime minister, Hun Sen, didn’t want his own Khmer Rouge résumé dredged up. (“We should dig a hole and bury the past,” he was quoted as saying in 1998, rejecting the idea of trials.) And then the international community didn’t seem to have much desire for it, either; being resource-poor and of no geopolitical advantage, Cambodia had nothing to offer. Meanwhile, the money that was earmarked for eventual trials, money that poured in through various NGOs and foreign governments, created a lucrative cottage industry for certain corrupt local officials who were motivated to drag out the process as long as possible.

And yet as time sludged forward, an agreement was finally forged in 2003 between the Cambodian government and the U.N. to inaugurate the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia for the Prosecution of Crimes Committed During the Period of Democratic Kampuchea, or the ECCC. A formal indictment followed in 2007, charging Duch with crimes against humanity as well as war crimes. In addition, the top Khmer Rouge leaders who remained alive were arrested and imprisoned, including Brother Number Two (Nuon Chea) and Brother Number

Three (Ieng Sary). But up until Duch took the stand in March of this year to begin the first trial, there were still those who doubted such a day would ever come—and others, mostly those born after 1979, who didn’t understand why there should be a trial for these mythical old men at all. Why did it matter? Or: Was it better left forgotten?

In writing the introduction to the trials in a handbook distributed to the Cambodian people, Hun Sen put it most simply. “The crimes of the Khmer Rouge period were not just committed against the people of Cambodia,” he wrote, “but against all humanity.”

DECEMBER 9, 1970: Feeling frustrated by the changing tide of the war in Vietnam, Richard Nixon calls his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, to discuss closing down North Vietnamese supply routes through Cambodia. “I want everything that can fly to go in there and crack the hell out of them,” says the president. “There is no limitation on mileage, and there is no limitation on budget.” Throughout the conversation, Nixon seems agitated, peeved. “The whole goddamn Air Force over there farting around,” he says. “It is a disgraceful performance.... Get them off their asses and get them to work now.”

Minutes later Kissinger is speaking to Alexander Haig: “I just talked to our little friend,” says Kissinger. “[H]e wants a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia. He doesn’t want to hear anything. It’s an order; it’s to be done. Anything that flies on anything that moves. You got that?”

On the transcript, the response is described as follows: “Couldn’t hear but sounded like Haig laughing.”

OVER AND OVER and over, in past, present, and future, it’s happening, has happened, will happen again. Like this:

In 146 b.c., the Romans attacked Carthage, jealous of its wealth and refinement. After giving up their weapons to avoid war, the Carthaginians were asked to abandon their beloved city and, when they refused, were set upon, beaten, and burned alive. Over the course of a week, Roman soldiers employed all manner of killing—using swords for stabbing and spears for impaling. They lofted bodies from rooftops to the cobbles below and buried children and old people alive or stampeded them beneath their horses. According to one account, bodies were “torn asunder into all kinds of horrible shapes, crushed and mangled.” When the Carthaginian commander, Hasdrubal, finally surrendered, his wife appeared before him at a burning temple with their children and, reproaching him for his cowardice, she “slew her children, flung them into the fire, and plunged in after them.”

Witnessing it all, the Roman commander Scipio clasped the hand of one of his lieutenants. “A glorious moment, Polybius,” he said, “but I have a dread foreboding that someday the same doom will be pronounced upon my own country.”

Or in other words, our own genocide forever comes next.

BEFORE RETURNING TO Cambodia during the phase of Duch’s pretrial hearings, I was reading a lot. Books about Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Books about torture and genocide. I sat in a room, in the middle of winter, ice shagging the windows, staring at pictures of the Brothers Khmer (oddly bloated while everyone else starved)—and some of their 1.7 million victims (fed on teaspoons of gruel; you could see their ribs). I read and took notes. By the time I recorded the details of one horrific happening, it was subsumed by the details of the next. It was hard to accept

the incomprehensibility of the feat, the sheer creativity of *Angkar's* sadism. But there it was, in the pictures taken at S-21, in the still-alive faces flashing with death. During this time, I thought that perhaps if you applied logic (for instance, a syllogism) to something illogical (for instance, a genocide), you might reach, well, the beginning of understanding. One afternoon, poring over my notes, a couple of disparate lines unmended themselves, floated up, and spun down again. It was a beginning:

Language is the only means to reconciliation.

Pain destroys language.

For those in pain, there is no means to reconciliation.

MY FIRST MORNING in Phnom Penh, I met at the hotel with a defense attorney for Comrade Duch named François Roux. The ECCC was set up in such a way that for every Cambodian attorney, there was also a corresponding international attorney. Roux shared his defense duties with a Cambodian lawyer named Kar Savuth, who himself had lost two brothers and nearly his own life to the Khmer Rouge. Roux had spent thirty years doing this work, traveling the world to defend the accused from Rwanda to French Polynesia. He'd defended José Bové, the man who tore down a McDonald's in France protesting genetically modified crops. Here in the United States he'd helped save the so-called twentieth hijacker, Zacarias Moussaoui, from the death penalty. "I like being on the side of the accused," he said. "I find it edifying."

At the hotel, he waved off the sumptuous five-star buffet, a cornucopia of pancakes and dumplings, *pho* and shrimp lo mein, and instead drank a single cup of orange-peko tea. He was a diminutive, impish man with quick, intelligent brown eyes, clad in a slightly ill-fitting black blazer and ironed white shirt. He'd spent so much time in Cambodia lately, he'd taken a little house to live in, and he found his life completely entwined with Duch, whom he met with every day. Yes, they had formed a bond, he said, a client-attorney bond, but a human bond nonetheless. "I wouldn't say we are friends," said Roux, "but we have an understanding, a very good understanding."

I wasn't sure what that meant exactly. Was Roux here to act as an apologist for Duch, to report that he'd looked into the man's soul and seen something that the rest of humanity had somehow missed? Somewhere along the way, Duch had converted to Christianity, but thirty years and 15,000 dead bodies later was it okay to say, "Oh yeah, that stuff back there, that was a big mistake"?

I'm sure it wasn't the first time Roux had been mistaken for one of his clients, and he tried his best to explain, but for a moment I held tightly to my own syllogism:

Duch was evil.

Roux had a bond with Duch.

Roux had a bond with evil.

The Frenchman's mouth kept moving—"due process...accepted responsibility...true justice..."—but I lost track of what he was saying. Only later, when I went back to the transcript, did I hear his voice again, almost plaintive in its individuation.

"I'm only here to try to make something fair out of something unfair," he said.

AT S-21, when Duch had once been omnipotent, when it seemingly hadn't occurred to him to question his own actions or seek expiation from his god for the sins he was committing, he preferred whips and electric shocks to waterboarding in order to keep his prisoners alive.

To an interrogator under his command, he gave these words of advice: "Beat [the prisoner] until he tells everything. Beat him to get at the deep things."

AT OUR MEETING, Roux had spoken eloquently about how it could be that we might allow someone like Duch back into "our human community." He went on to point out how the trial would allow his client to make his amends with the Cambodian people, how the criminal was always bigger than his crimes, that Duch had undergone a conversion. He was now a Christian, but more than that he was *changed* somehow.

Changed how? By sudden guilt? After the Vietnamese had poured into Phnom Penh in January of 1979, effectively ending the rule of the Khmer Rouge, Comrade Duch had stayed at S-21 until the final second in order to oversee the killing of the last of the prisoners (the ones photographed by the Vietnamese, bodies bound on the rusted metal bedframes, throats slashed, bled out on the umber-and-white floor); then he'd disappeared into the jungle, eventually making his way to China to teach Khmer. He returned to the jungle to work for Pol Pot as a bureaucrat and then taught school again in a small village, where he was regarded as a good teacher with a mean temper. Later, after his conversion, he became a lay minister and worked in the countryside with the Christian relief agency World Vision, which is where he was found in 1999, under an assumed name, by a young journalist whose own initial visit to Tuol Sleng had led him on a personal manhunt for Comrade Duch. Would he have ever come forward if he hadn't been discovered?

I admit I had a hard time buying the tale of his full conversion, especially from the French defense attorney whose advantage it was to sell that particular narrative, however passionate and personable Roux was, however much I trusted Roux's intentions and his absolute faith in the process of justice. "Every case needs someone to defend," he had said. He implied that even someone like Duch could be saved.

But if, as Roux insisted, the criminal was always bigger than his crime, I wanted to know this: Wasn't the victim much bigger than both?

ROUX, WHO WAS rushing to catch a plane to Rwanda, insisted that I speak to Kar Savuth, the other defense attorney. And so we set a meeting for a few nights later at the hotel bar. In 1994, Savuth had taken his oath as one of the first lawyers in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge, completing a dream that had been delayed twenty years: He'd been a law student when the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975. Instead of seeking revenge, a victim of the Khmer Rouge was defending them. When he appeared, I would have guessed him to have been anywhere from 45 to 65 years old (he was 77), wearing a gray shirt and gray slacks, flashing a gold watch and diamond ring, and carrying three cell phones, which he laid out before him on

the table. We took a seat in the far corner with my translator, a woman named Veasna, and beneath the rotating paddle fans that hung from the ceiling, drinking seltzer, Kar Savuth wanted to make something very clear. He saw himself as a medical doctor, with Duch as his patient. He understood his obligation to his client. But he was not willing to forget.

He was not willing to forget how they'd killed his brothers. He was not willing to forget how they'd killed his cousin's entire family. He could not forget his own feelings of survivor's guilt. He could not forget watching a woman killed in front of him, her liver removed, cooked, and eaten by the soldiers...then her hip meat...then her breast.

Kar Savuth sat on the cushion edge of the rattan chair as he spoke, straight at attention, his face a mask. He said all of it without a trace of emotion. His strength seemed almost severe. When he himself had been interrogated, he told them he was a cyclo driver, and then they asked him the distance between two hospitals in the city. A month later, three months later, a year, and three years later, they asked him the same question over and over again. What is the distance between the two hospitals? If he'd changed his answer, they would have killed him.

And of course, he remembered nearly starving to death, being so sick that his hair had fallen out. He'd playacted that he was clumsy so they might take pity—and ever after, he'd been clumsy, unable to relearn how to ride a bike, for instance. He'd even unlearned how to read. "It took a long time to become a human being again," he said. And yet, he said, when he first met Duch, the former Khmer Rouge commandant had cried, overwhelmed by guilt, then gathered himself, pointing out that the first commandant of S-21 had been killed and that he knew it was only a matter of time before he himself would have been killed, too. Duch asked Kar Savuth a question: If they told you they were going to kill your family, what would you have done? And Kar Savuth said, "I would have done exactly what you did."

THERE HAVE BEEN many myths about the trials: one is that the Cambodians don't want them, that the two-thirds of the population born after 1979 think of the Khmer Rouge as a scary bedtime story they'd rather not hear, while the other third would rather not recall the actual horrors they actually survived, suffering still as they are from PTSD and ungovernable fear. Another is that they won't be able to handle the trials, that the idea of Western justice is foreign enough to the populace at large that a sentence other than life in prison (the death penalty is forbidden) will open the masses to spasms of violence. And yet these misreadings—or half readings (of course, a third of the population *does* live in fear, but their Buddhist faith prohibits revenge killing)—by outsiders are just a continuation of centuries of *farang* misapprehension.

Despite the constant whiff of Western condescension that has hung over the country since the French made it theirs in 1863, the years leading up to the trials, and now

the first trial, the Duch trial, have forced an important if uneasy reckoning. And in large part that reckoning was begun for his people by Youk Chhang. Chhang was 16 when the Khmer Rouge controlled the country and his sister was murdered before him. Accused of stealing rice, she had her stomach slit open to prove her treachery (there was no rice there) and died a slow, painful death. After that—after becoming a refugee and making his way to America, to Texas—all Chhang wanted was revenge, Buddhism be damned.

An English teacher who befriended him, and who couldn't help but notice his anger, gave him a book about Cambodia by a man named Ben Kiernan with an inscription in her hand that read:

My friend Youk,

Happy birthday. May you understand your country's history and may it help your dreams come true....

As it turned out, Kiernan was a professor at Yale, Chhang sent him a letter, the two became friends, and when Kiernan received a half-million-dollar grant from the U.S. government to research the Khmer Rouge, he bought Chhang a plane ticket back to Cambodia—leaving Friday, January 13, 1995, a date Chhang will never forget—to begin compiling what became the largest archive of evidence chronicling the Pol Pot regime, and what became the foundation for the prosecution of its leaders. Without the two of them, it's fair to say there might not have been any trials at all.

"He changed my life," says Chhang of Kiernan today, sitting among the piles of books and folders, dossiers and files in his cluttered office on the third floor of the Documentation Center of Cambodia. Chhang, 48, wears a white pressed shirt and chinos. Before he had a staff and assistants, he worked virtually alone, going from village to village with a field recorder, interviewing victims but also interviewing the Khmer Rouge cadres (the farmers and shopkeepers, the teachers and laborers who executed, quite literally, the commands of their superiors). In the process, and as he collected letters, documents, ephemera of all sorts, he was able to map *Angkar* and its chains of command, the web of killing and unapologetic doctrine. In some villages, murderers and survivors lived across the street from each other, and he'd interview both—sometimes in each other's presence. But of the more than 10,000 Khmer Rouge cadres he and his fellow researchers have interviewed to date, only one has ever admitted to killing anyone, and in that case, only "five or six people." "We haven't begun to reintegrate ourselves with each other," says Chhang. "And that won't happen until the victims accept ownership of the atrocities—and the perpetrators claim responsibility."

IN A RARE INTERVIEW at the end of Pol Pot's life, he rejected the idea that he had ordered a genocide, that he had anything to do with the deaths of nearly 2 million people, claiming that it was the work of unhinged elements—radicals, the Khmer Krom, the Vietnamese, etc.—and that his conscience was clear. "When things get quiet, I go to bed at 6 p.m.," he said. "I sleep under the mosquito net by myself. My wife and my daughter live apart from me. Sometimes I do nothing, putting up with mosquitoes and insect bites. I get bored, but I'm used to it."

One mother, feeling herself being sucked away by *Angkar*, dying slowly in a work camp, turned to her daughter and said, “You will have to learn to live without me now.”

On the surface, Chum Mey had a typical story—if one measured such stories by torture endured, family members lost, atrocities witnessed, if one could ever accept the ingenious methods the Khmer Rouge had of robbing people of their dignity. Now he was an old man who no longer had the eyes or dexterity to repair sewing machines, and he walked slowly, carrying all of those invisible things bundled on his shoulders.

And yet he was almost natty, wearing a white watch cap, gray wool pants, a collared button-down short-sleeve shirt, and from the country that produced garments for some of the world’s best-known labels, a faux Versace belt. His face was open and almond-shaped, his eyes brown. He betrayed no hint of having been blindfolded for two straight weeks or stripped and hung like an animal from the crossbar as they’d whipped him with electric cords. I forced out the image of that metal bed and the pliers they’d used to remove his toenails or the electrodes they’d put to his ears until they’d shocked him unconscious. He’d begged a 20-year-old kid for another two weeks to let him live (the boy called him by the vulgar form of you, *hein*). He had no idea what CIA or KGB stood for, but they wanted him to confess to being an agent for one or the other. He prayed to the spirits of his mother and father to protect him. On the day the other mechanics, his friends, were taken to the Killing Fields, there’d been a broken sewing machine. And here he was, one of only seven to have survived S-21. Seven out of 15,000. How many times had he wondered why he’d been permitted to live?

As it was, he’d been too afraid to meet in a public place. He claimed his life had been in danger for years, all because he’d been willing to tell his story, and there were those, the relatives of those headed to trial, who wanted him silenced. Who could question his paranoia? Who could blame him for relaying the intimate details of his trauma as if he were watching himself from very far away? So there we sat in Veasna’s living room, in her new white house in a subdivision at the edge of the city as the land movers and bulldozers groaned outside, adding another walled ring to Phnom Penh as they excavated the skeletal past. Then, suddenly, the machines went silent. Lunch.

Chum Mey looked at his watch, worn on the wrist of the hand that the Khmer Rouge had broken when he raised it to block the bamboo stick whistling for his face. He looked blurrily at the frosted-glass window as if trying to see out, unsure perhaps if it was his eyes or the window itself that disallowed transparency. “Eleven o’clock,” he said. “This was always the time of day when the screaming was worst of all.”

THE WAY THEY KILLED, PART FOUR.

DEATH BECAME a pestilence: arbitrary, ravaging, and contagious. And it became a strange performance, too, the killers trying to outdo each other: At S-21, living prisoners were cut open with knives and scorpions were let loose inside their bodies.

THE MAN PAINTING the same image over and over, feverishly, incessantly—*green stroke, black stroke, the flesh-colored*—his name was Vann Nath. He, too, had lost a wife and two children. He, too, had been shackled at S-21, until they released him (*leave for using*) and brought him downstairs to a room where there were two other painters and a sculptor. He was given paints and a canvas and three days to regain his strength. He was handed a photograph and asked to make a “realistic, clear, correct, and noble reproduction” of it. He did not know, at first, that it was Pol Pot. For weeks, he woke at dawn and worked until midnight. When Duch arrived to evaluate his first painting, Vann Nath knew quite well that his life hung in the balance. The commandant looked at it for a time, then asked the opinion of another, who said it didn’t exactly match the photograph.

“It’s all right,” responded Duch.

And that’s how he lived.

WE’D MET WITH Vann Nath at his art gallery, which was attached to a restaurant his family ran on a busy street. Clad in a dirty gray dress shirt and green pants, he was 63 years old now, with a head of snowy hair, baleful eyes, bushy eyebrows, and a caramel complexion. During his time at S-21, he’d produced eight portraits and one sculpture of Pol Pot. After surviving the Khmer Rouge, he’d kept painting, feverishly, incessantly, but this time he depicted the scenes of torture at S-21. He painted Pol Pot’s dystopia: the sweltering cell block with fifty bodies in shackles; a prisoner having his fingernails removed in a torrent of blood; the whippings and near drownings; the starvation and degradation; throats slit and babies taken.

He had remarried, as many of the survivors had. After the decimation, after the sudden disappearance of the Khmer Rouge (one S-21 survivor, Chim Math, said her first act after freedom had been to eat three bowls of rice and then to break down weeping), they’d clung to each other; they’d tried as hard as they could to put it all behind them. But Vann Nath still had nightmares about Duch.

“For me, it’s the wound that can’t be healed. I knew the meaning and deepest horror of the Khmer Rouge. I lost my wife and children. When I think about it, I lose all my energy, all my bearings. It’s only my grandchildren that can take away the deepest wound now.”

“**HE WHO PROTESTS** is an enemy; he who opposes is a corpse.” One starless night, late, I went out to the hotel pool after the lights had been shut off. While the courtyard was silent, I could hear the faint late-night noise of the city, like the distant breaking of glass. I lowered myself in the warm water and floated for what seemed like an hour, trying to process all the raw data of genocide as I did, and yet I felt nothing. No sense of agency or emergency. No point of connection. No language

in the end to describe the fugue state that the country seemed to inhabit. Hyacinth and smoke mingled in the air. Cambodia kept passing me by in windows, but there was no way through. I felt utterly defeated: Who was I kidding, being here, as if to find a unified theory, practicing my own unknowing brand of exceptionalism—as if only I could figure it out? I floated like this for some time, letting it all stream out until I emptied my mind, until drifting off in the deep end, until Duch’s question came back: If you’d been threatened with the death of your family, what would you have done?

What *would* I have done?

THE WAY THEY KILLED, PART FIVE.

THERE WERE SO MANY ways they killed—it goes on and on—and none were ever tender. No method was somehow better than any other, more humane or considerate. This was murder, of course, but of the most heinous sort. Their acts came from the darkest part of the soul. In this instance, there was a soldier with a knife who cut the clothes off a pregnant woman. A deep incision was made in the flesh of the belly, there were screams and whispers and, finally, the stillness of death. That is, what came next, what was taken and hung by the neck, was as innocent as the act was unspeakable. They hung it with the others, in rows along the rafters, to ward off evil spirits. These were the Smoke Children.

CHUM MEY SAT in silence for a moment, looked up from his watch at 11:01 a.m., and began speaking again, at first in a dull monotone. He spoke directly to Veasna and only occasionally met my eye. When I asked him questions, he sat looking straight ahead at the window. Then he spoke.

As the Vietnamese approached Phnom Penh, you could hear bombs going off, locked in a room with twenty others, and then you were herded with the last group from S-21, up the same road that people had disastrously traveled when evacuating Phnom Penh nearly four years earlier. At about 7 a.m., your group met up with another group of prisoners being herded by the Khmer Rouge, and in that group, in one of those strange moments of fate, were your wife and son, whom you hadn’t seen in at least a year.

You watched her carefully as she walked ahead with your small son, both dressed as you were: in black pajamas. When the guards were at a distance, you spoke to her once about the scenery.

You did not touch.

By nightfall, it was clear you were being led to your deaths; members of the group were taken away, then gunfire erupted. When they took your wife and child, she screamed your name. She screamed it over and over and over again: They want to kill us! Chum Mey, *run!*

Her voice stopped when two reports filled the air. And then you ran.

THERE CAN ONLY be so much unmelding of the body before one turns away.

In Long Beach, California, ten years after the war, at least 150 female Cambodian refugees were diagnosed with psychosomatic blindness, an otherwise incredibly rare occurrence. Doctors were perplexed: Their eyes were fine, yet they couldn't see. According to the therapists who studied the group, their blindness was "linked to a dissociated cluster of primitive meanings, horrific images, and behavioral responses or muscular representations loosely organized around the incomprehensibility of the events and the desire or 'need not to see.'" As one survivor put it, "My family was killed in 1975, and I cried for four years. When I stopped crying, I was blind."

ULTIMATELY, DUCH, TOO, disappeared: to the jungle, to China, back to the jungle again. And then, unlike those he ordered to be tortured and murdered, he reappeared. He became a Christian. He was haunted and repentant. In 1999 he was arrested and later given counsel; François Roux and Kar Savuth were chosen to defend him.

By the rules of the ECCC, the pretrial discovery phase called for the accused to return to the scene of his alleged crime and stand before his accusers. And so on a February day in 2008, amid the rusted bedframes and blood-stained floor, Duch had stood before Vann Nath and Chum Mey and a number of other guards and survivors. He seemed so small, said Vann Nath afterward. But the painter was still filled with so much fear, he couldn't look him in the eye.

And yet however one chooses to look upon it, something remarkable happened that day. Duch tried to speak to them as human beings. "I ask for your forgiveness," he said. "I know that you cannot forgive me, but I ask you to leave me the hope that you might," he said before breaking down on the shoulder of one of his guards. And after everything that had transpired, after all the atrocity, one of those gathered said, "I've been waiting thirty years for those words." But the other survivors said nothing.

WHEN THE ECCC officially commenced this past March and Duch took the stand to begin a trial that will likely last until the new year, he looked tired. His face was swollen, and his eyes were red. He sat at a raised podium while Kar Savuth and Roux sat slightly below in black robes and white-frilled kerchiefs. To hear Kar Savuth tell it, Duch has spent an awful lot of time crying over the past year.

So far, in the first phase of the trial, the defense's strategy has seemed somewhat straightforward. Duch denies little, shares what he can, tries to set the record straight. He has discussed his reasons for employing torture ("I never believed the confessions I received told the truth," he said. "At most they were 40 percent true") and the killing of babies ("I didn't remember it until I saw the pictures, but I am criminally responsible for killing babies, children, and teenagers"). He has discussed his beloved leader ("Pol Pot was a murderer. He was the greatest criminal father of Cambodia") and the fact that, steeped in Khmer Rouge propaganda, he honestly never knew that torture was illegal, had never heard of the Geneva Conventions until he'd been charged.

And he continues to apologize. Discussing the fact that he tortured two prisoners himself but asked his minions "to smash" many others, killing them by cutting their

throats, he has said, “The burden is still on me—it’s my responsibility. I would like to apologize to the souls of those who died.”

Meanwhile, Roux and Kar Savuth continue to insist that Duch is being scapegoated, that he should be released from prison, that it’s really Nuon Chea—Brother Number

Two, the one from whom Duch ultimately took orders—who bears full responsibility for issuing the orders that killed hundreds of thousands of innocents. (His trial is slated to begin in 2010.) They claim their client faced execution if he didn’t follow instructions. They seem to ask the same question Duch asked Kar

Savuth when they first met: *What would you have done?*

And yet if this is the beginning of Comrade Duch’s redemption, as Roux so insists, one wonders if he, the steely commandant of S-21, will finally have the stomach for it. Or if the ruination he sees in the mirror will finally crush him, too.

A FINAL SYLLOGISM:

For those in pain, there is no means to reconciliation.

For those in pain, there is no means to reconciliation.

For those in pain, there is no means to reconciliation.

FINALLY, IN VEASNA’S living room, Chum Mey needed money to get home. He said he’d moved six times since the start of the pretrial hearings and now lived quite far away. He put on his white watch cap. His once broken hand was crooked. His eyesight was going. Veasna offered him a ride, but when he refused, she gave him a few small bills.

Earlier I’d had a meeting with a top-level diplomat who’d said that the best Cambodians might hope for now was that this generation, both the perpetrators and the ones that had been so traumatized by the Khmer Rouge, might die off and with them gone, the country might start over again, afresh.

And here was one of the last of that generation, fading before me. The man who’d lost his wife and two children, *Pa* to his family, the one who’d gone house to house in the ghost town of Phnom Penh collecting sewing machines to fix, the one who’d lost virtually everything and now moved again from house to house in utter fear and paranoia to keep ahead of his supposed enemies—how could one ever reach this man?

Veasna had something upstairs that she needed to retrieve before we left, too. So I went to the door and waited for Chum Mey to catch up. The room was blinding white, and since I couldn’t speak Khmer, I kept smiling as he approached. And he kept smiling as he shuffled toward me until I realized he had no intention of stopping, until he had gently walked into me, and wrapped his arms around, and rested his head on my chest.

Enough.

