

## Flowers from the ashes

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It's the dry season; humid, but with a soft breeze rustling through the leaves in the trees. My eyes follow the green curves of the earth surrounding me: mass graves, a final resting place for many. My curiosity is awakened, my understanding minimal, as I attempt to comprehend the atrocities that have happened here.

Pulled along in the current of people; tourists, curiously inspecting the clothes, jewellery and bones of a past life, I have strayed from my group. It's hot, the collar of my t-shirt remains plastered to my neck and a smell hangs in the air; gun powder is my conclusion. I listen to the gentle call of the birds weaving among the leaves of trees draped in ribbons, each a symbol of those so brutally killed at the hands of their own by the decree of Pol Pot.

One tree stands out in stark contrast to those festooned in ribbons, a harsh reminder of a past much less colourful. This tree is bare, average looking at first, yet grand; standing as a testament to former times, a witness to the tragedies it silenced. There is a sign — 'The Magic Tree', it reads. Yet, before my imagination has time to conjure a mystical purpose, the devastating reality of the task of this magic tree hits me as I read further: a 'tool' used to suspend a microphone whose purpose was to project music to muffle the tortured cries of those who were being executed. I think of the sound that may have come

from this microphone, as it resonated through the dead of night, mingling with the moans of those dying. Did it recite propaganda of the Khmer Rouge? Did it play a familiar tune, one that perhaps played in the family home? Or did it perhaps sing out as a lullaby? A sweet melody to those about to be executed into just another statistic of the Cambodian genocide, as they reached the end of their suffering? I think of what it must have been like, listening to the sound casting a shroud over the land every night as you lay terrified, not knowing of what lay ahead, until finally, your turn arrives and this sound that perhaps provided comfort, a distraction, becomes the last sound you hear. A realisation of the brutal truth of what the simple microphone hanging off a tree kept hidden.

The air feels sticky, thick, burdened by the reality of a period of time largely kept hidden from the prying eyes of the world. Here, people were silenced and mostly forgotten; the only indicator of a life once lived being either the expanse of mass graves stretching out in front of me here on the Killing Fields or the sad, starved and lifeless soul of a human looking out under drooped eyes from a grainy photograph now plastered among thousands of others in Tuol Sleng, now the genocide museum.

I feel suddenly selfish about letting myself complain about the heat. These people, who had endured so much, I had never heard them complain. I had been warmly welcomed to Cambodia, greeted with happy, smiling faces and invited to share food and entrusted to play with the children of the community. You would never have guessed at the torment quite recently endured. Their country had been divided, their spirits broken and they had been left with nothing. Yet they were happy, hopeful. That is what surprised me the most.

Walking along a wooden bridge as it wound its way through the graves and the trees, I see in a patch of dirt, which at first

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glance looks desolate aside from some ripped cloth from an owner now long gone, but is adorned with a single flower. Red, rimmed with bright yellow, and tall. Under the unrelenting glare of the sun, it stood proud, triumphant in its ability not to wilt. This flower had survived, had grown strong and stood rooted proudly in the dirt from which it had seeded and even now, continued defiantly, to push upwards.

As I left the Killing Fields and continued my experience in Cambodia, I remembered this flower. It would pop into my mind when I was with the Cambodians. To me, they were similar. Both had survived and risen from the ashes, both had endured onwards — their vibrancy portraying and spreading positivity and hope. Both remained tall and dignified in spite of past horrors and perhaps continued struggles still confronting them now in daily life.

Both these images stuck with me on my return to Australia. People who will not wilt under the weight of the past, but who instead can boast some of the kindest hearts I have ever met; and a flower, blooming in the dirt — for me, symbols of hope for the future.