

NéCROU

Period 1986-1998

VERONIQUE DECROP

A woman alone in the aftermath
of the Khmer Rouge genocide, who transforms the
boredom of the camps into light



(Véronique Decrop 1986 camp de KAO I DANG/photo Stéphane Rousseau)

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English version

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ISBN numérique : 979-10-405-9534-2

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Chapter 1 – The Return of the Khmers to Cambodia

Dawn was only just breaking over the Khmer refugee camp of Site 2.

A thin mist slid between the bamboo huts.

The buses stood in line, engines purring, packed to bursting with families and makeshift luggage.

Children, eyes still swollen with sleep, clutched bundles of clothes against their chests. Departures were a daily ritual – every morning at first light, a convoy of refugees left the camp for Cambodia.

That day, it was the last of them: the severely disabled, paraplegics, quadriplegics, amputees.

Father Ceyrac, upright, seemingly untouched by age, stood beside Véronique Decrop, known here as NÉCROU.

Around them, the dust kicked up by the tires hung in the air like an ochre veil.

Ceyrac turned toward her, his face creased like an old Paris street kid's.

“We must go with them.” he said simply. She nodded.

They climbed into one of the last buses. The engines roared, passengers clung to the rails, wheels sank into the red earth.

The camp receded, slowly swallowed by the rising light.

They drove for hours, crossing the border, passing flooded plains and villages hastily rebuilt.

By evening, they reached Battambang.

At the hospital, Father Ceyrac asked the director:

“What is your program for the severely disabled?”

The man laughed.

“A program? There is none! The severely disabled do not survive in Cambodia.”

Silence fell.

Véronique felt anger and helplessness throb together in her hands. That calm cruelty of a sentence would echo within her for a long time.

Something cracked in her then.

She understood – without yet admitting it to herself – that she would have to stay in Cambodia, abandon her dream of becoming a filmmaker.

She had sensed it already: the refugees’ return would be a chasm, not a deliverance.

The country was drained, the land mined, the bodies broken.

She looked at them – men and women without legs, on bamboo crutches, bodies hoisted gently into trucks – and felt herself falter, as though the weight of the world had settled again upon her shoulders.

She wanted only one thing: to sleep.

To sleep to forget, to sleep to stop thinking.

Wherever she could hang her hammock, she slipped into it, fell asleep at once, mind empty, body spent.

Sleep took her like an anaesthetic – brutal, dreamless.

And each time, there was Mala’s mother – Mala, the young student wounded by a grenade in the back at Site 2 – who came toward her, worried, and gently shook her foot.

She would murmur,

“Wake up, NÉCROU. This isn’t normal.”

Then Véronique opened her eyes, dazed, throat tight.

She smiled to reassure her, but deep down she knew: something had shifted.

Cambodia had taken her back – without a word, without a promise – simply because she could no longer leave it.

The next day, she left the humanitarian convoy.

She wanted to see for herself, to find her people again, to know what had become of the former students of her drawing school in Site 2.

In the transit camps, where refugees stayed a few days before returning to their provinces, she found two familiar faces: Yao and Thouk.

The two boys, now young men, waited for her with a mixture of emotion and restraint.

“You found us.” said Yao, his voice roughened.

“No – you found me.” she answered, with a tired smile.

They left the camp together, on foot, under an already heavy sun.

Yao and Thouk became her guides.

She had a few addresses scribbled in a notebook, but soon realized they meant nothing.

Families had moved, names had changed. Word of mouth alone opened the way.

They headed north.

Creaking buses, breathless tuk-tuks, overloaded trucks; sometimes they walked for hours along red-dust tracks.

Each village, each stop, was an investigation.

Some remembered the name of NÉCROU – the teacher from Site 2, the one who made the children draw.

Others only shrugged, indifferent.

At Sisophon, she found one former student.

Another in Kompong Thom.

Each meeting brought the same emotion, the same story of flight, of loss, of survival. Little by little, an invisible thread rewove itself – the thread of shared memory.

One evening, while they were staying in a pagoda, NÉCROU wrote in her notebook:

“Where are you, Roat, Payla, Math, Lock, Chunlee, Thy, Sareth, Vutha, Lao, Deth, Paply, Ha, Savoem, Duat, Bandol, Bun Chen, Sary, Danet, Reuth, Kunna, Sopheareth, Vat Hak, Sim Sou Yong, Tan Pothy, Seng Sophearoat, Phal Kunna, Yoeun Kouan, Râ, Mey Mui, Sa Luen, Chea Iao, Soat, Mey Mui, Proeun Reth, Pueut, Som Thy, Hem Chey, Ron, Lâch Thy, Men Vireak, Koeut Lôam, Khôl Khe, Hem Danet, Na Reuth, Yuon Yœurk, Sopheup, Sân, Ty Prench, Kheav Sary, Prak Ny, Ham Pich, Mey Mui, Yœun Chris...”

A few days later, they decided to head south, toward Prey Veng.

Yao thought another friend, Sareth, lived there, near the Vietnamese border. The road wound through flooded plains, palm trees, buffalo half-submerged in mud.

The land seemed to breathe slowly, as though still healing its wounds.

In the mornings, mist hovered over the rice fields.

The three travellers walked on foot, sandals heavy with mud, eyes narrowed against the warm wind. Each step lifted a little red dust – no longer the dust of the camps, but that of return.

The morning breeze carried the scent of rice and palms.

At the end of the road, destiny awaited them.

The next chapter would hold its promise.

Chapter 2 – Sareth

Dawn was barely rising over the countryside of Prey Veng, in southern Cambodia, near the Vietnamese border.

A veil of mist still floated above the rice fields, like a sheet of cotton laid across the sleeping water.

In a forgotten hamlet, a few bamboo huts clung to the earthen dikes, fragile as birds' nests at the water's edge.

Beneath one of those thatched roofs, Sareth was shivering. Lying on a rough mat, he held his thin arms tight against his burning chest.

The fever had gripped him for three days, and every breath came with painful effort. His dry lips murmured disconnected words, his eyelids fluttered as if trying to brush away a sleep too heavy to bear.

His mother sat beside him, her face drawn, eyes red with fatigue.

She kept dipping a cloth into a jar of lukewarm water to cool her son's forehead, but the heat always returned, relentless.

Her trembling voice whispered prayers to the spirits of the ancestors.

In a faint breath she thought: *We should go to the clinic...* But she also knew what that meant – payment.

And she had nothing. Her husband had long been gone, taken by the war, and only this son remained – her last breath of life.

At the doorway, an old man with white hair stood in the morning light. He looked at the boy for a long while, then said in a grave voice:

“NÉCROU is looking for him. She's in the region with Yao and Thouk.”

The mother raised her head, stunned. The name struck her like a spark. Everyone knew NÉCROU, the Frenchwoman who, in the refugee camp of Site 2, had opened a drawing school for the children. People said she had come back to the country to find her former students – to give them a chance to continue what they had begun there.

Sareth, despite the fever, heard the name.

His eyes opened wide in his gaunt face.

His breathing was shallow, but his will still burned.

He rose with difficulty, swaying.

“I have to go.” he whispered.

His mother tried to hold him back, but he was already standing.

His knees trembled, his hands groped against the bamboo walls for support.

He crossed the threshold, dazed by the light.

His old bicycle waited against the wall.

He placed a trembling hand on the handlebars, climbed onto the seat, and, despite the pain, began to pedal.

The bicycle creaked with every turn of the wheel.

Behind him, his mother’s voice faded into the wind.

The red dirt road stretched before him, bordered by palm trees and flooded fields. Every meter gained was a struggle against dizziness.

Birds took flight as he passed; the sky wavered above him.

He thought he might fall, but one image persisted stubbornly: NÉCROU – that name that echoed like a second mother.

Farther along that same road, NÉCROU was walking, flanked by Yao and Thouk.

They had been on foot since dawn, their pace slowed by the rising heat.

Each stop was an inquiry, each village a promise.

Someone had spoken to them of a sick boy, not far away, in a hamlet drowned in mist.