‘HOPE WILL FLOAT ON TEARS’

By Michelle Vachon • The Cambodia Daily

In His New Book, Artist and Author Chath pierSath Creates Fictional Letters To Reflect on the Lives Of Those under the Khmer Rouge

Cambodian-American artist Chath pierSath has a talent for depicting strong emotions in a sober fashion, which makes them all the more powerful. In painting, his imaginary portraits of Cambodians show faces set in quiet pain, as if people had let down their masks for a moment and revealed what was inside.

For his book of poetry released last month, Mr. pierSath used a similar approach: subdued tone and wording that lays bare the feelings behind each story he tells.

Written in prose, most of the poems in “After” are fictional letters addressed to relatives or friends, recounting people's lives under the Khmer Rouge regime and later in the US where Mr. pierSath and some of his family immigrated in 1981.

Composed over a period of 10 years, they may refer to a specific person although they all tell stories shared by many, he explained in an interview.

The book starts in the mid-1970s as civil war was raging in the country and thousands were fleeing combat zones where, he writes in the prologue, “Flat earth turned into bomb craters.”

On April 17, 1975—Mr. pierSath was about 7 years old at the time—the Khmer Rouge nightmare began and for three years, he writes, “Cracking skulls replaced the sound of birds chirping, and screams haunted the night.”

Mr. pierSath spent those years in a remote, Khmer Rouge camp in Battambang Province with his mother, who was desperately trying to hold the family together.

In “A Letter to my Mother,” he writes: “In spite of hunger you kept living, chanting prayer, invoking your ancestors, your deity to pour rain on the earth, to stop the war and stop others from disarranging your home, rearranging your fate, and deranging your children.”

In “A Letter to my Brother,” Mr. pierSath tries to understand why his brother in the 1970s brutally abused his wife and himself, concluding: “Lon Nol gave you a gun but not a battle to fight. […] Soldiering without a cause had driven you mad.”

Looking back, Mr. pierSath says: “I didn’t know how to forgive you. I am older now. […] You are no longer my nightmare.” Forgiveness eventually came, he writes, “Because you are still my brother.”

In the poem “About My Youngest Sister,” Mr. pierSath describes how she, like others who immigrated during the 1980s, found it difficult to rebuild her life in a foreign land. “My sister has frail, delicate eyes, a fragmented soul, a two-way smile, a side that’s dark and unconsolled. […] We live in one room on the 9th floor, she and I, and my sister blames me for bringing her here, as though I had coerced her to come with me to America.”

For thousands, reality had become, he writes, “assembling life into dollars one hour at a time in a factory […] and think of poor siblings in Cambodia pleading on tapes for money you don’t have.”

Toward the end of the 44-page work, published in English and Khmer through Abingdon Square Publishing in the US, Mr. pierSath reflects on people of the region who, from the 1950s through the 1980s, got caught in a Cold War conflict whose rules were written far away from them.

He writes: “Among Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are enough tears to fill the congested Mekong with the yearning and loss of a few more generations to come. There’s no stopping. They will continue to hope, and this hope will float on tears.”

Mr. pierSath started writing during high school in the mid-1980s as a way to learn English, he said.

He kept on writing while completing his first university degree in international service and development in northern California, and his Master’s degree in social psychology at the University of Massachusetts in Lowell, a Khmer enclave in the US. His thesis focused on trauma and coping mechanisms based on research he conducted in Cambodia in 1999.

In 2000, he started painting. He studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris on a French scholarship in 2005 and 2006, and has exhibited his work several times in Cambodia. Mr. pierSath now spends half the year in the country, and the other half working on orchards in northeastern US.