

small, deferred

On Souvankham Thammavongsa's Writing

Introduction

Vinh Nguyen

What does it mean to live in this world?

Small and deferred like the tangerine, which is not an orange, never growing “awkward / with limbs heavy, skin thick” (19) might be an answer. Marking time and space with a hand-drawn, imperfect slash might be another. It is to insist that the letter “k” in front of the word “knife” is not silent. Or, to bend through glass like light. At the very least, write oneself into the centre of the story.

For close to two decades, and over the span of five books—*Small Arguments* (2003), *Found* (2007), *Light* (2013), *Cluster* (2019), and *How to Pronounce Knife* (2020)—Souvankham Thammavongsa has explored this question, giving Canadian literature and beyond a rich body of work to contemplate and take pleasure in. This forum brings together poets, editors, booksellers, and academics to reflect on the various “scales” of Thammavongsa’s writing, from Canada to the transnational, the natural world to the labouring body, the nuclear family to histories of war and refugee migration, the miniscule to the transcendent. It concludes with a short piece from the author herself. Each of the contributions sheds light on the resonance and continued relevance of a singular voice in Canadian letters.

Small, deferred: always there, unyielding.

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Portrait of Small Artist as Brave Woman

Beth Follett

SCALE:

noun: a ratio of size in a map, model, drawing, or plan.

Similar: ratio, proportion.

verb: represent in proportional dimensions; reduce or increase in size according to a common scale.

It was Pedlar Press' fifth anniversary—2001—a party held in The Green Room in Toronto, at its old location, accessed through the back alley behind Bloor Street at Brunswick. A cavernous space. Dirty, cheap, fun.

I was seated at a long table, selling books and a fundraiser poster Stan Bevington had made, grateful for the speeches and the spectacle of Derek McCormack singing “The Book of Love” by The Magnetic Fields. Then: standing before me: Souvankham Thammavongsa, introduced by Jonathan Bennett, who was praising her poetry to the skies.

Impossible to tell how old she was. Sixteen? Twenty? (She was twenty-three.) Very small. Shy, or perhaps taciturn. Send me your work, I told her. And she did. Then she waited while I went through a year-long personal crisis that made communication with almost everyone unbearable.

Souvankham's *Small Arguments* was near perfect in manuscript form, and was launched in early December 2003, a party at Cameron House in Toronto (dirty, cheap, fun), with local luminaries in the audience. Dionne Brand was there, constant champion throughout the years, and, most recently, editor for Souvankham's *Cluster* (McClelland & Stewart, 2019). Souvankham took the stage as I lowered the mic. She said nothing, opened her palm, which held a small crank-handle music box, raised it to the mic, and played: Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.

And that, you might say, is the story of her life. Little Star, ablaze. Her brilliance is legendary among Canadian poets.

In August 2020, CBC Books placed Souvankham on a list of twenty-four Canadian writers “on the rise.” Sorry, no, that particular star rose

a long time ago. Hidden in plain sight, which is the reality for poets and “small” press publishers alike, settler and BIPOC. We are under the radar of mainstream media, even while we build up and reinforce the very ground that is Canadian literary culture, the designated scale being disproportionate to our contribution. This has been said a million times over the decades and must still be said: “all the rich imaginings of activists and thinkers who urge us to live otherwise . . . disappeared, modified into reform and inclusion, equity, diversity and palliation” (Brand).

It has been said that Souvankham Thammavongsa writes about the overlooked, the small. In a 2004 review of *Small Arguments*, Anne Michaels called her a true subversive who knows that to whisper is how to be heard. Kate Cayley writes, “She’s the kind of writer who conceals how technically brilliant she is. Her economy is astonishing—you feel yourself to be in the presence of someone who will not waste a second of your time, who will tell you exactly what you need to know, and who will only tell you the truth.” Her writing is quiet, penetrating, economical. In loud, crass, indiscriminate mainstream culture, where the modified quick byte, the gross dollar, is all, a writer like Souvankham could have been swept out to sea early on, except for the scale of resistance that lives in the woman herself and in those who have witnessed and supported the luminosity of her life work.

Major themes addressed by Souvankham have been adaptability, chance, survival. From the poem “Perfect” in *Light* (Pedlar Press, 2013):

. . . The math problems are easy.
 They are always about some guy who has to get
 to the other side. There’s always an answer, a sure thing.
 You just have to work your way there. . . .

 I will keep my print small, filling up every blank space
 I can find like a Captain fixing leaks in a sinking ship. (20-21)

From that moment at The Green Room in 2001, cut to the 2020 release of Souvankham’s first book of fiction, *How to Pronounce Knife* (McClelland & Stewart; Little, Brown and Company, US; Bloomsbury, UK), and her subsequent winning of the 2020 Scotiabank Giller Prize. Do not imagine that this award has taken her by surprise: what she has been up against all these years has been painfully obvious to her, her choices—financial,

social—clear. She has been a model of devotion, expressing herself as only she can, using silence, exile, and cunning as her tools, working her way to here, one brilliant word at a time.

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On Selling Books

Anjula Gogia

I am a bookseller who loves words but hates writing. But for Souvankham, I will write. Because of my love for her grace, for her deftness, for her vision.

I met Souvankham many years ago when I was co-managing the Toronto Women's Bookstore (TWB). First it was her zine *big boots*. I wasn't the "zine coordinator," but I was excited to sell it at TWB. Selling *big boots* exemplified what TWB was about: giving a home to writers who couldn't find one elsewhere.

Then, Beth Follett, publisher of Pedlar Press, came by with a beautiful (all of Beth's books are beautiful) book of poetry, *Small Arguments*. Now, this was my life before children, when I had the calm and space at home to read poetry. And *Small Arguments* captivated me. At the time, when there were very few books of poetry by Asian women in Canada, I adored the book. Not just because of who Souvankham is but also because of where she took me—a place inside myself, with my own family's history of

migration to Canada and struggles to fit in. Her words around language, community, and family resonated deeply.

“Here is a delicate and graceful hand naming the fragile materials of poetry” said Dionne Brand on the back cover.

And so, as any good bookseller does, I started to hand-sell Souvankham’s book. Looking for poetry? I would ask. Here, try this. I loved it and so did readers. This was the age before the Internet was ubiquitous, before social media. Our customers relied on us to show them books they would have had no idea existed, unless they read a review. I wanted to share Souvankham’s voice with our world—a voice I knew would likely get ignored and under-looked elsewhere. This was a time when “diversity in publishing” was not a buzzword. When our customers could not Google a list and find her writing. When very few big presses were publishing BIPOC writers.

People would come to us, as Canada’s largest feminist bookstore, and ask us, “Show me the books by Black women, Indigenous women, Women of Colour,” especially from Canada. Souvankham’s books were a gift I could put in their hands and it did not disappoint. Being able to sell Souvankham’s books in some ways exemplifies my *raison d’être* for being a bookseller: it is the labour of love, the connection, that one makes between writer and reader that can’t be done in any other way.

Over the years Souvankham kept writing, and I kept selling books. Both of us with pauses. For family, for life, for work, for time.

And then word came out that Souvankham was branching into prose. Short fiction and a forthcoming novel in the works! Some of my favourite novels have been written by poets. *Anil’s Ghost*. *Fugitive Pieces*. *What We All Long For*. I was eager to add her new one to my list.

Ah, and then winter came and Souvankham’s book was finally on the list and I could not wait to launch it. Where to launch one of my favourite writers? Who to pair her with? Serendipitously, Dionne Brand agreed to host a conversation at the Gladstone Hotel, located on Queen Street West in Toronto. Full circle with Souvankham’s first book of poetry. This would have been the highlight of my Spring 2020 launches.

Then COVID hit, and all was cancelled. But there with the grace of the publishing gods came *How to Pronounce Knife*. And in this new pandemic age I shouted it far and wide on Facebook, on Twitter, and masked at the

door of the bookstore. And not only did I shout it, but reviewers across North America listed it on every single must-read book of Spring 2020. Every time I opened Facebook there it was: *Chatelaine*, *Globe and Mail*, *New York Times*, *Quill and Quire*, and the list goes on and on. It became Another Story Bookshop's best-selling book of fiction in April 2020.

I loved Souvankham's writing back when no one could pronounce her name. I continue to love and sell her writing with *How to Pronounce Knife*. I can't wait to read and sell the next book and many more to come.

Pronunciations in Diaspora

Bryan Thao Worra

Among the new releases in short fiction this year was the debut collection by Lao Canadian writer Souvankham Thammavongsa, *How to Pronounce Knife* (2020), fortuitously released in April, which in the US is National Poetry Month and in Laos, the month of the traditional New Year celebration when we reflect on what has gone before and prepare for the times ahead.

The timing of her collection coincides with the forty-fifth anniversary of the Lao diaspora that began for many of us following the end of the wars in Southeast Asia. Today, almost half a million Lao reside in the US with roots as refugees. Thousands more are scattered in nations such as Canada, France, England, Australia, Japan, Thailand, Germany, Cuba, and even corners of French Guiana. Historians will quibble about whether the war began after the 1954 defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu that ended the colonization of French Indochina, and whether the conflict is distinct from the Vietnam War, or if the whole of the fighting should be called the "Secret War" or the "Second Indochina War," or the "American War," but what most readers will need to understand is that in the end, to avoid death, torture, and imprisonment, especially for assisting the US, a great exodus across the Mekong was necessary for thousands of families, and where they were resettled and how well they thrived in the decades after was anything but certain.

I became familiar with Souvankham's work first as a poet, with her wonderful 2003 collection *Small Arguments*, but it was in her 2007 collection of verse, *Found*, that I particularly appreciated the direction her writing would take. In *Found*, she explored ways to respond to the discarded notebook her father had kept in a refugee camp in Thailand, a life he had never fully spoken of to her while growing up. As fellow refugee poets, there is much I respect about her approach to navigating our journey, even though we met only once in person, in Minnesota during a 2015 gathering of Lao writers. In 2014, her third collection of poetry, *Light*, received the Trillium Book Award, which recognizes the excellence of Ontario writers and their works. This was a significant achievement. And so, it is with great interest that we see her turn her talents towards prose, where we clearly see Souvankham Thammavongsa's roots as a poet in almost every line.

How to Pronounce Knife is a groundbreaking collection for many reasons. It has invited comparisons to the work of Nabokov, and the surprising, warm humour and depth can remind many of the classic Asian American collection *Pangs of Love* by the late David Wong Louie. Among Lao writers specifically she has almost no peers in the Americas, with the only other major collection of Lao short prose in English being the late Outhine Bounyavong's *Mother's Beloved* published by the University of Washington Press twenty-one years ago. Since the end of the war, in the Western Hemisphere there have been fewer than forty-five books by the Lao diasporic community in our own words. The vast majority of our literary output has been poetry, children's stories, cookbooks, a memoir or two, and film and theatrical works.

Laos has long been ignored in literature, rarely figuring into various narratives, and often only in men's adventure stories and mysteries. One of the earliest mentions was in spy novelist John Le Carré's *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977) and the Doctor Siri series by Australian expat writer Colin Cotterill. Most Lao novels and short stories by writers in Laos have gone untranslated. *How to Pronounce Knife* provides a rare model of modern stories involving Lao people that don't involve someone getting murdered, dealing with crime, or fleeing immediate danger.

The magic of Thammavongsa's prose operates across several levels that are of relief to many of her peers and contemporaries. You don't have to be fully familiar with Laos to appreciate it, and she does not spend vast swaths of text as a literary tour guide, some "Explainer of All Things." If you

want to know more about Lao culture, you'll have to do the work yourself, even though she does not shy away from a Lao-centred experience. These are not melancholy stories falling into the usual tropes of Old Country-New Country, East-Meets-West-Fish-Out-of-Water stories that are typically in fashion for refugee stories presented to mainstream readers, and it should be clear that her perspective will be regarded as a classic, but she will not be the last word on our diverse experiences.

Whether it's the Halloween misadventures in her tale "Chick-A-Chee!" or reflections on what the music of Randy Travis meant to a Lao mother, or discovering the fallibility of a father in the titular "How to Pronounce Knife," we are given a chance to see a community journey from an intimate and refreshing perspective. We see a full range of emotions and questions, humour and deep reflections, that affirm our shared humanity and the importance of the best of our cultural traditions.

I am particularly enthused for her work because we are seeing some of the very first modern fictional characters of Lao literature in the Americas, complete with flaws and dreams and complex motivations. Will they go on to be as memorable and enduring as Don Quixote, Javert, or Wittman Ah Sing, or join Lao mythic heroines and heroes like Sinxay or Xieng Mieng? Only time can tell, but Thammavongsa has set a precedent well worth watching, and she has opened a door for many of her fellow Lao in diaspora to share their tales fully and freely. This is no small accomplishment, and it is a magnificent beginning for her journey as a prose writer, even as the poet in me hopes it is not too long before we also see more of her verse.

The Migrant Body's Work

Candida Rifkind

Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife* shifts between interiority and exteriority: she invites readers to look out at the world through her characters' eyes while we also watch them move through the worlds in which they find themselves, from school to

work to lovers' bedrooms. So much about these characters' relationships, between children and parents, between siblings, friends, and lovers, comes down to money, work, and buying entry into dominant white culture and what appears to be a more innocent and content life. As much as we watch her characters watching each other, and we sometimes see what they see, the economy of refugee gazes that structures these stories is always on a par with the other bodily senses, and *How to Pronounce Knife* is, amongst other things, a significant entry into narratives of the labouring im/migrant body in Canadian literature. There is a tenderness to Thammavongsa's descriptions of the smelly, sore, sexualized, labouring, at once excessive and lacking racialized migrant body that could be in productive dialogue with Adele Wiseman's highly embodied immigrant Jewish Winnipeg characters in *Crackpot* (1974), Dionne Brand's precarious Caribbean migrant women navigating Toronto in *Sans Souci and Other Stories* (1988), or the diverse labouring migrant characters in Mariam Pirbhai's *Outside People and Other Stories* (2017). Yet, there is a specificity to how Thammavongsa writes about Southeast Asian refugee and migrant labour in the twenty-first century, and some of this has to do with the way she writes about work and the body.

In "Mani Pedi," Raymond, an ex-boxer taken in by his sister to work in her nail salon, knows things about the women his sister employs that he thinks she doesn't know: "How they tried to get pregnant, but no babies ever caught on because of the chemicals from the salon. How their coughs started and didn't ever stop" (70). But it isn't just toxic chemicals that threaten the health and livelihoods of Thammavongsa's characters: Raymond has to take weeks off work because he develops warts on his hands from touching people's feet without gloves. But, the narrator tells us, the warts bother him less than an invisible contamination:

It was the smell of feet. It got into the pores of his nostrils and took root there, like a follicle of hair. It was becoming a part of him, the smell—like spoiled milk. He could never forget what he did for a living because it was always there. He was beginning to taste the smell of feet at the back of his throat. (66)

The smell of male clients' neglected feet is a stench slowly dulling his senses and diminishing his body—he stops eating because he no longer enjoys food. But he can still smell, and when a female client on whom he has a crush is dropped off at the salon by a wealthy-looking man, "the smell of this man's cologne came in with her" (69). Raymond's heart is broken and his impossible

dreams dashed; his sister sees his face fall, “the way it would fall in the ring when he knew he was losing” (69). But Raymond could never win this round, and the story ends with a heartbreaking image of him and his sister sitting in her car, windows open, listening to the sounds of a family barbeque and children giggling, the soundtrack of middle-class innocence “like a far distant thing, a thing that happened only to other people” (71).

Things that happen to other people is also a theme in “Paris,” in which Thammavongsa explores how the labouring refugee body is contained by the gendered, racialized, sexualized, and classed networks of power that structure workplaces. The Laotian women working in a chicken processing plant think that nose jobs, hairdos, and glamorous clothing might get them promoted to the front office by their sexual predator of a boss. But altering their bodies and trying to appear like the white wives of the company men can never unmark them as racialized others, and it can never insert them into nepotistic reproductions of managerial power. The narrator, Red, who distances herself from the other Laotian women’s feminine performances, is a bystander when her boss is discovered by his beautiful wife, Nicole, having sex with a Laotian female worker in his car. In distress, Nicole runs over to the narrator, seeking comfort in a hug: “She grabbed Red and held her like they were the closest of friends, and buried her pointy nose in Red’s neck. She could feel the poke” (23). The white woman’s pointy nose that other Laotian women mimic through plastic surgery breaks the invisible boundary Red maintains around her body, and the story ends with both women crying, “but for different reasons” (23). The male boss’ sexual exploitation of his female Laotian factory workers tethers these two women to each other, uncomfortably and without collapsing their differences.

And this is Thammavongsa’s point: the things that happen to “other people” are also, in various correlations, inversions, and contortions, the things that happen to her characters because of the centrality of work and labour in their lives. The Southeast Asian refugee body in Canada cannot escape the racialized webs of class, gender, and sexuality that so frequently situate them on the ground, both figuratively and literally. In “Picking Worms,” the narrator’s Laotian mother’s skill at picking live earthworms from farmers’ fields for bait gives her pleasure—“Man, I love shit of the earth” (172) she says after every shift—but it will never get her the promotion she deserves. Instead, the narrator’s fourteen-year-old white boyfriend, who

joins them on a lark, is promoted to manager and changes the way they pick. Her mother's organic, intuitive method of going barefoot and ungloved is prohibited; her health and productivity suffer because the boy manager's rules separate her physically from the earthworms she finds through touch and feel (177). And so she lives the contradictions of her refugee, racialized, gendered labouring body that is at once too physical for her physical job and too expert to be promoted to management. Throughout this collection, the characters' complex relationships are what elevate these stories beyond sociological or political exposé to rich explorations of the labouring body as also a loving, longing, knowing, and defiant body at once marked out for certain kinds of physical work and marked by it. The somatic focus of these stories offers a specificity of Southeast Asian refugee and migrant experience grounded in the labouring body that is always, both visibly and invisibly, seeking to transcend basic survival.

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Reading the Non-human

Joanne Leow

In the opening poem of her first collection, *Small Arguments* (2003), Souvankham Thammavongsa writes about the “only reading material” in her childhood home, the “old newspapers laid out / on the floor / to dry / our winter boots” (14). In the absence of conventional texts like books, the rest of the volume's poems take up the challenge of reading salt, water, fruit, weather, insects, and animals in meditations about memory, suffering, beauty, and loss. By paying attention to the non-human presences that surround the speaker, Thammavongsa's verses draw our attention to minute details that are usually overlooked. Her careful attention suggests a world larger and more entwined than the casual relationships that humans seem to have with these everyday objects and phenomena.

Metaphor functions in Thammavongsa's writing as a thing that hovers just out of one's grasp. A pear is a guitar, but not quite. A blood orange has not been struck and "yet there it is . . . stricken down" (23). A dragonfruit is almost a face with "a soft whiteness, freckled / with dark fragments" (25). Grapefruits have hearts, oranges have navels, the seed of a grape "is left unaware / of the body it will not become" (32). This incompleteness marks the small arguments that Thammavongsa makes about these entities. In making these arguments, her poems resist a wholeness in their anthropomorphism that might suggest a form of mastery. Instead, there is a fearless plunge into the unknowable depths of cruelty that permeate the world, where even snow is abandoned, "left / or thrown aside; / the path / of every gutter" (40), where heaven turns away the grasshopper, there is no light to lead an ant's way, and the butterfly "knows / this is its last" (47). These almost-metaphors, or almost-personifications, thwart the reader's desire to draw simpler and more direct comparisons between the human and non-human.

This clear-eyed vision of our imperfect ability to describe animal, plant, landscape, and weather continues in her collection *Light* (2013). Thammavongsa's poems find revelatory perspectives to describe what we too often view as mundane and ordinary: a feather is part bone, like a plastic straw, but also like needles; "ash can have colour like life" (44); "A Volcano / is / what happens / when you try / to take / the sun down / from where it is" (60); and "The Dark / is light / when light / isn't here" (22). We see these flashes of insight again as her gaze expands outwards to the images in her short story collection *How to Pronounce Knife* (2020)—dead chickens whose "eyes [are] closed tight like they were sleeping" (13), "mould [that] looked like a field of black dandelions" (151), worms that are "stretching their bodies out into such a length that I wasn't even sure these were worms" (169). These nightmarish images remind us of our incomplete knowledge of the landscapes and entanglements with what Heather Swanson et al. have called "more-human-than-human-life" (M2) where "modes of noticing" (M7) are required. These are states of attention that require our "slowing down to listen to the world—empirically and imaginatively at the same time" (M8). Thammavongsa's bare yet precise observations of our limited sight seem particularly crucial in our time of distraction.

Indeed, the writer's singular voice and self-assuredness in the face of partial and fragmentary epistemologies recall Donna Haraway's question: "How can we think in times of urgencies *without* the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse, when every fiber of our being is interlaced, even complicit, in the webs of processes that must somehow be engaged and repatterned?" (35, emphasis original). In this unfolding moment of climate catastrophe and of human and non-human peril, Thammavongsa's work gives us a purposefully flawed knitting of both in her images of brokenness, incompleteness, and imperfection. Her words remind us of our smallness and ignorance while paradoxically refusing to capitulate to despair.

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Second Glances at *Small Arguments*

Warren Heiti

Souvankham Thammavongsa's first book of poetry is called *Small Arguments*. What is an argument? A kind of thought structure. A structure in which one thought—called the *thesis*—is supported by an organized set of other thoughts—called *reasons*.

In *Small Arguments*, the thesis is usually a thing. The poems think about things by attending to them.

*

There is a form of poetry which has been called *the thing poem* (Rilke) and *the elemental ode* (Neruda).

It focuses on a particular. But it thinks in images linking the particular with other things. For these reasons, the elemental ode may be described as a hybrid genre, one that flickers back and forth between this particular and its internal relations.

Its primary method of understanding is metaphorical: Zwicky's nuthatch is seen as a tiny crumhorn, "beady and antique," Neruda's handknit socks are seen as sharks, Crozier's clothes hanger is seen as a question mark, Rilke's broken statue is seen as a gaslamp turned down low.

If poetry had an essence, the elemental ode would be its distillate.

*

A FIREFLY

casts its body

into the night

arguing

against darkness and its taking

It is a small argument

lending itself to silence,

a small argument

the sun will never come to hear

Darkness,

unable to hold against

such tiny elegant speeches,

opens its palm

to set free a fire

its body could not put down (41)

The poem utters *light*, over and over, not as noun but as imperative.

It also makes a promise. In Thammavongsa's third book, *Light*, a colossal squid stares into the lightless abyss, its eyes, the size of dinner plates, waiting for the rarest photon.

*

The dragonfly's eye is composed of roughly thirty thousand facets, which generate a complex mosaic of imagery. While the human eye is sensitive to combinations of only three colours (red, green, and blue), the dragonfly's eye exhibits as many as thirty sensitivities (including to ultraviolet) (Futahashi et al. 1247). For the dragonfly, "the eyes / are the heaviest, / the most difficult / to carry" (56).

Unlike the human eye, it cannot close.

*

Inside its "small cathedral" (57), the snail is praying. The trees argue with gravity, the grasshopper keeps asking heaven for a place.

*

(In his lonely little mental cell, Descartes thinks that his inability to imagine the difference between a chiliagon and the shape of a dragonfly's eye is evidence of the body's existence.)

Meanwhile, growing up in the house without books, the poet never doubted it.

*

One of the first philosophers, from whom no writing survives, tells us that all things are full of gods.

Thammavongsa's poems defend the souls of fruit, insects, elements. In some, there is an almost forensic tenderness.

The poet slices into the worm and names and labels its parts.

The snow falls into "an open petal, / a trellised stem, / a metal fence" (39).

*

In *Found*, the speaker turns the same intense attention toward something rescued from the garbage: a father's scrapbook from a Lao refugee camp.

Seven of the poems are named after months in 1979. Each consists in a single diagonal line striking out the entire month. The wordless austerity of a petroglyph. If we look closely, we can see that each line is unique. We see what it means.

*

In *How to Pronounce Knife*, there is a printer who makes his own paper and mixes his own pigment for Lao wedding invitations. Each invitation is an individual. "He wore a headpiece with jeweller's magnifying glasses attached and went over every single letter on the invitations. He was determined to get the smallest of details exactly right . . ." (87).

*

Like Rilke under the inspiration of Rodin, like Neruda with his columns, his "slim stalks of celery," Thammavongsa sculpts her poems as though they were *things*. And they *are* things. The physicality of the poem matters, the exact placement of each letter on the graph.

"A Firefly" is fifty-six words shaped into three unstopped sentences. The rest is empty space. In its spareness, the poem is a spark in the void.

The first two sentences form the two quatrains of the octave, the third takes the entire sestet. An Italian sonnet, composed according to organic prosody. The volta marks the moment when darkness lets go.

The poem's most important rhyme—*argument / darkness*—forges a lyric harmony between the firefly and the massive force it resists.

The poem makes an argument for attending to the smallest things.

It argues not by debating, but by bearing witness.

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How to Pronounce Laos

Guy Beauregard

In their discussion of "The Cold War and Asian Canadian Writing," Christine Kim and Christopher Lee draw attention to "[a] significant moment in Canadian immigration history": the arrival in Canada of over sixty thousand refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Affecting lives in innumerable ways, this history of refugee passage has also become what Kim and Lee call an "important Cold War legacy that has impacted Asian Canadian writing" (268), notably in texts by Souvankham Thammavongsa, Kim Thúy, and Madeleine Thien focusing

“on matters of memory, generation, forced migration, and statelessness” (268). Turning to Thammavongsa’s remarkable poetry collection *Found* (2007), and specifically to her poem “What I Can’t Read,” Kim and Lee observe that “the speaker prompts us to contemplate how Laos is represented and how such representations are intertwined with, and even bounded by, those of its neighbors, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and China” (269). In *Found*, such intertwining extends to include Canada as a presumed place of refuge as well as the unsettled legacies of the US bombing of Laos, inspiring me to think further about what I’ve elsewhere called *transpacific precariousities* and how we might respond to texts that represent them, not only in North America but also in different sites in Asia, including at my home institution in Taiwan.¹

The question of “how Laos is represented” has remained with me as I read Thammavongsa’s debut collection of short stories, *How to Pronounce Knife* (2020). These stories cut sharply across lives marked by precarious conditions, with characters working in meat-packing plants or on farms, driving a school bus or working at a nail salon. Across many of these work spaces, the position of one’s father, the shape of one’s nose, and the colour of one’s skin seem to determine who is eligible for advancement into managerial circles, and who is not. In the lead story, “How to Pronounce Knife,” for example, the young protagonist

listened as her father worried about his pay and his friends and how they were all making their living here in this new country. He said his friends, who were educated and had great jobs in Laos, now found themselves picking worms or being managed by pimple-faced teenagers. They’d had to begin all over again, as if the life they led before didn’t count. (4)

The father then tells the daughter: “Don’t speak Lao and don’t tell anyone you are Lao. It’s no good to tell people where you’re from.’ The child looked at the centre of her father’s chest, where, on this T-shirt, four letters stood side by side: LAOS” (4-5). The father’s stern warning to *not speak Lao* and *not tell anyone you are Lao* sets in motion a powerful rhetorical device through which such warnings paradoxically keep attempts to speak and tell alive.² The irony made visible through the daughter’s line of vision likewise keeps LAOS in sight, even as—and perhaps especially when—the protagonist struggles in and moves through the Canadian public school system and the specific forms of knowledge it assesses and rewards.

“If refugee is often understood as an aberrant condition,” writes Vinh Nguyen, “then refugeetude is a condition of possibility, a method of knowing and affecting the world that holds on to the critical potential of refugeeness” (121).³ In his circumspect account, Nguyen is careful to underline that this “condition of possibility” is far from assured. But if we take seriously Thammavongsa’s writing as a sustained and ongoing “method of knowing and affecting the world,” we may better understand how “Laos”—understood here as a signifier that is both locally situated and globally resonant—has not (yet) been adequately represented, a point also discussed by Bryan Thao Worra in his contribution to this forum. One way this inadequacy is made clear appears in the story “Edge of World” in which the narrator observes: “When my parents read the newspaper or watched the evening news, they never heard anything about what was happening in [Laos]. It was almost as if it didn’t exist” (96). Thammavongsa’s stories intervene in such circuits of representation—but this intervention is not simply a matter of providing new information or producing forms of positivist knowledge about Laos and its complex relations to Canada and other sites around the world. Instead, for variously situated scholars committed to thinking and writing about transpacific precarities, Thammavongsa’s collection can be thought of as an important transpacific text that teaches us how to acknowledge—as the narrator movingly does in “Edge of the World”—the many things we do not, and perhaps cannot, know.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 I’ve attempted to address these issues in “Transpacific Precarities: Responding to Souvankham Thammavongsa’s *Found* and Rita Wong’s *forage* in East Asia.”
- 2 Homi K. Bhabha made this point in the 1990s in his discussion of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*; see *The Location of Culture*, p. 18. See also Viet Thanh Nguyen’s later articulation of this point in relation to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* in *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, pp. 194–95.
- 3 In mobilizing the term *refugeetude*, Nguyen builds upon the work of Khatharya Um

and the Critical Refugee Studies Collective. See Um's *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*, p. 213; and the Critical Refugee Studies Collective's "Critical Vocabularies."

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Plots and Paths

Denise Cruz

I began writing this reflection on Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife* by hand in an empty notebook. As I watched my sentences unfurl in black ink, I thought of the closing lines to one of my favourite poems, Thammavongsa's "Agnes Martin, Untitled #10," and couldn't help but imagine that she might approve. The first poem in Thammavongsa's 2013 award-winning collection, *Light*, "Agnes Martin, Untitled #10" closes with the lines, "the plot and path of a small single letter / The face of a country you can make yours: / the lines, the grids, the marks are here" (10). Whenever I teach this poem, my students and I collectively marvel at its playful reconstruction of openings and closings, bounds and rules. We talk about enjambment, the transition

from a colon to the lack of punctuation throughout the poem, the creation and disruption of structural patterns. We often end by discussing the materiality of the book itself. The paper that Thammavongsa chose for *Light*'s publication has a subtly ridged texture that evokes the grid-like layout of both Martin's original painting and the poem's layout on the page.

Thammavongsa has said that she often composes initial drafts of her poetry by hand using graph paper. She approaches the craft of writing with exactitude. This precision, the contrast between small, sparse lines and the blank expanse of a page, works alongside the shape of her poetic lines. Precise placement highlights the various scales and registers that inform her work, which are fuelled by a tension between "something" and "nothing." Thammavongsa once described her interest in this tension: "[I'm] interested in what a person can do when given the fewest possible resources . . . what a mind can do with what people call 'little'" ("The Trillium Conversations").

In Thammavongsa's poetry, attention to small details is pivotal because these details reveal what might be lost amid accounts of transnational and transpacific migration that stress urgency through enormity (the number of people, for example, affected by a global refugee crisis, or the lasting historical repercussions of transpacific violence and its aftereffects). It has been a pleasure to read Thammavongsa's fiction through the lens of her poetry. Like her poetry, Thammavongsa's fiction is compact, exact, economic, and sparse. It is also wry, moving, heartbreaking, and memorable. Her prose carefully layers sound and image. In the eponymous opening story of *How to Pronounce Knife*, for example, Thammavongsa's first paragraph plays with alliterative "n" sounds across five sentences ("note," "not," "notes," "no"). It's a subtle preface to a painful scene: the narrator's mispronunciation of the word "knife" in school and her realization and negotiation of what her Lao parents do and do not know. The opening repetition of "n" in various forms of writing (the notes) and negation (not and no) sonically and visually recalls forms of erasure (the silent "k" in "knife" and "know").

In *Light*, Thammavongsa includes a series of shape poems, laid out visually in similar ways but with subtle differences, like the outline of a puzzle piece that almost but does not quite fit. The repeated image also holds together stories in *How to Pronounce Knife*. "How to Pronounce

Knife” ends with the father and child working on a puzzle. They begin with the borders and fill in the rest. The image of a puzzle returns roughly a hundred pages later in the story “Edge of the World.” In this story, the child works on the puzzle as a mother watches, and a map of the world emerges. When the puzzle is finished, the mother and child argue. “Just because I never went to school,” the mother says, “doesn’t mean I don’t know things” (102). This moment is a revelation for the child, who understands what her

mother knew then. She knew about war, what it felt like to be shot at in the dark, what death looked like up close in your arms, what a bomb could destroy. Those were things I didn’t know about, and it was all right not to know them, living where we did now, in a country where nothing like that happened. There was a lot I did not know. (102)

Recalling the content, imagery, and sonic and visual dynamics of those opening sentences in “How to Pronounce Knife,” here Thammavongsa again highlights erasures, absences, gaps, and distance, redefining the meaning of “nothing” and what her characters—and we as readers—do and do not know. Her poetry and fiction examine hierarchies that subsume the small amid the large, from the experience of those rendered inconsequential by a nation-state, to the status of Asian Canadian writing alongside canonical Canadian works of literature, to the “minor” status of poetry in relation to prose as the primary genre for the study of race in North America, to our lingering assumptions and tendencies in the study of transpacific relations.¹

NOTES

- 1 On the emphasis on prose in studies of Asian American literature, see Koshy; and Konzett.

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On Names and Resonances

Y-Dang Troeung

Souvankham Thammavongsa's name dances on my tongue with a singsong melody that reminds me of many of the sounds, cadences, and rhythms of Southeast Asia. When I gave a copy of Thammavongsa's book *How to Pronounce Knife* to my cousin, whose surname was once Phannavong, she immediately recognized the name: "Oh that's *definitely* a Lao name," she said. I told my cousin to start by reading the story "You Are So Embarrassing." I believed she would recognize something heartbreakingly true in this story: a resonance with the memories of how our mothers and sisters and aunts had worked on the farm grounds and the factory lines, year after year, as refugees in Canada; I hoped she would feel the twinges of excited familiarity, as I did while reading Thammavongsa's stories, at all the references to the joys and sorrows of rural small-town Canadian life as experienced from the vantage point of Southeast Asian refugees.

My cousin remarked that *How to Pronounce Knife* was the first book I had ever given to her by an author with a Lao name. Like Phannavong, Thammavongsa had that cadence of the many Lao names that rang throughout our childhoods: Sayavongs, Chanthavong, Phromprasack, Rasavong, Vongxay, Khampaseuth. These were the names that filled the wedding halls with seven hundred guests or more at a time; that created the ingenious worm-picking networks enabling Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Laotian refugees to survive in those early years of resettlement in Canada; that packed a single suburban home with dozens of extended family members for a ritual gathering such as a birthday party or a Lao Buddhist funeral. These names exerted a mental and affective pull for my cousin and me, a nostalgia for an intimate way of being and relating to family, to community, and to the earth and the land that I associated with my childhood days.

In a recent interview about "Writing Refugees," Thammavongsa discussed the multiple acts of refusal she has had to navigate as a Canadian author: her refusal to be relegated to the role of a Lao native informant;

her refusal to anglicize her name to make it easier for white audiences to pronounce, despite pressure from literary publishers. Thammavongsa stressed the importance of asserting those difficult-to-pronounce names that serve as indelible markers of our histories. These names are markers not because they represent something noble, heroic, or authentic about our racial or cultural selves, but because of how they move across fields of relations, creating intimate publics and lifeworlds that might otherwise be foreclosed. What Souvankham Thammavongsa's name signifies to me is a Canadian author's refusal to foreclose this possibility of community and encounter: with Lao history, with Southeast Asian people, with Asian diasporic communities, and with all people of colour whose names and beings have been traditionally read as "difficult" or unintelligible.

Thammavongsa's acts of disobedience place her within a long genealogy of women of colour writers who have similarly refused to be named or renamed. In Thammavongsa's work, I hear resonances with Anida Yoeu Ali's poem "What's in a Name?" in which the poet asserts that "My name knows my mother labored screaming for hours only to mourn a year later as she buried her sorrow" (2); with Larissa Lai's mythical protagonist in *When Fox is a Thousand*, who reflects that "A name must carry you into the past and the future. It needs roots to tap the water deep below the surface of the earth" (243). These writers assert the importance of being carried and transported by our names, that these roots need to be nourished and watered in order for the deep networks to remain sustainable.

Author Viet Thanh Nguyen has written about his experience of being "encouraged by generations of American tradition to believe that it was normal, desirable and practical to adopt an American first name, and even to change one's surname to an American one." Like Nguyen who "tried on various names" growing up in America, and like the character Chantakad in Thammavongsa's story who changes her name to Celine, I have worn many different names throughout my life, sometimes changing it out of embarrassment and exhaustion, sometimes out of fun and playfulness. In the end, I have always returned to the name that my parents gave me, the gift that tethers me to their past in Cambodia.

The story of our names, how we play with them and deploy them, says something about the changing landscape of Canadian literature. It gestures

to the shifting nature of who Canadian literature is being written *by* and *for*. On the cover of a book, Souvankham Thammavongsa's name demands a different kind of stop, pause, and attention. It says: this name is part of the work, part of the world and futures this book wants to make.

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There Are No Prizes

Souvankham Thammavongsa

There are no prizes when it is the first day of school. The children around you are all crying, clinging to their mothers, begging not to go. You do not cling to your mother. You know what this day means for all of you. You are five. You steel yourself and you don't look back. Not even as your mother sobs like the children around her. You tell her everything will be all right, and she is grown up now. There are no prizes when you know you will never have that shoe or dress. When the mould on the walls comes back. Over and over again. You will never live in that big blue house on the street. The one whose driveway you pretend to walk up when someone drops you off. There wasn't a prize for living in a van with your family. Not a single prize for doing all that math homework. Except the knowledge that the square of the Hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. And this fact would be this way, certain and forever. You make a wish on that moving light in the sky. "It's a plane,

stupid,” someone says. But you make one anyway because you’ve never seen a shooting star. A wish is a wish. There isn’t a prize for having been there. There isn’t a prize for you when you are told, “That’s nothing,” or “That’s not a living,” and you write anyway. There isn’t a prize when you ride a bus three hours every weekend for four months. There isn’t a prize for not leaving. There isn’t a prize for knowing exactly who you are. There isn’t a prize when you crawl underneath your office desk to sleep. No prize when you count bags of cash five levels below the basement. No prize, at all, when you lose the job you have had for fifteen years and have to start all over again. There isn’t a prize when the lights in the room dim and a space clears, and you think it’ll be different this time around, and it turns out just all the same. Certainly no prize for what you had to do, and there won’t ever be. There’s just no prize for telling the truth. Not even a jury to gather and deliberate. No prize for keeping the herbs on the balcony. No prize for feeling the sunlight on your face in the morning. No prize for that afternoon in the park. There was a bee. He said, “If you blow on it, they go away.” There is never a prize when it rains. There isn’t a prize when you turn forty-two. There is just a number divisible by two. Not that you don’t want, but that want can’t ever be anything right now. Isn’t it better to have something that can belong to you? There isn’t a prize for the near misses, the failures, the things you left off the page to get what you can on the page. The playground is full of children. They are walking unsteadily and look like they will fall over. None of them are yours. And it is probably too late for you. Keeping wood to wood. Having never carried a split. I live in this world too, you say. And there is no prize for that. In the end, there are just worms. Crawling and stretching out. You want to drop them all. But everyone wants this job and your mom got you in. So you hold on. The Styrofoam cups are filled. The door will remain locked. And you will put a finger up to the peephole so no one can see your open eye.

