

## **A Poetics of Sparsity: Refusing Authoritative Interpretation in Souvankham Thammavongsa's *Found***

Reviewed by Kasim Husain

Souvankham Thammavongsa's explanation of her choice to publish her poetry with the small press Pedlar recalls Marx's critique of the commodity. Marx decries the way consciousness of the labour that goes into the making of a commodity is abstracted in order for it to acquire exchange value, pointing out what gets left behind in this process: "existence as a material thing is put out of sight. Neither can it any longer be regarded as the product of the labour of the joiner, the mason, the spinner, or of any other definite kind of productive labour" (305). In a talkback session after doing a reading for the Test Reading Series from her collection of poetry, *Found*, Thammavongsa echoes this observation while contrasting chapbook publishing and working with Pedlar, saying "the paper people use is cheap and ugly and they s\apled it together and I just wanted someone to put in the time and effort to make it look good because... I already put in the time and effort to make it what it is" ("Test Reading" 2006). This cohesion between both form and content strengthens her concern with physicality, particularly that of the labouring body. In other words, not only is Thammavongsa stressing the work that goes into writing and publishing poetry, but also her poetics places the emphasis squarely on the labour embodied in the images she chooses to represent in this collection.

The unity of form and content is most immediately evident in the collection's slight and austere physical appearance. A stylistic continuation of the presentation that won her 2003 collection *Small Arguments* the Alcuin Society book design award, *Found*'s typeface is small, and the poems themselves are presented with substantial open space both between and surrounding their brief stanzas. This arrangement lends them a quality of presence.

By presence, I mean to suggest that the language of *Found* refocuses our attention on the embodied nature of language over and above the abstraction that takes place in transmitting meaning. Take "Thermometer, a Diagram of" as a case study; the poem situates the human body on a spectrum "between / two points" of boiling and freezing. The thermometer reminds us that the body occupies, or rather inhabits, space that is not of the mind, but is somewhere on a corporeal continuum between hot and cold: "This / is where / it lives / and how" (15). The poem's title also introduces us to the poet's strategic inversion of emphasis, placing the focus squarely on the object – as most of the poems are sentences, titles such as "Ideal Proportions, Male," "The Bible, Notes On" and "House, A Sketch Of" remind us that these poems are gestures at interpreting a life in which she was too young to be an active participant. Souvankham Thammavongsa was born in 1978, in a refugee camp in Nong Khai, Thailand, the same year that her father put together the scrapbook that formed the source material for this collection. The objects that make up the scrapbook seem to occupy a privileged position over and above any retrospective interpretation she might make of them.

Thammavongsa's reluctance to speculate on her parents' actual responses to the situation in which they found themselves is established in *Found*'s opening, an untitled poem in which she observes, "If you knew / love / these / do not say / but of life / your life / it was small and brief" (13). The emphasis here is on the material life of the body rather than the perceptive realm of the

mind, or the means by which human life is made knowable. The poems that follow break down the elements necessary for life into “The Heart,” “The Lung,” and “The Sun” (notably absent from this sequence is a poem entitled “The Mind”), which are marked out as different from the rest of the collection not only by their ambiguous connection to the scrapbook from which *Found* derives, but also by the way the stanzas cascade diagonally downwards across the page. All three poems reframe relatively standard tropes of lyric poetry in terms of (to borrow again from Marx) their use-value. In “The Heart,” for example, she dismisses the easy metaphor of heartbreak in favour of its role in circulation; “Nothing / here / can break, / or be broken / And nothing / can come / from here / but blood” (16-17). The heart here is involved in the maintenance of life, rather than its standard poetic figuration as the body’s emotional centre; in the context of life in a refugee camp, keeping the heart pumping “blood” acquires an urgency that renders the metaphor of the heart as the core of human feeling facile. Similarly, “The Lung” attends to the “work it does / it has done / and has been doing / all these years” (18), while “The Sun” emphasises the difficulty of living under conditions where it “built / shafts / and sent them / down to harm you” (20). Life is hard work, but applying themselves creatively kept her parents going. They “built, / to survive” (21), and her father’s scrapbook itself appears as a testament to that constructive basis for continued existence.

The preface’s revelation of the fraught circumstances of the scrapbook’s compilation in a refugee camp in Nong Khai, Thailand, lends the poems an ominous charge. When might the heart’s “blood” stop pumping, or worse, when might it be pumped out of the body? This tension becomes particularly apparent in the sequence of calendar poems towards the end of the collection, which progressively move from a combination of descriptive poetry and visual reproductions of her father’s notations of time (crooked lines that cross off months and days), to simply the notations themselves and finally to blank space. Punctuated as this sequence is by the violently desperate image of dismembering a pigeon in “Warning,” which ends the collection, the chain of objects is shattered sharply, as she describes how her father “broke / its hard neck / cut open / its chest / dug out / a handful / and threw back / its body” (60). While the relationship of the pigeon to the scrapbook is unclear in and of itself, fitting it into *Found*’s overarching schematic is beside the point; the arresting quality of this moment of sheer human necessity returns our attention to the way all of these objects collected in the midst of privation acquire a sense of “particular purpose,” to borrow from the collection’s epigraph – in this case, it is a “warning,” a reminder of the fragility of life, and the ease with which bodies can become lifeless husks.

In contrast with this dramatic finale, however, many of Thammavongsa’s poems seem to disavow interpretive representation altogether in favour of material presence, which is exemplified by the catalogue of units that make up “Tables of Weight and Measures, Equivalents.” Reading this poem against *Found*’s epigraph from Wittgenstein, which explains, “[t]he work of a philosopher consists of assembling reminders for a particular purpose,” the question becomes, why did her father choose these particular measures? Beginning with the conversion “1 chain / is 22 yards” (30) might carry a carceral connotation suitable to the refugee camp setting, but there is a sense of the poet’s careful abstention from narrativizing what is ostensibly a simple reference list. This question recalls the observation of poet Jan Zwicky – the source of Thammavongsa’s Wittgenstein epigraph – in attempting to define metaphor, that “it is impossible that all utterances should be metaphorical. But from this it does not follow that there

is always a reliable way to determine, in a given case, whether an utterance is metaphorical or not” (15).

More importantly, perhaps, while the measurements above convert neatly into another form, some of the poems address the difficulty of attempting similar equations in terms of language. “The Bible, Notes On” focuses on the one word that is readable to the speaker in a Bible written in an unknown language. This poem follows closely on “What I Can’t Read,” which focuses on the appearance of language in the absence of understanding; Thammavongsa’s description of the way written Laotian is figured, a script in which “Each letter / wound / around itself / drawing / a small dark / hole / an / inner ear / tiny and landlocked” (26). The “inner ear” metaphor appears particularly appropriate with reference to the alphabet’s appearance, an example of which follows:

## ພາສາລາວ (Ager).

Laos itself, a “landlocked” country, is embedded in the closed circles or “inner ear[s]” that punctuate each letter of the script. Here, the graphology of language takes the place of the typically linguistic basis for metaphor. This is wholly consistent with Thammavongsa’s poetics, as she refuses to mourn her inability to understand Laotian in favour of relating to the material body of the language itself. Such attention to the body of language appears as an affirmation of existence in “My Father’s Handwriting,” where she notes how “He carved / every letter / into / the sound / its / shape made / and every one took / a place / where nothing / stood” (25). While she is writing here about her father, her own poetry appears to make a similar claim of permanence in the midst of absence.

According to Zwicky, a “good metaphor is the expression of a homology, an isomorphism, between the way two things gesture” (9). In this context, Thammavongsa’s refusal to abstract into narrative in order to establish a sense of connection with her past cannot be stressed enough – these poems appear as gestures at understanding informed by material artefacts of her father’s scrapbook, rather than making any claims to authoritative interpretation on her part. Think here of the connection between the senses of place both on the anatomical and geographical maps in “Thermometer, A Diagram Of,” and “The World, A Map Of.” In the earlier poem, life happens between two points on a thermometer, or, in terms of the latter, “If / it is round / or if / you can see / the sun / the other way / does / not matter.” Ways of seeing are less important than acknowledging the places we inhabit; for Thammavongsa’s father, this is “the country / and / the blue dot / inside” (42). In *Found*, the poetry itself inhabits a physical body that is consistent with its contents. The thick expanse of empty paper surrounding the poems presents them as objects laboured over; this setting allows for the abstraction of interpretive response to the past while insisting on consciousness of the crucial element of materiality upon which that process must be based. I might conjecture that Marx himself would approve of such a principled poetics, but that in itself would be immaterial speculation.

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