

Interview with Souvankham Thammavongsa

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Souvankham Thammavongsa is the author of three collections of poetry, *Small Arguments* (2003), *Found* (2007) and *Light* (2013), all published by Pedlar Press, Toronto, Ontario and now in St. John's, Newfoundland. Thammavongsa has been the recipient of the Lina Chartrand Award for her poem "Water" and the ReLit Award in 2004 for *Small Arguments*. Her books have received the Alcuin Award in 2004 and 2007 for book design and she is the winner of the 2014 Trillium Book Award for poetry in the English Language.

Recently I had the pleasure of meeting with her publisher, Beth Follett. Thanking her for publishing and promoting this amazing poet, I also expressed my surprise that there is not more of a buzz in the academic poetry world around Souvankham's work. The critical attention she has garnered and much of the interview space seems to circle around questions of identity rather than attempting to uncover at least a glimpse of the poetic practice that informs her work. This interview is an attempt to provide some questions and answers about her poetics and practice and perhaps to start a conversation that will result in more critical discussions.

On a recent trip to the Baltics when considering what great Canadian works I could share with other parts of the world, the only books I thought to bring were copies of Souvankham Thammavongsa's *Small Arguments*, *Found*, and *Light*. I sent her the following interview questions shortly before leaving on the trip and I received the responses from Thammavongsa when I was on my second visit (after an interlude of fifteen years) to Prague, Czech Republic, a city renowned for its enduring beauty. In spite of the awe-inspiring sights and the vibrance of that city, I spent much of the day reading and rereading Souvankham's responses to my questions and thinking about and rereading her work. That is to say, in this perhaps less than apt comparison, Prague is a city of enduring beauty that people return to again and again and I expect Souvankham Thammavongsa's poetry to have a similarly enduring presence in the landscape of Canadian poetry. What follows is our interview.

SG: Like the content of much of your work, *Small Arguments* and *Found* both have very minimalist covers—a single bug and a single line. They are also both square. Were the works written to be printed in that unusual size and what effect does this have on the work?

ST: When I wrote *Small Arguments*, I was an undergrad at the

University of Toronto. I printed and bound my own books and sold them out of my school knapsack to people I met at small press fairs or at readings or in my English literature classes. *Small Arguments* was printed in that unusual size to honour the spirit of the original chapbooks. The insects on the cover of *Small Arguments* are unnatural. It is not a matching or real image of an insect in the book but it is a simple form of an insect. It is the language of the work that makes it the insect. The image on the front cover is just a “cover,” a kind of shell. The language is what makes it real. I never planned or pressed the designer to make this. After some time had passed, I was shown this image and I thought how magical her work was—she understood me.

That mark on the front cover of *Found* means nothing until you go in. By the time you finish and close the book and see its front cover, the meaning of that mark changes. You understand what it is and what it means in a way you never would just by looking at the cover. I thought a lot about “making marks” and making “markers” and “how marks are made.” I thought a lot about reading and how reading things is not always about words. Reading is about putting together what you know, and what you know doesn’t happen to you in an instant—it’s something you accumulate, something you build upon and with.

I loved the shape of the first book so much that I wanted to keep it and for it to “echo” the first in a visual way. The physical shape of *Found* was, in a way, a visual rhyme to *Small Arguments*.

SG: Why is *Light* a different size and how is the cover art related to the text? Does the change in size and the less minimalistic cover reflect some of the changes in the writing?

ST: The acorns on the front of the cover match the number of poems in the collection. There are forty-two poems as there are forty-two acorns. If you look at each acorn, it is a little different from the other. They are all diseased. That is, each acorn didn’t grow into “what it is supposed to look like.” I think what makes this drawing so beautiful is their slight differences. The thing that is supposed to kill them, to make them grow into their damage is what actually makes them beautiful. There is one perfect acorn but it’s so uninteresting.

When my publisher, Beth Follett, showed me Catharine Nicholson’s painting for the front cover of the book—I just thought how perfect it was. In a single glance, you get the idea of similarity and difference and how each mark matters to the other. I thought each poem functioned the way these acorns lived. Each took light in and was made into its own shape—which is exactly what happens inside each poem.

I think the cover is still very minimalistic. They are all acorns—but what happened to them, a small event, made them more detailed in a way, gave them a kind of narrative.

SG: I found it interesting that you chose to begin *Found* with a quotation from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: “The work of a

philosopher consists of assembling reminders for a particular purpose.” How does this quotation provide a way into the work, or does it? Do you see your work as a poet and your work with language in a similar way, or is this an epigraph that applies more particularly to the content? Are you “assembling reminders” and, if so, what is the “particular purpose”?

ST: I was thinking of my father, both my parents really. When we think of success we often are talking about educated, learned people. People who are read to, who read, who have gone to school. We also think of ambition, that a person just has to want it and work hard enough for it, and do the work to get there. But it is not that simple. Sometimes you can have ambition but your life and the setbacks—the ones that come one after the other, after the other, after the other, in a way that doesn’t make recovery or hope possible. Well, that’s my parents’ lives. In my heart, I do measure them with a great sense of hope and success. I think a lot of learned people can learn a lot by their lives. I wanted to say that while my father was not considered a philosopher, I considered him one. What he assembled and collected in his scrapbook had a particular purpose—he just needed a particular reader.

SG: I am interested in the mechanics of your structure in individual poems. I notice quite a number of poems that have two lines composed of only a few words and quite a number of these two line stanzas down the page. Then there are other poems that have a word or two and are arranged from left to right down the page with this pattern sometimes repeating. Why these forms? How do the form and content relate?

ST: I am thinking about space and time and language. What happens when someone gives you this narrow space or this little time, how do you move within it with language? How do you get yourself to the centre of your own language? How can clarity and understanding shoot through that space? I think you have to understand your material really well and trust what you know even if what you know isn’t considered knowledge in a traditional way.

SG: Quite a number of your poems look at objects in the natural world. How do you relate to nature? Do you see yourself on equal terms with other living beings or do you recognize a hierarchy of living beings?

ST: I don’t care about nature. I think everything in it is just trying to do its best. I have no precious feelings for these things. Only when nature is language to me do I see how much I do care.

SG: You mention tools and measurements in relation to precise scientific endeavours and then less precise measures based on instinct. What is the interest here and how does it relate to the natural world and to language and your personal poetics?

ST: I think everything you need to know has been given to you. And if you don't know it yet then you may never, or you haven't understood that you know it. In particular, the poem "the weight of salt" talks about someone cooking. If you think about the cooking industry there are so many tools and accessories like timers and special pots and pans and thermometers, but does that actually make the kind of meal you want to eat? When I got married I was given these things and I didn't know what to do with them. My mother never cooked with them and she makes the most delicious meals—meals that make me cry whenever I get a chance to have a meal with her. They bring so much of our life together back. I can't just go out to a restaurant and ask for a Lao meal—maybe I could but it would be bland and the real ingredients like fermented fish sauce would be missing because customers complain that "it stinks." Unless, of course, you lived in a place like Minnesota, where the Lao community is really huge and the customers wouldn't say that. What I am trying to get at is, you have all the tools you need to do something but if you don't know what to do with them then that's just not very useful. Sometimes instincts and experience are things worth valuing alongside those tools.

SG: You write about different sorts of fruit and bugs in your first work, *Small Arguments*. Do you write with the objects in your mind or do you have them physically there in front of you or a picture of them at hand? How do the poems relate to the physical object? And how does the human relate to these living objects?

ST: I work from memory. I think everything I need to know about that thing has already been given to me, or I have already given to myself by remembering it. It's interesting what a person remembers and how they remember it. The poems are all about one thing—one orange, one firefly, one snail. I never go back and repeat the object in the poem in another poem.

I think the poems are very true to the physical object. I don't make things up about them. A firefly is really a firefly—it doesn't become some beast and start tearing up the town.

These objects are always made human somehow, because the looking is human. I have no experience other than being human, so what I look at is always going to have some human understanding.

SG: In one of your interviews you discuss Buddhism and bodies being laid out in the temples as part of Buddhist custom. In your latest work, *Light*, in one of your poems you say "A Buddhist Temple is called a wat" in this case playing with the implied sound of the word that remains unmentioned and its relation to a light bulb. Those are the only two explicit mentions I can find of Buddhism in your work, but when I read your work I feel like I could be participating in a kind of guided meditation. In another interview you speak about the importance of breathing when reading poetry. Your poems feel spiritual. Is there something spiritual underlying your work? Is there a Buddhist sensibility?

ST: No. *Light*, for me, is a work about commitment. I am committed to writing about one thing and I saw it through.

SG: When I met you we discussed your experience of learning how to swim and I happily found a poem in *Light* on this topic. Your collection *Found* looks at your father's scrapbook and clearly has an autobiographical starting point. How much do you write from a place of memory? Are childhood memories important to your work either in terms of the way you see the world or in terms of the way you use language?

ST: I write a lot about family. Those are the people who form you, who give you your first word, who are the ones who share your language at the very beginning, who are there at the very beginning.

All of my writing comes from memory. Something I saw and wanted to tell someone about, or something I saw but didn't know how to describe until twenty years later.

In some ways, I do think a lot about the child I was. I do feel I am always writing to her, telling her about the things that are here in the world and to not be afraid. The language is always simple and clear because I want a child to be able to understand on a level that an adult does or can remember doing.

SG: In both *Found* and *Light* you look at single words in languages other than English and use those words as a starting point for the poem and the exploration of language. Where do you find these words? Do you look in dictionaries of other languages and/or do you know or learn languages other than English as part of your poetic practice or as a way of defamiliarizing yourself and/or the reader with language?

ST: By accident. I felt haunted by this word. It stood out to me in my life in such a strong way.

I was talking to a friend about writing about light, about how Marianne Moore had said "Speech is light," and she told me about the two Icelandic words she knew. When I saw them side by side, I thought they were so beautiful. Two words that looked alike but some slight difference made all the difference. I wanted to not just write about those two words but the shape of them on the page, the location of their difference in the ending.

I was in Amsterdam and was buying a stamp to mail a postcard and on the stamp was a light bulb and it said "licht." It looked so much like the word light but it sounded so different. The sound of it made me think about light differently—like it was "lick" and something you could eat.

Then, I was reading an autobiography by Queen Noor and in the book it said her name meant light. I had been wanting to write a poem about the moon and how it has no light at all. But then I saw the two circles in "Noor" and just wondered what if these two things, the moon and the sun, were equal in size? Why does one have to have all that

light generating it and the other reflecting it. I had been wanting to write a poem about having little—that sometimes a person can have the same ambition as another but one had just a bit more, things worked out a bit better—and wanted to write about two things that are the same, equal in size and shape and what one felt about the other. Here was a word in a language that said light but also seemed to reflect and question the thing it was describing too.

A lot of this comes from speaking another language: Lao. It's a tonal language. It uses the same sound but where the sound falls changes its meaning. With the different languages in *Light*, I tried to show that how you think about light changes in the language you think of it in.

SG: *Found* is a work of such minimalism that there are pages that contain only a partial line and eventually a blank page. Why? *Light*, on the other hand, seems much less of an exercise in minimalism and even at times comes close to being narrative poetry. Why the change?

ST: It isn't a change.

I think *Found* and *Light* is the same but as readers our points of reference, our experience of the subjects is different.

When I wrote *Found*, it was so difficult to get readers to understand the emotional weight for *Found*. How do you write about a man no one knows or cares about? Usually, the idea of a father is enough to give a narrative some emotional weight but my father was mine and I never gave him over to the narrative.

With *Light*, the subject is so broad and wide that getting it to be particular and personal was just as difficult. I am just writing about light. That is all. How much could I say about light that isn't going to make the work lose its energy or get caught up in the fun of play?

For me, the reading of *Found* is a longer one than *Light*. It is true that there are no words on the page, but to get to the answer why is infinite. Why is it blank? Is it because language is inadequate? Is the scrapbook even a real thing? Does it really exist? Does this event really exist? If I don't write it, will it exist?

SG: What is the structure of *Light*? If the idea of light is the organizing principle, what led to the inclusion of poems such as "When You Learn to Swim," "Stouffville," "Dream," and "I Remember" among others that seem to be based on memories and are much less minimalistic?

ST: The structure is on the front cover.

Not only is the idea of light an organizing principle, it also determines the subject, the shape, the tone of the poem.

Light is not just about visual light. It plays with other meanings of light. Light in tone, light in weight. Each poem was "in light of" another. The poem about swimming is really about the sun, describing the sun without using the word "light" at all—calling it an unsettled speck, a thing to have. The absence of light is an essence of light itself.

When you dream or remember there is no light there, just the memory of it.

SG: Where do you see yourself going from here? Are you currently working on a poetry project?

ST: I don't know.

I do know that I don't ever want to use the word "light" again in my next collection. It's too particular and personal to me now. I am trying to get out of not noticing or using "light." That's been hard because everything is about light.

SG: Where does your inspiration come from? What is your writing practice? Do you write every day and/or do you need to be in a particular physical or mental space? What is your poetic process and has this changed over the course of the publication of your three works with Pedlar Press?

ST: I don't think my writing has changed. It hasn't changed, but the people who read my work have changed. There are more people now and they can pronounce my name or will at least try to.

I don't write every day. I read everything as much as I can. I really love non-fiction and short stories. I love reading profiles about people in magazines and interviews too.

I don't know what my poetic process is. It's still something I am working out. I do always go back to read my books, to see what I got so right the first time around and how to get back to that way again. When I read *Small Arguments* I think of the things Beth didn't touch, the things she let be in there that are completely of my hand—and I am so grateful for that kind of editing. When she says that she thought I was one of the most interesting young writers in the country from the very beginning—I see it in *Small Arguments*, what she left there, my voice.