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The Sound of a Silenced Letter: Souvankham Thammavongsa and the Kinetic Archive

LINDA M. MORRA AND GREGORY BETTS

When I was born, I weighed less than two pounds. . . . My body was the size of a pop can. . . . They were afraid to touch me.

Years later, in Toronto, I found a red book. It was aged and burnt by the sun. On the front cover, the year 1978 [was] embossed into the leather. It was the year I was born, the year my parents lived in building 48 in Nong Khai, Thailand, a Lao refugee camp. He [my father] carved every letter into the sound its shape made. And everyone took a place where nothing stood. Now, my father had thrown this scrapbook away. Without his knowing, I took it and read what was there.

— Souvankham Thammavongsa (in Nath)

SOUVANKHAM THAMMAVONGSA WROTE or rather “found” her second book of poetry, *Found* (2011), through a gesture of recovery, one that involved a quick but decisive revaluation of a scrapbook that her father had made and then, decades later, discarded. Her act of reclamation would reposition his narrative — which he himself deemed unworthy of further preservation — from its inconsequential status in a trash bin to its eventual status as a mainstream literary form. Thammavongsa was apparently fascinated by how her father’s scrapbook captured her family’s experience in a Lao refugee camp in Thailand, addressed in the passage above, which traced facets of their lives there, including her birth; it is used as the epigraph to this essay to foreground questions of value, archives, and chance and the confluence of these elements as they appear in her work. Her life, begun as a refugee at the margins of state recognition, was significant enough to her father to record it in a book — notably a “scrapbook,” or “book of scraps,” or “odds and ends” accrued during their life there. Her father deemed the book, in turn, sufficiently valuable to safeguard it spatially and temporally — that is, to transport it across continents, to Canada, and preserve it over

decades. At some point, however, its value diminished, at least from his perspective, so he disposed of it. By chance Thammavongsa happened to spy the book in and retrieve it from the garbage. The scrapbook then served as inspiration for the poems that document the vulnerability of her and her family members' lives, the fragility of that book as a record, and the precarity¹ of value and values — of human life itself — in a war-torn zone.

Thammavongsa's subsequent works — *Light* (2013), *Cluster* (2019), and especially *How to Pronounce Knife: Stories* (2020) — extend this contrapuntal reflection on how a stateless refugee claimed value despite such overwhelming precarity and on how deliberate acts of preservation became essential to this process. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said develops the musical concept of contrapuntal (i.e., possessing dual melodies) to propose a contrapuntal *reading* that highlights the jarring simultaneity in literary depictions of safe cities whose safety depends on or benefits from colonial violence *elsewhere* (62). Even though Canada is not directly implicated in the violence of Laos that led to Thammavongsa's own and many of her characters' displacements, we use the word *contrapuntal* here to recognize the disparity and disjunction between, in Said's terms, the two "intertwined and overlapping histories" of Laos and Canada in her works (14).² Her unique contemplation of the intertwined and overlapping strands of chance, fragility, and precarity, embodied in the delicately carved words and letters of her poetry and prose, thus retrieves or invents value despite the forces attempting to efface it. We propose that such works include and encode a particular archive of value — indeed networks of value — operating with and through elements of chance and unpredictability. We also propose that this kinetic model of the archive, also inscribed by affective significance, admits the roles of chance and precarity into the very proposition of value as it recalibrates ideas about what should be preserved and which forms it should assume.

Theoretical understandings of archives often find their beginnings with Jacques Derrida, who traces the origins of the word *archive* to the Greek word *arkheion*, meaning "a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrate, the *archons*, those who commanded" (2). It is clear from this formulation, first, that archives have been often regarded or approached as static repositories and, second, that they are often imbued with a sense of power, offering strongholds for institutions by which they govern, preside, make meaning, and justify their

continued authority and the value systems associated with them (Morra, *Unarrested Archives* 10). Derrida thus observes that there is a fundamental connection between the magistrate's political power and the "right to make or to represent the law" (2). But whose law? And whose meaning? And how legitimate is it to continue to approach archives in ways that suggest their immovability, especially in a world increasingly subject to migration and global transfer? The work that Thammavongsa's literary oeuvre performs ultimately shows that archives, in fact, are not static and that meaning can shift over time — not only in terms of their inherent, ontological status but also in terms of how they are (under) valued by individuals and institutions alike — resisting state-sanctioned authority to develop a sense of self-legitimacy that exceeds the boundaries exacted or the limitations imposed by formal institutions. Her work thus also invokes Derrida's insight that archives, in selecting certain materials for remembering, simultaneously forget and repress other materials, other possible truths. Derrida defines this dynamic as the *anarchive*, recognizing the "violence of forgetting, superrepression (suppression and repression)" inherent in the archon's task of maintaining power (79).

Thammavongsa's poems and stories recover value from silence, acknowledging, navigating, and resisting the function of the anarchive or acts of silencing and repressing material elements. Like the gesture of insisting on an unheard, silent letter, scholars have taken up the idea of the anarchive as a preferred vector for establishing value, reversing the work and "forgetting violence" of the archon (Derrida 79). Adam Siegel writes about the implications of the anarchive in terms of its potential liberation from bureaucratic processes and the benefit of disorder: "It is necessary to construct an archive that resists administrative control, offers unrestricted access, and abstracts itself from property regimes that assign value and license use: an anarchive. . . . To do so, the anarchive must dispense with both the assignment of value and the imposition of property rights" (13). The anarchive might elude the enforced complicity of capitalism, and feel like a liberation, but it recuperates no recognition of value or affect, kinetic or otherwise. In defining this idea, however, Derrida was more circumspect, recognizing the entanglement of a death drive, an inherent forgetfulness, with the act of archiving itself: "The archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself" (12). Preservation, in his estimation, amounts to a "superrepression" and a "putting to death" of the "archon of the archive" (79). In the words of

Irish literary scholar C  il  n Parsons, “The anarchive is not simply negation of the archive, but negation of the power of the constituting forces of the archive” (84). Thammavongsa’s work attends to this ambivalence, recognizing the difference between state-recognized value and an existential valuelessness that de facto resists or undermines state power.

The literal and imaginative journey that her scrapbook undertakes renders clear that archives exist in tension between such forces: they are in flux, dynamic entities that are often the unpredictable products of “emotionally engaged, emotionally charged processes” (Morra, *Moving* 2). Its journey specifically demonstrates how archival objects can “travel from one location to another . . . across national boundaries, in response to narratives that conceptualize or assign affective values . . . in sometimes remarkably different ways” (6). Thammavongsa’s discovery, however, adds yet another dimension, one of serendipity, what we term “affective dynamite” in relation to the archive, as when chemist John Walker realized that “a stick coated with chemicals” would “burst into flame when scraped across his hearth at home” and would become the first “friction match” (“John Walker’s Friction Light”). Such chance encounters with materials that hold and illuminate possibilities for interpretation fundamentally change the goalposts of understanding and, indeed, the very frameworks or interpretive grids by which we define what is of value; they offer profound and startling moments of revelation. *Found*, we argue, is thus the product of such affective dynamite, since it is also a productive moment of chance, one of the undertheorized vectors of value; the first friction match is the moment when Thammavongsa dislodges her father’s scrapbook from a garbage bin, recuperating its value, and transforms it into a literary achievement that rearranges its internal elements into a recognizable and legitimate literary form. The affective properties of chance, in archival studies, are almost always intertwined with a narrative about the potential loss of a precious text or object whose value was initially overlooked. As Sara Ahmed would observe, this kind of proximity between subject and precious text ultimately shifts the “affective economies” in which the interacting subjects and objects are contextualized. Archivists or scholars in the field who engage with preserved materials thus often recount stories of such discoveries or recoveries in relation to shifting recognitions of value and fortuitous moments in the archives. Loss, and the anarchive, always hover just behind such stories. Although it is frequently acknowledged that the archive instills or creates value (whereas

the anarchive denies or divests value), to which Derrida's foundational work, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, attests, it is less commonly understood that chance plays a significant role in animating, recalibrating, apprehending, or altering the values themselves. Thammavongsa's scrapbook models a different kind of affective power that arises from chance, however, and a different kind of kinetic affect of the archive that permits loss and valuation simultaneously.

Thammavongsa began her literary career as a poet, publishing *Small Arguments* with Pedlar Press in 2003. It was followed by *Found* in 2007, a central literary piece in this essay, and then *Light* in 2013, both also published by Pedlar Press. Her most recent book of poetry, *Cluster*, published in 2019 by McClelland and Stewart and Penguin Random House, was followed by her Scotiabank Giller Prize-winning story collection *How to Pronounce Knife*, published by Penguin in 2020. Her beginnings on the literary periphery are of relevance to her publication trajectory: that is, Thammavongsa was positioned at the margins of the literary scene, recognized as a poet of value by a small publishing house that then supported her ascendancy as a major writer in the field of literature in Canada. As she herself acknowledged in her Scotiabank Giller Prize acceptance speech, "I am the author of five books. I am the product of the small press in this country. Thank you to the poets of this country for teaching me to care about the line, the word after the word after the word" ("2020 Scotiabank Giller Prize"). The "kinetic" archive — its process — set in motion by her discovery of her father's scrapbook is re-enacted and further energized by Pedlar Press's "discovery" and subsequent "production" of Thammavongsa, of her skill and accomplishment as a poet. In effect, this "small" publishing house is positioned in a similar space and performs a similar gesture by recovering her work from a liminal space and conferring on it greater value than it held or was perceived to hold before.

Thammavongsa's *Found* is a sixty-page volume dedicated to her parents. It opens with an epigraph from Ludwig Wittgenstein, the twentieth-century Austrian British philosopher: "The work of a philosopher consists of assembling reminders for a political purpose." The quotation directs the reader not only to the contents of the volume, and not only to Thammavongsa's role as the poet/philosopher engaged in the act of "assembling reminders," but also to the part that her father assumed in recording his experience — through postage stamps, sketches, and so forth — of the Lao refugee camp in his scrapbook. The camp was estab-

lished in response to the refugee crisis in Indochina that began in 1975 after communist governments assumed authority in the former French colonies of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. In itself, the scrapbook is a register of the legacies of imperialism in that epoch and of those who endured forcible migration because of shifting political powers and how they lived in and through this crisis. The scrapbook is characterized in terms that might yet seem to register inconsequential items, the detritus of a life lived, such as “doodles, addresses, postage stamps, maps, measurements” (11). As Joanne Leow observes, Thammavongsa is invested in “non-human presences” such as stamps and maps, both to “draw our attention to minute details that are usually overlooked” and to suggest “a world larger and more entwined in casual relationships that humans seem to have with these everyday objects and phenomena” (128). Thammavongsa adds in *Found* that, however invaluable the scrapbook seemed to her father, when he “threw it out . . . I took it and found this” (11). The lack of a referent after “this” is suggestive, even ambiguous, presumably indicating not only the unexpected discovery of the scrapbook but also, in the secondary meaning of the word *found*, “to set or ground on something solid” or “to establish (something) often with provision for future maintenance” (“Found”). *Found* is thus not only a moment of kinetic discovery, with all of the movement that it implies, but also paradoxically the solid groundwork upon which the subsequent volume is produced. So, in the opening poem of the collection, Thammavongsa invokes a metaphor related to assemblages, by which she incorporates elements of her father’s scrapbook to build her own. She takes “only bone” to construct one half of his face, leaving the other half in addition to “skull and rib” intact, as she “found” them — in other words, she constructs the stage for his presence and his life, refusing any gesture of diminishment (13). Thammavongsa seems to assert that the value system in place, whatever it is, might not be determined by mass, volume, or size; those who claim that his life was “small and brief,” she argues, do not “know love.” Love, then, is the dynamic force that allows for the chance discovery of the scrapbook, the impulse that allows her to recognize its worth and confer value, but it is also enjoined in the archival recovery process and the artistic process; love is required to see what might otherwise be jettisoned.

The pattern of discovery and recovery, of rebuilding and “refound-ing” life and art from ruins or remnants, is further reinforced by several poems in *Found*. In “Laos,” for example, the poet comments on the

destruction wreaked by the American bombs dropped on the country of Laos during the “secret war,” a spillover conflict connected to American participation in the Vietnam War (also known as the Second Indochina War). After burying the dead, the remaining citizens take the detritus and scraps to make something new: they use the “metal / for stilts,” by which they elevate their homes “above / the ground” (33). This is like the poem “The Sun,” in which “shafts” are built to “harm you,” but you “lifted them / from dirt” and “built, / to survive” (20-21). In both instances, destruction is followed by creation from the vestiges or “scraps” left behind; discovery produces new forms of survival and recovery. Ultimately, Thammavongsa seems to suggest that this is the role of the artist: to seize the moment of chance and seeming destruction and to use it to transform, to create, to recover — to work beyond the circumstances in which one has been seemingly confined. In “Light,” she thus argues that, even though glass “has not yet / learned / to bend,” it is light — which one could supplant with creativity, or love, or value systems — that “must come in bent” (22).

Eventually, the poems in *Found* shift toward calendar days that are “circled” but then only slashed out to indicate the passing of time — until there are nothing but slashes under calendar entries and finally calendar entries themselves with no slashes visible. The absence itself, in this instance, becomes meaningful: just as her father recognized the value in her presence, and sought to preserve it in a scrapbook, so too Thammavongsa recognizes the value in his gesture of counting out their days in the refugee camp. The seven pages with nothing but the mark “of / a hurried hand” (43) that “takes out / the month” (48) from February to August 1979 signal the passing of time in limbo or, as Guy Beauregard suggests, in transpacific precarity (565). In Canada, Thammavongsa reads these markings not for what they say but rather for how they encode the affect of her family’s precarity, their powerlessness, and their hopes in passing through that time and that space. The three months from October to December 1979 constitute pages in *Found* without text, encoding the haunted erasure of value. These grim pages are followed by an even grimmer poem of “Warning,” in which her father is described as killing and gutting a pigeon (60). He and his family might have escaped their own erasure, but this violent gesture (unlike the slashes of months passing) reveals their real hunger and their enduring precarity: that precarity has remained, embedded in the poet’s point of view, confirmed by the class- and gender-based vulnerability

that Thammavongsa experiences in Canada (as documented especially in *How to Pronounce Knife*). Safety, then, like value, is temporary, kinetic, and subject to the forces of chance.

In *Cluster*, Thammavongsa develops the warning of *Found*'s final poem by noting how the impact of chance consistently includes a potential loss and absence. The title refers specifically to the cluster bombs dropped on Laos during the widely unacknowledged (unarchived) war, eighty million of which did not detonate at the time but were embedded in the ground to be defused later or triggered catastrophically by chance. These bombs were the detritus of war and imperialism; the recurring casualties produced a particularly devastating effect in the total effacement of meaning. In the poem "O," Thammavongsa writes, "Clutter and garbage can have meaning / The cleaning-up that needed to be done / . . . Whatever happens to meaning / It is always there" (58). Other poems in *Cluster* attend to absence, like the photographs in which the speaker is not visible, or the collection of dead animals that she has witnessed, or the memories that exist but are fading. As in the archive, the meaning is "always there" but must be activated to make an impact. A found bomb that detonates, moreover, erases and destroys, becomes the anarchive to value. In the anarchive, movement and all kinetic affects end. Whereas *Found* attends to the networks of chance that kept Thammavongsa alive and that brought her poems to life, testaments to the forces that produced and founded her, *Cluster* addresses the proximity of death and danger in life. Spread across the collection, "Brokerage Report" is a five-part series that pulls found or mimicked business copy into a meditation on the fragility and the thin veneer of capitalist values. In these poems, striking workers are replaced by new workers, faltering stocks by rising stocks, and all circumstances coordinated to maintain profits: "Blame workers / and redesign the universe" (23). In this immediate apperception of value, Thammavongsa gives her voice to the mechanisms of her society that lead to recognitions such as a bank-sponsored literary prize. These acknowledgements of the enforced complicity of capitalism, in which we all become subjected to and subjects of its worst effects, contextualize the kinetic affects of the archive with the destructive power of the anarchive.

Whereas *Found* was initially a part of the literary periphery, the story collection *How to Pronounce Knife* landed directly in the centre of the literary stage with its Scotiabank Giller Prize-winning recognition. Even the title of this book reinscribes in several ways the ges-

ture that Thammavongsa enacted from almost her first publication, *Small Arguments*; however, whereas the latter book refers primarily to a moment of recovery related to her father and her history, *How to Pronounce Knife* is ostensibly about reintegrating and articulating the otherwise silent letter *k* in the word *knife*. As Vinh Nguyen observes, it means living in the world by insisting “that the letter ‘k’ in front of the word ‘knife’ is not silent” (118). Nguyen refers, of course, to the titular story, in which Joy, the young heroine, brings home a note from her elementary school teacher, apparently dismissed by her father as unimportant, although it signals his inability to read English; indeed, he insists in the same moment that she should never “speak Lao” or “tell anyone you are Lao” (4). Like the father in “Randy Travis,” he urges Joy to engage in or display a kind of silence that, in fact, is a form of love (47). What he wants, of course, is for his daughter to be part of mainstream culture, to survive and even succeed in a context otherwise inimical to their difference. When she thereafter appears at school informally dressed and unprepared for picture day compared with her peers, the teacher asks her if she was able “to get [her] parents to read the note we sent home with you” (5). Rather than “embarrass” her parents, Joy claims that she did not submit any such note — and the result is that she is “seated a little off to the side” with the “year and grade sign placed in front of her” to “hide the dirt on the child’s shoes” (5-6). Almost as silent as the letter *k*, shunted to the margins of the class photo, the culture, the word, Joy remains far from the centre that her father wants her to occupy.

Even so, giving sound to — or recovering and preserving — the otherwise silent *k* is a central part of this story when Joy brings home a book from school from which to practise reading. The moment of affective dynamite that allows the *k* — and Joy and her father — to find articulation and presence in a mainstream lexicon occurs when she returns to school and is asked to read from a passage that she practised with her father the evening before. Asking him how to pronounce a particular word, he “leaned over it and said, ‘Kah-nnn-eye-fff. It’s kahneyff’” (7). When Joy attempts to use the same pronunciation at school, the teacher “tapped at the page as if by doing [so] the correct sound would spill out” (7). When Joy is sent to the principal’s office for resisting, her response is telling:

She doesn’t tell [her father] how she had insisted the letter *k* was not silent. It couldn’t be, and she had argued and argued, “It’s in

the front! The first one! It should have a sound!” and then she screamed as if they had taken some important thing away. She never gave up on what her father said, on that first sound there. And none of them, with all their lifetimes of reading and good education, could explain it. (9)

Joy’s explosive reaction, her insistence, reveals that the “important thing” has affective and precarious value; it is in part about the cultural erasure engendered by ignoring a letter “in the front” or a father on whom she would “never g[i]ve up.” The insistence on enunciating even silent letters is parallel to the need to recognize all constituent members of society, ensuring that certain letters — and persons — are not pushed to the margins.

In her story “The Universe Would Be So Cruel” in *How to Pronounce Knife*, Thammavongsa describes the individual letters of the Lao language as embodying the idea that “little things can shape big outcomes” (85). The main character in this story and a printer by trade, Mr. Vong, devotes himself to original, highly crafted, and detailed wedding invitations because of what he perceives as their certain implications: “To use the same colour pigment more than once might invite the idea that no marriage was unique. 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 — a spelling error could be a sign that the couple was not perfect for each other” (87). This kind of detailed attention to non-human presences habitually overlooked shows not only the kind of care and love that he invests but also the “larger and more entwined” world of which these social objects are parts. So, for example, when a bride and groom request invitations with “raised print” on “thick paper” that do not include Lao lettering, Mr. Vong predicts the failure of the relationship because of the ambivalent attachment to Lao culture. Shortly thereafter, he proves to be correct: “The would-be groom broke off the engagement to marry someone *else* named Sue” (90). In this moment, he adds, the woman, whose full name is Savongnavathakad, has pretended to be someone else: “It’s a long name — but that’s *your* name. Why would you want to be Sue when your real name is Savongnavathakad?” (90). Instead, she allows for her self-erasure, an embodied form of the anarchive — for someone else, in fact, whose name actually is Sue to replace her. In spite of Mr. Vong’s attention to his daughter’s wedding invitation and to Lao protocols, however, his daughter waits during the ceremony for

the groom, who never appears — he jilts her at the altar.³ Still, in this story, the exquisitely hand-painted letters on invitations for weddings in the Lao diaspora, which fail or dissolve without clear reasons, become metonymic symbols of transpacific precarity and, more largely, of the anarchive.

Michael O'Driscoll and Edward Bishop note that in contemporary scholarship the idea of the archive has shifted from designating the institution that houses and preserves records to “the entire process of cultural production and consumption. . . . [T]he archive operates as a form of mediation at every stage of cultural circulation” (4). They posit the intervening archive as a means of breaking out of “house arrest” (in Derrida’s terms) and recognizing all stages in the production of value. The kinetic archive builds from such a figuration by recognizing the movement and dispersal of value to its most dynamic contingency, recognizing chance and arbitrary forces in the construction of value, including in the construction of texts, such as those by Thammavongsa. Her work attends to the affect of the kinetic archive by holding the destruction of value close to the creation of value, recognizing negation in every moment, in every word choice, and the unique feeling of loss and value intertwined. Thus, in the kinetic archive, we align the intervening archive with the moving archive, in which, as Linda M. Morra writes, “affect informs the decisions we make — to pursue, to forgo, to concentrate on particular archival materials, and to establish particular archives” (*Moving* 5). This attention to precarity and chance serves as themes in the work of Thammavongsa but also becomes a structuring methodology of recovering small moments and acknowledging their roles in changing meanings and lives. Thus, in “Paris,” in *How to Pronounce Knife*, she writes of the precarity of women in the workforce and in heterosexual relationships (21), concluding with a touching scene shared by a distraught scorned woman who grabs, by chance, the protagonist for solace: “It was the first time someone had ever been that close to Red, had touched her. Both women cried, but for different reasons” (23). The meaning of the moment is unique for those involved, but through their shared precarity (class for Red, gender for Nicole), and by chance, a story of loss and desolation is gently if briefly ameliorated. Such stories collect moments of affective dynamite in which value and loss are simultaneously entwined, highlighting both archive and anarchive at every stage of cultural circulation.

It should be clear that the ambivalence and awareness of precarity are not evidence of just a poor immigrant story, as Shoshannah Ganz astutely notes (105), or necessarily a return to the biographical hardship of refugee experience. The book certainly does not propose or present Canada as an idealized safe haven. Thammavongsa's attention to chance and precarity attends to a systemic vulnerability and the cost or consequence of value. Her writing is prized for its delicate precision, yet it heeds the words that have been cut in the act of writing, and the paradoxical presence of that loss lingers in the words that remain, giving them additional weight. They become — each word after each word after each word — an archive, too, of kinetic affect.

The idea of the archive has shifted considerably from conventional understandings of what constitutes the particular identity of an archive. Indeed, we have sought to highlight how Thammavongsa's poetry and fiction articulate the formulation of value. The difference between being valued or heard and being unvalued or silent/silenced is painfully arbitrary, as in castigating a child for not knowing the seemingly arbitrary rules of pronunciation for English words, and dependent on forces of chance: hence, affective dynamite. Where her life was disrupted by imperial forces that disregard the value of Lao life with shocking neglect, Thammavongsa documented a kinetic value to her life in surviving that disruption. In Canada, her characters in *How to Pronounce Knife* discover that the huge event that cut their families off from their homeland was “a war that no one ever heard of” (60). Laos itself seemed to disappear: “It was almost as if it didn't exist” (96). The “warning” that she attaches to her survival, however, is precisely the perpetual presence and possibility of her loss. The archive, from this vantage point, is perpetually contingent, inherently kinetic, and *almost* indistinguishable from the anarchive with which it is intertwined.

In a short prose sketch for *Canadian Literature*, Thammavongsa draws unprized things into purview as a holistic perspective on literary value: “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” (“There Are” 143). Accordingly, her first book, poignantly titled *Small Arguments*, attends to insects and plants, things typically unnoticed or disregarded, by documenting their inherent value and even their suffering. Her comment to Soraya Peerbaye about the cost of writing delicate poems is particularly revealing of the contrapuntal perspective: “*Small Arguments* is a work of violence. There is a delicacy, but it all comes out of violence. . . .

Minimalism is a work of violence” (“Interview”). This violence, though, is not a repudiation of value (as in Siegel’s anarchive) but a recognition of its arbitrariness and contingency: “It is about keeping things from being destroyed (as you say, resistance) because what you have on the page are the words that have been collected, kept in that picking and choosing.” Like the metal collected from bombed-out villages in a secret war in a country none of her Canadian peers seems to know about, a text is founded upon the detritus of value. A life might be built from a war’s discarded metal — or a family might flee. A child might come to life in a refugee camp — or a child might die there. A father might record the moment of his child’s birth, but later, after the family makes its harrowing way to relative safety in Canada, he might also discard that record as if it now contains nothing of value. A daughter might find that scrapbook and turn her reflections on it into a series of poems. She might think through the aleatoric nature of her contingency and use those meditations to create a literature that her adopted society values and prizes and rewards, as it can. It is at this point that the archive, the formal institution of the archive, becomes interested in the scrapbook that her father made and threw out so many years earlier. Its value, however, was inherent, precarious, and kinetic throughout the entire process: affective dynamite waiting to explode.

NOTES

¹ We use the term “precarity” with reference to Guy Beauregard, who — commenting on *Found* — offers the poignant notion of “transpacific precarities” (565), in which the context of “precaritized lives” is expanded to include vast territories as interconnected. Drawing from the scholarship of Guy Standing and the portmanteau of precarious and proletariat, Beauregard highlights the systemic and ideological nature of vulnerability in Thammavongsa’s work — addressing what Judith Butler describes as a “politically induced condition” (qtd. in Beauregard 566) of systemic vulnerability as an experience of class, race, and gender. Beauregard appropriately applies that concept to the specific geopolitics of the transpacific as represented in Thammavongsa’s work.

² In the story “Edge of the World” from *How to Pronounce Knife*, the daughter recognizes and values her mother’s knowledge of war and survival, yet respects that her mother might lack, as a result, knowledge suited to their new home (102). Similarly, the daughter later grieves the loss of her mother while understanding the lack of grieving by her father: “He had done all of his life’s grieving when he became a refugee” (104). The two irreconcilable stories of *there* and *here* overlap in the complex recognition of their simultaneous presence.

³ See the story “The School Bus Driver,” also in *How to Pronounce Knife*, in which the driver’s insistence on using his Lao name — Jai, which “rhyme[s] with *chai*” and “means

heart” in Lao — works against the kind of invisibility or desire for assimilation expressed by Savongnavathakad (109, 114). When his wife refers to him as Jay — like “blue jay, a small blue bird” — he does not recognize himself in their exchange; instead, he believes for a moment that “she was talking about someone else, or to someone else” (109, 114). Although she argues that “No one here knows *jai* means *heart*” and that it “doesn’t mean anything in English,” the only language, she adds, “that matters here,” his gesture at the end of the story affirms both his name and his identity, for it refuses his renaming in a Canadian context. He looks at his driver’s licence, an official record, on which his first name is printed: “Jai. It rhymes with *chai*. It means heart. Heart” (115).

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