

WITNESSING THE DARKNESS: LIGHT MOVEMENTS IN THE POETRY OF  
SOUVANKHAM THAMMAVONGSA

by

Brittany Kraus

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Masters of Arts

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
August 2015

© Copyright by Brittany Kraus, 2015

## DEDICATION PAGE

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who is forced to live in the dark.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2: LIGHT.....	6
CHAPTER 3: DARK.....	28
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION.....	46
WORKS CITED .....	49

## ABSTRACT

To date, Laotian Canadian poet Souvankham Thammavongsa has published three collections of poetry: *Small Arguments* (2003), *Found* (2007) and *Light* (2013). A former refugee and an immigrant to Canada, Thammavongsa is deeply concerned with questions of citizenship, identity and belonging. Examining Thammavongsa's work in relation to Canada's current refugee and immigration policies, particularly her most recent collection, *Light*, my thesis analyses how she uses the metaphor of light to explore the movements of refugee and "irregular" – migrant, temporary and undocumented – bodies across national and international borders. I argue that Thammavongsa's poetry critiques the colonial dimensions of Canada's immigration and refugee laws, and illuminates the "hidden" corridors of expulsion – the detention centres, deportation flights, the lives "forced underground" (Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism" 1074) – that are authorized by Canada's current migrant detention and refugee determination processes.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my supervisor, Dr. Carrie Dawson. She not only introduced me to citizenship studies and the work of Souvankham Thammavongsa, but continues to help me grow as a writer and a thinker. Because of her, I look closer.

Many thanks are due to my second reader, Dr. Marjorie Stone, whose scholarly acumen and compassionate spirit have always been an inspiration. Thank you also to my third reader, Dr. Dana Mount, for her insightful and generous feedback. I hope one day our paths will cross.

Big thanks to Mary Beth MacIsaac and Adria Young for always going above and beyond. Thank you, as well, to Dr. Leonard Diepeveen, for making me laugh (inappropriately), and DAGSE, for all the wine and cheese.

To Gen and Liam, words don't express.

To my family, for being there.

Finally, to Andrew – my friend, my love, my occasional antagonist – thanks for teaching me how to party on.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

“Words are said, be it only by the silence kept.”

– Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

In a 2006 interview with *Wordsters*, Laotian Canadian poet Souvankham Thammavongsa discusses the importance of being documented:

You see, I was never given a birth certificate when I was born. It was a refugee camp, and anyone born there isn't exactly staying. So you aren't recognized as a citizen... We need documents to prove that we are alive and real. It isn't enough that I happen to be right here – a piece of paper needs to prove this. (n.p.)

The author of three critically-acclaimed<sup>1</sup> collections of poetry – *Small Arguments* (2003), *Found* (2007) and *Light* (2013) – Thammavongsa has produced a small arsenal of “piece[s] of paper” that testify to her ongoing interest in questions of citizenship, identity and belonging. “I’m thinking about space and time and language,” she says of her writing in a recent interview with *Postcolonial Text*. “What happens when someone gives you this narrow space or this little time, how do you move within it with language?” (Thammavongsa qtd. in Ganz). Considering that Thammavongsa spent part of her childhood living in a Lao refugee camp in Nong Khai, Thailand before immigrating with her family to Canada, her poetic inquiry into how language can construct, negotiate, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Thammavongsa’s first collection of poetry, *Small Arguments*, won the 2004 ReLit prize. Her most recent collection, *Light*, was awarded the Trillium Book Award for Poetry in 2013 (“Bio,” n.d.).

carve out passages of movement within “narrow space[s]” and “little time” takes on both a personal and political dimension and emerges as a major, if not defining, feature of her work. Indeed, all three of her collections, particularly *Small Arguments* and *Found*, resemble identity documents, with small black text printed on thick, parchment-like paper, weighty to the touch. Responding to the publication of her first collection of poems, *Small Arguments*, Thammavongsa states, “It [the collection] makes me feel real...It feels like I’ve been granted a place of belonging. And no other thing I’ve had has given me that sense” (qtd. in Peerbaye). But how can something as light as a “piece of paper” carry so much weight? How can a document – a compilation of words and spaces, “the lines, the grids, the marks” (*Light* 11) – testify to the presence of a life in ways a body cannot? How can a document, conversely, make a life disappear? These questions are central to Thammavongsa’s work and undergird my own research into the ways in which “piece[s] of paper” – the passports, the proofs of identity, the data that “speak for the body” (Nield 139) – have the power to make a life “alive and real” or alternatively, make it disappear.

With the 2012 passing of Bill C-31, the Protecting Canada’s Immigration System Act (nicknamed by dissenters “The Refugee Exclusion Act”), Canada introduced a series of legislation – of pieces of paper, as it were – that effectively function to “disappear refugees – via mandatory incarceration, deportation or immediate and irrevocable denial of their claims” (Dawson, “On Thinking Like a State” 14). In other words, as C-31 tightened the restrictions applied to the refugee determination process, the already “narrow space[s]” and “little time” afforded refugees and non-status migrants decreased

even further: the time periods to file refugee claims became significantly shorter, the verdicts of hearings increasingly final, and the narrative component of the refugee claim form – the space where the claimant could tell her story in her words – all but evaporated.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Canada has increased its practice of migrant detention and further expanded the grounds of ineligibility to deny a growing number of asylum claims by designating certain countries “safe,” and thereby making it more difficult, if not nearly impossible, for refugee claimants from these nations to satisfactorily prove a “well-founded fear of persecution” (CIC, “Determine Your Eligibility” 2012) in accordance with the state's demands. As many critics argue, the recent reforms to Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act are having a kind of vanishing effect, as an increasing number of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants are being systematically erased from what Sherene Razack terms “the realm of common humanity” (8) by policies and practices that deny them access to time, space, human rights and basic dignities.

While Thammavongsa does not directly address the “actual laws and practices” that are making undocumented migrants and asylum seekers “vanish in reality” (Macklin 369), her thematic use of the metaphor of light (and, by contrast, darkness) in *Light* and, to a lesser degree, *Small Arguments* and *Found*, invites a closer examination of the borders – literal and metaphorical, visceral and imaginary – that regulate, limit and

---

<sup>2</sup> As part of Bill C-31, Canada replaced the Personal Information Form (PIF) with the Basis of Claim Form (BOC). The BOC form eliminates the narrative component of the PIF in favour of a series of questions, the answers to which must identify – and prove – the claimant's fear of persecution upon return home (CCR, “C-31 Summary” 2013). Without space to tell her story, the refugee claimant faces a more difficult task of convincing the state of the legitimacy, the “well-foundedness” of her appeal.



contain the movements of migrant bodies across geographic, political, and discursive spaces. To what extent are these borders constructed along racial and economic fault lines, with “civilized nations standing on one side, and uncivilized nations standing on the other” (Razack 10)? How are discourses of citizenship and migration mobilized by colonial assumptions of Western privilege and Third World primitivism? How is Canada – once quoted by former Minister of Immigration, Denis Coderre, as “a place where immigrants will find hope, hospitality and opportunity” (qtd. in Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees* 420) – closing its doors on “the refugee, the political prisoner, the disappeared, the victim of torture, the dispossessed” (Downey 109) only to open them for the wealthy, the privileged, the “right” white, and the elite?

In an analysis of select poems from *Light*, as well as relevant works from *Small Arguments* and *Found*, I argue that Thammavongsa’s poetry critiques the colonial dimensions of Canada’s immigration and refugee laws and illuminates the “hidden” corridors of expulsion – the detention centres, deportation flights, the lives “forced underground” (Nyers, “Abject Cosmopolitanism” 1074) – that are authorized by Canada’s current migrant detention and refugee determination processes. In the first section of my thesis, I examine the ways in which Canada’s migrant detention system is increasingly criminalizing, dehumanizing and, finally, disappearing asylum seekers and undocumented migrants from discourses of citizenry, protection and human rights, from the “realm of common humanity” (Razack 8), as it were. Drawing on Levinas, as well as Judith Butler, Giorgio Agamben and others, I analyze Thammavongsa’s work in relation to Canada’s brutal (and brutalizing) treatment of migrant detainees. To this end, I

examine the "apparatus[es] of disappearance" (Nield 144) and technologies of silence<sup>3</sup> that structure national discourses of migrant detention and contribute to its ongoing practice. The second and final section of my thesis is devoted to an exploration of the colonial and racialized dimensions that mobilize and inform global discussions of citizenry and belonging and function to restrict, jeopardize and, finally, "disappear" the movements – and lives – of "asylum seekers, refugees, non-status residents, undocumented workers, so-called 'overstayers' and 'illegals'" (Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism" 1069) via practices and discourses that cast them as abject or dangerous, undeserving or undesirable.

---

<sup>3</sup> I am borrowing this phrase from Adrienne Rich's poem, "Cartographies of Silence." In it, she writes, "The technology of silence/The rituals, etiquette/the blurring of terms/silence not absence" (16).

## Chapter 2: Light

“Why Light?” (*Light* 69), the speaker of Thammavongsa’s “Questions Sent to a Light Artist That Were Never Answered,” asks in the poem’s concluding line. The question, like all thirteen questions asked of the elusive “Light Artist,” remains unanswered, left to linger in the blank space of the page, “hover in what/could be air” (*Light* 15). Yet light is everywhere in Thammavongsa’s work, weightless as “what could be air” (*Light* 15), “furious and hot” (19) as the sun, dark as “black fabric” (43). In an interview with *The National Post* in 2014, Thammavongsa describes her most recent collection, *Light*, as a text obsessed with light, even where there is none:

I use the word light in every poem. Sometimes it isn’t there and hiding it that way was using it too. Or I put it inside a word like flight or hid it inside another language or behind an emotionally charged moment. And then I tried to do all this without noticing it was being done. (n.p.)

The need to conceal light, to hide it “inside a word like flight” or in “another language,” gestures towards the need for illegal or undocumented bodies to stay hidden while moving between – and within – sovereign borders so as to avoid being “captured,” detained, and possibly deported by the state. To the extent that the movements of light can be associated with the movements of migrant bodies, Thammavongsa’s persistent camouflaging of the word light, her refusal to define, regulate or limit the word’s fleeting movements (and meanings), emphasizes the importance of remaining elusive and ambiguous to the pervasive and punishing gaze of the state’s scopic regime, to find cover from the “sun [that]/built/shafts/and sent them/down to harm you” (*Found* 20). Hidden

inside a language, a word, a moment even, light can avoid detection, moving freely and unbounded across linguistic, geographic and spatial boundaries, to surface as “Licht/That’s how they say light in Amsterdam” (*Light* 65) or disappear behind the linguistic cover of the “long white [read: light] eyelashes” (*Light* 17) of a face examined “up close” (17).

Throughout her work, Thammavongsa repeatedly invokes the image of the sun to represent the state’s constant surveillance of migrant bodies. The state’s “eye,” as it were, is an eye that watches, surveys, captures, an eye that sees, dominates, fixates, but does not recognize. But how can something see and not recognize? How can an eye behold a face, a smile, a gesture, but remain blind and ignorant of its meaning? According to Levinas, recognition is a fundamentally ethical act; that is, “to see the face of the Other” – the subjectivity, singularity, and “absolute alterity” of the other – is to take responsibility *for* the other, to acknowledge that “I am to the other what the other is to me” (197). As Thammavongsa implicitly suggests, however, the state refuses to see its own “narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance” (Morrison qtd. in Brown 88); it does not recognize anything beyond its own shining image, its own “benevolent” reflection: “The Sun,” she writes, “does not know/what it is like/to be cold,/or how/to take in that dark around it” (*Light* 39).

Thammavongsa’s use of the metaphor of the state as sun, a symbol of constant authority and power – “that shadowless thing, that thing to have” (*Light* 15) – is particularly poignant given the recent and controversial reforms to Canada’s refugee and immigration laws. According to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, the

Minister of Public Safety may designate any two or more foreign nationals a group of “irregular arrivals” who are then subject to mandatory and indefinite detainment, sometimes for “five, six, seven years without trial or charge” (Chak 4), in one of Canada’s three Immigrant Holding Centres (IHC’s), or, alternatively, “in rented beds in provincial prisons” (10). As Carrie Dawson explains,

There are three Immigration Holding Centres operated by the Canadian Border Services Agency... These facilities are designed to accommodate “low risk” individuals who are typically detained because they are not in possession of adequate identity documents or because they are perceived to be flight risks. In parts of the country that are not served by CBSA facilities, where the facilities are full, or where individuals are deemed to have exhibited behavioural problems or mental health problems, they are held in provincial prisons. The use of provincial prisons for immigration detention has risen dramatically over the past five years... (“Refugee Hotels” 829)<sup>4</sup>

While migrant detention is, as Stephanie Silverman notes, a “civil procedure” (29), its resemblance to criminal incarceration is, by and large, identical, even in those facilities designed to house “low risk” persons. And, although former Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Jason Kenney, compared the “living conditions at detention centres... [to]

---

<sup>4</sup> In 2013, over 7300 migrants were detained. According to the University of Toronto’s Executive Summary of migrant detention in Canada, nearly one third of all detention occurs in facilities designed to house a “criminal population” (Gros and van Groll 4). Although migrants held in provincial jails are not serving a criminal sentence, they are, as the report indicates, “effectively serving hard time” (Gros and van Groll 4).

those at a two-star hotel with a bit of security” (qtd. in Silverman 27) in an address to the House of Commons, the Global Detention Project (GDP), a nonprofit research centre located in Geneva, Switzerland, that investigates “the use of immigration-related detention as a response to global migration” (“About the Project” 2012), tells a starkly different story: “The IHC’s,” the GDP website states, “operate as medium security prisons with fences equipped with razor wire, central locking door systems, security guards, and surveillance cameras (“Canada Detention Profile” 2012), hardly the trappings of a “two-star hotel” or the detail associated with “a bit of security” (Silverman 27). Yet as Dawson argues, the “discourse of hospitality” (as so unabashedly invoked by Kenney) “is very much part of the apparatus of disappearance in Canada: where the asylum seeker is not detained against his or her will but is understood to be a ‘guest’ of the state who enjoys ‘hotel-like living conditions’” (“Refugee Hotels” 835), privileged to (forcibly and indeterminately) stay on Canada’s beneficent soil.<sup>5</sup>

The efforts to glamourize – and simultaneously sanitize – the image of Canada’s migrant detention system coincides with state efforts to conceal and camouflage the actual detention facilities themselves, until they too disappear from public view and public imagination, unmarked and indistinguishable from one building, one site, to the next. In her 2014 graphic essay, *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention*,

---

<sup>5</sup> One man – Michael Mvogo from the Republic of Cameroon – has been held in detention for nine years without charge or trial. After being picked up by authorities at a Toronto homeless shelter in 2006, Mvogo has been left to languish in detention, year after year, as Cameroon will not issue him travel documents, making it difficult for Canada to deport him (Keung, “UN Chastises Canada”). While Mvogo’s case is extreme, his situation is not unique. Many countries refuse to issue travel documents for their citizens, which prohibits Canada from legally carrying out their expulsion. These individuals thus “disappear” in detention centres, their lives made small, indefinitely criminal, for lack of a piece of paper.

activist, artist and architect Tings Chak<sup>6</sup> describes migrant detention facilities accordingly:

these spaces are where people without status are expelled to, to buildings and landscapes so banal, that they can go by unnoticed. Just as the people detained are without papers, so too are the buildings without papers, so too are the buildings without photos or drawings...they too are undocumented.  
(10)

The expulsion of people “without papers” to places without definition – buildings without photos, detention periods without foreseeable end – is akin to a vanishing act, "Here, but not Here [sic]" (Nield 144). In other words, the concealment and containment of undocumented peoples within undocumented places, people held between “2 square metres of floor area, and 3.5 cubic metre of air space” (Chak 103), is a state-sanctioned effort to vanish refugees from view, to render them practically invisible behind blank buildings and blank walls.

In her poem, “Noor,” Thammavongsa writes, “Two circles sit side by side/Twins, equal in size and the space they both contained/They had been made to be like each other” (*Light* 38). Referencing the adjacent letter “o’s” that comprise the word *noor*, the transliterated “Arabic word for light” (38), Thammavongsa evokes the image of “side by side” prison cells, wherein one incarcerated body becomes unrecognizable from another, “made to be like each other” (38), as each occupies the “minimum habitable space” (Chak 103) required to sustain the bare minimum of human life. In this poem, language –

---

<sup>6</sup> Chak is actively involved with the “No One Is Illegal” movement, a grassroots migrant justice organization that, in her words, “strives and struggles for the right to remain, the freedom to move, and the right to return” (“No One Is Illegal” 2012).

and space – function as metaphors for the dehumanizing and de-individualizing conditions of migrant detention centres:

On this sheet of paper, these two circles look to be the same, as close in likeness as they could ever be

Stripped of light, one is like the other, as small, as equal, as alone

(*Light 38*)

The letters, like the detainees, are rendered “equal” only in their isolation from one another, even as they are held “on this sheet of paper” in such close proximity. Taken out of context – removed from the word *noor* – the letters are quite literally “stripped of light,” refused meaning, such as the detainee is denied her “identity and subjecthood” (Chak 90) until the state confirms – that is, recognizes – her identity. Stripped of light – denied liberty, individuality, human rights and human contact – one detained body becomes “like the other/as small, as equal, as alone,” as utterly dehumanized.

To reduce an individual to what Giorgio Agamben terms “bare life”<sup>7</sup> – a life granted only the basest of existences – the markers of individuality must first be removed or, at the very least, withheld. Accordingly, migrant detainees are meticulously and methodically stripped of their rights and belongings, from personal effects to privacy, family to freedom, space to sanity:

---

<sup>7</sup> In Agamben’s formulation, “bare life” refers to the phenomenon of including a human life “in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)” (*Homo Sacer* 12). In this way, migrant detainees are included in Canada’s political and juridical order (they are held, after all, within state borders), but are excluded from anything resembling legal or political rights. According to Agamben, “bare lives” may be tortured, abused, neglected and even killed without judicial consequence; their lives are effectively given no weight, imbued with no value, sacrificed, as it were, in the name of security. In the practice of indefinite detention, “bare life,” Agamben notes, “reaches its maximum indeterminacy” (*State of Exception* 4).



Men and women are held in separate wings, with a special section for children detained with their mothers. There are regular searches with metal detectors, and sometimes body searches. Personal effects are confiscated on arrival. All aspects of daily life are controlled by rigid rules, and failure to respect rules may be punished by solitary confinement. (Cleveland et. al 6)

In some detention facilities, such as the Central East Correctional Centre (CECC) located in Lindsay, Ontario, detainees are required to wear standard-issue orange jumpsuits, rendering them virtually indistinguishable from the rest of the prison population (Gros and van Groll 29). In addition, detainees are locked inside their cells for approximately seventeen hours a day, with “nothing to do except think about problems” (Gros and van Groll 32), isolated, neglected, and, in Thammavongsa’s words, “severed once more” (*Small Arguments* 28). Not surprisingly, behind the white walls and blank facades of Canada’s migrant detention facilities, mental health issues are rampant. As the GDP reports,

[O]ver three-quarters of detained asylum seekers are clinically depressed, about two-thirds are clinically anxious, and a third suffer from post-traumatic stress symptoms. The prevalence of posttraumatic stress symptoms is almost twice as high as among non-detained asylum-seekers, while the depression rate reaches 78 percent. (“Canada Detention Profile” 2012)

Yet in spite of the high levels of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress symptoms

present among immigrant detainees, as well as high risks of suicide, Canada's detention system is sorely lacking in its provisions of adequate "medical, psychological, and hygienic care" (Silverman 30) for its so-called "guests." Psychological services for detainees, such as counseling and mental health assessments, are "woefully inadequate" (Gros and van Groll 8), while those who do receive medical treatment are often handcuffed or even chained during the proceedings, so that "many detainees choose to forego medical treatment rather than face the public humiliation of being handcuffed in a hospital waiting room" ("Canada Detention Profile" 2012). Not surprisingly, the longer an individual is held in detention, the worse, the more irremediable, his or her physical and/or psychological condition(s) becomes, causing some detainees to engage in such desperate and self-harming behaviours as "attempted hanging, self-cutting, drinking shampoo or detergent, and voluntary starvation" (Gros and van Groll 22). These behaviours, while violent and potentially fatal, nonetheless function as wordless protests against the systematic degradation of human beings to "'garbage,' 'animals', or something less than human" (Gros and van Groll 5). Seeing as many detainees "don't speak a lot of English" (Gros and van Groll 35) but are refused access to interpreters (outside of formal hearings), the cry of a body – hungry, bleeding and sick – is, for some, the only voice available with which to express the pain and suffering of being treated as "something less than human," where all "the contents of your life are caged" (Chak 103).

But what does it mean to be "bare"? To be made speechless, inhuman, animal? In her poem "Bare," Thammavongsa characteristically plays with misnomers and misidentifications, the easy slippages of words and letters, to displace and simultaneously

replace “lost” or “missing” identities. While “Bare” does not specifically address the abuses suffered by migrant detainees, the poem nonetheless offers a protest against the systematic degradation of human lives to bare bodies based on nothing more than an arbitrary designation of status (or lack thereof). As Thammavongsa writes,

BARE

It means you are light, that you can begin differently now, that you've taken it all off

It means to show your tooth and claw, without the work, the polish, the  
appointment

If the ending were different, if you placed the last letter right after the beginning, it would  
be an animal, a power, a warning from which to stay  
away

*(Light 26)*

The poem begins on a note of liberation, defining “Bare” as “light,” weightless and unfettered. But, with a simple inversion of letters, “bare” becomes “bear” – “an animal, a power, a warning from which to stay/away” (26). When it comes to designations of status, however, even minor discrepancies have major consequences. As Macklin explains,

The legal consequences of categorization are very significant...refugees with the country cannot be deported, except under limited circumstances. Illegal migrants are deportable. Refugees merit protection. Illegal migrants are criminals whose border transgression offends deeply held beliefs about border control as the instantiation of sovereignty. (366)

In effect, the difference between “certified” refugees and all other “illegals” (refugee claimants, undocumented migrants, those in violation of their visas, “irregulars”) is similar to that between “bare” and “bear” – a single letter, imbued with the power to designate the nature of a life, “bare” or “bear,” legal or illegal. However, as Thammavongsa reminds the reader, differences are deceiving, as too are similarities:

Face to face, maybe you’d see they’re really not all that different, both just trying

A rearrangement, a shift, a move out of place, a spine realigned

But it would take that wouldn’t it? That face to face, to know.

*(Light 26)*

The last line of the poem – “But it would take that wouldn’t it? That face to face, to know” – issues a kind of Levinasian invocation of responsibility to meet those who are relegated to “bare” spaces and bare lives in a “face to face” encounter, to witness and recognize their subjectivity, their humanity, in ways a letter, a designation of status, cannot. According to Levinas, the outcome of such an encounter is freedom: “But the other absolutely other – the Other – does not limit the freedom of the Same; calling it to responsibility, it founds it and justifies it...the relation is maintained without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity” (197). The freedom of “bare” (or “bear”) bodies thus depends on a fundamental recognition of the humanity of those held from view, a meeting “face to face.”

The dehumanizing effects of being forced to live within small and binding enclosures, between “walls too thick, impenetrable” (Chak 96), manifests for the detainee as physical and psychic trauma. In relaying testimonies of migrant detainees, Chak

writes,

People describe a sense of spatial haunting – feeling the presence of someone else in the cell, or in the walls, who you can never catch a glimpse of...After a long time staring at white walls no more than 6 feet away and 24/7 exposure to fluorescent lighting, it can induce what has been called “white blindness” – the inability to see colour, or to see at all.

(97)

Exposed “24/7” to the unnatural rays of fluorescent lighting, the bright, humming, nauseating nothingness of white lights and white walls, the detainee begins to hallucinate, her spatial perception affected as much by “what you do see as what you don’t” (Chak 96). Her view becomes distorted, disfigured, until, finally, she goes blind. Although “white blindness” does not affect all detainees, nor is it necessarily a permanent or lasting condition, the detainee’s body – and mind – must find ways to respond or cope with the unbearable pain and trauma of being held for “a long time” between walls “no more than 6 feet away.” To this end, some detainees experience “intense anxiety, paranoia, depression, memory loss, hallucinations and other perceptual distortions” (Guenther); some become “unhinged” (Guenther); others go blind.

In “The Fish in Mammoth Cave,” Thammavongsa describes an unusual species of fish that have adapted to life in their lightless, cavernous environment by “ceasing to grow eye structures and unnecessary skin pigments” (“Mammoth Cave” n.d.), by becoming, that is, eyeless and translucent. While the poem is about fish – not people – it is nonetheless evocative of the ways in which migrant detainees must adapt to their own

“lightless” lives, in order to survive the days, months, and sometimes years of confinement. As Thammavongsa writes,

THE FISH IN MAMMOTH CAVE

don't have eyes

You look

at one;

look at where

the eyes

should be,

or could be;

and wonder,

if this here

is how

(*Light* 71)

The last poem of the collection, “The Fish in Mammoth Cave” concludes *Light* in darkness, underground, in which the speaker gropes for answers, wondering if “this here” – this cell, this utter darkness – is how anything “should” live, “could live.”

Thammavongsa directs the reader’s gaze to the place on the fish’s body “where/the eyes/should be,/or could be” (71), to what is missing, rather than to what is there, to the memory of colour and sight, rather than the presence of darkness. For some detainees, however, even the memories of their former lives are too much to bear. As one detainee

states, “I missed three of my sons [sic] birthdays, I missed three anniversaries with my wife...I cannot see myself being detained indefinitely and thinking about them. That will drive me crazy. So I have to keep it out of sight and out of mind” (qtd. in Chak 94). Like the fish of mammoth cave, the detainee must become eyeless, amnesiac, in order to survive a life lived without the light of hope, the comfort of family, the certainty of release – a life lived in perpetual darkness.

As the detainee keeps his memories and hopes “out of sight and out of mind,” so too does the Canadian government affect the same eyeless, mindless mentality to its treatment of migrant detainees, especially those struggling with mental health. Due to the lack of healthcare services made available to detainees, those showing signs of mental illness or suicidal ideation, those driven “crazy” by loneliness, boredom, fear and uncertainty, are placed “under 24/7 individual surveillance, usually in solitary confinement” or transported, “sometimes shackled” (“Canada Detention Profile” 2012), to a provincial prison with a higher security designation. Increasing the surveillance of sick or suicidal detainees, however, does not increase their chances of recovery or survival. In fact, in the cases of refugee claimants Jan Szamko and Michael Akhimien, it effectively sentences them to death:

In 2009 Szamko died of heart failure three days after being moved to the Toronto West Detention Centre from the Toronto Immigration Holding Centre, where personnel had deemed him “uncooperative” and alleged that he was “faking” an illness upon finding him face down in his room, incoherent, unable to walk, and covered in his own feces (Keung). In 1995

Mikhael Akhimien died from medical neglect...Following a series of health complaints that included dizziness, fainting, and extreme thirst, Akhimien made twelve written requests for medical treatment. All of them were ignored. When he defied a guard who denied him the opportunity to get a drink of water, Akhimien was put in solitary confinement and died twelve days later. (Dawson, "Refugee Hotels" 830)

Ironically, the state's increased surveillance of migrant detainees is characterized by blindness, by the inability – that is, the unwillingness – to see "a face looking back at you/or a body/you can/remember" (*Found* 40). Although the detainees are constantly under surveillance, they are nonetheless largely invisible to the state, viewed as criminals and "fakes," their voices ignored, their bodies neglected.

The problem is systemic. Even the detention review process is blind to the people it purports to help, forgetful of its purpose:

In practice, the detention review process, which is meant to mitigate the risk of indefinite detention, actually facilitates it...a string of lay decision-makers preside over hearings that last a matter of minutes, lack due process, and presume continued detention absent 'clear and compelling reasons' to depart from past decisions. It is an exercise in smoke and mirrors (Gros and van Groll 11).

While the detention review process may be an exercise in "smoke and mirrors," an illusion of concern and accountability, the state's refusal to acknowledge "clear and compelling reasons" to change the course of migrant detention despite the obvious risks



is telling of how little value the state places on the lives (and deaths) of migrant detainees. In the opening poem of *Light*, Thammavongsa compares “a clearing” – an empty space – to the colour of cold and bone:

This is a clearing: a rule  
you will bind to yourself like a promise  
to begin.

It's the colour bone is when you take it out  
of itself, the colour of cold  
when the sun doesn't come to its calling

(*Light* 11).

Given that the experience of solitary confinement is commonly referred to by prisoners as “‘living death,’ the ‘gray box’ or ‘living in a black hole’” (Guenther), viewed in the context of migrant detention Thammavongsa's poem takes on a morbid dimension. That is, as the actual sun does not reach the detainees living – and dying – in isolation, so too does the sun-as-state not reach out to them in times of dire need, of darkness, as it were, “the colour of cold/when the sun doesn't come to its calling” (11).

The sun – that is, the state – most certainly did not come to the calling of Akhimien or Szamko. In both cases, however, the detainees’ requests for help, verbal *and* non-verbal, were not only ignored by the state, but subject to penalization. Of Szamko’s final (videotaped) hours, Nicholas Keung, a journalist for the *The Star*, reports,

A 45-minute video taken in the holding area shows a frail Szamko slouching in a wheelchair, head tilted to one side, being spoken to by border services officer Steven Bean...“He was not responding to verbal

instructions or conducting himself in normal fashion,” Bean testified, explaining why he deemed Szamko to be uncooperative and faking his medical conditions. (“Not Good to Fly” 2011)

Instead of perceiving Szamko’s inability to respond to “verbal instructions” as a sign of grave illness, the border services officer saw Szamko’s “irregular” behaviour as a sign of guilt, an elaborate ruse to avoid deportation. Similarly, Akhimien’s repeated requests for medical care fell on deaf ears and blind eyes: only when the Nigerian man “defied” a guard did the state acknowledge his voice, which consequently silenced him forever. The slouch of a sick body, the anger of a thirsty mouth – “it is a small argument,” Thammavongsa writes, “the sun will never come to hear” (41).

Sadly, Szamko and Akhimien’s deaths are not unique. At least nine people have died in immigrant detention since 2000, two by their own hand; one at the hands of others.<sup>8</sup> Some died from “natural” causes – heart attacks, illness, sudden collapse – while others still died from causes “unknown.” As Leslie Young, an investigative journalist for Global News, notes, “until recently, Canada’s Border Services Agency did not tell anyone when people – refugee claimants, immigrant detainees – died in its custody” (“Deaths in Detention” 2014). Even worse, in some cases the CBSA is not even aware of who dies in its custody, or who lives for that matter. For example, Shawn Dwight Cole, a Jamaican national with a history of seizures, died on December 26, 2012 (“Deaths in Detention” 2014). Because the prison did not report his death to the CBSA, the Minister’s counsel arrived at his detention hearing two weeks later, prepared to interview a man who

---

<sup>8</sup> 24-year old Kevin O’Brien from Trinidad and Tobago was fatally beaten to death in 2010 by four other inmates (“Deaths in Detention”).

was by then – to put it crassly – a corpse. Indeed, Cole’s death, like the others (known or unknown, named or nameless), are the moribund product of a migrant detention system – and an industry – that runs on silence and blind compliance, “censored and censoring” (Morrison qtd. in Brown 88). As Chak argues,

There are billions of dollars made in the incarceration of human bodies. There are a lot of hands involved in this industry, but there aren’t many faces. In these authorless spaces, we hide the casualties of poverty and displacement, we even try to hide the spaces themselves. It is a tyranny without a tyrant, where nobody rules... (91)

Hands without bodies, bodies without faces: “nothing/can come/from here/but blood” (*Found* 17). In other words, the violence perpetuated by a system characterized by invisibility and unreality, facelessness and silence, a system that derealizes individuals before their identities are recognized (before they are made, that is, “real”), makes ghosts out of humans. As Judith Butler argues, “the derealization of the ‘Other’ means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral” (33). Those, however, who “have suffered the violence of derealization... have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again)” (Butler 33). Violence “renews itself” (Butler 33), reproduces itself, becomes its own shadow, its own “infinite paranoia” (34). Migrant detainees, then, might be ghosts, but they are ghosts that haunt.

Indeed, migrant detention has far-reaching and long-standing effects not bound by prison walls. According to Silverman,

The damage from detention is not limited to those persons who are

incarcerated: there is a ripple effect out from the IHCs and jails in to the wider community, touching the detainee's networks but also ordinary residents who form negative impressions of detainees as criminals, deviants and worse. (32)

These "impressions" – often half-lit and malformed, darkened by prejudice and misinformation – "feed into the sorts of moral panics" (Silverman 32) that allow the state free range to practice unlawful activities with the veritable blessing of its citizenry; the paranoia of the state becomes the paranoia of the citizenry. By "calling on and exploiting their detention systems to amplify minor events into full-blown crises...a growing cohort" (Silverman 32) of developed nations are able to pass legislation that is "virtually indisputable in the public realm" (32) and directly contradicts established judicial, constitutional and democratic processes. "Indefinite detention," Judith Butler argues, "is an illegitimate exercise of power, but it is, significantly, part of a broader tactic to neutralize the rule of law in the name of security" (67). The state's authority to suspend law in the name of security (a phenomenon Agamben refers to as a "state of exception") therefore divests the state of any degree of accountability either to the law or to its citizenry for however long national security remains at risk. In modern day discourses of securitization, however, the state is *always* at risk, perpetually in a state of crises, and therefore free to take whatever unlawful measures it chooses to "protect" its sovereignty. "Indefinite detention," Butler continues, "does not signify an exceptional circumstance, but rather the means by which the exceptional becomes established as a naturalized norm" (67). Lawlessness, in other words, becomes law.

In this way, Canada is breaking its own laws without, in fact, actually breaking them. According to the Canadian Bill of Rights, “no law of Canada shall be construed or applied so as to authorize or effect the arbitrary detention, imprisonment or exile of any person.” Yet Canada’s current Immigration and Refugee Protection Act allows – indeed, legislates – the practice of all three, routinely effecting the detention, imprisonment and exile of *many* persons to varying degrees of “arbitrariness.” In addition, once a detainee is transferred to a provincial prison, he or she falls into a “legal black hole”:

There is a marked absence of the rule of law in immigration detention decisions, including decisions about the site of detention, transfer to provincial jail, and decisions to continue detention. There are large gaps in accountability – what we call “legal black holes” – such as that no governmental body is clearly responsible for detainees held in provincial jails. (Gros and van Groll 17)

Where no one is responsible, no one can be held accountable. Moreover, as Butler argues, if violence is “done against those who are unreal” (33), those who are hidden from view (such as the migrant detainee), those rendered inhuman and invisible (through discourse and/or through practice), then “from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure those lives since those lives are already negated” (33): no laws are broken, no “persons” harmed. If “certain lives are not considered lives at all” (Butler 33), then they do not, as it were, count and cannot, therefore, be accounted for.

Child detainees do not, quite literally, count in the eyes of the state. In cases where children are detained “as ‘guests’ or because they are ‘accompanying their

detained parent” (Silverman 31), Canada does not count them among its migrant detainees; their numbers are excluded from official statistical records; their lives, for all intents and purposes, made invisible, inconsequential. In a poem entitled “The Weight of Salt,” Thammavongsa explores “how much” weight invisible lives hold:

There are no measuring cups to mark  
how much is enough

no scales  
to balance the weight one holds

There is only salt in  
an open hand

an open hand  
that knows the weight of how much

*(Light 15)*

While no instrument is fine-tuned enough to measure the weight of what is nearly weightless – the small, translucent granules of salt; the lives exiled to oblivion – an “open hand” knows, by touch, by contact, the “weight one holds.” The image of an “open hand” – an intimate gesture of generosity and compassion – recalls Levinas’s notion that to recognize the other is to bear responsibility for the other, to accept the weight of her life, to hold it in an “open hand.” Considering that approximately 40,000 migrants have died since 2000 (Tortorella) trying to cross borders and escape prisons of war, poverty and

violence, the “weight of how much” damage and devastation is perpetuated by apparatuses of erasure and silence – by governments that refuse responsibility; by policies that claim neutrality; by walls that bind and blind – is incalculable. Lives that are “light,” emptied of status, given less weight than a number, less credibility than a piece of paper, are measurable only insofar that their humanity, grief and suffering are acknowledged, that they are, in effect, made real, recognized.

In “My Mother, A Portrait Of,” Thammavongsa indicates the importance, the primacy even, of restoring people the incalculable worth of their lives, even when the “proof” of those lives is missing:

There are  
no photographs

of  
my mother here

just  
her name

her  
real name

Her  
real name

looks

like her

Quiet and reaching

for my father's

*(Found 31)*

In the absence of a photograph, “her name” becomes a living portrait, a body “Quiet and reaching” for another. Yet as “There are/no photographs/of my mother here,” so too is “her name/her real name” missing from the poem. The “Portrait Of” Thammavongsa’s mother is, in effect, a blank canvas, a poem that reveals nothing. By refusing to reveal her mother’s identity, to give her “real name,” Thammavongsa protects her mother from scrutiny, shields her from the reader’s gaze. Her mother’s portrait, as it were, remains private, off the record, “Quiet and reaching” into absence. “There are/no photographs/of my mother here,” Thammavongsa states, definitively.



### Chapter 3: Dark

“Do you think or work with the dark?” (*Light* 68), asks the speaker of “Questions Sent to a Light Artist That Were Never Answered.” Of the thirteen questions posed to the “Light Artist,” it is the only one that references “the dark”; all the others focus on the functions and features of light: “Do you work with real light (light from the sun) or only with electrical light?” (68); “What about the Sun?” (68); “Would you say you describe or tell with light?” (69). To the extent that “the dark” can represent those who are excluded or disenfranchised by the ideologies that align “light” with “might” and “right,” the small interjection of “the dark” in a poem otherwise dominated by light invites the reader to consider the ways in which thinking or working “with the dark” is necessary to resist those processes and practices that only “think or work” with the “light” (the white, the privileged, the wealthy and the powerful). As the majority of those disappeared (or disappearing) migrants and asylum seekers are “dark” – that is, dark-skinned – thinking “with the dark” functions as a way to protest and defy “the light’s” exclusion of “the dark” from discourses of humanity. As Butler argues,

It is not just that some humans are treated as humans, and others are dehumanized; it is rather that dehumanization becomes the condition for the production of the human to the extent that a ‘Western’ civilization defines itself over and against a population understood as, by definition, illegitimate, if not dubiously human. (91)

In other words, the Western “human” is produced only insofar that the “foreign” Other is portrayed as a figure of animality or, at the very least, suspect humanity. In discourses of

citizenship and belonging, the refugee or non-status migrant has come to occupy this “dubious” of positions, cast to the “lower rungs” (Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees* ix) of the global hierarchy. According to Peter Nyers, the “non-human” status of non-status migrants is part of a systematic effort to relegate “today’s ‘global cast-offs’ – the refugee, the asylum seeker, the ‘illegal’ worker” (“Abject Cosmopolitanism” 1074) to members of an “abject class of migrants,” and thereby exclude them from gaining access to the rights and freedoms afforded First World citizens.

It is important to note, however, that not every member of a First World nation constitutes a First World citizen, at least not “rightfully” so. As Sherene Razack writes,

As an immigrant to Canada from the Third World, I have long understood that the ‘we’ is a white category and that it refers to people who imagine themselves to be the original citizens (Aboriginal peoples are considered dead or dying and people of colour are considered recently arrived). (13)

Artist, activist and former refugee Francisco Fernando Granados echoes her contention that Canada continues to run on colonial principles: “Many places have never been postcolonial,” he writes. “The landscape bound by the nation state of Canada is one...It is a place where white supremacy has been implemented and adapted as a way to control access to the recognition of belonging and its basic protections” (1). In both Razack and Granados’ formulations, the “recognition of belonging” is employed by the state as a strategy of exclusion, designed to preserve white privilege by “driving out darkness” (Levinas 190), whether by means of deportation, detention, or the systematic expulsion of the Other from accessing the same rights, privileges and “basic protections” of the state

as the so-called rightful citizenry.

Indeed, according to Daniel Coleman, Canada's immigration policies have always been colour-coded along a spectrum of light to dark. Citing J.S. Woodsworth's *Strangers within our Gates, or Coming Canadians* (1909), a "well-intentioned but now notorious" book detailing how early Canadians "should deal with ethnic and racial pluralism" (21), Coleman argues that Canada's immigration policies are founded on "well-intentioned" but nonetheless racist principles:

[Woodsworth] follows the predominant thinking of the time, and immigration policy too, in proceeding according to a hierarchy of races organized in descending order from most to least assimilable...descending in preference from British, Americans, Scandinavians, German and French to southeastern Europeans, Austria-Hungarians, Balkans, Hebrews, and Italians, before it reaches the cut-off at the White borders of Europe, so that Levantines, Orientals, Negroes and Indians (both 'Hindus' and Amerindians) are considered incompatible... (22)

While Canada can no longer openly designate a "racial taxonomy" (Coleman 22) of its preferred immigrants, the line segregating the "White borders" from the non-white world – "the rest of us" (*Light* 37) – continues to structure national discourses of citizenship and identity. "Behind all citizenship," Peter Spiro writes, "lurks a premise that the state is the natural unit of community. In most cases, this premise is unthinking" (109). But what policies allow this premise to lurk, unseen and unthinking, in the shadows? What discourses are mobilized, what mythologies, are told and retold again (and again) to

ensure citizenship appears a neutral-seeming category, automatically granted to those who deserve it – by blood or by soil or other such “legitimate” means – and denied those who do not? In Thammavongsa’s words, “It is said that everything in the universe contains the same matter/That we begin somewhere in the same place” (*Light* 12). What, then, keeps us apart?

In her poem, "Licht," Thammavongsa rethinks the nature of light. "I thought light," she writes, "always had something to do with the eye, a thing you see when/it's open/I never thought it could be something you could reach for, pluck out of/its place in the universe and its order" (*Light* 65). To the extent that light can function as a metaphor for one's “order” and “place in the universe,” one's social, economic and political status, the poem indicates the ways in which naturalized and normative discourses of citizenship are mobilized to keep “light” (privileges, rights, protections) out of reach of those who do not “imagine themselves to be the original citizens” (Razack 13), those who “never thought” light attainable. Imagined privilege, however, manifests as reality. As Spiro argues,

In the context of the state, rights and obligations can cement an identity. If law on the basis of membership extends entitlements to you and demands services from you in return, it can enhance the feeling of specialness that comes with membership and distinguishes members from nonmembers.

(108)

Of course, status is not a given, nor is that “feeling of specialness” a constant. “Status is a fickle thing,” Chak argues, “it can be taken away from you, and at any moment, it can be

lost” (92). In other words, while “rights and obligations can cement an identity,” they do not ensure its impermanence or irrevocability. The illusion of belonging, of impermeable borders and inalienable rights, thus depends on a continuous (re)articulation of the sanctity of the line dividing “members from nonmembers,” 'us' from 'them'. In the concluding lines of “Licht,” Thammavongsa questions the legitimacy of discourses that claim universal – and unthinking – authority: “What if the sun isn't hot, if it has no heat, if it doesn't burn, if there are no/bursts of fire or storms happening out there? Or anything, really, to fear up/close?” (*Light* 65) The poem concludes with a supposition, a statement of possibility: “If things aren't set, if in the order of things a law can come loose” (65). Thammavongsa, however, does not provide the correlative “then” to her “if”: the line ends, paradoxically, as an open-ended question, unfinished and unpunctuated, the laws of grammar coming “loose” (65).

In order to limit the movements of a world that is “on the move like never before” (Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees* ix), in order to keep the borders from coming “loose,” the state repeatedly casts global migrants, the majority of whom hail from Third World nations, as “the objects of securitised fears and anxieties, possessing either an unsavoury agency (ie they are identity-frauds, queue jumpers, people who undermine consent in the polity) or a dangerous agency (ie they are criminals, terrorists, agents of insecurity)” (Nyers, “Abject Cosmopolitanism” 1070). In other words, these “unsavoury” or “dangerous” individuals represent either a threat to civic society or a burden – in both cases, unwanted. According to this logic, the Canadian government’s authorization of “enhanced detention provisions” (Kenney qtd. in Dawson, “Refugee Hotels” 833) used to

criminalize and dehumanize migrants is, in actuality, a legitimate – and benevolent – effort undertaken by the state to protect Canadians from liars and thieves, terrorists and smugglers, and all those Others “who have not followed the rules” but nevertheless want “access to more generous benefits than the average Canadian receives” (CIC, “Backgrounder” 2012). Indeed, to champion the passing of Bill C-31, Jason Kenney referred to Canada’s refugee and immigration system as “broken,” claiming that “for too many years, our generous asylum system has been abused by too many people making bogus refugee claims” (CIC, “Speaking Notes” 2012). While Kenney’s words have since received criticism from academics, journalists, and human rights activists, the trope of the “bogus” refugee is still used to justify and gain public support for laws that effectively outlaw what is internationally recognized by all signatories to the Refugee Convention,<sup>9</sup> of which Canada is one, as the right to seek asylum.

Canada, however, is not alone in its decial of the “legitimate” refugee. “Most states,” Macklin argues, “deplore the arrival of asylum seekers. The spontaneous flow of non-citizens possessing a limited legal claim to control entry represents a threat to sovereignty-as-border-control” (367). To limit this “spontaneous flow” of arrivals, the state grants the right to seek asylum to only a select and, more importantly, *invited* few:

The state continues to smile only on the most demonstrably abject of refugee claimants – those able to prove that they are utterly powerless and without hope...those who have the temerity and the resources to arrive uninvited at our borders or airports are represented as invasive,

---

<sup>9</sup> All major Western nations are signatories to the Refugee Convention, originally known as the U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Convention was adopted July 28, 1951 and brought into force April 22, 1954 (Macklin 365-66).

threatening... (Dawson, "Refugee Hotels" 831)

By sheer virtue of getting here from "out there, *there*" (*Light* 25), these individuals – or, as is more often the case, groups of people – are automatically deemed too capable, too agential, to be anything but "bogus":

Many critics of refugee regimes in western nations are quick to admit that there are millions of "real" refugees in the world today. These refugees, however, are necessarily elsewhere, suffering quietly and passively in squalid camps far away in places like Afghanistan, Ghana, Tanzania, and Iran. (Macklin 369)

In the state's eyes, the "real" refugee is the abject refugee, the one who claims no right to anything, possesses nothing, stays out of view, "suffering quietly and passively in squalid camps" on the *Other* side of the world.

The invasion of darkness into the "white" space of Canada, is an anxiety – indeed, a national mythology – that Thammavongsa implicitly critiques by focusing her attention on the lives and quiet dignity of some of the world's most abject creatures: bugs. In her poem, "The Dung Beetle," she writes,

THE DUNG BEETLE

has been given

this

all its life

and all its life

it has quietly sifted and culled

each bit, each piece

As if

each bit, each piece

had been lost to us,

a lesser light

dropped

from pinned points

in the night sky

*(Light 34-5)*

The dung beetle's lot in life, as it were, is to sift and cull through excrement, to roll, transport and feed off balls of feces – the feces of other, larger animals "dropped" from above. Yet the dung beetle can carry up to 250 times its own weight; the dung beetle is strong, powerful, resilient. And when “it strays off course,” unable to see above its heavy load, “the dung beetle climbs on top of its ball and uses the position of the sun, the moon, and even the Milky Way to reorient itself” (“True Facts About the Dung Beetle” 2013). Indeed, Thammavongsa's dung beetle navigates its way through the wide universe by looking to the “pinned points/in the night sky,” to the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars to help it find its way. One of the most striking aspects of Thammavongsa’s poem is the respect and reverence with which she represents a creature that, quite literally, survives on the abject, that “doesn’t know/what it looks like/to each of us” but nevertheless instinctively knows how to navigate the wide channels of a world so vast and incommensurable by simply turning its face towards the sky and standing, undetected



and undeterred, on top of a big ball of shit.

Yet the “pinned points/in the night sky” also indicate the dung beetle’s vulnerability, the ease with which precarious lives are “collected, marked and ordered” (*Found* 35) by larger, governing bodies (such as the state), pegged and “pinned” in a system of classification that allows for only the most abject, most bare of existences. “Their very smallness,” Dawson writes of Thammavongsa’s bugs, “helps to communicate the intense vulnerability of their subjects and encourages a meditation on the violent potential of the large, lumbering human forms that typically overlook or denigrate them” (“On Thinking Like a State” 59). Insofar as the bugs can function as metaphors for “refugees, illegal migrants, and perhaps, all racialized migrants” (Dawson “On Thinking Like a State” 59), the poet’s quiet reflections on the lives of bugs invite the reader to take a closer look at the movements and small dignities of those lives unseen or overlooked. “A Firefly,” Thammavongsa writes in another “bug” poem, “casts/its body/into the night/arguing/against darkness and its taking. It is a small argument/lending itself/to silence” (*Small Arguments* 41). The poem asks the reader to see the imperceptible, hear the inaudible – a tiny light, flickering in the darkness, a small voice, “lending itself to silence” (41), arguing against “darkness and its taking.” The firefly’s triumph over the “Darkness,/unable to hold against/such tiny elegant speeches” (41) recalls Chak’s assertion that “our bodies always find ways to carve out space, to refocus our attention from the geometry to the lived experience, from the container to the contained” (403) no matter how small the space or, alternatively, how vast. Thus, small acts of resistance, unseen moments, blur the boundaries and distinctions between the state’s attempts to

capture and erase migrant bodies, to abandon them to the darkness, and the body's ability to resist that control, to refuse that erasure.

So much depends on small things in Thammavongsa's poetry – the work of a moment, the slight movements and minor shifts that “can lead to a transformation, a rearrangement of language, or an adaptation in nature” (Wang). In a review of *Light*, Phoebe Wang states, “[*Light*] alerts us to the act of witnessing, as well as to the events and moments that can be easily missed” (n.p.). Kevin Connolly shares her view: “Each Souvankham Thammavongsa poem feels like an *event* (emphasis in original),” he writes, “which makes a new collection akin to a small riot. In *Light*, she does what only very good poets do: sees the things others miss” (n.p.) Yet Thammavongsa “sees the things others miss,” with characteristically minimalist language, with sparse poems comprised of more white space than text, more absence than presence, more silence, as it were, than speech. With so much space dominating the page, the reader has little choice *but* to notice the small words that interrupt the silence, that darken the wide corridors of emptiness, protest erasure and resist subsumption. Conversely, Thammavongsa's tiny text, her “small riot” of small words, draws the reader's attention to that which has been cut from view, that which hides and is hidden in language, that which moves in silence and in space. Her focus on the miniscule and the momentary, the lives and events “small and brief” (*Found* 13), asks the reader to consider the ways in which “asylum seekers, refugees, non-status residents, undocumented workers, so-called ‘overstayers’ and ‘illegals’” (Nyers, “Abject Cosmopolitanism” 1069) can trespass the “narrow spaces” and “little time” allowed them by the state, how they can (and do) in fact move – albeit “lightly” – across borders

designed to keep them out. “I will keep my print small,” Thammavongsa quietly declares, “filling up every blank space/I can find” (*Light* 21).

Being small is precisely what the asylum seeker or undocumented migrant must do to cross the vast and unknown spaces, the heavily secured-borders set between nation-states. Most, if not all, major First World states take drastic measures to discourage asylum seekers from arriving at their borders, unbidden and unwelcome:

The United States and Australia aggressively interdict boats on the high seas in order to deflect potential refugees before they reach territorial waters. Many states impose liability on air and marine carriers who transport undocumented or improperly documented migrants, thereby providing incentives for private transportation companies to behave as private (and unaccountable) delegates of state customs and immigration departments. Canada even posts visa officers at foreign airports to check passenger documentation on planes bound for Canada. (Macklin 368)

Every mode of transport, every corridor of movement, every “path/of every gutter” (*Small Arguments* 40) is watched, securitized, and even infiltrated by the state. “For the person who can cross,” Sophie Nield writes, “they find no worse at present than a high level of surveillance and some discomfort. For the person who cannot cross, however, the consequences are significant” (3): every pathway is a potential prison, every person a potential threat. The state’s control of sea, ground and sky travel – water, earth and air – metaphorically plunges the asylum seeker into darkness, perpetually at the mercy of the elements, of time, chance and other human beings. In her poem “Water,” Thammavongsa

gestures towards the very real and ever-present dangers that face undocumented migrants travelling unsanctioned between borders: “Water/will lie to you/make you believe/this/unmarked end/isn’t deep/—until you go in/without enough air/to find your way back” (*Small Arguments* 16). Considering that at least 4, 077<sup>10</sup> people died in 2014 alone “trying to cross borders as they fled war and poverty in Africa, Asia and the Middle East” (Tortorella) – many by shipwreck and/or drowning – the “lie” of water becomes a sad reality. Each year, ships built to sink or set to crash (The Blue Sky M, for example, a ship carrying hundreds of “clandestine migrants” [“Cargo Ship” 2014] was not only abandoned by its crew, but deliberately programmed to crash into the coast of Italy) transport people to nowhere but their graves. Yet for most migrants, there is little choice but to trust in the lie that water tells, the safety of a rickety ship, the truth of a false promise: “Water will lie to you...it breaks light/before light knows/where it is” (*Small Arguments* 16).

In the same way that every stranger, every route, is a potential threat to the undocumented migrant, so too is every stranger, every undocumented, a potential threat to the state, an automatic suspect, until proven otherwise. As Marc Augé argues of modern – or what he terms *supermodern* – processes of identification:

[W]ords hardly count any longer. There will be no individualization (no right to anonymity without identity checks). Of course, the criteria of innocence are the established, official criteria of individual identity (entered on cards, stored in mysterious databanks). (83)

---

<sup>10</sup> According to an article published in *The Guardian* in April, 2015, approximately 1,700 migrant deaths have already been recorded so far this year (Grierson et. al, “Migrant Deaths,” 2015). These numbers continue to rise at a dramatic rate.

In Augé's formulation, the innocence of any border-crosser (the airplane passenger, the visa applicant, even the "supermarket customer" [82]) – is determined through a speechless trial of paper trails and digital records. The proof of identity – the passports, the boarding cards, the identity documents and visas – is concomitant with the proof of innocence: a person's "truth" is measured and decided in a wordless process,<sup>11</sup> wherein "only/the black ink/stamped/across their face" (*Found* 35) qualifies as credible and trustworthy. Without proof of identity, the subject cannot claim the right to "anonymity," cannot clear the checkpoints and territorial markers, the tollbooths and border stations, until his or her identity, and thereby innocence, is approved. Therefore, moving "freely" between spaces, bypassing checkpoints and trespassing borders is, according to the state, a proclamation of guilt. Of course, asylum seekers are routinely and systematically denied the "bona fide travel documents" (Dawson "Refugee Hotels" 831) that would satisfactorily testify to their innocence, making it "virtually impossible" (Macklin 367) for them to travel anything *but* illegally. And, as Dawson notes, in the past 25 years alone, Canada has introduced a series of increasingly restrictive legislation that make it "almost impossible for asylum seekers to arrive at our borders without breaking our laws" ("Refugee Hotels" 831). Undocumented migrants are therefore prohibited from all modes of travel, as they are neither permitted to legally depart their countries of origin, nor are they permitted to legitimately arrive anywhere else.

---

<sup>11</sup> As the Canadian government becomes increasingly reliant on biometric technologies to determine refugee and migrant identities, refugees and migrants are becoming increasingly wordless. The government's practice of reading "refugees as bodies of evidence, or data sets" (Dawson, "The Refugee's Body of Knowledge 58) reduces them to mere body parts, wherein the body is assumed to speak truths the refugee claimant or undocumented migrant is not trusted to utter.

That is not to say, however, that asylum seekers “cease to enter,” but rather that, as Macklin argues, they cease to do so as “refugees” (370). In her poem, “Light,” Thammavongsa alludes to the ways in which migrant bodies “must come in bent” (22) through state lines that not only refuse but actively, aggressively, resist their entry and, in many cases, force their exit (or hold them, indeterminately, in detention):

Because glass

has not yet

learned

to bend

and because

even now

glass

will not bend

light

must come in bent

*(Found 22)*

By directing the reader’s gaze to the “bent” – that is, refracted – movements of light, Thammavongsa invites the reader to contemplate how even the movements of light are regulated and organized by seemingly neutral constructs – a flat surface, a piece of glass. To the extent that glass can function as a metaphor for the state and light for the

movements of undocumented migrants, the poem offers a critique of the ways in which naturalized discourses of citizenship and state security are forcing refugees and migrant subjects to “come in bent” – illegally and dangerously – across borders and boundaries that “will not bend.” Seeing as Canada continues to introduce and uphold legislation that effectively erodes “the idea that people who seek asylum may actually be refugees” (Macklin 365), the state is able to maintain an image of national civility and global generosity – a flat, glassy surface, as it were – without, in fact, having to regularly practice either.

For example, in 2012 the Canadian Border Services Agency launched a pilot program that offered failed refugee claimants (an increasing majority) an incentive of up to \$2,000 to voluntarily “go home.” According to the CBSA website, the program – called the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration program (AVRR) – was intended to allow failed claimants “a way to return home with support, dignity and anonymity,” as well as a modest amount of money intended “to help the rejected claimant find a job, set up a business, or go back to school” (Fitzpatrick). Candidates, however, were only eligible to receive the full amount if they applied “before going to the federal court review of the decision, \$1500 if they apply [sic] before asking for a pre-removal risk assessment, and \$1000 if they have [sic] already made that application and received a decision” (Fitzpatrick). In other words, the state’s level of generosity depended on the refugee claimant’s willingness to voluntarily – and preemptively – give up their rights to pursue any course of appeal or mode of recourse. When the program was abandoned after a brief two-year stint, the CBSA issued the following statement:

The number of AVRR removals exceeded expectations in the first year but fell short in the second year. This was due in part to a combination of the refugee reform and the introduction of visa requirements for some countries, which led to a decrease in the total number of refugee claims from 33, 250 in 2009 to 10, 380 in 2013.

(“Evaluation of the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Pilot Program – Final Report” 2014)

In other words, because the reforms made to the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act were so successful in reducing the number of asylum claims made to the state, the need to bribe failed claimants to return home of their own volition was rendered obsolete; fewer claimants, after all, means fewer "bogus" refugees to deport.

The state’s attempts to “reverse the flows of established transnational migratory paths” (Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism" 1070), to send asylum seekers and global migrant in one direction only – *back* – is further mobilized by “safe third country” agreements. As part of Bill C-31, Canada introduced the Designated Countries of Origin list, which strategically divides the world’s “safe” countries from its presumably “dangerous” ones based on a set of “quantitative factors...or on the basis of the minister’s opinion that the country exhibits the hallmarks of a refugee-protecting country” (Silverman 28). The DCO extends the government’s discretionary – that is, exclusionary – power by significantly reducing the resources and recourse made available to refugee claimants from DCO approved nations. Asylum seekers from Designated Countries of Origin, including such reputedly “safe” nations as Israel and Mexico, are subject to



additional restrictions that effectively deny them access to legal representation,<sup>12</sup> adequate health care, interim employment, and the right to have their case reviewed by the Refugee Appeal Division in the (increasingly likely) event of its rejection. In addition, a DCO claimant is allotted only half the time of a regular claimant to prepare for trial, as hearings on DCO claims are held within “30-45 days after referral of the claim to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) as opposed to the 60-day timeframe for other refugee claimants” (CIC, “Designated Countries of Origin” 2014). In the government’s own words, the purpose of this expedited processing is to “deter abuse of the refugee system by people who come from countries generally considered safe” (CIC, “Designated Countries of Origin” 2014). But “safe” countries does not necessarily mean “safe” people. How safe, for example, is a Roma living in the Czech Republic? How safe is a Serbian in Croatia? How safe, for that matter, is an Aboriginal woman in *Canada*?

For Lucia Vega Jimenez, a Mexican woman who hanged herself in a CBSA holding cell at the Vancouver International Airport in 2013, death, it seems, was “safer” than deportation. Brought into custody after being caught for paying less than the full fare of a public transit ticket, Jimenez, a non-status migrant, was immediately scheduled for deportation, a fate she presumably thought worse than death. Because Canada’s DCO list makes it increasingly difficult for refugee claimants to prove a well-founded fear of persecution and furthermore denies them any opportunity to appeal their rejected claims, there is a surplus of failed DCO claimants left with little choice but to go “underground,”

---

<sup>12</sup> As Silverman notes, “Legal aid reductions announced by the Canadian government in April 2013 mean that asylum claimants in Ontario who originate from any of the DCO safe countries may no longer be entitled to legal aid and representation at their hearing” (29).

as Jimenez did, and live as non-status migrants, “shrunk/from the reach of light” (*Small Arguments* 31), or risk whatever unspeakable perils await them at home. But living in darkness – that is, away from the eyes of the state – requires living “light,” as it were, like “a ghost” (Trejo qtd. in Dawson, “Refugee Hotels” 838): non-status migrants must quickly learn how to live invisible lives, how to disappear “in plain sight” (Nield 838). The irony of Canada’s strident efforts to strengthen its “apparatus[es] of disappearance” (Nield qtd. in Dawson, “Refugee Hotels” 838) is that the state’s efforts to drastically reduce the number of “bogus refugees” is increasing the number of “bogus citizens” – the undocumented, the non-status, the “fake” Canadians – living and working, without state permission or state support, within Canada’s borders. And if, as Macklin suggests, “The cumulative impact of the various measures designed to deter asylum seekers is to drive them deeper into the hands of smugglers and the world of clandestine, illegal, and dangerous modes of travel” (369), does not the same hold true for the measures designed to expel and repel asylum seekers? Is Canada, among other First world nations, not simply abetting global levels of violence and criminality?

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

In a poem entitled “The Dark,” Thammavongsa indicates the impossibility of eradicating the darkness from the light:

THE DARK

is light

when light

isn't here

It comes

in

the same way;

takes up

what light left,

and makes

sure

to this

it comes back

*(Light 23)*

Though the poem is a quiet meditation on the movements of light and darkness, it is also evocative of the ways in which state efforts to disappear global migrants – that is, “darkness” – can never be fully achieved. Despite the risks involved, the weight of the journey, the uncertainty of the future, refugees, undocumented migrants, “irregulars” and “illegals” will continue to cross borders without permission, slipping past checkpoints, hiding from view, coming in “when light isn’t here.” In the same way that light cannot permanently drive out the darkness, so too is the state unable to wholly monitor, detain, and “disappear” those people “smuggling themselves beneath trucks and buses” (Johnson 1), forging or faking documentation, living “light” and moving quickly to avoid detection, detainment and deportation. Even as the reforms to Canada’s Immigration and Refugee Protection Act make it increasingly difficult for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers to arrive at our borders legally, even as the government further disappears people behind cloaked discourses of security and citizenry, behind walls “too blank, impossible, and violent” (Chak 96), locked in cells “so friggin’ cold” (anonymous detainee qtd. in Gros and van Groll 30), undocumented or “illegitimately” documented people continue to find ways to move within “narrow space[s]” and “little time” (Thammavongsa qtd. in Ganz), to trespass the borders designed to keep them out. The poem thus calls for a recognition of the ways in which refugees and migrants are refusing

to disappear, despite the state discourses, policies and practices that blithely attempt to make them invisible. As Thammavongsa reminds the reader, even that which goes unseen is present, even those who live in “the dark,” undocumented and unauthorized, belong to the same realm as those whose identities are “light” – the citizen, the so-called rightful subject. “The dark,” she writes, “is light/when light/isn't here”

## Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.
- . *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005. Print.
- . *The Open: Man and Animal*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004. Print.
- Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. London and New York: Verso, 1995. Print.
- "Bio." *Souvankham-Thammavongsa*, n.d. Web. 8 July 2015.
- Brown, Wendy. "Freedom's Silences." *States of Injury*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1995. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London and New York: Verso, 2004. Print.
- Canadian Bill of Rights. *The Government of Canada Justice Laws*, 2015. Web. 15 February 2015.
- Canadian Council for Refugees. *Overview of C-31 Refugee Determination Process*. 21 February 2013. Web. 10 June 2015.
- "Cargo Ship Carrying '700 Migrants' Docks in Italy." *BBC News*. BBC News, 31 December 2014. Web. 13 June 2015.
- Chak, Tings. *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention. Montreal and Amsterdam*. Montreal and Amsterdam: The Architecture Observer, 2014. Print.
- . "No One Is Illegal." *Tings Chak*. Tings Chak, 2012. Web. 10 August 2015.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). "Backgrounder – Cracking down on Human

- Smugglers who Abuse Canada's Immigration System." 29 June 2012. Web. 10 June 2015.
- . "Designated Countries of Origin." 10 October 2014. Web. 10 June 2015.
- . "Determine Your Eligibility – Refugee Status from Inside Canada." 2 December 2012. Web. 14 February 2015.
- . "Speaking Notes for the Honourable Jason Kenney, P.C., M.P. Minister of Citizenship and Immigration and Multiculturalism." 16 February 2012. Web. 13 February 2015.
- Cleveland, Janet, Cecile Rousseau, and Rachel Kronick. "The Harmful Effects of Detention and Family Separation on Asylum Seekers' Mental Health in the Context of Bill C-31." Brief Submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration Concerning Bill C-31, the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act. Apr. 2012. Web. 15 Feb 2015.
- Dawson, Carrie. "The Refugee's Body of Knowledge: Storytelling and Silence in the Work of Francisco-Fernando Granados." *TOPIA* 29 (2012): 55-72. Print.
- . "On Thinking Like a State and Reading (About) Refugees." *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'Etudes Canadiennes*, 45.2 (2011): 58-75. Print.
- . "Refugee Hotels: The Discourse of Hospitality and the Rise of Immigration Detention in Canada." *University of Toronto Quarterly: A Canadian Journal of the Humanities*, 83.4 (2014): 826-46. Print.
- Downey, Antony. "Zones of Indistinction: Giorgio Agamben's 'Bare Life' and the Politics of Aesthetics." *Third Text* 23.2 (2002): 109-25. Print.

- "Evaluation of the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Pilot Program – Final Report." *Canada Border Services Agency*. Government of Canada, December 2014. Web. 8 June 2015.
- Fitzpatrick, Meagan. "Failed Refugee Claimants Offered \$2,000 to Leave Canada. *CBC News*. CBC News, 5 July 2012. Web. 9 June 2015.
- Ganz, Shoshannah. "Interview with Souvankham Thammavongsa." *Postcolonial Text*. 9.1 (2014): 1-7. Web. 5 Mar. 2014.
- Global Detention Project, *Canada Detention Profile*, 2015. Web 16 February 2015.
- Granados, Francisco-Fernando. "Reciprocal Gazing: Confessions of an Ungrateful Refugee." *Fuse Magazine*. 1: 30-32 (2010). Web. 20 February 2015.
- Grierson, Jamie, Alessandro Bonomolo, and Alan Travis. "Migrant deaths: funerals held as EU leaders meet for crisis summit." *The Guardian*. The Guardian, 23 April 2015. Web. 28 July 2015.
- Gros, Hanna and Paloma van Groll. "We Have No Rights: Arbitrary Imprisonment and Cruel Treatment of Migrants with Mental Health Issues in Canada." *International Human Rights Program*, University of Toronto Faculty of Law, 2015: 1-129. Print.
- Guenther, Lisa. "The Living Death of Solitary Confinement." Editorial. *The New York Times*, 26 Aug. 2012. Web. 17 July 2015.
- Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. *The Government of Canada Justice Laws*, 2015. Web. 15 February 2015.
- "Interview with Souvankham Thammavongsa." *Wordsters*, 2006. Web. 4 Mar 2015.



- Johnson, Heather. *Borders, Asylum and Global Non-Citizenship: The Other Side of the Fence*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2014. Print.
- Keung, Nicholas. "Not 'Good to Fly': The Tragic Death of a Roma Refugee." *Toronto Star*. Toronto Star, 28 March 2011. Web. June 7, 2015.
- . "UN Chastises Canada Over Immigration Detention, including un-deportable man jailed 8 years." *The Star.com*. Toronto Star, 24 July 2015. Web. July 10, 2015.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Alterity and Transcendence*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. New York: Columbia UP, 1999. Print.
- . *Totality and Infinity*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991. Print.
- Macklin, Audrey. "Disappearing Refugees: Reflections on the Canada – US Safe Third Country Agreement." *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 38 (2004): 365-426. Print.
- "Mammoth Cave." *National Park Service*. National Park Service, n.d. Web. 14 May 2015.
- Nield, Sophie. "The Proteus Cabinet, or 'We Are Here but Not Here.'" *Research in Drama Education* 13.2 (2008): 137-45. Print.
- Nyers, Peter. "Abject Cosmopolitanism: The Politics of Protections in the Anti-Deportation Movement." *Third World Quarterly* 24.6 (2003): 1049-1067. Print.
- *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Peerbaye, Soraya. "Interview with Souvankham Thammavongsa." *Poetics.ca*. Poetics.ca, 2005. Web. 10 May 2015.
- Razack, Sherene. *Dark Threats and White Knights: the Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping,*

- and the New Imperialism*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Cartographies of Silence." *The Dream of a Common Language*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978. Print.
- Shay, Maureen Elizabeth (2012). *Perpetual Refugee and the Unmaking of the Global World: The Migrant Narrative Beyond Postcolonialism*. Diss. U of California, 2012. Proquest, 2012. Web. 4 March 2015.
- Silverman, Stephanie J. "In the Wake of Irregular Arrivals: Changes to the Canadian Immigration Detention System." *Refuge* 30.2 (2014): 27-34. Print.
- Spiro, Peter. *Beyond Citizenship*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Thammavongsa, Souvankham. *Found*. Toronto, ON: Pedlar Press, 2008. Print.
- . *Light*, Toronto, ON: Pedlar Press, 2013. Print.
- . *Small Arguments*, ON: Pedlar Press, 2007. Print.
- "The Trillium Conversations: Adam Dickinson and Souvankham Thammavongsa." *National Post*. National Post, 17 June 2013. Web. 11 February 2015.
- Tortorella, Ivan. "2014 a Record Year for Migrant Deaths." *Toronto Star*. Toronto Star, 31 December 2014. Web. 9 June 2015.
- Wang, Phoebe. "'That Thing to Have': A Review of Souvankham Thammavongsa's *Light*." *The Puritan: Frontiers of New English*. The Puritan, 13 Jun 2015. Web. 10 July 8 2015.
- Young, Leslie. "Deaths in Detention: CBSA's Fatal Failure to Learn From its Mistakes." *Global News*, 5 November 2014. Web. 21 June 2015.
- zeFrank1. "True Facts About the Dung Beetle." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube,

15 March 2013. Web. 13 May 2015.