

The Echo of Ice Letting Go. By Julie Hungiville Lemay. University of Alaska Press, 2017. 112 pages.

Reviewed by Joanna Lilley

It's not too difficult to persuade a poetry reader to pick up a book of poetry—they are usually beautiful objects and Julie Hungiville Lemay's debut collection is no exception, with Juneau artist Ian Grant's dark, rushing painting, *Sockeye Run*, on the cover.

But it's the back cover of *The Echo of Ice Letting Go* that might be more likely to attract the attention of someone who doesn't read poetry. The description speaks of the author's "personal story of the recurrence of cancer" and "an account of her son's struggle with addiction." It speaks of "the harsh, yet beautiful landscape of Alaska."

This is poetry, it seems, for anyone who has suffered from illness or addiction, whether directly or indirectly. This is poetry for anyone who is drawn to the North. The poems in the collection bear this out; there is a great deal for readers to connect with, an intricate braiding of narratives reminding us that life and death are indivisible.

A compelling thread in the collection are the poems that deal with mother and child relationships. In "The Anchorage Jail," a mother visits her son in jail who "swears / he wants to change" while "Mothers trade / in hope and time." In "Still," a middle-aged daughter watches her mother prepare breakfast and asks herself "Who else will ever / care for me like this?"—not from a perspective of selfishness but rather as an awareness of the irreplaceable nature of the relationship. This precious moment is delicately mirrored in the poem "Ge(ne)ology" in which a mother lets her daughter take care of her: "Her / grown-competent hands / prepare our meal."

Julie Hungiville Lemay is highly skilled at crafting such mirroring, or echoing as the title of the collection intimates. In the poem entitled "Recent Blood Tests are Indicative of a Cancer Recurrence" the poem itself does not speak of cancer or illness. Instead the narrator is watching "the yellow joy / of warblers flick and fidget," invoking the delight we can still experience even though, or because, we are faced with the inevitability of death. This is a poem that is worthy of repeated readings, shifting as it does from the time-worn metaphor of falling leaves that "die to the earth" to the narrator's own anticipated descent

into kneeling on the ground, a motion that articulates the complicated, tangled emotion of fear, surrender, and even spiritual ecstasy.

That poem is in turn echoed by “This is a Raging Wind” where the title doesn’t mention cancer but the eponymous wind “is a ghost, pale and bald” and the disease steadily metastasizes through the verses.

Reading this collection, there is an evocation of piles of journals, letters, photograph albums, and dog-eared books surrounding us as we sit beside a burning wood stove with a view through a window of snow, spruce, and mountain. There is an invocation of the changing moods that take hold of the pen as we write in secret with no intention of our pages ever being read.

Not that a poem should ever be assumed to be autobiographical. As readers we must be careful never to make this automatic deduction. Julie Hungiville Lemay perhaps reminds us of this in the second poem in the collection, “In the Belly of the Whale,” ostensibly about the funeral of a “young mother,” in which the author writes in different stanzas “This is my story” and “This is not my / story.”

Nevertheless, poetry is often deeply personal and, consequently, often deeply truthful. Such truth is what Julie Hungiville Lemay excels at in her collection. There are lyrical insights: “Tomorrow waits like a thousand roads” (“More Ache Than the Sea”). There is honesty through narrative: “Six months ago I was afraid if I moved my hand too quickly / the sky / might crack open,” (“Remission”). And there are many flashes, like sun on snow, of striking, poetic perception: “We speak grief in layers / of deepest blue,” (“This Body is Baggage I’m Not Yet Ready to Leave Behind”).

This collection deftly, heart-rendingly, and sagaciously unites our indoor and outdoor lives, and our internal and external lives. It’s a study of our twenty-first century existence where we find ourselves experiencing everything from cancer treatments, spiritual exploration, and environmental connection to jail visits, driving, and tea.

Because of this apparent preoccupation with the everyday, the opening poem, “Tosca Lived a Good Life,” may appear discordant. *Tosca* is a Puccini opera; it’s high art. It’s red velvet and gold leaf. Yet perhaps the *Tosca* poem is an epigraph to the entire collection, a curtain lifting on a funeral and a son living on the streets, while all of us in the audience watch and wait for the glimpse of a warbler,

of a glacier, of a sky that is the “blue of the high holy lakes of the Himalayas” (“Remission”).

Indeed, we watch entranced until the last poem in this collection reveals to us the final, inevitable scene of each of our lives—“Sky Burial” set in the Talkeetna Mountains, Alaska—in which the narrator requests, perhaps on behalf of us all: “Bury me to the sky.”

Joanna Lilley, Whitehorse

Auguries. By Clea Roberts. Brick Books, 2017. 101 pages.

Reviewed by Kendalyn Mckisick

With seven years between Clea Roberts’s debut collection, *Here Is Where We Disembark* (Freehand Books, 2010), and her most recent collection, *Auguries*, the poet has continued her work of precisely mapping the land of the North, with a nod to the historical and personal past as well as to the future’s potential. Everyday items and everyday interactions are illuminated through fresh and powerful language, harnessed by Roberts’s undeniably deep sense of knowing, understanding of the human experience, and her connection to the place she calls home. Anyone who reads her books knows that what is found there can be taken as the absolute truth; nothing tries to be anything it is not. Roberts is not afraid to approach the familiar, and she seems to do so with the promise of honesty and of inclusion.

While Roberts manages to leave nothing behind, language and space are used sparingly. Entering these poems heightens attention through her use of the short, enjambed lines. These also give the reader plenty of white space to breathe, and to process the information of the poems. Tranquility is found in the poems, in their precise and compact formal elements, where the real and the imagined collide, where Linnaea becomes human and a tongue becomes a petal “drawing down the milk” (46). The brevity of lines are reminiscent of haiku, as are the subjects of nature. The quality of laying images one on top of the other expose something more vivid and more intimate that allows us to witness the communion between woman and nature, in which “nothing belongs entirely / to innocence or to blame” (51).

From an experience of a mother’s death to a singular breath expelled in winter, nothing is left ignored in the 101 page collection; Roberts creates equality between the immediately profound—her