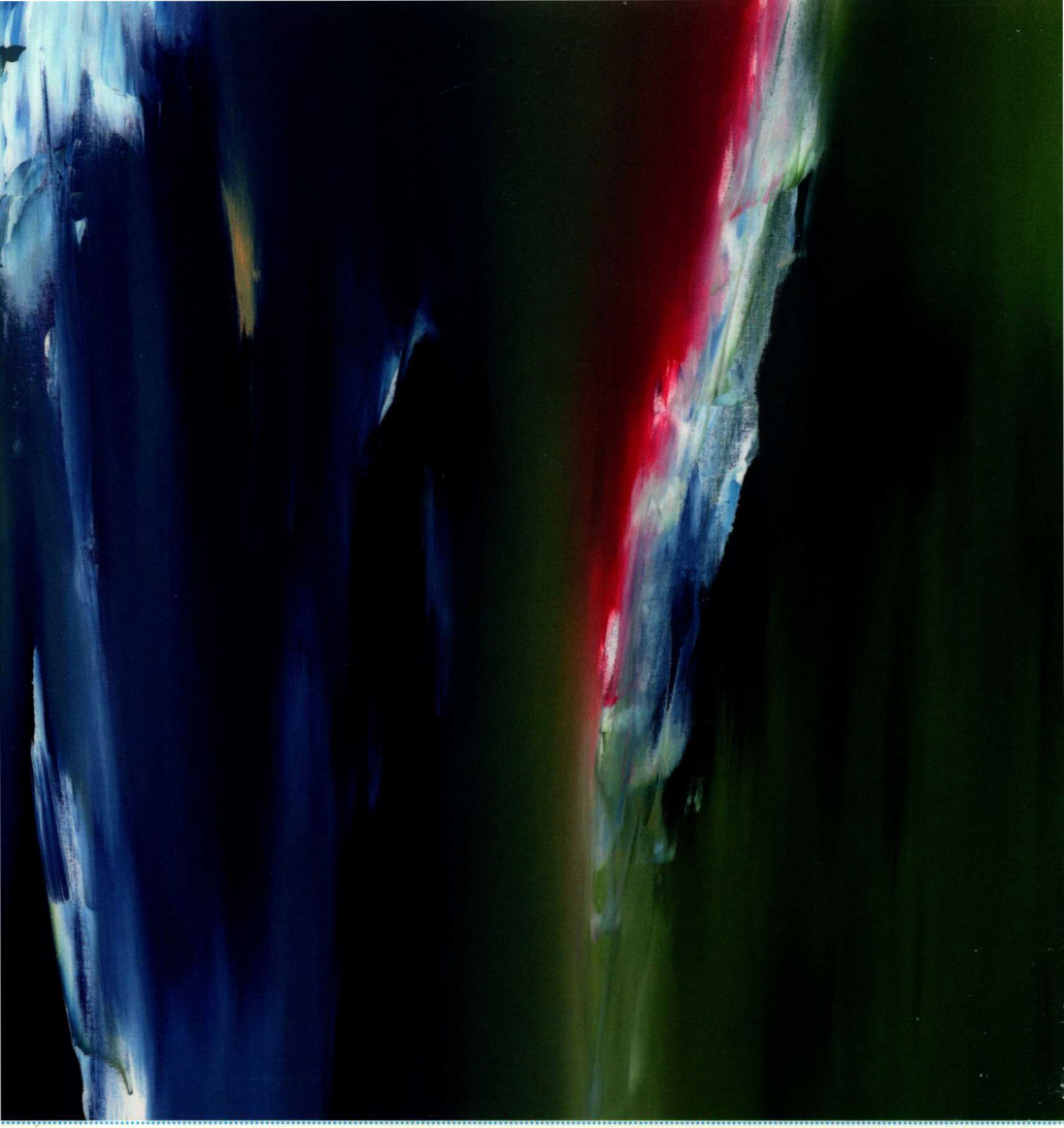

THE ECHO OF ICE LETTING GO

JULIE HUNGIVILLE LEMAY

POETRY

Rooted in the harsh, yet beautiful landscape of Alaska, this collection of poems is at once comforting and disquieting, permeated with wisdom, darkness, and resilience. Taken together, the poems form a powerful narrative, as Julie Hungiville LeMay relates a personal story of the recurrence of cancer and interweaves it with an account of her son's struggle with addiction. In a world of so much pain, her poems ask, how can we find meaning? The answer, often, is nature: among "spruce branches that whisper" and "the yellow joy / of warblers." Half-found poems inspired by John Muir essays are placed throughout the book like touchstones, while other poems invoke the spirit of Wordsworth. LeMay's voice is precise and clear, her lines musical and sonically rich, making this ambitious, wide-ranging book one that readers won't soon forget.

JULIE HUNGIVILLE LEMAY was born and raised in Buffalo, New York and moved to Alaska's Matanuska Valley where she has lived since 1978. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University, Los Angeles and served as poetry editor for Antioch's journal, *Lunch Ticket*. Her poems have been published in a number of journals including *Potomac Review, Passager, Bluestem, Split Rock Review,* and *Cirque.*

. . . a poet who knows how to praise this world in all its raggedness, beauty, and grief . . . a transformative, magical collection . . .

CAROL POTTER, author of *Some Slow Bees,* winner of the 2014 *Field* Poetry Prize from Oberlin College Press

These poems are vespers reminiscent of Mary Oliver's quiet observance and expanse—prayers or prayer time best linked to the heart . . . a wonderfully bountiful debut . . .

F. DOUGLAS BROWN is the author of *Zero to Three*, recipient of the 2013 Cave Canem Poetry Prize

In the face of extremes that can pull us under—illness, addiction, loss—Julie LeMay's "rough heart" perseveres in this powerful collection . . .

JIM DANIELS, author of *Birth Marks, Eight Mile High,* and other books

These poems . . . confront the gaze of each unbearable life transition calmly, moving each word out with a map-maker's commitment to get the knowable down.

JENNY FACTOR, author of *Unraveling at the Name*

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THE ECHO OF ICE LETTING GO

LEMAY

THE ECHO OF ICE LETTING GO

JULIE HUNGIVILLE LEMAY

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In the face of extremes that can pull us under—illness, addiction, loss—Julie LeMay's "rough heart" perseveres in this powerful collection by "taking care of the next thing in front" of her. Set mainly in harsh, beautiful Alaska, these tight yet rich and layered poems offer us both the authority of experience and the authority of place. LeMay carries with her the knowledge of a survivor who has learned what she can carry forward and what she must leave behind. She teaches us that sweetness is always bittersweet, and that knowledge is always hard-won. None of us knows what lies ahead, but as we move toward the uncertain and tenuous future, these inspirational poems give us something to hold onto.

—JIM DANIELS, author of *Birth Marks, Eight Mile High,* and other books

Julie LeMay's poems in *The Echo of Ice Letting Go* pull us close, ask us to embrace ecstasy, faith, and joy in the face of the *world's rough heart.* These poems honor the majesty of the mountains and skies of Alaska and Tibet, while at the same time acknowledging the difficulty we encounter in these bodies and here on this ground. LeMay's work gives sustenance, and *the faith of fast small wings;* we get *the whole/land in every mouthful:/taste willow bud, /muskeg, winter sun.* The music and clarity of image in these poems pull us toward something larger within, as well as outside of ourselves. This book is a pleasure to read; there's a generous, honest, courageous spirit at work here, a poet who knows how to praise this world in all its raggedness, beauty, and grief. This is a transformative, magical collection of poems, something readers will come back to over and over.

—CAROL POTTER, author of *Some Slow Bees,* winner of the 2014 Field Poetry Prize from Oberlin College Press.

Even when Julie LeMay is describing nature and Alaska—a stunned bird, a trapped moth, an ice lake—she is more than a poet of place. This gentle meal of resiliency, community, illness, and transcendence offers "the whole/ land in every mouthful". These poems that don't look away from death and other unimaginables (spousal violence, children's pain, illness and loss), confront the gaze of each unbearable life transition calmly, accommodating, and then accommodating further, moving each word out with a map-maker's commitment to get the knowable down. LeMay's poems poise there on the edge of each mystery, admiring: "In my sky there is no /god. But even in this damp cold/I could kneel . . ."

—JENNY FACTOR, author of *Unraveling at the Name*

What does a body know, or better yet, what does the body have the capacity to know? In Julie Hungiville LeMay's debut book, *The Echo of Ice Letting Go,* this question of the body hums throughout from the very first poem. From the onset, we are confronted with the delicate nature of the body's desire, "Maybe/ love is a con/ man's con, faith/ cobbled in misery." Is love fleeting or here for only tricks and twisting jabs? From the onset, LeMay prepares us for the encounter of "Life" being "pregnant/ with death" a motif the rest of the poems in her book wrestle with or celebrate. What LeMay offers are rich and personal histories as we excavate through Alaska or Tibet or the many beautiful land/sky-scapes she brings us to. And so, it is the journey that the body knows, and we move with this body of work with a Marlboro in hand, floating down a river at night or in a big truck rolling through a canyon.

To be honest, it took me awhile to read *Echo of Ice Letting Go,* mostly because these poems are like looking out at the sky at daybreak or dusk: your smallness amidst all the vastness and expanse. I would read three or four of the poems, then I had to stop just to breathe a bit before I read on some more. I discovered that these poems are vespers reminiscent of Mary Oliver's quiet observance— prayers or prayer time best linked to the heart. LeMay's work grounds us the way a kiss from our children keeps us; or the way a dead friend pleasantly haunts our memory; or the way nature envelopes us "*back/ into the* immeasurable blue." Echo of Ice Letting Go is a wonderfully bountiful debut because each poem does what good poems should: appreciate and remind us to simply "Look:/ this day", our bodies are alive and present.

—F. DOUGLAS BROWN is the author of *Zero to Three* (University of Georgia Press 2014), recipient of the 2013 Cave Canem Poetry Prize

The Echo of Ice Letting Go

For Eowyn and Forrest

I

CONTENTS

I

Tosca Lived a Good Life *1*
In the Belly of the Whale *2*
A New Toolbox *3*
Recent Blood Tests Are Indicative of a Cancer Recurrence *5*
What I Lost That Day in Gifford, Pennsylvania *6*
No More Words *8*
What Meaning *9*
Not a Fairy-Tale Ending *10*
Dear Becky *12*
I Drowned *14*
Half-Found John Muir Poem #4 *15*
River of Mercy *16*

II

Winter Rain *23*
Half-Found John Muir Poem #5 *24*
Spargania magnoliata *25*
On a Summer Day after My Son and I Witness
a Young Man's Drowning *27*
What Is Gathered and What Is Lost *28*
Walking Home *30*
More Ache than the Sea *31*
The Anchorage Jail *32*
Emergency Room, Wednesday 4pm *34*
Inside Out *35*
His Sadness Is a Lake *36*
These Mountains Are Long-Extinct Volcanoes *38*
Near Power Creek: After a Marriage *40*
Looking out the Window on a Winter Morning *43*

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Still *44*
Anniversary: My Parents' Marriage *45*
Redpolls in Winter *47*

III

Mythography of the Wolf's Sorrow or An Alternative Rendering of the Romulus and Remus Legend *51*
Trinity *56*
Tosca, Act V *57*
Here the Promise *58*
Only Winter *59*
Reincarnate *60*
I Bow *62*
Kashin-Beck Disease Is Endemic to Tibet *63*
Who Will Speak of Lhasa? *64*
Faith *66*
All Things Are Transient *67*
Dr. Anderson Called and the News Isn't Good *69*
This Body Is Baggage I'm Not Yet Ready to Leave Behind *72*

IV

This Is a Raging Wind *75*
Since June *76*
Walk on Water *77*
Half-Found John Muir Poem #1 *79*
Ge(ne)ology *80*
Half-Found John Muir Poem #2 *82*
On a Summer Day *83*
Sun like a Daffodil *85*
A Light in Winter *86*

Half-Found John Muir Poem #3 *88*
Remission *89*
Half-Found Li Shang-yin Poem *90*
Tomorrow Is a White Flag *91*
Unravel *93*
Sky Burial *94*

Notes *95*
Acknowledgments *97*

TOSCA LIVED A GOOD LIFE

Tosca on her knees sings
of her good life,
of her great love, why
it should exempt her

from suffering. Maybe
love is just a con
man's con, faith
cobbled with misery.

Life is pregnant
with death, a prayer
dead on the altar, just
sad fish, sad fish.

The Madonna in her mantle
sings a death song to the sky
and is still beautiful. I ride
with sadness. I am ripe with sorrow.

I am perched, I am hanging, Sir.
What will this seat cost me?

IN THE BELLY OF THE WHALE

We pray in the belly of a whale,
low rafters like ribs enclose us.
Bob Dylan croaks *forever young*
and Joni and I wish we had a river
to skate away on. I am wholly
smothered by darkness and winter-
wet wool. This is my story:
chairs groan under the weight
of the living. My daughter,
eight months pregnant, delivers
the eulogy. In the mourning

our songs drift away. No light
shines because an elegy
for a young mother drowns
the sky. This is not my
story but ten years from now
I will remember this day
and poetry will fail
me. The hymnal slams itself shut
and I stumble through another tune.
The pale sun never rises, only trolls
the cold horizon for echoes of our songs.

A NEW TOOLBOX

Two years ago, living on
the streets—at some point even cheap
hotels will kick out a young guy with cash
when windows get sealed with worn
blankets, yesterday's papers, and stolen

duct tape—he told me:
Mom, my old babysitter is in the Hell's
Angels. She's No-Name now.
They took some guys out
KGB Road. You know what that means.

I don't. But I've learned not
to ask. Meth madness
makes me miss
his heroin-quiet thievery. Except for
those near-fatal overdoses.

He texted me today. Methadone
makes his life easier, even if it's not
prescribed. He's three weeks into
his first job in three years. *I just got made*
apprentice. Getting paid to learn.

Once he asked me, *Did you know*
the universe is 13 billion years old?
Today he told me
he's just taking care
of the next thing in front of him.

Me too.

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