*Landscape With Missing River*, Joni Wallace (Barrow Street Press)

The river is not the only thing missing in Joni Wallace's new book of poems. Her father is too, and although 'It is difficult to see a ghost', Wallace writes about the landscape of New Mexico where her father lived and worked, to produce elegies and nocturnes focussed on the absence and memories which grief produces.

This is not a nostalgic book though. Wallace has a keen eye for nature, sometimes filtered through science, as her father was a scientist at Los Alamos. Snow, clouds, storms, owls, wasps, crows and foxes are all here, as are atoms and 'The Salt Composition of Tears', all punctuated with suddenly triggered associative memories. 'Elegy for Atoms' starts with a list of things the narrator learnt indirectly from her father:

 The way he kept things unsaid I thought
 made a language between us immaculate as space.
 An unseeable spell that held together the shimmering view.

That shimmering view is the stars at night, the constellations moving with a soundtrack of an unseen river, which prompts a brief fantasy of capturing what is gone:

 If I head due north, if I follow the river, I could still reach
 him, particles, a father in the sparking dark.

The reality of course is something different. 'Traceless', the following poem starts with the flat statement 'I go on living. You don't need anything.', then goes on to list the activities of a normal day, punctuated by finds of her father's shoes and jacket pin, before returning to find her yard littered with dead insects. Meanwhile, alternate lines are contrasting phrases, italicised and justified to the right, which offer a pseudo-commentary that turns into a discussion of colors and physics: 'the red shift of a body, the visible spectrum' then 'after image, an I dissolved.'

This rational, somewhat reductive, approach to death is constantly interrogated, with Wallace, questioning herself and her father:

 Melancholy in a skein of geese, moans and honks corresponding
 waves. *What is emotion*, you say, *but a series of electrical impulses?*
 ('Punctum')

and often reflecting upon how nature triggers grief*,* informed by memories along with the kind of childhood stories and familial episodes most of us have stored somewhere. So one of my favourite poems here, 'Man on the Moon', remembers the narrator and her father watching the moon landing (as I did with my Dad), but also imagines him stepping on to the moon with 'a bubble' around his head, and remembers the bedtime story she was told that night, about a 'rabbit / made of rags'. Meanwhile in the next poem, 'Aubade with Rabbit', the father continues his moonwalk before producing a real pet rabbit, who 'never was what I wished her to be'; and in 'Sleight of Hand', the poem which follows that, Wallace recalls that 'Once, as a child, I dreamed the moon into my room.'

The narrator is aware however, of the subjectivity of experience and grief. Although her mother is asleep 'in another room', where 'valium hums inside her brain' ('Still Life with Circles'), in 'One of a Circle' Wallace notes that her 'daughter sees the landscape from another angle'. The same poem plays with themes of light, offering a metanarrative about itself and the whole book:

 To elegize is to make a light box,
 chasm to hold the dead and the living, the breathing

 and the breathless

 This viewing chamber, ad infinitum.

Although we can never truly understand grief or what triggers our emotional responses to absence and change, books like this can help. Not because they are in any way self-help manuals which offer answers, nor because the experiences and poems may be 'true'. Like all good poems they are elusive and allusive constructs of language, spinning off into unexpected places and ideas. In the end, the book turns death against itself, and it is the father who actively leaves in his own dying:

 When my father turns back to look

 he sees the end of seeing

Both father and daughter must move on; as the poem title says, must 'Let Gone Things Get Behind Me'. Nature, science and people persist, even as they change and adapt. This book of ghosts, constructed from poetic explorations and conjectures, immersion in physical and mental landscapes, will haunt any reader. As Wallace says in 'The Salt Composition of Tears':

 There is no science to it. It is like this
 and then it is like this some more.

Rupert Loydell