*The Wind and the Rain*, Anthony Wilson (Blue Diode Press)

This is a sustained and flowing group of lyrical poems, many elegies for the author's mother, despair and upset leavened with occasional glimpses of humour, and consistent clarity of observation and expression. It is also a book flooded with images of rain, used for scene-setting, metaphor, simile and as a link between poems.

It is not, however, a wet book . I generally struggle with poems that offer confessional outpourings and focus on feelings, but Wilson keeps an emotional distance from himself, and indulges in some wonderfully smartarse self-deprecation. In fact the second poem does this and warns the uninterested reader away:

 Like the poet

 who asked me at a party

 if she should have heard of me

 if you need to know what these poems

 are about

 you aren't really interested.

 ('To My Rain')

whilst others, such as 'To the Wife of a Famous Poet', offer a vitriolic response:

 When you accosted me

 at the conference

 and shouted my name

 (though I stood one pace from your mouth)

 into the air,

 declaring it a

 *useless*

 *name for a poet*,

 what poisonous motivations

 thickened in your veins

Elsewhere there is both that outside looking at oneself and also a sense of bewilderment:

 During my creativity lecture

 in which not one soul

 had heard of Joni Mitchell

 it was raining.

 ('With Hey, Ho, the Wind and the Rain')

As a lecturer at a different university, this is a feeling I know all too well (in fact I once had a whole student group of lyric writers who hadn't heard of Joni), but here of course the rain is not only physical but stands for grief. Life goes on but, but, but... the rain, death and grief, are ever-present as the same four-part poem points out elsewhere (these are isolated excerpts; the dots are mine):

 When the rain came looking for me

 I hid.

•

 The rain is keeping us prisoner.

 It takes even longer to die

•

 When I began writing

 about rain

 forty-seven poems ago

 I'd no idea

 it would take over

 my life.

The rain is ever present, seemingly even foreshadowing itself to 'a lost child / wandering the zoo' but also 'a kind of memory / cleansing the roads' ('The Small Rain'). And just as water flows and evaporates away, absenting itself, death does the same to those we love, absence precipitating (rain again!) loss and grief: in an empty kitchen / we go on crying // because we go on / loving you.' ('Now and Not Yet')

Elsewhere, there are often amusing, sometimes personal, anecdotes about the mother/son relationship, explorations of spiritual faith, doubt and the nature of prayer, and recollections and versions of events and conversations that happened despite and during the loss and grief: friends, relatives and the everyday crowding in on coming to terms with death. And here are those moments of humour I mentioned, even at the start of a serious poem like 'Now and Not Yet', already quoted above:

 We are in Tesco in Exeter

 waiting for a funeral.

 These dried pink and rubber things

 are scrambled eggs salmon and a bagel.

It is this clever use of the domestic and everyday, rooted in specifics, that makes Wilson's ability to share what seems to be true stand out from the crowd of mawkish and self-obsessed books that also deal with grief. Under all the gentleness, Wilson is a survivor:

 It is still raining.

 I am still dancing.

 I am all

 memory.

 ('With Hey, Ho, the Wind and the Rain')

Even as these memories disturb and upset, even as he wonders about the possibility of an afterlife he is questioning and commenting:

 If there is one

 please God

 go easy on the rainbows.

 ('It Raineth')

Although Wilson suggests that 'Either everything's a poem / or nothing is' and elsewhere that he is 'tired of putting things into lines' and 'just wants to rest', I am glad that he wrote this wonderful collection first. It is far, far more than things put in lines.

Rupert Loydell

(680 words)