*Grief's Alphabet*, Carrie Etter (Seren)

I'm sceptical of most confessional poetry but Carrie Etter's book of elegies for her mum is a tough, not-to-be-missed exploration of grief and loss. Although there is a titular poem using the A-Z, the book feels more like a response to what was a plan but soon proved impossible. We only get 'Notes for A' and a few other letters such as 'W Is for Wedding' and 'M Is Usually Memory and Occasionally McDonalds'; more poignant perhaps is 'F Is for Fuck This', where the title is the complete poem, the poem the closing one of the second of three sections.

It gives an impression of reaching an impasses, the author resisting her own attempt to order her grieving responses which perhaps the writer in her had partly mapped out. Instead we get a wide range of voices, forms and stories which gradually reveal Etter's past, relationships and loss.

'Origin Story', the first section, reveals Etter was adopted, was a sister, had teenage attitude, and tells stories about her Mum, her Dad and of a 'Pregnant Teenager and her Mama'. Of graduation and travels to England before 'The News' arrives back home in the States:

 Crackling across the Atlantic
 my mother's voice.
 She says 'Your father,'
 and, as one, we fall.

In time, post coma and now a paraplegic, 'father' dies and we are gifted 'The Last Photograph' of Mrs. Etter before the poet returns to England.

Later, or perhaps sooner (we are not told) Etter will have to face 'The Brink': her mother's death, again across the ocean, along with the physical, mental and emotional reactions, most startlingly recorded in 'The Body in Mourning'. Here, the poet has to endure 'the daily waking to mourning' but also considers the bodily results of grieving:

 O leaky body such water such flood, mucus and

 mascara she'd forgotten her charred cheeks in the mirror

and the body of the deceased:

 the body still, eyes open a soundless, resounding *no*

 [...]

 the body become stone, the breath reluctant

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 and after years? the body's subtler flux

 amid the elements an hour aflame or drenched

 weight as mineral deep in earth or almost

 transparent, nearly air thin linen pined to string

 adrift or aloft depending on

After this open-ended poem, the second section of poems moves to 'H Is for Hurtle, J Is for July', a retrospective look back at coping. Then comes the F poem mentioned earlier, an assertion of self, of coping, of having to go on.

Having to go on, however, into the 'Orphan Age', the book's final section. Loss, of course, cannot be simply swept aside; all too often – as I know from firsthand experience – small and often stupid things can trigger grief anew. But you can, and Etter does, take refuge in the everyday, be that snuggling up to a cat or baking and eating tuna casserole. Also the less everyday: Etter gives us a prose poem 'W Is for Wedding', acknowledging that her mother both 'is and isn't' there but also content to 'take a step, then another, toward joy.'

The rest of the book is mostly calm and lucid, philosophical even, with poems about endless birth and rebirth ('Oroboros'), the memories brought up when playing crazy golf, and the completed alphabet of grief poem. But there is also a hint of mysticism: 'Instructions for the Glimpse', the invocation of a 'Ghost', and a moving final poem, 'Reincarnation as Seed', where a new plant is urged to 'grow / grow toward light' as the personification or representation of 'my dear mother', urged to 'bask' in the sunshine.

Writing poems about death and grieving is an almost impossible task but Etter has managed to carefully walk the tightrope between mawkishness, confession and bewilderment. Her words combine vulnerability and emotion with a writerly detachment, seeing anew and documenting the struggle with 'not falling face first into woe.' This is brave, powerful, moving poetry that has clearly been fought for every step of the way.

Rupert Loydell