

Craig Raine
How Snow Falls
Atlantic Books
£14.99 h/b

By Paul Batchelor

First published in *The Times*, 11.12.10

Craig Raine is best known for his early collection, *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home*. The title poem brilliantly de-familiarised everyday objects, allowing the reader to see them afresh. Outlandish visual comparisons became Raine's signature effect, and they dominate his new collection, *How Snow Falls*. The most engaging poem here is "51 Ways to Lose a Balloon". In each example, the balloon is lost because the child is momentarily distracted. The distraction usually takes the form of an ingenious metaphor or simile: "There's a friendly dog in the street who jumps up at your face like someone playing netball..." or "You see a bubble car. It's like watching someone driving a poached egg and you start to laugh and..."

It's a marvellous way of adopting a child's perspective: the world appears to be a volatile surface ripe with lateral connections. Unfortunately, Raine applies the same technique to every situation. Triggering a brief moment of recognition – making the reader lose their balloon – is the ultimate aim of Raine's art, and he sacrifices everything to achieve it. This seems harmless enough when the subject is relatively light, as in this rueful reflection on ageing: "When we floss our teeth / we look like Francis Bacon's / screaming Popes..." But Raine's ambitions are grander, and *How Snow Falls* is dominated by two long elegies.

At its best, "I Remember My Mother Dying" captures the awful immediacy of nursing a loved one through a final illness. In the hothouse atmosphere of a hospital ward, banal details seem painfully incisive: "The surgeons in their scrubs / looking like pirates. Olive-green drab." And when he eases up on the clever-clever stuff, Raine can write simply and movingly: "Too late, I put my arms too late around her." Here, the simple repetition of "too late" does far more work than a wacky metaphor.

Raine's last duty to his mother is, at her request, to pluck the hairs from her chin. In lines that will make most readers blink in disbelief, we are informed: "Every time a hair was plucked, / she sighed, almost like someone being slowly fucked." This is wretched. But good taste has been flouted, and Raine believes that good taste is the enemy of art; therefore art must have been made. This is the reductive syllogism upon which Raine's art depends.

The second elegy is dedicated to an ex-lover who died of AIDS. "*A la recherche du temps perdu*" finds Raine steadfast in his belief that the morality of art is its accuracy, and so once again, the most private details are presented in the form of ingenious metaphors. His lover's vagina is described as "the dark brown lips / labyrinthine as a molten iris". Speaking to the dead woman, Raine defends his approach: "details that make you cringe // will make the reader see..." True enough, but what we see is not the woman herself so much as Raine's sexual obsession with her.

Raine is aiming for “The yes of writers. / The nod we give exactitude”. But exactitude, like accuracy, is a slippery word. For all his dazzling visual effects, Raine conveys little emotional substance. How can a poet settle for this: all candles and no cake? Raine not only settles for it, he glories in it, comparing himself to Marcel Proust and Joseph Conrad, who described the artist’s task as follows: “It is, before all, to make you *see*.” Raine repeats this dictum approvingly: “To make you *see*. Before all. I agree.” Likening himself to Conrad might be Raine’s most bizarre comparison of all.