

# See how it shines

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Polly Samson

PERFECT LIVES  
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In Polly Samson's third book, *Perfect Lives*, which comes with praise from Ali Smith, Maggie O'Farrell and John Banville, the lives of several women are linked by a piano tuner in a seaside town, their individual stories running together in a novel. It is a pleasurable form that draws attention to its own making – a reflexiveness deepened by the suggestion that the perfect lives to which the title alludes are self-created traps, cover stories for unresolved trauma.

One such illusionist is Celia Idlewild. Her well-heeled life, with "everything as it should be", is disturbed one morning when an egg drops through the letter box, the words "Happy Fat" written on the broken shell. Like the signs puffed out by the aeroplane in *Mrs Dalloway*, the meaning is elusive, but it carries a threat of spoiling. This is an idea much repeated here: pleasure in a perfect world ("clean as peppermint", "pristine as chalk") that is sullied by dog shit, tattoos, a concentration camp number inked on flesh.

As well as the musical-fluvial imagery, "the trilling ripples of waves", Samson has the familiar inheritance of the woman writer, Virginia Woolf's "luminous halo". It creates here an impression of a world on show, "shimmering", "glimmering", "glistening", "glinting". But Samson is nothing if not

knowing, and she parodies herself: one woman romps in an orchard fantasizing about her lover, the language becoming increasingly tremulous ("dewdrops", "dew-fall", "diamonds of dew"). The joke is that she lusts not after a man, but an "unbearably chic" Leica camera.

The result is a deformation of Woolf's language of sensitivity. Rather than making us receptive even to the falling atoms, in Samson's stories, the writing becomes a sign of contemporary narcissism: the natural world glitters to attract *me* – like the camera, the "naughty kitten" shoes and the other spangly things a girl wants (but doesn't want to feel guilty about wanting). This Fall is implied in differences between the generations, from "strong as an ox" grandmothers living through totalitarian regimes, to mothers of the vegetarian, Greenham Common kind; to resentful daughters, not wanting their kids to be scared out of their wits when Granny insists they demonstrate against the invasion of Iraq.

Aurelia, a concert pianist in Hamburg for a recital, remembers her grandmother on Kristallnacht telling her sons to look at "how prettily the glass glistened on the pavements". Unspoken is the thought that what we once did to stave off fear – making the world into alluring objects – has today become a form of avoidance. In the final story, a woman gives in to her husband who annoys her by coming home late and slouching in front of the television. Urged on by a witty cat, who voices her misgivings, she thinks of attacking the set with a steak hammer but is distracted by her husband's smile, "dazzling" in the firelight, then further seduced by an actor in a favourite movie. She knows the house is a shambles and is aware that her husband has outmanoeuvred her, but the kids are fine and she snuggles contentedly on the couch. Is this collusion, or is it finding joy in a necessarily imperfect life? Samson's stories are so finely tuned that it is impossible to tell.