

## *Opalescence*, by Judith Skillman

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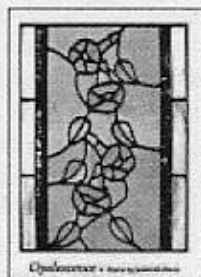
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Judith Skillman's *Opalescence* explores the beauty that shimmers just below the surface of pain. The poems are opulent more often than not, and occasionally take on a light of their own. Here, the world refracts in brilliance, but nuances of death and separation form inside the poems like faults or cracks in glass.

*Opalescence* is divided into three sections; the first is an exploration of light, glass, and sets the foundation for a nature/death metaphor that will continue throughout the collection. The first poem in this section, "The Victorian Plume," recalls the narrator's mother's hair and links it with the Victorian culture of clothing and recipes. Lines like "innocence was broken in childhood" breaks the ornate descriptions and foreshadows the darkness in later poems. The rooms in this poem are the years of the narrator's life, punctuated with the Holocaust, an unhappy childhood, and houses filled with furniture and glass carvings. The Victorian plume in this poem reminds the narrator of so many things that by the end, there is no real sense of situation, only that "the insult of fifty years/has come and pronounced me well."

What is interesting about this section is its undertaking of the historical elements of glass-making and how Skillman pulls it into each poem. The ordering of this section is very deliberate and works well. The poems, "An Artisan's Dream," "The Stone in Glass," and "Glasswork" all work to create not only an understanding of Tiffany and La Farge, but sets out to create a myth behind their craft as well. "An Artisan's Dream" links water and glass, time, and the weight of memory. Light moves in veins, which suggests both elements of glass and its subtle relationship to the body.

The wordplay between *pane* and *pain* is perhaps the most interesting element of *Opalescence*. In "Glasswork," Skillman's narrator links the two, and uncovers "In panes lies the past—/there



nothing can be confirmed." This wordplay continues in "Solstice-Close," where ". . .your feet/pained by hexagonal stones." Here, pain is literal, but Skillman goes a step further in the description of the hexagonal stones, which bring up images of glasswork.

The title poem, "Opalescence," announces the totality of Skillman's mythology, the fractal light (life) and the sharp, broken glass edges (death):

In each of us was a light box,  
call it the *soul*. So we could transmit  
the message of light, if not its substance.

The second section furthers Skillman's exploration of life and death. The opulence of glasswork remains behind and light, whether literal or metaphorical, radiates through these poems. The mosaic structure of this section begins with "Totality," in which layers of a man's life: piles of letters from foreign countries, shirts that smell of war, because "the dead are good for nothing." This thematic statement is stirring and winds through an in-between state, where stories die, but memory holds their place. In "The Affair," the narrator reminisces about a former lover, and how she pulls him back to her in dreams:

her sleep an instrument  
that could return him to her,  
if only for what might  
make a moment seem like an hour.

While the language here is a bit contrived, the poem gains its strength from the idea of memory and how memory is relived through altered states of consciousness: a song, a restaurant, dreams.

Skillman, like the glass artisans of *Opalescence*, crafts beauty from the raw world. In "Self Portrait," the narrator sits where "all the false gods swaddled/by women swollen/with grapes and flowers/but missing their hands." This image of women with fruit and ornamental decorations resonates with the earlier portrayal of the mother and her Victorian accoutrements. These women are

depicted as beautiful statues, missing parts of themselves, hiding their sadness from the world in a blind-eyed stare.

The final section of *Opalescence* moves past history and the in-between states of life and memory and into the mystery of death. The first poem, "Cranesbill," focuses on nature, a theme Skillman employs quite often. Endings, alterations, and memory are integral; a woman's rage cuts through the entirety of the poem until the narrator decides "it seems as sham." The poems in this section are the most interesting in their attention to language and detail. Gone is the wordy opulence and reliance on glass imagery from the first section. Here, the poems take on a life of their own and not only tie the book together, but give it a skillful element of depth and originality that is not entirely present in earlier sections.

Skillman's use of myth blossoms in poems such as "Diogenes" and "Demeter's Delight," which is probably one of the most accomplished poems in the collection. In this poem, Skillman stakes her claim to the decay of the landscape all humans share. Poems such as this bring this collection out of the expected personal history diatribe and into something much more compelling. The final word in this collection is "nostalgia." From these poems, there is the sense that nostalgia is both a hindrance and an asset to living. Skillman claims nostalgia as "my own daughter," which is a bit heavy-handed, but cannot be completely discounted in light of the overall glitter and richness this collection calls upon.

In "Emendation," the narrator asks, "what more can I distill/from this life, well into autumn." The narrator explores this question: the body outlives its own hunger, waits for another "experimental dawn." While none of these poems could be called experimental, Skillman creates a world where memory is a shard of glass: a glint of light, a broken image, wounded flesh. Along the way, these poems develop a myth: love and death are the body's anchors, and the world becomes "the negative/of a twentieth century photo."