JENNIFER MAIDEN

THE ESCAPE OF BLOOD

Masques. By Robin Gurr. Outposts Publications (UK) c/- 17 Little Church Street, Windsor, N.S.W. 2756. RP $9.95.

Masques is a transitional work for Robin Gurr. Her previous poetry — published over the past thirty years and in four collections — has been compact, lyrical and largely pessimistic. "Cat's Eyes" is from her first collection, *Song is a Mirror*:

> Twin candles
> hang in a window,
> their light at once
> the origin and
> the experience.
>
> Thin flame
> reaches, tight
> as metal, from
> darkness into darkness
> the certainty between.
>
> Day spreads
> bland on the flame,
> painted, and part
> of the knowing.
>
> The light leaps
> as vapour, the moving
> and the moved,
> the self-consuming.

Robin Gurr's poetry has abounded in sensual and accurate of Nature imagery. The poems in *Masques* continue to display these qualities, but the central stance — the nature of the persona — has changed. Part of the persona is Plathian, declamatory, deliberately shocking. "The Wound":

> My god, I cannot
> stay the flow.
> The wound is
> within, it is quite
>
> inaccessible. There is
> a spreading-out
> like a noisy light
> permeating the darkness.

Stay back! When
lacerations are licked,
the tongue that brings balm
also tastes blood.

But this persona is being used intelligently and self-awarely, with a keen sense of the professionalism and irony in Plath's own work. There are terrible traps in "Confessional" poetry. As John Berryman says in "Dreamsongs", "we are using our skin for wallpaper/ and we can't win." Robin Gurr, therefore, is careful not to confuse a fictional Plathian persona with the entirety of life and vision. She employs her own dramatic role, questions it, and grows from it into a more balanced and mellow style. The last poem in *Masques* is "Full Circle":

I have come full circle.

I have come back
to the place where I began.
The place that is
so close to the ground.

I can hear the earth crumble
under the strides of ants.
I smell the green blood
of the thrusting grass.

I see the features of my youth
reflecting from my mother's little face
poised delicately
on the anxious edge of the past.

I have no need to look back.

I am young again,
I am fresh.
I can move mountains.

I am as small as the daisies.

I feel my petals flaring out forever
like the great white flower
of the sun.

Here it is evident that Robin Gurr is combining the subjective persona with her earlier Nature imagery and a new generosity of approach. Still not fully developed in *Masques*, however, are an additional intellectual perspective and wide breadth of diction. Her next collection *The Tiger in the Head* (forthcoming from Jacaranda Press) will boast these in vivid full bloom, but *Masques* is a book which shows the growth process of Robin Gurr's technique. As such it is of great interest to the reader.

Early in *Masques*, Robin Gurr conveys a lively exasperation — exasperation is often one of the most fecund literary emotions — with "The Restless Words": ". . . I thought/I had put them/nicely in their places./ I thought they were quite securely/ fastened by their ink/ on to the paper./ But they keep/ jumping around/ and tricking me!/ Little devils."

That last "little devils" is not to be confused with any benign maternal chuckle. Robin Gurr has a dry, dry — almost passive-aggressive — irony which in cases like this she turns against herself. She is suggesting that the problem is not with the words as such but with the poet's command of diction. And behind this, too, there is a suggestion that the "devilry" of the words may be real.

There follows an assortment of poems full of death and unease about the flesh, culminating in the sequence "Sounds of Suicide", which concludes "(6) . . . I am equally convinced/ that, like the sun,/ I am obliged/ to burn forever."

After this exploration of the Plathian subjective mode, Robin Gurr's experiments with persona soon result in the telling, completely "depersonalised" piece "Glass Cages":

> Across their lunar inscapes
> eroded by deep cerebral quakings
> and pinched by the uneasy
> strictures of the skull,
>
> the men lurch in their safe
> enclosures, their cages of glass.
> Vision half-obscured by sweat and the
> crystal beads from their own lungs,
>
> they glimpse each other, try to wave,
> reach our searching hands, but their
> manufacture of the glass cages is
> without fault. They can never touch.

Having equipped herself with such technical extremes, the poet is free at last to choose a variety of attitudes and subjects which are stylistically objective but individual to herself. She can even attempt and accomplish that most difficult of modes, religious poetry. In "A School of Fish", God proves "as modest and as copious/ as whitebait in weeds".

While the mood until "Full Circle" is still often funereal: "None can strike spark/ from the flint that was my body" ("Song of the Dead"), the style is increasingly varied and energetic. The stylistic encounter with death and the absolute has been existential and reviving

rather than accusing and self-imprisoning. The book itself is a wonderful lesson in how control of the use of persona can result in a new control and creation of subject and diction.

As a result, the blood-imagery suggests the return of circulation to cramped limbs rather than the escape of blood from the body.

CHERYL TAYLOR

Carole Ferrier, ed. *Point of Departure: The Autiobiography of Jean Devanny*, University of Queensland Press, 1986. Recommended price: $39.95 (hardcover).

The tragic and bitter experiences recorded in this autobiography raise some tantalising questions. Was Jean's life as unhappy as she suggests, or was her choice of material influenced by unhappiness at the time of writing? Was she the innocent victim of brutality and negligence by the male-dominated Communist Party, or did some justification exist for the bureaucracy's treatment of her? Can any positive interpretation of her sufferings be found, or is the whole message of the book disillusionment, and the futility of political activism?

Jean sums up her upbringing as "luckless", and records her mother's lack of love and preference for her younger sisters. As a child she defended her mother and sisters from her father's drunken abuse, just as she defended the animals of a neighbouring farmer from cruel treatment. The origins of her lifelong identification with the underdog and fighting determination can be seen here, but her early emotional experiences could also have resulted in pessimism of the kind that fulfils itself in unhappy events.

Other aspects of Jean's early life may have prepared her for the role of victim. Brought up in the Nelson district of New Zealand's South Island, she left school at thirteen, to housekeep for her family and to work as a domestic. Although gifted as a musician, and a voracious reader, her lack of formal education and provincial upbringing partly account for her early focus on Communist ideology, in the end so destructive to her, and for the naivete of much of her fiction. Her marriage, at seventeen, although for love, followed the pattern prescribed for women of her class and era, and the relationship was later interrupted by years of estrangement and antagonism. The outcome was tragic also in that her daughter, Erin, died at the age of four, and her son, Karl, at twenty-two.