Accelerated Paces
by Jim Oaten

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In *Accelerated Paces*, with its intriguing subtitle “travels across borders and other imaginary boundaries,” Jim Oaten writes an interesting variety of memoirs, travel stories and essays in which a theme of borders ranging from biological life-and-death boundaries to philosophical differences and paradigm shifts across literal borders becomes apparent. Oaten implements dramatic surprise and unexpected juxtaposition or collage as ways to open the mind to these leaps in understanding the world.

“Stardust” records a choking accident involving the writer’s infant brother during a car trip and, with ironic purpose, ends with a scene in which the writer takes leave from his own young son. As he cups the four-year-old’s face to comfort him, he remarks: “It was like laying my hands on heaven just so I could scratch out the stars” (14). The imagery is shocking but brings home to the reader the pain and alarm involved in such leave-takings – an alarm in this case reinforced by the speaker’s memory of the car incident involving his brother at the same vulnerable age.

In “Penumbra,” the speaker’s mother suffers from Alzheimer’s disease so that what remains is the boundary of “a familiar skin encasing something alien (19).” A psychological and intellectual barrier between mother and son is underscored by this disturbing image of the wasted body in which his mother’s spirit has faded beyond recognition.

In “Neither Here Nor There” the narrator meditates on the troubling nature of memory, which he identifies as a subject of personal interest, “given my family history and genetics’ cruel twists” (23). Recalling with detailed accuracy falling down stairs as a child, including the “strobes of black and white” before concussion, Oaten also points out how memory remakes our experiences, no matter how unreliable:

I find it harder to recall exactly what my mom was like when she was well: how she walked, laughed, spoke – “Jimmy, I think a cup of tea would be lovely right now.” The memories are there, but faded, tinged with nostalgia’s dim glow and the flat reminder of photo albums. (27)
The candour and careful attention to perceived facts chill us with the speaker’s own desolation.

In the horrific sequel to “Penumbra,” “We Will Always Have Hiroshima,” Oaten recounts his experience on a psych ward after being diagnosed with clinical depression. Rather than write a self-absorbed study of his own mental state, however, Oaten, with a journalist’s attention to details, gives an account of the other patients. To encapsulate his view of how he must deal with his own mistakes, he alludes to J. Robert Oppenheimer who, he considers, would have felt relief that the Hiroshima bomb did not go on to destroy the world rather than lugubriously project steps towards his end (41). (Of course, Oppenheimer committed suicide after the war, so he may not have been so positive-thinking after all!) Significantly, he never tries to contact the psychotic Gina, whom he befriends on the ward and promises to keep in touch with after he is discharged. In a moment of great embarrassment for the speaker, Gina runs into him and his new girlfriend in the movie theatre.

Several stories from a specifically journalist’s perspective follow, including “We Will Be Landing,” “Allahua Akbar,” and “Forty Foot Love.” One of the most scintillating stories is “Accelerated Paces,” in which Oaten presents a collage of impressions derived from various European cities. A dramatic one is of a female beggar in Florence. Preparing us for the worst, Oaten describes her as a “shapeless” figure behind a “slitted veil, picking likely targets” (141). After the speaker and his companion guess what her aliment might be – leprosy or elephantiasis or AIDS – the unexpected truth is revealed when she undresses from a “safer distance”:

Beads of sweat on flawless olive skin. The gypsy teen draws herself to full height, lithe and healthy limbs rippling under her short bright skirt. She drops the shroud and skips off, barefoot through the piazza, laughing at all the fools who ran away and those who gave her money. (144)

As in a film, impressions of the various cities are presented as clips of landmarks and the individuals who populate those areas. There is an elegance and dramatic surprise that delights in these entries with their local colour and reflected human truths.

Perhaps the most provocative piece in the collection is “C.N.N. and the Death of the Universe,” in which Oaten uses rock idol Jim Morrison’s death to illustrate how the age of communication has become the “age of rumour” and “noise.” An almost apocalyptic view of a modern Babel emerges. Oaten reinforces his suggestion about “noise” stylistically, using point and counterpoint in the following discussion of the news coverage following Morrison’s death:
Morrison became a movie about the same time the Gulf War ended. Both Bill Graham and Ray Manzarek, two close friends of Morrison’s, denounced The Doors as a distortion of the truth. Many reviewers praised the movie’s authenticity. A number of biographies and hundreds of articles were published around the same time. All of them claimed to give us some insight, some essential truth, about the life of the rock star. Meanwhile, somewhere beneath a graffiti-covered gravestone in Paris, the only person who knew the whole story, the star of the show, crumbled slowly into dust. (165)

*Accelerated Paces* is a thought-provoking collection of writing, candid and inquiring, with the dramatic flair and quick pace that we associate with journalistic style.

Gillian Harding-Russell lives, reviews, edits, teaches and writes in Regina. Her latest collection of poetry is I forgot to tell you (Thistledown Press, 2007).

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