GRACE NOTES

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This paper was originally entitled 'Anger, Atonement and Grace: an Emerging Sense of Identity in Adolescence.' I should have known I'd never get away with it. 'What are ya?' a chorus of adolescent voices clamour, 'Get a life!' And skateboards in hand, they head for the door. So what I am offering instead is, according to the New Shorter Oxford dictionary, '*Mus.* additional notes (often printed smaller than the others) introduced as an embellishment not essential to the harmony or melody of the piece.'

1. The narrative beyond the narrative. Beyond the end of the novel. An old man. Weather-beaten. Leathered skin. Gnarled fingernails. He's no archetype. Reminds me of my grandfather. He is in conversation with Brodie, who rationalists will tell us has no existence outside the pages of the novel, therefore this conversation never takes place.

> 'Sounds to me, Sonny, Like life done you a good turn, in an arse-up sorta way.'
> What's he talking about?
> 'Well, lots of us running around like blue-tailed flies all our lives, keeping just ahead of the fire-breathing monster. All that keeps us going, the running, keeping just out of reach of its claws, or hiding, trying to bluff it out, pretend it's not there. Know what I mean? But you, you walk right up to it and before anyone can say Jack Robinson, up you go in a puff of smoke! Pfft? Just like that.
> We sit there for a while, looking out over the baked brown hills.
> 'Yeah, ' I say at last, 'that's all very well, but what then?'
> The old man takes out a tin of tobacco and some papers and starts to roll a fag.
> 'Nothing,' he says. 'That's it. And that's everything.'
> 'You don't understand?' I splutter and the dreary movie of the last five years starts to roll in my mind. It's either spill the whole story, demand that he explain what the hell he's talking about, or say nothing.
> I choose the last.
> The old man smokes. Suddenly he hawks, rakes a gob of phlegm into a corner of his mouth and spits. I shudder. He laughs and slaps my shoulder.
> 'Go home son,' he says.
> So I do.

The Arrernte people of Central Australia call their sacred places *everlasting homes*, meaning/implying permanent resting places of the spirit. Brodie inhabits/travels through many landscapes, metaphorical and physical, the place of the accident, the landscape of guilt and grief - countries of the mind and the body. There are places he has not travelled to - which are there as promises, perhaps, as templates of the notion of *everlasting home* - places of return, of identifiable meaning with which to frame the

open-endedness of outward journeying. *The Lord preserve thy going out and thy coming in.* The prayer invokes protection for those journeys, for, implicit in transition, in journeying, is the possibility of losing one's way, of remaining in eternal exile, of never coming home again.

For much of the time I was writing *Watersky* I wasn't sure if I believed that Brodie could or would survive, or whether I knew enough as a writer, or as a human being, to create situations in which it would be possible for him to experience/intuit/encounter/the meaning he needed to ensure his survival.

This question occupies my mind for months.

2. He almost walks into me in the Todd Mall. An old blackfeller, mumbling to himself, staggering drunk. After months of living in Alice Springs I still can't come to terms with these smacks in the eye from history. I move to side-step him as he approaches.

> *Jishta,* he whispers.
> I gather myself embarrassedly to refuse the expected request for money for more grog.
> His voice is urgent. *Is there a balm in Gilead?*
> The question so takes me by surprise that I'm shocked into immediate, unthinking truth.
> *Yes,* I reply, *there is.*

And he's off, lurching down the Mall muttering to himself. I watch his progress for a while. I am still full of gratitude to that old man. It's as my grandmother used to say: there's more than one way to skin a cat.

3. *Watersky*: How the story begins. Brodie McPherson, aged nineteen, meets Jana, middle-aged psych patient, who claims to be a Quester from a different time/space zone. Identity problem number one. Number two is that she insists he is Fenna, temple chanter from her inter-galactic home. Problem compounded by the fact that Brodie is adopted: is he also an ET? He is disappointed with life, with himself, and at loggerheads with his father; his childhood dreams have not materialised, he is worn out from years of inner turmoil, the one bright thing in his life the relationship with Geraldine, a nurse. It is at a party at Geraldine's that Brodie's first encounter with Jana takes place.

When Brodie finally realises his deep feelings for Geraldine, he experiences a brief period of happiness and renewed hope, but this ends abruptly when, after a blazing row with his father, he crashes his car and Geraldine is killed.

Brodie speaks:

> When I was a kid I always imagined I'd do something amazing when I grew up. I wasn't sure what, but something wild and glorious, possible only in the magic world of grown-ups. I'd sit on the swing under the pear tree for hours, singing to myself, watching the leaves make blotchy patterns on my arms and legs ,waiting for the wonderful thing. It would be something hard, I knew, something that would take courage and daring. Like rescuing Mum and Dad from dreadful danger, a fire, or a hurricane, or perhaps saving the whole town, or the world, or even the universe.
>
> Instead of that I'd grown up ordinary. Average size, average looking, the usual number of zits. Not god at anything in particular. Nothing special. In fact a big fat zero. Mum and Dad never said anything but you can tell, same as I knew they'd rather have a kid of their own than someone else's reject.
>
> Every now and then I'd make an effort. I'd take the skate board out and forget everything as I flew up the ramp with the wind in my hair, twisted in the air and curved into a fancy dive. It gives you a real high, skating, but it doesn't last. Afterwards it's the same old shit again.[1]

Echoes of my own teenaged daughter, captured eight years ago in a poem I call '17 Year-old Blues.'

> ... what's the matter Beck?'
> 'We just give each other the shits, that's all.'
> (I try again) 'Is it College?'
> (she shrugs) 'You don't understand Mum,
> I just can't be bothered, I haven't been able
> to be bothered for years.
> What's it for, anyway? You get
> a job, build a house, work forty years
> then die. That's all there is, nothing else.

And my response:

> I am silenced. Perhaps she's right,
> perhaps that's what I've been staving off
> for years with poetry and prayers.[2]

4. My motivation for writing *Watersky* was a powerful (my own and other children's) despair. I had no answers to pass on, no magic spells to weave, only the art of the storyteller.

'How can I stay alive?' my youngest son asks me, as he struggles to achieve some sense of himself as worthwhile, in a country town where half the adult population has no ongoing paid employment, where alcohol abuse and car accidents claim the lives of his friends and neighbours almost weekly, where the rate of suicide of young men is reputedly the highest in the world. His friends and family see him as a talented, compassionate and

hospitable man: his despair terrifies me. 'Mum, I try to keep up a front, but inside I've been like this for years. I can't go on.'

The search is for a moral map: at his age I couched my search in conventional Christian terminology, he describes his politically and humanistically, but it is the same search for the safe haven of self dwelling in a morally meaningful landscape. The journeyer is goaded on in many ways: by unease, diffuse or focussed guilt as well as desire, and often a great sense of outrage at having been short-changed, let down by the adult world, denied its touted pleasures and privileges and handed only its tarnished world weariness.

> I tried the broken cisterns , Lord,
> but ah the waters failed

as I sang at gospel meeting when I was younger. As teenagers, my children contemplated my religious youth with great amusement. 'Mum used to argue with her mother and father to be allowed to go to more prayer meetings', they'd tell their friends in gales of laughter as they passed the bong around. Or, in blacker moods, they'd demand, 'Where did all that praying get you, anyway?'

And if, to register the privilege of ordinary heartbreak, you place the protagonist in what feels to him to be a morally untenable position - he is, after all, responsible, in some sense, for someone else's death - outside even the secular parameters of good citizenship, then there is a chance to see a process working in a concentrated way.

Brodie speaks:

> It's weird how physical everything turns out to be. Take pain, loss, shame, guilt, any of them. They're just words, but when they're inside you there's not one bit of you that isn't mangled, hacked into pieces so small you know you'd never be able to fit them back together, as long as you live, no matter how hard you tried.

and again:

> The only song I'm singing is the song of disintegration, the song of annihilation, the hallelujah chorus of self-hatred.

As he struggles to make sense of what is happened there is no efficacy for him in received meaning: other people's formulae do not apply. He must find his own way.

> The way Mum tells it, we're divided in two, body and soul. It seems the soul's the important bit and the rest hardly matters. At least that's how I understand it. Why bother to eat then, or wash, or exercise, if only the soul matters? I've never said any of

this to Mum, she'd just think I was being disrespectful. But if the soul's the part of you that knows stuff, and is able to feel guilty and bad, how come it's my body that feels so terrible? I can't eat, I can't sleep, but I can't stand being awake either. I can't sit down or stand up, I can't do anything without my guts feeling as if they're being torn out. And it's not like on TV, everything sorted out by the time the ads come on, it's forever, like that Greek dude, Prometheus, in our primary school myths and legends book. He pissed the gods off for some reason, I forget what now, and they chained him to a rock and got a vulture to come and peck out his liver. And as fast as the vulture ripped it out, it grew back again, so the whole scene would go on forever. I knew jüst how that guy felt.

It would be like this for me from now on, and when I stop kidding myself and really get down to it, that's how it had always been, more or less. I'd kidded myself that Gerry and me getting it together had changed things somehow, but that was a dream, a big beautiful phoney dream, not real life. Real life sucks so badly. Most people don't admit this, even though it's true.

Same with this memory stuff. Jana reckons I'm this dude Fenna who betrayed her: to Mum and Dad I'm Brodie, loser, and somewhere out there are my real mother and Father: dunno who they thought I was But they got rid of me pretty quick smart., so does it really matter whether I'm Brodie or Fenna or the man in the moon?

He makes a plan - to stay asleep as long as he can, which he sets into operation by obtaining prescriptions for sleeping pills from a number of different doctors. 'Sea Ice' is the title of this first section of the novel: Brodie is stuck fast, can find no way out. His plan fails, and eventually he finds himself in the same Psych ward as Jana, the place Gerry used to work.

At the beginning of the second part of the novel, 'Clear Passage', after one failed bid for freedom, Brodie simply leaves the hospital. He has no clear plan, simply 'to put distance between me and Maitland, that's all I want; and maybe I can outrun the voices' (*Watersky*, 179). Accepting that his life, in the way he expected it to be, is over, he tells us, 'I leave my old life, with most of my gear, in Maitland.' (181) 'I don't expect ordinary things any more.' (181)

After months of hitching about, killing time, and then working as a picker, Brodie finds himself at Freshwater Creek, a sour, polluted place, a parody of its name, with an 'abandon hope all ye who enter' feel to it. But it is also the place where Brodie, on his own admission, will stop running, and which, despite its outward appearance, will become his place of epiphany. There are echoes here back to Jana's quest: it is the search for the miraculous substance of water, which does not exist in her own zone, that has brought her to her present predicament, and which, curiously, will eventually free her, but I won't give away the ending. Incidentally, I might mention that *Watersky* is not a fantasy novel: Jana's particular sense of reality functions as a goad, a prick, to Brodie's questing for/testing of identity/reality - of a centre that will hold for him.

It's at Freshwater Creek Brodie begins to get a sense of the miraculous inherent in the ordinary - in the daily round of work, in the unexpected and unwarranted kindness of strangers (Jock, the caravan park proprietor, Bru and Gaylene, fellow fruit pickers), in the quiet orderliness of the lives of plants and animals, and in the enduring friendship of Atlas, his old flat mate, who turns up out of the blue for a visit. And when Atlas and Brodie explore the nearby caves together, the ordinary becomes miraculous.

Einstein's dictum, *the greatest experience we can have is the mysterious*, is borne out, far beyond the painful and inexplicable mystery of Gerra's death and Brodie's desire for atonement. However, in the main the events of Freshwater Creek are no cataclysmic road to Damascus, merely the small daily events that help to build and rebuild hope; the accruing of experience, the gathering of the wisdom to appreciate and accept all of the gifts given in life. It's there in the blank spaces - the efficacy of the ordinary - if you have the will and the wit to see it, and both Jana and Brodie (as well as the second narrator in *Watersky*, Heather, who has not rated a mention in this paper till now) have created some powerfully blank spaces in their lives.

The cave scene was a difficult one to write with any degree of authenticity. Finally I realised that it was only once Brodie was able to accept that Atlas's visit was motivated by nothing more devious than friendship (brotherly love in fact, though this is not that way Brodie would express it at this point in his life), that 'Atlas is no social worker, he's as much on himself as anyone else, he can't think past heavy metal or body building or scoring with the chicks. And he's a slob. But also a friend. A good friend' (p.218); that Brodie is open to the experience of waking in the cave and sensing some great powerful beast breathing close and menacingly, pressing the black air into a stranglehold.

After the first panic he begins to detect a rhythm to the sound, and eventually perceives it to be some sort of wordless song.

> I lie there in the dark with this weird song making electric currents through my body. I can feel my hair standing up on end. It's the creepiest, loneliest sound I've ever heard, but not a loneliness that hurts: it's old, something that stretches back into forever, that knows everything; and whether it's the earth singing, an approaching cave in or the spirits of olden day times chanting their ceremonies, or whether its the sound of my mind looping through space, it's the most awesome thing I've ever heard. It draws me in and frees me up at te same time. Mum would call it grace.

5. I did not set out to write a modern day *Pilgrim's Progress*. Nine months after I'd delivered the first part of the novel to the publisher I still did not

know whether I was going to be able to find some sort of resolution of the plot, or, to put it more honestly, whether Brodie was going to survive. Not only survive, but begin to make some sense of his life. My adult children, the novel's earliest readers (they checked the manuscript for the accuracy of the slang), would ring me with questions I could not answer: 'Why was Brodie's father such an arsehole?' 'What happened to make him like that?' 'Would Brodie suicide?' 'Was he ever going to get it together again?'

6. I ring my eldest son one Sunday. The most buoyant, the most 'together' of my children. He tells me he has just left his high powered job in the hospitality industry. 'I was turning into a Hitler.' He has gone to live in the country in an old stone church with his girlfriend, and is working part-time in a hydroponic nursery. He has got too far away from himself, he says and wants to come back. 'Have you finished the book?' he asks me. That question has many layers.

I tell him no, I don't seem to be able to yet. I joke that I'm going to abandon Brodie in the bush somewhere and finish the novel with an epilogue.

> I met an old man.
> He said go home son
> so I went home.

Simon jokingly suggests an alternative:

> I wanted to go home
> but I didn't have the right clothes.

Later I write the epilogue, the one I began this paper with, but I don't include it in the text. Nevertheless it remains part of the story.

7. I am living in Darwin, working twelve, thirteen hours a day. I take my first day off in ten weeks, travel with a friend to visit a wonderful hippy couple who live a busy, abundant life in the bush: who welcome me extravagantly. It's a golden day. 'You're so different away from work', my friend says to me on the way home. 'And when I'm with people who love me', I reply. A great burst of writing follows.

8. I leave Darwin. Come to Central Australia to an even more stressful job. Work and sleep, work and sleep, I could be anywhere. Read literary theory in my spare time. Send home to a friend for a concordance and a stack of

references on Old and New Testament doctrines - atonement, redemption, judgement, grace. I write to the Publisher: 'I will finish the book by the end of September. Promise.' I take a week off work. Sit at the desk in the house I am minding for a friend - I have moved five times in nearly as many weeks - no time to find a more permanent place to live - and I finish the novel. Months pass. I move out bush. Decide to leave my job as manager. Go back to hand to mouth freelancing. Once I have made this decision I become ill. I build a fire pit by the verandah, drag my swag outside under an old mulga tree and lie down. For four days I lie there, looking at the sky, reading, sleeping, watching ants, birds, lizards, the changing patterns of light, stars and satellites in the night sky. On the fifth day I roll up my swag and move back inside. I paint the walls of my study an undesert-like undersea green, and get ready to face my uncertain future.

9. The land is a powerful presence in the novel, Richard, my MA supervisor, tells me. I hadn't noticed. It is one of the givens in my life. 'We are held in life by those who love us', I tell my youngest son, 'and by the earth, of which we are made.'

10. There are no ready answers in *Watersky*. The title derives from a term which has emerged from Antarctic exploration. It refers to the signs in the sky ice pilots look for when they are steering the ship through sea ice. If they see blue they know it is a reflection of clear water ahead, even if the way to reach it is not apparent.

I use the title as a metaphor, but at the same time wish to insist on the physicality of experience. We long for the sublime but we reach it within the boundaries of our lived existence. We are incarnate beings, and the physical is a dense medium, but if what we seek is not possible within these limits its is merely a chimera, and will not hold, or sustain us, except through illusion. Brodie's Heather's and Jana's lives intersect, in order for me, the author, and they, the protagonists, to explore this issue.

Little by little Brodie comes to understand that living out the impossible, the unbearable, the unforgivable, yields up a pearl of great price. His own truth. And it will set him free.

11. I give the last word to George Rodne, a Norwegian Stevedore in Fremantle, WA, who was providing me with some background information, as well as some lines of Norwegian dialogue for the radio play I am writing about my journey to Antarctica last summer. 'You must search

the sea ice,' he said, 'look for a crack. Pick a big one, even if it's off-course. You can't break the ice head on. No, you have to go where the crack is, then later you can get back on course.'

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[1] Terry Whitebeach, *Watersky* (1996).
[2] Whitebeach, 'Bird Dream' in Penguin, *Four New Poets* (Penguin, 1996).