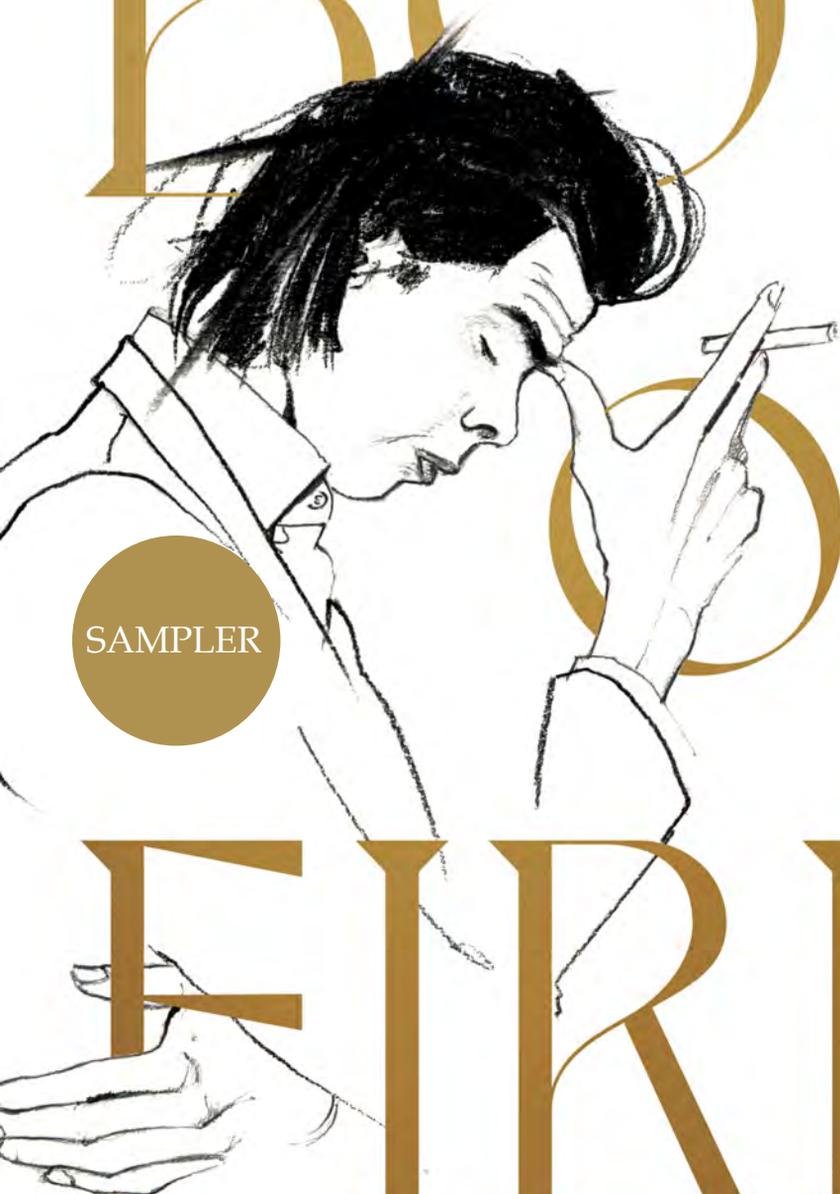


THE YOUNG NICK CAVE

BOY



SAMPLER

ON
FIRE

MARK MORDUE

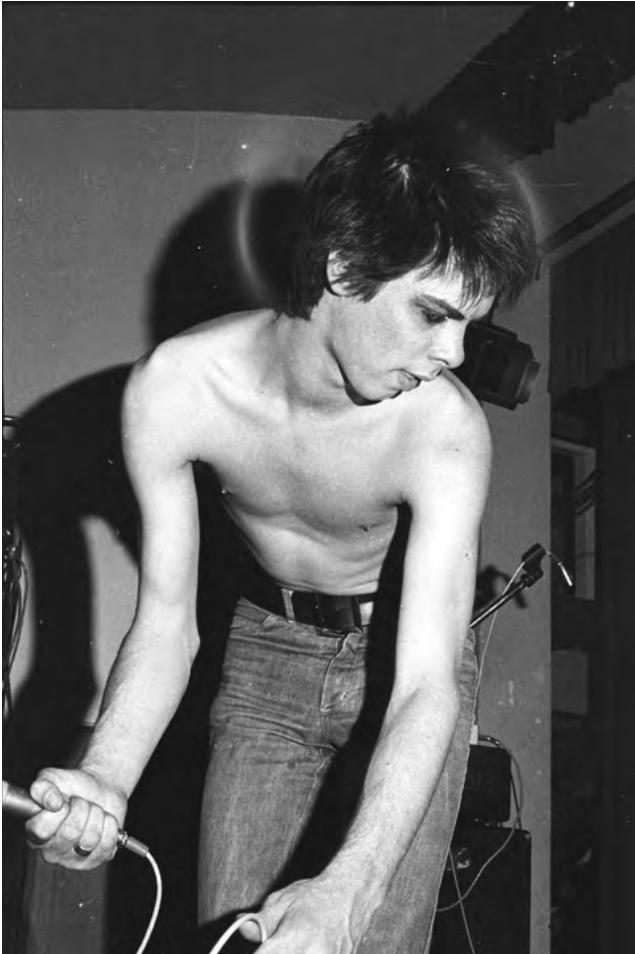
BOY ON FIRE

**THE BECOMING OF
NICK CAVE**

MARK MORDUE

Unedited text.
Not for sale,
review or quotation.

FOURTH ESTATE



PROLOGUE

THE JOURNALIST AND THE SINGER

The first time I ever spoke to Nick Cave was in a phone interview to promote his second solo album, *The Firstborn is Dead* (1985), an ominous, blues-affected work that sanctified the birth of Elvis Presley and thereby rock 'n' roll itself in quasi-religious, apocalyptic terms. Our conversation around the recording was dry as spinifex, so slow and spacious it sometimes ceased to exist. As if Cave could not be less interested in what I was asking or saying and never would be. Given his notorious hatred of journalists back then this made for an uphill experience. I put the phone down with sweating palms and a sinking feeling in my heart. What a failure.

Dealing with Cave again, let alone meeting him in person, was not something I looked forward to. In 1987 I nonetheless lobbied to interview Nick Cave for Sydney's *On the Street*.

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Second time lucky, I must have been hoping. Face to face he had to be more approachable than that distant voice on an echoing telephone line. Besides, he was the pre-eminent Australian rock 'n' roll artist of his day. This made him hard to ignore.

Cave was in town to read from and preview a much anticipated literary work in progress, a book that would become known as *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1989). He'd already gone so far as to declare himself 'more of a writer now'¹; disowning rock 'n' roll for its low-brow qualities and Pavlov's dog audience responses.²

I was given a laneway address for a warehouse located directly behind Sydney's somewhat alternative and bohemian gay strip, Oxford Street. Cave was apparently holed up there with a girlfriend or a dealer or criminal acquaintance: rumours varied, depending on whom I spoke to. As always with Cave, rumours were all around him, as if his every movement across town were hot-wired into the gossip chambers of inner-city Sydney conversation. The only other wave-making machine of this kind that I would ever know of was Michael Hutchence. It was as if you could feel their presence rippling through the city from the moment their flight hit the tarmac and they entered, half in secret, into our closed little world.

When I knocked on the door of what looked like an old garage, a key was hurled to the road with a vaguely familiar shout hovering invisibly on the Sunday afternoon air. As I let myself in I

¹ It's ironic Nick would repeat this phrase about being 'more of a writer' in a few interviews at the time without fully believing it himself. Much later, in his 1996 essay 'The Flesh Made Word', Nick would look back on writing *And the Ass Saw the Angel* and regard its mix of Biblical language, Deep South vernacular and rampant obscenity as covert manifestations of artistic breakdown and creative blockage. If it wasn't already obvious from the book itself, Nick reflects in the essay on Eucharist as a kind of negative Jesus figure. The novel is in many ways a failure, but it offers a genuine yearning for redemption in the author's quest for a new language in which to speak. The message would seem to be that Nick is trapped inside himself, or trapped inside a pain he is still finding the right words for.

² Strangely, Nick's disgust with rock 'n' roll mimicked his father's classical tastes and disdain for popular forms. Nick would soon return to music as his true heartbeat.

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heard footsteps on the wooden ceiling and the creak of a trapdoor above. At the top of the ladder-like stairs that rolled down to meet me with a thud there was now a hole in the ceiling where Nick Cave himself stood, bathed in backlight. He beckoned me upwards like some awful figure in a B-grade horror film about a rock 'n' roll journalist come to interview a terrifying rock 'n' roll vampire. I gulped and set forth on my way to meet my Nosferatu.

Once upstairs the atmosphere changed immediately. Cave was a solicitous host, while a young woman I took to be his partner bossed him about as if I had just entered a Goth version of the British comedy *George and Mildred*. 'Get Mark something to eat, Nick,' she said briskly. A large serving of the very best fruits was put before me – grapes, lychees, melon, apple – all prepared and presented in a grand manner.

As Cave was about to seat himself and enjoy some of this banquet his partner said, 'Did you offer Mark some coffee, Nick?' Again he rose, mock lugubrious, stick-insect angular. Cave went over to an old metal funnel attached to a wooden workbench, poured in some coffee beans and began to slowly turn a handle: 'Grind, grind, grind, it's the story of my life.'

With a variety of expensive biscuits now also arrayed before me, I was soon thanking the couple for their surprising hospitality. Cave asked me why it should be so unexpected. An evasive answer seemed tactically unwise, so I mentioned the Prince of Darkness thing around him, and his general reputation for treating journalists poorly. 'Who says that?' he asked, a little surly. 'Why, the *NME* [*New Musical Express*] ...' I began to say, in reference to the influential British music paper of the day. 'The *NME*!' he barked. Cave began to grind the coffee beans with much greater intensity. His partner looked at me and said, 'Don't get him started.' To Cave she called out in a calming voice, 'Now, Nick ...' Cave ground on, taking it out on the beans: 'The *NME*!'

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Finally he came back over to us with a large silver coffee pot steaming with his efforts. A set of fine china cups were ready on a matching silver serving tray. Mid pour Cave lost focus, the coffee slowly streaming out of the spout and around – but not in – the cups in an ever-widening circle, the tray filling with black liquid as if it were a swimming pool, until Cave snapped back into consciousness and finally found the cups as well. Completing the task at last, Cave then asked me with all the decorum he could muster: ‘Would you like milk or sugar with that?’

The next two and a half hours felt rather like an interview taking place under similarly dark water. Each question seemed to demand huge reservoirs of concentration from Cave, not to mention frequent pauses and micro-sleeps. Cave’s sometimes thin and creaky, sometimes sonorous and self-consciously refined speaking voice certainly had its hypnotic qualities. I felt suspended, unsure of what to do, or even how to leave. To be honest I’m not sure the interview ever quite ended so much as faded away. With everyone heavily relaxed, I departed once more through the floor.

It was yet another Cave interview in which I felt I had somehow failed, despite Cave’s very best efforts to help me. This was largely because I didn’t really understand how to write up what had happened. I also dreaded sitting down and transcribing the interview tapes, a process that would demand even greater leagues of passing time from me all over again.

Two nights later on stage at the Mandolin Cinema in Sydney’s Surry Hills, Cave would recite from sections of his work in progress while an ambient soundtrack rose and fell with suitably ominous and dream-like effect around his reading voice. Looking every inch the ‘Black Crow King’ (one of many self-referential character songs that would add to his mythology despite the satirical swipes it took at his image and those who

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subscribed to it), Cave did not so much walk on to the stage as dangle, stoop and hang in the air as if from unseen strings. He would eventually fall off the stage. And yet the cinema was full to the brim with his fans, a sell-out performance over two nights, and a success in terms of the mood created by him reading from what appeared to be a credible, black-humoured, Faulknerian work of fiction well on the way to completion.

Almost a decade on from these readings and our warehouse encounter, the boot would be on the other foot as I once again spoke to Cave, this time over the phone in 1994. He was now living in São Paulo, Brazil, and – by all public accounts at least – was clean as a whistle. For me it was a very early-morning interview. Unfortunately, I'd broken up with my girlfriend the previous night and not been home, to sleep or otherwise, barely brushing in the door to take Cave's call. Thank God for having prepared the previous day. When Cave asked me how I was I told him at great length: that I'd been out wandering all night, that I'd been here and there, felt this and thought that, a long wild emotional ramble that ended with me saying I loved his new record *Let Love In* and finally asking if he had a favourite walk he liked to take in São Paulo.

Cave took this all in with a long pause and slight grunt – and we began to talk. It was a great interview and I liked him a lot. He seemed completely non-judgemental about my 'condition'; in fact, I'd say he was both kind and curiously amused throughout. As for his answer to my opening question ... 'Well, I make my favourite walk daily. Which is up to my local bar. Out the door, up the street, past the junkyard where the chickens and the old junkyard dog sits. And up a steep hill to my favourite bar, San Pedro's. There's this giant barman there who is the fattest guy I've ever seen. He is constantly described by locals as a huge woman, but he's a man with a moustache. He looks more like a giant baby

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to me. I sit there and read, drink, and contemplate the meaning of life. Then I walk back down.³

A few years on and I would meet Cave again, in 1997 in a rather sterile fluorescent-lit room at the offices of Festival Mushroom in Sydney. Cave remembered me well enough, but his mood was odd and, I realise now, highly vulnerable as *The Boatman's Call* – a raw and revealing album that revolved around his break-up with Brazilian partner Viviane Carneiro and a wounding affair with PJ Harvey – was about to be released. None of that was known yet. I nonetheless asked him, almost randomly, if he thought the love of a good woman could redeem a man. It was a question that seemed to lead out of his lyrics and what they implied across the record. Cave looked at me as if I were a total fucking idiot and then away at the white wall as if he were a hopeless and God-forsaken case himself: 'How the hell would I know?' he said. And then he looked back at me and waited for the next question.

*

More than a decade after that last experience I began work on a biography of Nick Cave's life. Biographies are strange beasts, underlined by a cautionary wisdom that dates back to artists of the Italian Renaissance and their understanding that the portrait painter always paints something of himself.⁴

Nick and I would meet to discuss the project at his Brighton-

³ Mark Mordue, 'Let Love In', *Juice Magazine*, Sydney, April 1993.

⁴ There are many levels to this: the secret messaging that occurred in paintings back then; as well as our later understanding of the unconscious and what we project of ourselves on to others. But for artists in the time of Da Vinci and Michelangelo, there was a conviction that all of God's secrets reside within us, and thus the mysteries and magnificence of Creation can be revealed if we look truly and deeply enough, finding in this our larger unity.

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and-Hove home office in the United Kingdom in 2010. I was told he could give me a few hours. We would spend the next three days talking intensely, then speak often in person after that – as well as on the phone, on tour and via email over the years to come. I still remember our first meeting outside his office, a very warm day. We were so close to the beach I could hear the tide washing back and forth over the stones. I had on a new pair of Havaianas branded as ‘Brazilian blue’, a good-luck purchase for my opening encounter. Surprisingly, Nick noticed them immediately. ‘Great colour! Mine are pink. I will wear them tomorrow.’

He was bright as a button, his office charged with creative energy and an apparent zeal that year for the works of American poets John Berryman and Frederick Seidel. Later I would become intrigued by Berryman’s sense of multiple selves and his use of them to create a performance on the page, interrogating himself through actors that were variations of his own personality. Seidel was very different, commanding, aristocratically savage and song-like as he moved through his world. It was not hard to understand why these voices appealed to Nick. He would encourage me to investigate Jerome Rothenberg, whose collection *Technicians of the Sacred* had become an almost Biblical text for him, gathering together a global array of shamanistic ritual songs and chants and their contemporary equivalents. The radical leaps in logic, the sense of magic at work, the veneration of sound (over language itself) as a form of meaning or feeling, clearly resonated into everything that came along from *Push the Sky Away* and after. As I write I can see how Rothenberg’s work changed Nick’s thinking about music as much as lyrics, affecting the spiritual journey he would go on to make *Ghosteen* with Warren Ellis and rest of the Bad Seeds.

On the second day of our meetings in Brighton, we would go upstairs to Nick’s family home, a rare act of trust. While Nick was answering phone calls, his wife, Susie Bick, asked if I was

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hungry. She made me a sandwich for lunch, then offered me tea and biscuits she scabbled to find in their fridge. Susie had an aristocratic, almost nervous, energy that struck me as eccentric and slightly vulnerable, and also wild, not quite of this earth. Something about Susie finding those extra biscuits for me felt particularly kind and thoughtful. And though she did not want to be interviewed for the biography, I liked her from that moment on for making me feel so welcome in her home where others may have been more defensive or suspicious.

Nick told me later that Susie had a habit of moving the furniture around. He would return from a visit to London or a tour, even just a night out, and not be able to find the lounge and the television. ‘Sometimes she’s moved the entire bedroom to another room and I can’t find that either.’ He seemed to accept this with a shrug. ‘I’ve mentioned it in song. People think it’s some poetic image I’ve made up. I’m just documenting a straight fact.’

There was a guy downstairs whom Nick had recently helped clear out some space. ‘He was like those people you see on TV shows about hoarding.’ It had been almost impossible to get inside his apartment. The debris had begun to collect outside in the hall. Nick took great triumph in convincing him to surrender a number of old and rusty pushbikes as well as the more general rubbish he’d accumulated. It was all a matter of giving the poor fellow encouragement. ‘I told him, “C’mon, you can do it.”’ Nick laughed. ‘I know he will collect the same kind of stuff and it will all just come back in the door and I will have to do the whole thing again a year from now.’

Perhaps fame necessitated the same kind of clearing out. I would come to see how forcefully some people sought to attach themselves to Nick, as well as how wounded and resentful those left behind could feel. I had set my own terms of intimacy and distance as best I could, embarrassed by the way people would disempower, even disenfranchise themselves just to be in his company.

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As a biographer, I came to define the cloudy territory I found myself in as akin to a working friendship. I understood that when the work was over so too the friendship would likely pass. This was the dilemma Nick left behind for people as their life story got sucked up into the slipstream of his story, and forever measured against his adventure and the songs that marked it. I vowed to avoid this fatal attraction. Though, of course, as you get to know people over time, things are never so straightforward. The act of maintaining a little distance or detachment could be confusing, perhaps even two-faced. So too could opening up.

On the third day of our meetings, the end of a school day, Nick and I went out for pizza with his twin sons Arthur and Earl. Like many fathers who worked from home, Nick struck me as attentive and involved with his children, and very close to them, a good father. Earl seemed quieter and shyer, nearer somehow to Susie in his tender demeanour. Although Arthur was fair in his looks, he took more after Nick and was robustly social. He was interested in magic and a bit of a performer. Arthur had an impressive rope trick he could do. Even when he showed me how he had managed the finale, a dramatic and quick untangling, I still could not work out how he had done it. Arthur tried to show me again a few times and I failed to see the revelation each time he explained it. Eventually, Nick waved his hand to stop and said, 'I think your secret is safe here in England, Arthur. Mark won't take be able to take the rope trick back to Australia with him.'

By the summer of 2013, I was deep into the biography. Nick and I met in Melbourne at his mother Dawn's house. It was twilight and we walked with his sons to a nearby park. The boys shared a skateboard and what looked like a very good digital film camera to play with. I was under the impression Earl was more accomplished on the skateboard, but it was Arthur who rode it slowly inside and around a hazily lit park rotunda while Earl climbed on to its railings and filmed him. Nick called out

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to be careful. They explained they wanted to avoid showing the skateboard, to create the illusion that Arthur was floating like a bird or someone in a dream.

The loss of fifteen-year-old Arthur from a cliff fall in 2015 was a terrible tragedy for Nick and Susie and Earl and all the extended Cave family. By then my biography project had long unravelled as the quantity, quality and depth of Nick Cave's output overwhelmed me. What I had started writing became a baggy and unfinished monster with all the scope and cornucopia of a biographic *Moby Dick*. My idea for its form had involved conventional chronology and the nine lives of a cat, but also a symbolic under-structure loosely to pinned to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a work Nick had referenced repeatedly with allusions to 'the red hand' of God.⁵ I could see many easy parallels: God casts the rebellious Satan out of Heaven (Nick is banished by his father from his country home of Wangaratta); the fallen angel gathers his demonic cohorts together (Nick meets the members of The Boys Next Door and they forge themselves at the Tiger Lounge and the Crystal Ballroom in St Kilda); Satan travels across space to wreak revenge on Eden (Nick travels to England to begin his assault on the garden of culture) ... Such connections were loose and incidental, but also well mapped in song, as if Nick had been writing and reinforcing his own mythology all the way. Which, of course, he had.

After the death of Arthur, Nick would feel he had been changed entirely. There was only before and after. 'I'm a different person now,' he would say to me on a few occasions. In his opinion, this rendered what had been said in our conversations mostly redundant. Our communications would dissipate and cease. I'd occupy myself with my own struggles and life story, a messy and tangled narrative all its own as, by then, my grand Miltonian plans

⁵ As well as 'Red Right Hand' and 'The Red Hand Files' the line crops up in 'Song of Joy'.

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for a Nick Cave mega-biography had well and truly collapsed. I must say Nick was only ever kind and understanding over the period when I went off the rails, expressing concern for my well-being and encouraging me to rebuild myself, as well as offering good-humoured conversation and a few spikes of pragmatism. But the road we were on was parting, as I always knew it would. The ride was over.

I would lament that I nonetheless did have a biographical volume almost done, a portrait of the artist as a young man and all that he promised ahead of him. A book that with just a bit more work was even more important in the wake of what had occurred. This book keyed itself in to Nick Cave's childhood and youth, from Wangaratta to the Crystal Ballroom scene in Melbourne, through the early landscapes, novels, artists, loves and friendships that shaped him. Much of which Nick would continually refer to in his songs, books, poetry and films. I believe this Australian youth, this Australian being, to run deep inside him. I also believe it relates to something paradoxical about the nature of 'Australianness' itself: how we undervalue and disguise, and even dismiss what we are as we look outward from our culture for international affirmations, losing sight of our history in a sometimes brutal and ongoing act of forgetting. The older we get, however, the more we begin to reach back to our youth as essential to who we are and can still be.

What emerges in this biography is a remembering of that world. Not just Nick Cave's story of growing up, but the memories and stories of all those around him. The life and times of a boy on fire, with all that he absorbed in order to dream himself into becoming one of the darkest, and then one of the brightest of our rock 'n' roll stars. Light enough for the many to share.

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‘Too little, too late,’ he says. Nicholas Edward Cave has just turned fifty, and old wheels are grinding inside him.¹ His car pulls forward at the traffic lights and makes its way further down his former stomping ground, Fitzroy Street, St Kilda. The silvery light of an encroaching Melbourne dusk settles over the peak-hour traffic and he catches a glimpse of the waters of Port Phillip Bay at the street’s bottom end, as if he could drive into this same silvering and disappear.

It is 28 October 2007 and Nick Cave is about to fly to Sydney to be inducted into the ARIA (Australian Record Industry Association) Hall of Fame. The singer describes it as ‘the seventh circle of hell’, then ‘a bad party you can never escape. Let’s face it, it’s really a form of punishment’.² For a moment he considers

¹ Nick Cave, Dawn Cave and Bleddyn Butcher were interviewed about the day of ARIA Hall of Fame induction and events surrounding it.

² Nick’s off-hand reference to the ‘seventh’ circle of hell comes from Dante’s *Inferno*, with which Nick is well familiar. Dante reserves the seventh circle in particular for those who have committed crimes of violence: against people and property, themselves and God.

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stopping the vehicle so he can hop out on Fitzroy Street and run away. The ARIA Awards! He puts his head to the glass as if he has a headache. Thump. ‘God, I’d rather just go and get a kebab.’³

The only people he’d care to associate with in this Oz Rock Valhalla to which he is being condemned are The Saints and AC/DC, he reckons. There’s Michael Hutchence too, of course, ‘a beautiful guy’, but Cave’s friendship with him was not about halls of fame or even music, not INXS anyway; that was quietly understood. There was something else between them. Something brotherly only people in their shoes could share. Those stoned afternoons they’d spent trying to pull their lives together as well as having fun. Mornings when the pair would take their respective son and daughter, Luke and Tiger Lily, to a local park. The Portobello Café they bought together in London in 1995, that place never made a profit. The phone messages Michael left him two years later, so wild and funny, and in retrospect so in need of contact. Michael’s voice on his answering machine saying, ‘I’m coming to see the Bad Seeds play in Sydney, Nick. I’ll be up the front throwing rotten fruit at you.’⁴ Nick still has the hotel number jotted down in an old diary somewhere, along with a note to call Michael back in Sydney.⁵ ‘Ask for Murray River’s room,’ Hutchence laughed.⁶

November 1997. Ten years ago. What a bad month that was. Beginning with Kevin ‘Epic Soundtracks’ Godfrey – the former drummer for Swell Maps, Crime and the City Solution, and These Immortal Souls – turning out the lights in his West

³ AAP, ‘Nick Cave, reluctantly famous’, *The Age*, 23 October 2007. Also “‘Arias bore me’ – Nick Cave”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 October 2007. Nick again discussed how he was feeling in a conversation with the author. Kebabs were clearly the favoured pre-awards snack.

⁴ Mick Harvey, interview with the author, Melbourne, 11 February 2010.

⁵ Nick Cave, ‘Notes’ (hardcover notebook), dated 1996–1997, *Nick Cave: The Exhibition*, The Arts Centre, Melbourne, Box H000653, File 2006.019.040.

⁶ Murray River was a favourite pseudonym of Michael Hutchence’s when booking hotel rooms.

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Hampstead flat and never waking up again. Nick can only shrug his shoulders when Epic's name comes up. He didn't know him that well. 'And to tell you the truth, I was never a big fan of his music, but people I rated always rated him, so I had to respect that.' Epic died in his sleep, cocaine and heroin in his system, autopsy results inconclusive. The information would reach Nick through mutual friends like his Bad Seeds collaborator and bandmate Mick Harvey and the singer Dave Graney, both of whom were troubled by Epic's death and what could have been a decision or plain bad luck.

A few weeks later Michael Hutchence passed away at a five-star hotel in Double Bay, Sydney, under similarly cloudy circumstances. Ten years ago, almost to the day.⁷ Nick ended up writing out a set of lyrics when he got the news: 'Adieu, adieu, kind friends adieu, I can no longer stay with you ...' The words were drawn from an eighteenth-century west-country English ballad called 'There is a Tavern in the Town': the lament of a suicidal woman destroyed by her lover's insensitivity. It is also known in some quarters as 'The Drunkard's Song'. In Nick's diary version various lines are reworked as the narrator's voice slips uneasily between a method actor's empathy for what is happening and a storyteller's more detached insights.⁸

Looking from the outside, who'd have thought Nick was the good influence in this friendship, the one who had learnt to swim while Michael was going under.

These weren't the first or last people Nick would witness leaving this world unexpectedly. Not by a long shot. Ever since his father, Colin Cave, was killed in a car crash he had been

⁷ Privately, Nick blames the media for having a major hand in Hutchence's demise. He recalls a night out in London with Hutchence and turning on an aggressive paparazzi. Hutchence had to restrain Nick and tell him it was not worth the bother. 'Those bastards hounded Michael to his grave.'

⁸ Cave, 'Notes', *op. cit.*

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learning what it meant to live with the dead. The road accident happened on the first Sunday of 1979, just a few months after Nick turned twenty-one. It took him a long time to accept how much it affected him, Nick says, 'to engage with it or even understand it'. Between his mother's pain and the thrill of leaving for London a year later in February 1980 with his fine young band, The Boys Next Door, Nick had pushed his own feelings aside. He only saw later how the loss of his father intensified something that went back to boyhood days in Wangaratta. Not even the town as it was, really, more the way he would remember it and then mythologise it. Things like the railroad tracks, the slaughterhouse, the river where he swam and its willow trees, had become the stuff of songs such as 'Red Right Hand' and 'Sad Waters' for him, a real and yet imaginatively transformed land akin to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County.⁹

As if to confirm a rural Gothic streak straight out of a novel by the likes of Faulkner, Nick had even found a body once when he was a kid. Someone from the old people's home had stumbled down in their pyjamas to the shade of the riverbank and lain down to sleep in the mud. For the twelve-year-old Nick and his friends it had been the thrill of their day, astride their bikes on a narrow strip of road staring down at the still figure. Amid their excited chatter, one of the boys silenced everyone. "Show some respect for a dead man," he said. I really remember that.' Nick could not wait to get home and tell his mother about their discovery. 'She wasn't very happy with the way the police had spoken to us, actually. They told us all to piss off when they arrived.'

⁹ William Faulkner created an imaginary place called Yoknapatawpha County based on Lafayette County, Mississippi where he was raised. Almost all his novels would be set in this fabled version of his past, requiring Faulkner to create a 'map' of the landscape he rewrote, remembered and transformed. It helped Nick to see how he might unify his songs and pushed him towards the conception of his own first novel, *And The Ass Saw the Angel*.

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Nick Cave's old friend, photographer and journalist Bleddyn Butcher, is driving him to the airport in Melbourne today so Nick can get to the ARIAs on time in Sydney. Bleddyn's black suit and bolo tie accentuate a bright face and bob of unruly white hair that faintly suggest the appearance of a frontier town Tennessee judge. An exceptionally long fingernail on the pinky of Bleddyn's right hand serves him well for playing guitar at home; it has Oriental overtones too, symbolizing a man of culture and breeding who is above manual labour. In *Taxi Driver*, a much loved film of Nick's teenage years, the actor Harvey Keitel's pimp character has a similarly long talon, painted red and used for the convenience of sniffing heroin on the go. A figure of almost enraged intelligence, Butcher is made of more affectionate materials than such associations might indicate. 'I think I can call Nick a friend,' he says, touching his chest. 'I think so. I feel it in my heart.'¹⁰ Having photographed Nick for the *NME* (*New Musical Express*) ever since the singer's arrival in London with The Birthday Party in 1980, then run an official Nick Cave fanzine called *The Witness* in the late 1990s, the Perth-born Butcher can lay claim to knowing Nick's work as well as anyone. Unlike many in Nick's orbit, he's never shy of making his judgments, or his appreciations, known, something that moves Cave to droll comment, 'You don't go to Bleddyn for a response when you have something at a sensitive stage of development.'

Even so, here Bleddyn Butcher is, back in Melbourne and driving 'The Dark Lord' (as he likes to call Nick) around again. It amuses him that the singer did not apply for a Learner's Permit till 2001 in the United Kingdom, which is where Cave continues

¹⁰ Bleddyn Butcher, interview with author, Summer Hill, Sydney.

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to reside today in the seaside community of Brighton-and-Hove. The driver's license might be interpreted as yet another marker of Nick's drug-free lifestyle. Let's face it, the 1980s was not a time when you would want to see The Dark Lord behind the wheel of any vehicle coming your way. Bleddyn can only arch an eyebrow and observe, 'Nick is still a little prone to lose focus behind the wheel if he's talking to you.'¹¹

Bleddyn has picked Nick up from his mother's place, and sat around over tea and homemade cheese scones with Dawn Cave while her son packed his bags. The sparring intelligence between mother and son has the light touch of comedy: Nick's lugubrious, 'Yes, Mum'; Dawn's wry comebacks; the jolts of affection that unite them and pull you closer to them when they are together. It is surprising to Bleddyn, but there is one word rather under-used in critical appreciations of Nick's work, and yet it is present throughout a host of songs and the way he sings them. That word is *tenderness*.

Dawn Cave's present happiness is a matter of long-term relief as much as anything else. After all the years of turbulence her son 'has settled down so well' with his wife, English former model and Vivienne Westwood fashion muse Susie Bick. 'And he's such a good father to the twins, Arthur and Earl. If Nick's father, Colin, were alive today he'd be so proud,' she says later in an interview.¹² 'And Nick's free of the drugs, too.' Dawn holds her hands together in an unconscious prayer motion as she contemplates it. Being with Susie made all the difference in the end: 'They saved each other, I think. I could have run down the street and jumped up and kicked my heels together, I was that relieved and happy when Nick first told me he was going into rehab. Little did I know how hard it would be, how long it would

¹¹ Bleddyn Butcher, interview with author, Summer Hill, Sydney.

¹² Dawn Cave, interview with the author, Melbourne, 27 March 2010.

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take, but I will always remember that first time [in 1988]. At last, I thought, at last.’ Ten years on, and four more rehab centres later, Susie Bick finally came on to the scene. At last, at last.

Dawn waves goodbye to Nick and Bleddyn from the door of her home; closes the security grill. Nick told her the night before that a few old friends were ribbing him about an exhibition of his life and work coming up in Melbourne, entitled, appropriately enough – ‘and with all due humility!’ he says – Nick Cave: The Exhibition.¹³ Pennants showing his face are already fluttering from flagpoles around The Arts Centre in the heart of the city to promote the show coming in another week. Together with the 2007 ARIA Hall of Fame induction this evening, it contributes to a rather uncool impression this one-time punk rocker and wild man of Australian rock ‘n’ roll is being institutionalised and tamed.

The put-downs are endless, a few quite barbed. Nick’s ex-girlfriend and first great muse, Anita Lane, will be there with the others on opening night, going through room after room, heckling him and comparing Nick Cave: The Exhibition to a game of *Where’s Wally?*

Anita Lane. She always had a way of shaking Nick out of himself. Old friends sometimes refer to her as ‘his first wife’. You can barely see the scar she left on Nick Cave’s face two decades ago. He touches it, almost without thinking as he sits in traffic and Bleddyn edges their vehicle forward. Fitzroy Street in St Kilda makes him think of her, especially with the night coming on. It’s where their adventures began in the late 1970s, with art and

¹³ Nick Cave: The Exhibition, The Arts Centre Gallery, Melbourne, 10 November 2007–6 April 2008 (then Adelaide, Brisbane and finally Canberra in 2010; now preserved in The Arts Centre’s permanent archives). Curated by Janine Barrant in partnership with Nick Cave, it would also form the basis for *Stranger Than Kindness: The Nick Cave Exhibition*, developed by Christina Back and Nick Cave for the Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen, originally set for 23 March–3 October 2020 before COVID-19 delayed the opening (catalogue book, *Stranger Than Kindness: The Nick Cave Exhibition*, is available).

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music, with heroin too, and a whole way of being that carried on across the world, to London, then West Berlin and a few other cities as well. On the cover of *Tender Prey* (1988) the scar looks as fresh as a rapier slash from a duel. It was a vegetable knife, prosaically enough, a middle-of-the-day domestic during which Anita took a chunk out of his face and went at him for another piece. Their screams and blood and abuse spilt all the way down the stairwell to their warehouse loft in the Kreuzberg district of West Berlin, horrifying friends. The relationship would recover, sputtering on for another year.

Amphetamines could do that you back then. The drugs flowing from the East were very high grade. Speed addictions would send half the city mad, leaving people damaged and broken just as the Wall was falling and Germany was being reunited. Nick would hear the crowds shouting in the streets about freedom while he and The Bad Seeds were finishing the mixing for their album *Tender Prey*. He would not let any of the band leave the studio to go and take a look. For Nick it was simply time to finish the album – and get out of town. Owing money to various dealers only added to his impetus to leave.

Ever since Nick left Australia he had lived in a wilful state of exile, and more than a little like a man on the run. Having used up London and West Berlin, the city of Sao Paulo in Brazil would be his next port of call in early 1989, after coming out of a legally enforced stint of rehab for the first time in the UK late the previous year. Back living in London by 1993, and much the worse for wear from drinking and drugging again, he'd find himself being interviewed by *MTV Europe* in a bar, sitting beside The Pogues recently sacked singer, Shane McGowan, perhaps the most famous booze-hound in rock 'n' roll since the early days of Tom Waits. McGowan's profoundly Irish music made Nick aware of a great loss in his own life. 'The older I get,' Nick told *MTV*, 'the more inclined I am to think that you need some kind

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of roots and you need to think that you belong somewhere... I've kind of destroyed that part of me as a person. I really don't feel I do belong anywhere anymore.'¹⁴ It was a sad confession to make on camera. But Nick was bullshitting himself. He was always going to have to answer to home sooner or later. Or if not quite home exactly, the gravitational pull of a past he'd yearn for in his songs and buck against in his life as if there was something way back in time to be ashamed of.

There were days when Nick had 'this awful intuition of Melbourne' looming over him. When it felt as if everybody was trying to own him and 'any sign of me enjoying success is construed as me getting too big for my boots'. It makes coming home to Australia hard, even a little suffocating. It is not so far away from the ideas he played with in the old Birthday Party song 'Sonny's Burning'. Crime and punishment in his work were as ambiguous as the sadomasochistic twist to his heart in those days. 'Sonny's Burning'¹⁵ enhanced the demonic sexual presence glowing around him in 1982, irradiated in the song by repressed desires that completely consume him. The narrative positioned the listener as complicit in a torture scenario, enjoying the warmth and light that comes from burning Sonny alive. Birthday Party performances would be incited by an hilarious ritual shout-out before it began: 'Hands up who wants to die?!' Though he played the seductive predator in the song, a carny-like presenter of a sinister peepshow, Nick was slyly sanctifying himself as the victim of an audience revelling in his self-destructive impulses. Twenty five years later and here he is, no longer destroying himself, which seems to invite greater resentment from some quarters. His crimes in 2007 are health

¹⁴ Interview with Nick Cave and Shane McGowan, MTV UK, 1993, [Online], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbOxwLkXRmE>

¹⁵ The Birthday Party, 'Sonny's Burning', *The Bad Seed* (4AD), 1983, lyrics by Nick Cave, music by Nick Cave, Mick Harvey, Rowland S Howard, Tracy Pew.

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and happiness; his punishment delivered by friends who once supported and understood him. Susie chides Nick for putting up with their snide comments at the Melbourne social events they are invited to. Why do you bother with these people when they behave this way towards you? Nick was unusually silent and unable to answer. But he most definitely brooded on it. Friends of a world he had left behind.

As Nick had left his mother's house for the ARIA Hall of Fame induction, Dawn sensed his troubled mood and pulled him aside to give him a tight hug and a pat on the back. 'Hold your head up high, Nick,' she told him, 'and fuck them all!'

*

Nick Cave laughs to himself in the car about what he describes as his then 81-year-old mother's 'sage advice'. A retired librarian, it's not her usual manner of speaking. He'll pocket it away for future reference, 'a maxim to keep in mind'. Even tell Dawn later, to her horror, he is thinking of getting it translated into Latin and put on a family coat of arms in England. Fuck them all! He wishes he had it emblazoned on a T-shirt right now ... *Fuck lemma totus?* That isn't quite right. If his old friend, The Boys Next Door and Birthday Party bassist Tracy Pew, were alive he'd translate it in a snap – and probably come up with a suitably ribald T-shirt design as well.

An epileptic fit would kill Tracy Pew on November 7 1986. Nick suspects the hard-drinking Tracy giving up alcohol may have actually brought on the fits on that eventually ended his life at age 28. It was yet another event that made the month of November chime with dark anniversaries.

'Tracy's death was a really sad business,' Nick says. 'I still miss him.' And if Tracy were alive today what would he make of *Nick Cave: the Exhibition?* Ah, Nick suspects, he would give

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him shit too for being a wanker. Pennants, you prick! Nick laughs at the thought, questions ‘how you can love someone so much – and yet have so many punch-ups with that same person? We used to hit each other all the time. I don’t even remember why now.’

Despite the gibes he’s been getting, Nick says, ‘I’m actually very proud of the exhibition at the Arts Centre. Trying to look at it from the outside, as a show about this guy called “Nick Cave”, I think it is kinda interesting.’ But the 2007 ARIA Hall of Fame induction is harder for him to come to terms with. He looks over at Bleddyn and realises his friend is rattling on about T.S. Eliot and the artistry of theft, a much worked-over topic between them whether they’re talking about blues music or Greek mythology or, as Nick likes to put it, ‘my favourite subject, me!’

Bleddyn shifts his conversation to Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* and what did you think of that vision of the fish at the end? Then it’s back to T.S. Eliot and how the world will end ‘not with a bang but a whimper’.¹⁶

Nick feels a vague headache coming on, one of the by-products of the insomnia he suffers when he has had a bad night. ‘Yes, Bleddyn,’ he says. ‘Cheer me up already, and no more end-of-the-world stuff, please.’ But Nick is only half-listening as he starts to jot down ideas for the acceptance speech tonight. ‘Look, do you know any good dirty jokes I can use? I think I’d like to be funny.’ He hunches over his notebook and scratches away. Bleddyn says something crude in French as their car hauls to a stop again, caught in traffic barely half a block further down

¹⁶ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, 2007. TS Eliot, ‘The Hollow Men’, 1925. Bleddyn and Nick’s conversations about *The Road*, apocalyptic futures, the nature of fatherhood and the search for spiritual consolation in art would help set Nick on a path towards writing the soundtrack, with Warren Ellis, for a 2010 film version of *The Road*, directed by Nick’s friend and cinematic collaborator, John Hillcoat. The story’s intense focus on the relationship between a father and a son, and how one dies while the other must go on, would continue to haunt Nick Cave for the rest of his life.

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the road. Nick begins to sing The Loved Ones' 'Sad Dark Eyes' under his breath till it trails off into an embarrassed croak while the car shunts along.

The song is all mixed up inside of him, the words of Gerry Humphrys merging with his own lyrical improvisations. It's yet another bastard marriage in a classic interpretative repertoire that includes Cave's diabolically violent 'Stagger Lee', a drastic rewrite of an old blues ballad formerly known as 'Stack O' Lee', and a raucously possessed slant on Bob Dylan's 'Wanted Man'. Over the years, the way Nick Cave reworks songs and makes them his own will almost be as important to understanding him as his originals. Maybe the covers are even more revealing, as Bleddyn implies when speaking of T.S. Eliot's ideas of theft and transcendence. How does one define a voice you can call your own anyway? It comes from everything you've borrowed.

'Sad Dark Eyes' still sounds good to Nick. It makes him think again of being a kid in Wangaratta, of his eldest brother Tim coming back to their home town from yet another moratorium march in Melbourne to protest against Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. Tim had been the real wildcat in the family. A young Nick relished hearing his teenage brother's tales of the big smoke, as well as the black wafers of vinyl Tim returned with: LPs by Cream, Jimi Hendrix and, yeah, The Loved Ones.

Wangaratta slides over Nick's vision of St Kilda today and overwhelms it. Wang! The heat haze of summer rippling off the bitumen, the sub-zero winter mists chilling a wire fence so cold you could not touch it in the morning. It's like the country town is floating in the landscape, and him as a boy along with it. 'That town was all about walking,' Nick says, with undisguised affection, 'just wandering around on foot.' More random thoughts roll by: a teacher holding up a Bic biro and explaining to the class they won't need their fountain pens anymore; his school stopping to witness grainy black-and-white

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satellite footage of the first man on the moon; the closest Nick ever got to sex education, he says, was a documentary in biology class on the birth of kangaroo. Left to his own devices, Nick liked to contemplate ‘how hot Elizabeth Montgomery looked on Bewitched, the way she wrinkled her nose’ to cast a spell. Oh boy. ‘I couldn’t work out whether it was her or Carolyn Jones as “Morticia” on The Addams Family that first aroused my interest in women.’ Talk about patterning behaviour. The secretarial types and the Goth girls imprinted on his formative desires – thank you, crap 60s television.

These days whenever journalists ask him about his past he tells them to ‘Just Google it!’¹⁷ They usually do. But it’s mostly half-truths and data, not much inner life or mystery; it all seems inadequate or wrong. It took Nick a long time to get over his disgust with himself over doing interviews during the 1980s, and the awful truth that they were among the few times he allowed intimacy into his increasingly drug-fucked life. No wonder he was so ambivalent about the process. Then to have things he said ten, twenty, even thirty years ago quoted back at him like he’d never change his mind, let alone remember it? If he even meant what he said in the first place? Cave’s mother Dawn tells him that it is his own fault. ‘You do like to exaggerate when you tell these people your stories, Nick.’

*

Dawn was right. Nick would develop a life-long practice of rehearsing his quotes in casual conversations till he had them sounding exactly how he wanted them to be in print. Once he had them down, he’d mostly stick to the script and often regret

¹⁷ Simon Hattenstone, ‘Old Nick’, *The Guardian*, 23 February 2008 [Online], available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/feb/23/popandrock.features>, accessed 4 June 2012.

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it when he didn't. Like all contrary artists, Nick Cave wants his tale told on multiple levels: larger than life, yet right on point; how it was, and how he sees it now. Biographers will suffer from the shifting ground. Nick has only to make an off-hand comment in an interview, drip-feeding his rabid fan base a 'fact' that becomes their gospel to spread. In his Birthday Party days Nick had regarded his audience with something approaching disgust; time had flicked a switch and he had come to love, even need the communal energy that rallied around him. But he was never much of an Oz rock hero at the start; you will discover that quickly enough on Google. If anything, Nick Cave cast himself as the villain to succeed: the prince of darkness, the junkie Hamlet of rock 'n' roll, yak, yak, yak ... God, how the press can go on. And having become a drug-free family man, driver's licence and all, 'I am suddenly "Quiet and Contented of Hove"'! Living one's life under other people's slogans can be a laborious business, especially when some of them have sprung, well-practiced, from your own lips. After a while the stories run on without him and seem to be about someone else. Decades of this have made him obsess about controlling his own narrative, but Nick is many years away yet from doing his question-and-answer talking tours and having his own 'agony uncle' website in the form of *The Red Hand Files*. Journalists are still the funnel through which he must communicate with fans, and he admits he finds it impossible to say much to them without seeing the words appearing in black and white before his eyes as he is speaking them. 'It can make you a little self-aware.'

In any case, here he is in late 2007, not doing so badly: on his way to Australia's rock 'n' roll hall of fame. An international star with million-selling recordings including 'Where the Wild Roses Grow' (his duet with fellow Australian Kylie Minogue) and classics such as 'The Ship Song', 'Red Right Hand', 'Into My Arms' and 'The Mercy Seat'. The résumé is so rich as to

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be boundless: writing a row of film scores and award-winning scripts such as *The Proposition* (2005); soundtracks for theatre and dance projects from London to Reykjavik; invitations to curate arts festivals and give lectures; the odd bit of acting over the years ('I think I've proved it's not my forte. I'm stiff as a board.');

and even a well-reviewed, if somewhat word-drunk novel, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1989), along with a set of violent, white-trash, one-page plays he worked on with Lydia Lunch when he was off his head in his twenties. It has been a long journey from those chaotic early days to singing with the likes of Johnny Cash and creating songs that people ask to be married and buried to. And yet in so many ways it is all of a piece.

'There's more to come, more to come,' Nick says, hinting at a veritable deluge: another film script in development about a sex-addicted door-to door salesman, and another novel maybe too; more soundtracks; and a collection of poems tracing the history of violence in literature that he plans to edit if the copyright issues can be ironed out. As if that's not enough, the singer launched a side-band project at the start of this year called Grinderman. Their sexed-up, prog-rock, blues-metal squall and what Nick Cave thought were some pretty satirical lyrics are already earning him a fresh round of misogyny charges from critics, as well as plenty of mid-life-crisis comments. Even from his mother.

Dawn Cave told his wife Susie, 'I think Grinderman is Nick's change-of-life record.' Nick rolls his eyes. The pornstar moustache he has taken to sporting only encourages such impressions. Even so, Nick wonders how anybody could mistake a Grinderman song such as 'No Pussy Blues' for anything other than self-mocking. A friend has messaged him earlier in the day from Los Angeles about the last Grinderman show there to say he had never seen so many girls in miniskirts in one place before. It really makes Nick laugh. He texts back this response: 'It's sexy

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music, man! The girls love it! I tell you, Grinderman are the rock 'n' roll equivalent of chick lit!¹⁸

As usual Nick feels the old reactive surges sparking extremes in him, the desire to take things even further now that people are angry or upset. 'If people think what I say in Grinderman is bad, wait till they see what I am doing next.' In this Nick has long felt an unlikely bond with a renowned feminist thinker and fellow Australian expatriate. 'I love Germaine Greer, if only for the fact she just stirs things up again. I don't always agree with everything she says but I understand, to a degree, where she's coming from: that it's not always necessary to be right. Sometimes just to provoke is enough.'¹⁹

While the self-titled Grinderman release continues to dominate Nick Cave's life over 2007, a fresh album of songs entitled *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!* is ready to go with his main band, the Bad Seeds. Like the gridlocked traffic Cave is caught in today, this new Bad Seeds album has been postponed by his record label, Mute, until people digest the Grinderman recording and the plethora of interests the singer is unleashing on the world. Mute Label boss Daniel Miller is worried about how to manage it all: the range and quantity of Nick's output verges on a mania.

What's driving all this creativity? An ex-junkie's need to stay busy, perhaps? This theory has been doing the rounds for ages. It's a post-rehab 'condition' that may have added velocity to Cave's output since the late 1990s, but a close look at the singer's life shows the raging work ethic was always there. For a time in the 1980s you could even argue Nick Cave was the hardest-working

¹⁸ Phil Sutcliffe, 'Nick Cave: Raw and Uncut 2', in Mat Snow, *Nick Cave: Sinner Saint: The True Confessions*, Plexus, London, 2011, p 231. Note: Nick's original email is lost, but the gist of his text message is repeated, as jokes so often are, in interview comments made again here.

¹⁹ Stephen Dalton, 'The Light in the Cave', *The Age*, 19 September 2004 [online], available at <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/09/17/1095320941733.html#>, accessed 4 June 2012.

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heroin addict in showbiz. At his personal worst during the West Berlin years his output was just as phenomenal, even frenzied.

People say Nick is a driven man: all those records, books, films, and live shows across the planet; all the people who have fallen in his wake. Cave seems to share in Keith Richards' hardy rock 'n' roll voodoo in that respect, standing where others have dropped like flies. Again and again friends will note how ridiculously lucky Nick is. The guy always lands on his feet. Nine lives like a cat. Others say you make your own luck. But there was something Shane Middleton, the roadie for Cave's teenage group The Boys Next Door, observed a long time ago that struck a deeper nerve: 'I don't think Nick's a driven man, but a fleeing man, running from the fear of failure.'²⁰

It was true Nick had to keep proving to himself that his talent was still there, that he hadn't dried up. Maybe he was striving to prove something to his long-dead father, too? The pop psychologists would love to hear him admit to such thoughts. 'We Call Upon the Author to Explain', a song on *Dig!!! Lazarus, Dig!!!*, goes right into the heart of that subject: rock stardom, fan worship, dead father hang-ups, disputes with God, the full technicolour yawn.²¹

*

'It's all good' – that's the shorthand Nick's older sons, Luke and Jethro, use on him whenever he bugs them about how they are going. The two sons were born to two different mothers in two different countries, Brazil and Australia, a few weeks apart in 1991. It's one way to start a decade. Nick would not begin seeing

²⁰ Robert Brokenmouth, *Nick Cave – The Birthday Party and Other Epic Adventures*, Omnibus Press, London, 1996, p 64.

²¹ Nick Cave, 'We Call Upon the Author to Explain', *Dig!!! Lazarus, Dig!!!* Mute Records, 2008

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Jethro till he was seven; distance would strain and complicate their relations as Nick reached out and tried to be a father. It would take years to bridge the gap. He'd be much more involved with Luke's day-today upbringing in London, and in some ways saved from drugs by looking after Luke. Nick came to value being a father more than anything else in the world, though he may not have appeared the most orthodox of parents at the time. He had started making changes; he was fighting to get a few things right. But it wasn't all good before he met Susie in 1998. Not at all. PJ Harvey ditching him over the phone because of his heroin habit had caused him to break down and cry.²²

It was the final wake-up call. That and Susie refusing to see him till he got clean. Luke and Jethro needing him, losing in love with PJ Harvey, knowing that heroin was blunting his ability to create as he got older, the sheer boredom of feeding a habit, the work that scoring involved, then meeting and keeping Susie, and Arthur and Earl being born. At last, at last ... his world was changing, step by step. But then the world always was. It can take a while to see that when it's your own life, like starlight reaching you long after the fact. People would ask him if his music had changed because his life had changed, but they did not understand how songs could be wishes, things made to will yourself into another state of being. It's why art was so dangerous as well as inspirational. It could make things happen, terrible things. It can also be your gaoler.

Sitting in the passenger seat, Nick Cave grows agitated once more about this ARIA Hall of Fame induction. He says that he has been told they won't include the Bad Seeds because there are 'foreigners' in the band. Nor will they include Cave's first great band, The Birthday Party, the Melbourne group that evolved out of

²² PJ Harvey appears to document their relationship and problems in 'The Garden' on *Is This Desire*. A close listen suggests Harvey is also referencing The Birthday Party song 'Mutiny in Heaven' and sending Nick a haunting correction.

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The Boys Next Door. It they who had shot-gunned him on to the English stage as the underground music icon of the post-punk era, a successor to the vaudeville viciousness of the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten and the tense interior realms of Joy Division's Ian Curtis.

Like Rotten and Curtis, Cave became a true Romantic figure on the UK cultural scene, mad, bad and dangerous to know.²³ He did not do it alone. The Boys Next Door, The Birthday Party, the Bad Seeds, they had given him his wings ... Nick Cave considers his solitary honour tonight, and says that he regards the exclusion of his bandmates as an affront 'typical' of an Australian music industry against which he has always battled, an industry that never really understood him. 'We always had this thing, too, way back then, that anybody the Australian music industry liked just couldn't be any good,' he admits. 'We didn't want to be a part of it.'

And now he has made it, the belated pat on the back. That is how it seems to him. Onya, mate! 'Foreigners!' Can you believe that? Nick re-examines his attitude from every side, the good and the bad of it, as he sits stuck here in Bleddyn's car a few hours before the ceremony. Yet it is obvious the coming evening means a great deal to him precisely because it is much-longed-for recognition from home, the one place where his Australianness can at last be understood. 'We're an Australian band making Australian music,' he will say of the Bad Seeds at the ARIAs. All

²³ Mad, bad and dangerous to know' was the phrase Lady Caroline Lamb used to describe the Romantic poet Lord Byron. Some literary historians say Lamb was really describing herself. A married woman, she rejected his early advances with these famous words, then succumbed to Byron's increased ardour, immersing herself in a passionate affair. Lovers commonly exchanged a lock of hair at the time; Lady Caroline Lamb sent a clipping of her pubic hair. Unfortunately, Byron was already struggling to end their relationship. His demonic social reputation and self-mythologising poems such as 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage' (1812–1818), were only enhanced by Lamb's pioneering Gothic novel, *Glenarvon* (1816). The book featured a thinly veiled and highly negative portrait of her ex-lover that, ironically, helped foment the grand Byronic archetype: solitary, brooding, cunning, rakish, self-destructive and mysterious. The German writer Goethe became a big fan of the novel. Nick would delve deeply into both Goethe and Byron.

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Nick's emotions center on these simple words as he puts pen to paper in the car and jots them down now.

Bleddyn brakes suddenly, almost rear-ending the truck in front, casting everyone forward for a moment. 'Sorry,' he says. Tram bells ring once more. The traffic finally moves. And Nick Cave is released from Fitzroy Street, St Kilda and all his thinking at last. Fuck them all.

That night in Sydney Nick's attention is drawn to the press release that has gone out prior to the induction. Ed St John, the Chairman of the ARIA Awards Committee, is quoted fulsomely: 'Nick Cave has enjoyed – and continues to enjoy – one of the most extraordinary careers in the annals of popular music. His contribution over the past thirty years was never limited by geography or nationality and nor could it ever be described in terms of hit records, chart positions or radio airplay. He is an Australian artist like Sidney Nolan is an Australian artist – beyond comparison, beyond genre, beyond dispute. As an industry we should be immensely proud and humbled by Nick Cave's achievements; I know I speak for the ARIA Board when I say it's a real pleasure to be inducting this artist into the Hall of Fame.'²⁴

The comparison to Nolan strikes a chord in Cave's heart just before he strides out to accept the honour and receives a standing ovation. He feels surprised, even overwhelmed by the occasion, which are not the feelings he expected after brewing over the event all day back in Melbourne. Ed St John must have known he nursed ambitions to be a painter. Cave's biggest living hero as a teenager was actually the flamboyant wunderkind of Australian art, Brett Whiteley. But Sidney Nolan, eh? The reference is oddly more on point. Whiteley flamed out on heroin; Nolan grew old and grand and endured. Almost at the microphone and those phenomenal

²⁴ Ed St John.

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Ned Kelly paintings by Sidney Nolan rise up like phantoms in Nick's mind.²⁵

Oh well, here I am, he thinks. Centre stage right. The ARIA gallows! Such is life.²⁶ But there's something brash to Nick Cave's manner as he begins to speak, something overly theatrical and forced to his speech. 'I cannot really accept this until we get a few things straight,' he says.²⁷ He then wonders loudly, too loudly it seems, why The Birthday Party and the Australian members of the Bad Seeds are not included in the Hall of Fame. And he takes it upon himself to induct them all along with him, one by one – leaving out The Birthday Party's vital original drummer, Phill Calvert. Despite Cave's insistence on giving due credit to his bandmates, the exclusion of Calvert will leave a less-generous impression in the minds of some of those who saw both The Boys Next Door and The Birthday Party in their flaming heyday. Had Nick just forgotten Phill, as he would later claim, or was it true that even thirty years after a rupture the singer could not bring himself to say thank you to an old comrade? Oh yeah, people will tell you, Nick really knows how to hold a grudge. Don't be fooled by the charm. Wait till he cuts you down, they warn, everybody gets their turn.

The fact of the matter is only one man has lasted the distance with him so far. But watching the Australian Rock Industry

²⁵ Nick's father, Colin Cave, was one of Australia's leading scholars of Ned Kelly. He organised a 1967 Easter weekend symposium that led to a book of essays edited together by Colin. See *Ned Kelly: Man and Myth*, Introduction by Colin F. Cave. Cassell Australia, Melbourne, 1968.

²⁶ 'Such is life' are purported to be the Australian outlaw Ned Kelly's last words before he was hanged on 11 November 1880. Peter Carey would write a Booker Prize-winning novel based on his life and exploits, *True History of the Kelly Gang*. As if to fulfil a generational prophecy dating back to the family history in Wangaratta, Nick Cave's son Earl would grow up to play Ned's younger brother, Dan Kelly, in the 2020 film translation of the book directed by Justin Kurzel.

²⁷ AP, 'Cave enters ARIA Hall of Fame on his own terms', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 October 2007 [online], <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/cave-enters-aria-hall-of-fame-on-his-own-terms-20100223-ox5l.html>, accessed 2 April 2012.

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Association's 2007 Hall of Fame induction ceremony on YouTube, Mick Harvey – Nick Cave's increasingly alienated collaborator and long-time musical arranger – will ponder the vanity of Nick's words and actions, the ostentatious generosity that comes *too little, too late*.

'You should be asking *yourself* the question, Nick. Just why are you on your own up there? I'd love someone to ask you – and to hear what you have to say. You did it yourself. You're the one who made it happen. That's why you are up there alone,'²⁸ says Harvey to no one in particular as he watches.

Making *Dig!!! Lazarus, Dig!!!* has rubbed the relationship between Harvey and Cave red raw. The ARIA broadcast only puts salt on the wound. In the recording studio and playing live, Nick has increasingly leant to the thinking of Bad Seeds violinist Warren Ellis. Their communication has the undertones of a bro-mance typical of Nick when a creative infatuation sets in. Harvey remembers how it was with Rowland S. Howard and Blixa Bargeld. Mick and Nick had always been more pragmatic in their bond, less romantic. It was a working friendship; but if Mick's central role in the work was being superseded, maybe there was not much of a friendship left? Mick had put up with a lot of bullshit over the years... the heroin, the chaos, the lies, the madness. Not only from Nick either. All for the work. He'd kept the wheels on when no one else was able. It was hard not to resent being re-cast as the killjoy and the grump in the band. During the making of *Dig!!! Lazarus, Dig!!!*, Mick turns something down in the mix and leaves the studio; only to return and find Nick and Warren, like mischievous schoolboys, have turned it back up again. They are chafing at the bit to rock out more. Mick is worried about subtleties in the sound. He can almost accept those creative differences, but Mick sees Nick's changed behaviour and personal asides as childishly cruel

²⁸ Mick Harvey, interview with the author, Coalcliff.

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and all too familiar when someone is being pushed out. The Bad Seeds ... one of the most sophisticated rock 'n' roll bands on the planet, with all the stunted emotional capabilities of a chapter out of *Lord of the Flies*. It was getting hurtful to be around and it was going to get worse. News of the Grinderman project was delivered to Mick as a fait accompli, a party to which he was not invited. Mick felt a crassness below it, a hunger for playing stadiums and success in America. Any Birthday Party comparisons from the critics with Grinderman were horribly misplaced. For fuck's sake, they more like Hawkwind.

Nick sees it differently, of course. He thinks Mick is drinking too much, falling into an addiction while he has left his own problems long behind. There's some terrible irony in that. Worse, though, is Mick's tyrannical anger. What used to be something that brought discipline to the band has begun to feel like bullying. Nick has to break that energy open if the Bad Seeds are to progress. It was all for the work. But all Mick Harvey can see in Nick's actions are the nastiness and an overweening hunger to be more accepted by the mainstream, not to mention a mile-wide riff of hypocrisy when it came to judging him for alcohol intake or the doubtful treatment of others. Raking over things, Mick has begun to put it down to fame finally bending Nick's mind out of shape. 'He's says he's not affected by it. But of course he is.' It will be two more years before he and Nick part ways for good. Followed by another ten years of percolating resentments and half-hearted rapprochements that fade again into the fundamental irritations between them.²⁹

In 2020, Mick would make a few stone cold observations on what had happened. 'For my exit from Nick Cave and the

²⁹ Ironically, one of Nick's attempts at healing the rift between himself and Mick Harvey involved commissioning an essay on how the pair came to write 'The Mercy Seat'. It was included in a booklet with the deluxe version of the boxed set, *Lovely Creatures – The Best of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds*, May 2017, Mute Records.

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Bad Seeds in 2009 there were irreconcilable points of difference. Things changed with how Warren Ellis and Nick Cave were collaborating. I think Warren is really great for Nick, but not necessarily for the Bad Seeds. What he wants to be is maybe in conflict with that band thing. Grinderman was one thing. Fine in isolation, but with *Dig!!! Lazarus, Dig!!!* I just found that what was really great about the Bad Seeds was being rejected. Maybe Nick wasn't interested in that any more. Also, live, Nick was interested in pushing the entertainment factor. Jumping around, a whole lot of wah-wah solos, getting people to clap along to 'Tupelo'. It's entertainment – and I've never been about the entertainment.³⁰

Nick would be aghast when Mick first laid into him with those criticisms. How could Mick honestly think he or Warren or any of the Bad Seeds cared any less about the music than they ever did? It was delusional. Despite the praises heaped upon *Dig!!! Lazarus, Dig!!!* in reviews, Nick tends to hear the compromises that were made during the recording. His homecoming to Melbourne, the ARIAs in Sydney, the exhibition about his life, turning 50 a few weeks earlier, will all reinforced an even deeper restlessness in him rather than any sense of achievement. Nick leaves the triangular-shaped award behind on his mother's mantelpiece. 'ARIA ICONS: HALL OF FAME' it reads at the base, with his name on a plaque and the date inscribed, '28 October 2007'. Nick will wonder about it on reflection as he finally departs for the UK a few weeks later. How hard it was to maintain a hold on what was occurring as he stepped up to the microphone with his trophy and the stage seemed to skew away from him. 'As if I had somehow stumbled into the wrong movie,' Nick says, 'and I was playing the wrong part.'

³⁰ Andrew Male, 'Beyond the Bad Seeds', *MOJO*, UK, 1 June 2020.

THE RIDER II

It's still in the high 30s out there, a stinker of a day. The sky is a pale, hurtful blue that seems to lose its colour in the glare. Tired eyes as grey and mineralised as the road ahead. He blinks to water them. The time is headed towards 4pm on Sunday, 7 January 1979 and he is in a hurry to get home. His white Ford Fairmont is not fitted with air-conditioning. He has the window down, an oven-temperature breeze offering little relief. As he'd passed through the Mount Buffalo National Park, then dropped out of the coolness of the high country altogether, descending into the valley below, he might have amused himself with a line from Shakespeare: 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun!'¹

A former English teacher and amateur director for the Malvern Theatre in Melbourne, Colin Cave can reel off entire stretches of the Bard, a little Dostoyevsky and Nabokov too as a moment may demand. There is a lot preying on his mind this afternoon. The weekend's triumphs are fading, and the

¹ William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, Act IV, Scene 2, spoken by Guiderius.

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troublesome question of Nick is coming back into view. Most immediately, what to do about the police charges being put against his youngest son? A bandaged cut on Colin's right thumb irritates him as he grips the wheel.²

Colin takes consolation in the words of Vladimir Nabokov: 'Existence is a series of footnotes to a vast, obscure, unfinished masterpiece.'³ Yes, there is plenty ahead for him and Nicky, and for the whole family yet. A passionately held philosophy of 'continuing education', in both life and work, connects these thoughts with the Russian author's vaguely ironic words. Fate versus will: it's an interesting theme to consider.

The bitumen of the road continues to waver before him, transforming what should be a three-hour return to Melbourne into what feels like one long drive into a heavy dream. The land around here is parched. On the horizon a few wispy rain clouds are struggling into shape.

Colin is not far outside the town of Wangaratta where he and his wife, Dawn, and their four young children – Tim, Peter, Nick and Julie – settled from late 1959 till the end of 1971. He doesn't push on into Wang. Instead Colin tears off the bitumen and on to the dirt of the Docker Road, wrenching the steering wheel out of a gravel slide as he lead-foots the accelerator. Dust trails behind him and he disappears.

Eight years may have passed, but this is an old, familiar realm. Later, questions will be nonetheless asked about what he was doing on these hazy excuses for roads. Visiting a 30-acre block of land the family had purchased as a holiday place and was yet to build on? Going to see someone? A look at the map suggests the most likely answer is that Colin Cave was taking a short cut, but the story of

² Colin Francis Cave', Inquisition, Wangaratta, Case No. F360, Reference 790809, 21 May 1979.

³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, Penguin Books Australia: Popular Penguins, 1955.

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his movements will become as faint as the legend of these roads.

Summer always made for a difficult start to the year when he worked out here in the 1960s. Trying to keep students alert in the drowsing heat. As an English teacher in Wangaratta he had enjoyed playing with the roots of language, striding into his first classes and chalking 'CAVE' then 'COLIN' side by side on the blackboard, then 'cave' and 'canen' below it, 'Latin for "beware" and "dog"!'⁴

His friend Bill O'Callaghan, the former mayor, recalls that 'like many teachers there was a bit of the thespian in him. Students ... never knew what to expect'.⁵ A flamboyant, boom-voiced lover of literature with memorably bushy eyebrows – and 'nostrils that flared like a thoroughbred when he was excited'⁶ – Colin Cave would not just recite *The Merchant of Venice* for his class, he would act it out, almost weeping the lines 'the quality of mercy is not strained'. Thirty years later his students would not only remember these displays vividly, they would describe them as life changing.

*

It was as a galvanising and sometimes over-the-top high-school teacher, then as the founding Chief Executive Officer of the town's new adult education centre, that Cave would make an impression – with still enough energy leftover to be both the director and sometime star of The Wangaratta Players. He also wrote the high-school anthem and submitted satirical verse to the local newspaper. Dawn Cave recalls how 'Colin really loved to shake things up wherever he went,' but there was a faint feeling among his children that sometimes Dad had enough energy for everything except a family.

⁴ Mary Brown, 'Introduction – the 60s', *Centre History*, The Centre for Continuing Education, Wangaratta, p 5.

⁵ Brown, *Ibid.*

⁶ Author interview with Chris Morris, 25 March 2010

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Because it was the first attempt of its kind outside of Melbourne, the Wangaratta Centre for Continuing Education was used as a test case for the expansion of adult education across the entire state. Colin Cave was not unaware of this significance, or the commitment needed to make it work. The caretaker who lived nearby remembers hearing the door frequently bang shut at 10 pm as Cave ended his day. His hands would be stained red and blue from the inks of the spirit duplicator he was forced to wrestle with so that the secretary could copy his furious output of letters and reports.⁷

Son Nick would inherit this obsessive work ethic. He would also soak up other influences that came through his father's agency. In the refurbished old school that became known as 'the Centre', Colin oversaw courses, talks, screenings of European films and exhibitions that took in such unlikely subject matter as 'Mexican Popular art' and 'American Psychedelic [sic] Posters'. As a boy, Nick treated the Centre like a second home, wandering through the rooms and events almost at will.

It was here that Colin set up a workshop for the construction of small fibreglass boats known as mirror-class dinghies. Locals loved to sail them of a weekend on the nearby man-made Yarrowonga Lake. Colin even made one for Nick, the son who seemed to feel his absences and lack of attention the most. Nick proudly notes that his father built it 'all by himself. He painted it bright yellow and named it "Caprice"'. Nick was too young to make much use of it, and not particularly interested in sailing to begin with. 'I just hung around on the foreshore of the lake,' Nick says. 'Got a crush on a girl there, though, a skinny thing called Libby Meek – mostly because she wore a Jimi Hendrix

⁷ Mary Brown, 'Introduction – the 60s', *Centre History*, The Centre for Continuing Education, Wangaratta, p 7.

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T-shirt.’ He would end up spending hours, either alone or in his mother’s company, watching his father and his older brothers and younger sister out on the water calling out to each other. Years later Nick Cave would say, ‘Dad loved that boat.’

*

When Colin Cave announced his imminent departure from Wangaratta in 1971 to become Director of the Council for Adult Education (CAE) in Melbourne many locals were saddened. He had only recently been named Wangaratta’s 1970 Citizen of the Year. Colin suggested another local teacher, Adrian Twitt, as an appropriate successor at the Centre. Unfortunately, Victoria’s rigidly conservative Liberal premier, Henry Bolte, sought to overturn this nomination. Twitt’s face had been recognised from an old newspaper photo that showed him leading a moratorium march against the Vietnam War in Melbourne. Colin opposed the premier and fought to see his colleague given the job on merit. As always, Colin Cave proved a very hard man to resist. To many people’s amazement Colin got his way, and Twitt was approved.

A full-page photo of Colin Cave was duly published in the *1971 Report from the Wangaratta Centre for Continuing Education* with these words printed boldly underneath to mark the end of an era: ‘The King is Dead – Long Live the King!’

*

Cave’s promotion to Director of the CAE was an acknowledgement of his determination and abilities. It would lead him to spend most of the 1970s cultivating a blossoming network of centres across the state, all based on what was now commonly known

as ‘the Wangaratta model’, part of a revolution in community education he had helped set in motion.⁸

On the first weekend of January 1979 he was typically hard at it, the year barely started. A classical-music ‘song camp’ had been organised in the hill town of Harrierville. For a man of Cave’s dynamism, the long drive from Melbourne to launch its debut was no obstacle. That Harrierville was a satellite of Wangaratta only added to his interest. His weekend mission successful, Colin is making his way back home on Sunday January 7th.

Tourism brochures refer to the region he passes through as ‘Kelly Country’. A sign back on the Hume Highway duly entices visitors with the slogan, ‘Legends, Wine and High Country’. Colin Cave has long been fascinated by the convergence of myth and fact in Ned Kelly’s life, the rebel hero who formed out of this frontier and continued to ride on through history as an apparition of everything from Australian Republican sentiments to something eternally independent and anti-authoritarian in the national consciousness. Way back in the Easter of 1967 he organised a national symposium in Wangaratta that would deeply affect perspectives on the outlaw in everything from historical writings through to art, film and literature. Comparisons were made to Robin Hood, William Tell and Jesse James. The great Australian historian, Manning Clark, had given the keynote address.⁹

Something of a frustrated storyteller, Colin Cave had written a florid introduction to a book that came out of this weekend entitled *Ned Kelly, Man and Myth*. It is actually one of the best and most entertaining things in the entire essay

⁸ Behind the scenes Colin Cave held even grander visions, including the establishment of the state’s first regional university in Wangaratta, towards which the Centre might be a foundation stone. The competing regional town of Geelong would steal away this dream with the advent of Deakin University in 1978

⁹ In his definitive biography of Ned Kelly, the author and historian Ian Jones would cite Colin Cave’s symposium for ‘prompting quantum leaps in my studies’: Ian Jones, ‘Preface to the First Edition’, *Ned Kelly: A Short Life*, Hachette Australia, Sydney, 2008, p viii.

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collection. Colin highlights the moment when Kelly was captured wearing the homemade armour he had forged out of melted iron ploughshares. A bizarre vision protected from gunfire, Kelly was shot in the leg and downed while searching for his younger brother outside the Glenrowan Inn at the height of its siege, his gang burnt out and brutally slaughtered in a melee that saw some 15,000 bullets rained down upon them. The bodies of Steve Hart and Dan Kelly were found burnt almost beyond recognition inside the Glenrowan Inn. Fellow gang member Joe Byrne, Ned Kelly's second in command, was in good enough condition to be placed outside and strung up against a wall like a marionette for press photographs.

Colin Cave likens this series of events to a Western by the American director John Ford.¹⁰ And he writes about it in a similar spirit of high plains drama and regal fatality. Colin's eldest son, Tim, would later caution against reading too much into a performance on the page that was as much about 'Dad's passion for theatrically expressing himself'¹¹ as any inner obsession being revealed. It is a son's subtle distinction between public performance and the private man. But it is undeniably true that you hear a highly excited voice stirring out of what would normally be a more sober historical appreciation, a voice distinguished by a rush of exclamation marks and a zeal for bloody fantasies of crime and murder that borders on the unseemly as Colin Cave enthuses over all things Ned Kelly from start to finish:

There is something in us which makes us forgive a man his sins so long as he is chivalrous. Moreover, Kelly rode a horse. This makes a man ten feet high, something to look

¹⁰ Colin F. Cave, 'Introduction', *Ned Kelly, Man and Myth* (Cassell Australia, Melbourne, 1968), p 8.

¹¹ Tim Cave, interview with the author, Melbourne.

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up to, something quick to come and go, something with that air of mystery and mastery which stirs us all ...

‘But above all, Kelly was clad in armour. Here is the impregnable disguise for which the civilized soul yearns.... In the imagination of all who think of Kelly stirs that faceless thing in iron, like Sidney Nolan’s image of Kelly, Iron with Eyes. What reckless jaunts, what romantic exploits, what criminal escapades would we indulge in if only we could be unrecognized! What would we not do if only we had some armour to climb into which would hide us, disguise us and protect us?’¹²

One does not think of the word ‘subdued’ when reading this now. And in *hearing* that voice you are immediately struck by just how much these rhetorical qualities – and the attraction to masks, as well as violent or chivalrous freedoms – would resound in the songs of his son.¹³ As a nine-year-old boy Nick never forgot seeing the suit of armour on display at his father’s symposium. The presence of the breastplate; the headpiece that looked like an upturned billycan or a welder’s visor; the iron that Kelly had beaten into shape for his last showdown at Glenrowan. Dented by bullets. ‘It really made quite an impact on me,’ Nick says. So too the photograph of dead Joe Byrne,

¹² Colin F Cave, ‘Introduction’, *Ned Kelly, Man and Myth*, Cassell Australia, Melbourne, 1968, p 9-10.

¹³ Nick Cave would repeat the story of his father reading various literary passages to him and how he saw his father transformed into a larger being in the process. It is almost certain Ned Kelly’s *Jerilderie Letter*, a rambling, often hilarious proto-republican document written as a justification for Kelly’s outlaw actions, was one of Colin Cave’s transformations. The novelist Peter Carey would note how “all the time there is this original voice – uneducated but intelligent, funny and then angry, and with a line of Irish invective that would have made Paul Keating envious. His language came in a great, furious rush” (Robert McCrum, ‘Reawakening Ned Kelly’, *The Guardian/The Observer*, UK, 7 January 2001). Sidney Nolan’s paintings are also influenced by Kelly’s *Jerilderie Letter* and what the artist saw in the words as “their blend of poetry and political engagement” (*A new home for Ned Kelly – The Ned Kelly Series*, National Gallery of Australia).

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disfigured and blackened by flames, his body held up with guy-ropes, the gruesome historical precursor to Nick's song 'Sonny's Burning' and other works.¹⁴

When he became an art student in Melbourne, Nick could truly appreciate why Sidney Nolan had made such a mysterious icon of Ned Kelly in his paintings, as if the outlaw were a medieval knight adrift in a colonial Australian Dreamtime. The connections become even more vivid when Nick speaks of his youth wandering the countryside around Wangaratta: 'It would be fair to say that, unlike much nature I have experienced, the Australian bush has always felt haunted to me, and the ghosts of its bloody past felt ever-present and still speaking to us and had yet to be laid to rest. The enduring image of Ned rising from the mist in his armour was a powerful symbol in our household, and I was often told that story by my father when I was a boy.'

Inevitably, Colin Cave's book and the stories it contained would assume its own ghostly presence in Nick's library. Footnotes to a vast, obscure, unfinished masterpiece that Nick would try to bring together in the mock-heroic title of an Australian tour that marked his first ever steps onto the stage as a solo artist in the summer of 1983-84: 'Nick Cave – Man or Myth'.

*

¹⁴ The presence of Joe Byrne's body can be found in other songs by Nick Cave. The most significant among them is 'Dead Joe', his 1982 Christmas car crash song (co-written with Anita Lane) with bizarrely personal resonances that connect it to Colin Cave's accident a few years before. Nick's decision to also read the work as poetry, however drolly, indicates how important that song was to him at the time. The reading was caught for posterity on film and is available on YouTube. There is possibly an echo of Joe Byrne's ghost, too, in Nick Cave's 1995 death row song, 'Knocking on Joe', performed by the Bad Seeds. The song is based on an American prison term for making a noise in support of a man marching to his execution, though it is also used sarcastically in reference to rape in gaol.

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Out here on what has become Docker Plains Road Colin Cave drives on alone towards the Glenrowan tourist site and the Hume Highway that will take him back to Melbourne. Everyone will remark later that he always liked to flatten the accelerator. Tunnels of dust fly from the wheels behind him, sheep graze in the sparse shade of the gum trees. Colin hopes the police charges threatened against his son – drunkenness, vandalism and petty theft – will be dismissed as nothing more than youthful tomfoolery before they are ever brought to court. They have shaken him as a parent. Trouble with Nick, now twenty-one, so much trouble; even when he was a boy. It was why they had to send him away from Wangaratta to a boarding school in Melbourne when Nick was only twelve. If only schoolboy unruliness were the issue confronting Colin and Dawn today. He hurries the car along. Getting back to Melbourne has begun to feel imperative with the police still enquiring into Nick's behaviour.

An image of Nick performing with his band The Boys Next Door lingers in Colin's mind. The way Nick had rolled round on the dance floor of the Tiger Lounge in Richmond groaning on about somebody watching him.¹⁵ When a surprised Nick saw his father mingling among the crowd, Colin Cave had given him an encouraging smile. His son had continued to roll around before jumping back on to the stage, knocking over a microphone stand in the process. Colin had gone home and told his wife, 'Nick's a phenomenon!'¹⁶ He appreciated the theatre of it, though it was not to his own musical tastes. Nick had only to show him a list of song titles to create fresh reservations: 'Sex Crimes', 'Masturbation Generation'...

¹⁵ 'Somebody's Watching', The Boys Next Door, *Door Door*, Mushroom Records, LP, April 1979.

¹⁶ Privately, Colin Cave would tell his son that he had looked 'like an angel' on stage. A description that would stay with Nick for the rest of his life, as noted in the documentary *20,000 Days on Earth*, directed by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, UK, 2014.

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Colin has lost count of the number of times he had tried to tell Nick it was beauty that would save the world; education and beauty, Nicky. He hoped the message might stick. Nick had always been a fine drawer. But he had dropped out of art school and got caught up with the band. Colin still thought his son's interest in art might lead him to become a writer and illustrator of children's books one day.

Colin Cave is even deeper now in a network of country back roads. The far-off Warby Mountains where the Kelly Gang once rode into hiding are clothed in a smoky blur. The car slips again on the gravel. He rights the wheel. Just by Bobinawarrah Memorial Hall someone comes driving towards him out of nowhere. Their dust consumes him in a cloud. Then he is out the other side of it and on into the silence again.

Some dead trees arch over the road just ahead. Countless small, brightly plumed parrots are gathered in the roadside ditches, flocks of musk lorikeets fluttering upwards and away as his car approaches. The road is long and straight.

*

A local farmer is out repairing a fence near the edge of his property when he sees an ominous cloud starting to spread. Fearing a bushfire, Michael Conroy heads on down towards it to discover it is still dispersing dust. He then sees a badly damaged vehicle that appears to have come off the road and overturned before rolling back on to its wheels. The passenger looks seriously injured. Conroy rushes back home to call the police. 'That's all I can tell.'¹⁷

¹⁷ 'Colin Francis Cave', Inquisition, Wangaratta, Case No. E360, Reference 790809, 21 May 1979.

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Senior Constable Brian Erskine receives the call at nearby Whitfield. 'From something I was told I believed it to be a fatal accident'.¹⁸ A heavy, and surprising burst of afternoon rain forces the police vehicle to slow on the Docker Road as the officer rushes to get there. At the scene of the accident Erskine notices a fallen branch on the gravel and wheel marks that indicate the car might have swerved, losing control and running off the road altogether.¹⁹ He sees a logo for the Council of Adult Education, an owl with a folded wing and a sprig of leaves beside it, on the buckled door. The roof is bent in badly. It's clear the man behind the wheel is deceased. The officer then finds a metal ID tag that the driver wore hanging from a chain around his neck. Unable to locate his family in Melbourne despite repeated phone calls, Senior Constable Erskine summons Adrian Twitt to the hospital in Wangaratta. Twitt will formally identify the body as 'Colin Francis Cave', relationship 'friend.'

'There was nothing to show that anything had happened to him at all, apart from a bandage around his head,' Twitt says now. 'You'd think he was just asleep, there was not another mark on him.'²⁰

A coroner finds that Colin Cave was killed on impact. Colleagues use phrases such as 'the prime of his life' and 'the peak of his career' to express their dismay at his death. Descriptions like 'meticulous', 'hard working' and 'man with a vision' are also used. The formalities behind such words sound clichéd, but his presence was so vital Adrian Twitt was stunned to be told Colin Cave was fifty-three; Twitt presumed him to be a decade

¹⁸ Colin Francis Cave', Inquisition, Wangaratta, Case No. F360, Reference 790809, 21 May 1979.

¹⁹ Colin Francis Cave', Inquisition, Wangaratta, Case No. F360, Reference 790809, 21 May 1979.

²⁰ Adrian Twitt, interview with the author, Wangaratta, 25 March 2010.

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younger, as most local people had. 'I never would have thought he was that old,' Twitt says, 'not even close!'

Eventually a room will be set aside at The Centre and renamed The Colin Cave Gallery to honour a figure who still looms large in the memories of the town, even as his name fades with the lives and memories of a generation that knew him as the dynamo who changed their world and the shape of adult education across the state. The gallery was opened by Dawn Cave in 1994. Tim had driven her to Wangaratta for the occasion. Peter and Julie were bound by work commitments in Melbourne. Nick was overseas and also unable to attend the ceremony.

Inside the gallery there is nothing much to show today but a bare foldout meeting table, stacked rows of plastic chairs pushed against a wall and a large black-and-white photo of Colin Cave, framed and tucked into a seemingly neglected corner.

