

INTO YOUR ARMS NICK CAVE'S SONGS REIMAGINED

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FROM THE CURATORS

It began with a simple idea, and through some deft curating of talent, eighteen of Australia's finest writers bought in, climbed aboard, and *Minds Went Walking: Paul Kelly's Songs Reimagined* became more than a dream.

Now, here we are with volume two: *Into Your Arms: Nick Cave's Songs Reimagined*. Although Jock Serong (from volume one) couldn't come along for the ride, we were more than fortunate that Kirsten Krauth – a Nick Cave aficionado-bar-none and editor extraordinaire – agreed to join the team.

Harking back to the 1970s with The Boys Next Door (before morphing into The Birthday Party), to his forty years with The Bad Seeds, the depth and breadth of Nick's catalogue provides a deep, rich and often dark vein to explore. Just the thing for our collected group of writers to sink their teeth into.

As with the first volume, we've again corralled twenty-one of Australia's pre-eminent authors and we would like to thank all of them – Sarah Bailey, Tony Birch, Emily Brewin, Rhett Davis, Jon Doust, Richard J. Frankland, Goldie Goldbloom, Andy Griffiths, Ben Hobson, Toni Jordan, Cate Kennedy, Melissa Manning, Mykaela Saunders, Gillian O'Shaughnessy, Bram Presser, Kirsten Tranter,

Christos Tsiolkas and Arnold Zable – who joined us on this journey. Some of them have retained the song title as their story title; others have forged something new. Either way, you will find the original title of the Nick Cave song running vertically down the story's title page.

Each contributor has selected a Nick Cave classic, dug deep into the lyrics, basked in its mood, and reimagined it in their own inimitable style. From brash, angst-ridden tearaway, to today's more introspective, even spiritual man, Nick Cave – and his music – is ever-evolving. And it is this life-spanning ebb and flow, culminating in a re-birth (of sorts), that we've hoped to capture with this collection. We certainly hope you enjoy the reimaginings of our writers as we deliver this anthology into your hands.

– Mark Smith and Neil A. White

DANCE HALL DAYS
CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS

RELEASE THE BATS

DANCE HALL DAYS

I was shopping for Christmas presents when I bumped into Marlene.

It was a sweltering day, the oppressive heat coming on unexpectedly after days of shitty wintery weather that had us pulling out our jumpers and overcoats. I had decided to visit my aunt in Oakleigh, who had recently been in hospital for day surgery. I found her tethering the tomato plants in the garden. She ignored my protestations that she should be resting. ‘Staying in bed makes you sicker,’ she snorted. She brewed coffee and ordered me to eat two large pieces of the spinach pie she had baked that morning. Afterwards, I headed to the local shopping strip.

We had decided not to buy new gifts this year. Our nieces and nephews were now mostly adults – only Eva and Simon were under eighteen. My intention was to buy only from op shops: small trinkets, or second-hand books. By noon the temperature had reached the high thirties, and I was glad to enter the cool of the Vinnies on Crewe Road. I wandered the aisles and stopped to rummage through a collection of old vinyl records. There was little of interest. Classical selections, Bach and Tchaikovsky, the glue long unstuck from the seals on the cover; or disco twelve inches from the eighties. I picked up a copy of Aretha Franklin’s ‘Freeway of Love’ and grinned at the garish pink and purple colours on the

sleeve. A voice behind me, a little gravelly, the tell of a smoker, muttered, 'That's not one of her best.'

'Well,' I answered, still holding up the record, 'it's Aretha, so there's a lot of competition.' I turned. 'Marlene, is that you?'

It was startling to see her without make-up. At high school, she had been the first goth, her face plastered with white powder that accentuated the almond curve of her enormous eyes. Back then she was always getting into trouble for dyeing the skirts and jumpers of her uniform black. She was heavier now, and her hair was completely grey, cut short in an almost martial style. When we were young, she always wore it long, and she would tease and gel it so it seemed to rise in a jagged halo of raven lightning bolts from atop her head. Yet those eyes were unmistakable, and they still flashed with a becoming sharpness.

She nodded. And then, abruptly, but in a gesture that conveyed affection, she grabbed my arm.

'No need to ask whether it is really you,' she chuckled, and then added, seriously, 'I am so proud of what you've done.'

I mumbled a thank you, and held up the old record.

'My niece, Sonia, is obsessed with eighties kitsch. I'm thinking of giving her this as a gift.'

She shrugged. 'It's certainly kitsch.'

That did it. I decided to buy the record.

She let go of my arm. 'Have you got time for a coffee?'

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I followed her as she marched across the arcade. The unrelenting heat had driven everyone indoors. The banks of outdoor seats were empty. She turned down a small side street and we entered a tiny

coffee shop, arrays of Balkan and Mediterranean cakes behind the glass, the counter covered with Orthodox Christmas breads. She curtly nodded at the young women behind the counter, and we ordered our coffees. That done, she swerved and continued walking out the back of the shop, past the narrow kitchen where an older man and a youth were stripped down to their singlets. The blast from the ovens was brutal and they were constantly raising their arms to their brows to wipe away the sweat. ‘*Geia sou*, Niko. Hello, Pavi,’ she called out. The young man smiled at her and nodded in greeting. The old Greek was grimly fixed on his task of kneading rolls.

She opened the back door that led to the toilet. There was a small garden table and two chairs, the white paint chipped and curling along the slats of the furniture. An ashtray, near overflowing with butts, was sitting on the table.

‘Good,’ Marlene announced with a wide grin. ‘It’s free.’

She plonked herself on a chair and I sat across from her. She rummaged through her handbag and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. I didn’t recognise the wrapper: it wasn’t the usual faecal brown of Australian packets. She offered me one and I shook my head.

‘You don’t mind if I smoke?’

‘No, not at all.’ Though I was starting to regret my agreeing to the coffee. There was no shade in the small courtyard and there was a sour ammonia stink coming from the bins a few metres away from us. The sun was directly above us.

She lit the cigarette, blew out a long trail of smoke.

‘Dimitri, who owns this place, lets me smoke here. Oakleigh used to be great for smokers.’ Her face soured. ‘Then fucking Labor decided they needed to out-nanny state The Greens on the council and they started getting Nazi with the fines. Poor Dimitri, he got

saddled with thousands of bucks of fines over one weekend.' She smiled sadly. 'He's a good anarchist, keeps this place here for old diehard gaspers like me.'

I was looking down at my lap, at the record. Would the heat buckle it? The young woman came out with the coffees and placed them on the table, and as she did so, she took a puff from the cigarette, and handed it back to Marlene.

Marlene leaned across and pointed at the vinyl.

'Hey, Jasleen, be a love and put this behind the counter.'

With an embarrassed smile, I handed her the record.

'And Jas,' Marlene added, 'can we have some water?'

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The latte was good, strong and aromatic. I sipped at it slowly, suddenly shy. It had been decades since we had seen each other. Marlene and I had been friends, good friends even, yet I had also been intimidated by her querulous energy. In that wistful vertigo, there was a flash of memory. Our last year at high school, a party at Christine Tsingas' house and my getting up excitedly to dance to Echo & the Bunnymen's 'The Cutter'. I had loved that record and I had a crush on their drummer, Pete de Freitas. Marlene had refused to get up and dance. She was slouched on the sofa, smoking a joint and looking bored, in a tight black bodice and a skirt of heavy purple faux satin. The blue-and-white swirls of the Evil Eye sitting on her plum cleavage. 'Come on,' I insisted, 'come dance.' She had shaken her head. 'I'm disappointed in the new LP,' she answered. 'It's not a patch on *Crocodiles*.' I had nodded my assent. Though I continued dancing, my joy in the song had gone.

Fuck you, Marlene. I was glad I had bought 'Freeway of Love'!

I chuckled.

‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ I answered, ‘I was just thinking of us at high school, how we thought we knew it all.’

Marlene affected a mock shudder. ‘God, I hated that time. I thought everyone hated me.’

And I thought everyone pitied me.

Marlene butted out the cigarette, and grabbed her bag off the ground, placed it on the table. She searched, found a handkerchief and raised first her left arm, and then her right, wiping furiously. I noticed that her armpits were unshaven, and I silently berated myself. I was disturbed at the thickness of the swirls of glistening black hair.

‘Excuse me.’

She got to her feet and pushed open the door to a small lean-to, the shed next to the toilet. She came back pulling at an old cantilever garden umbrella. She shook it and it rained a fine dust. She promptly raised it and pushed the long rod through the hole of the table. One of the shades was torn, but the sudden sweep of shadow was glorious. She fell back on her chair.

‘Sorry,’ she muttered, ‘I’m hopeless in the heat.’ Then, shrugging, added, ‘Though I’m fucking hopeless in all weather nowadays.’

She lit another cigarette. ‘I seem to be enduring the longest menopause in history.’ She grimaced. ‘God is male and he fucking hates women.’

But after a long draw of water, she was smiling. ‘Tell me, what are you working on now? Is it television or is it a movie?’

The ancient, wicked force of the impulse was staggering: I had to stop myself from reaching for the cigarette packet.

‘Nothing,’ I said quietly.

‘I loved you in that movie, it was a few years ago, where you played a Serb farmer. And your son had lost his kid. I cried in that movie, it was beautiful. What was it called?’

‘*Tribute*.’ And that old pleasant vanity returned, the flush of pride.

‘That’s right. You made a good Serb.’

‘*Jedno lice, jedna rasa*.’

Marlene laughed out loud. ‘Did I teach you that?’

I nodded, laughing as well. In the toilets back of The Club in Collingwood, after woofing up two strong lines of speed, she and I staring at our faces in the dirty mirror. And hadn’t she said to me that night, ‘You should try make-up. You’d make a pretty girl?’

‘It was a good movie.’

It was, but it had lasted a week in the cinemas.

I hadn’t spoken to Zoran for over two years. Was he still trying to get a new film up? The poor bastard had spent twelve years on *Tribute*, battling the funding bodies who questioned the family being Serbian, who wanted the old man to be played by a Sam Neill or a Russell Crowe. He had remortgaged his apartment and by the time we had finished the shoot, the new regime at Screen Australia thought the family was too white. God, how I hated the industry.

I slurped the last of my coffee and realised that Marlene was looking at me quizzically.

‘I’ve given up acting.’

‘Don’t say that.’ Her tone was adamant. ‘You’re good, we’re so proud of you.’

She took hold of my hand, her grasp firm and vital.

‘I saw *Tribute* with Stephen Chan, remember him?’

Terribly handsome, an immaculate dresser, the first boy I knew

to wear pomade in his hair. Or at least the first who wasn't an uncle.

'How is he?'

'He's good. We've kept in touch, and he comes out regularly to visit his mother. He's been living in Zurich for decades.' She scratched at her forehead. 'His lover died and left him a fortune.'

'I'm sorry about his lover.'

'I never knew him. He was old even back then. Stephen met him when he was a steward for Qantas. That wasn't long after school.'

'Still, that's a long time together. It must be difficult for him.' I swallowed. 'The grief, I mean.'

'Yes.' There was something hard in how she bit on the word.

Her hand hovered over the cigarette packet. She drew it back. 'Anyway, he loved the film as well.' Her voice became a growl. 'You have to keep acting.'

I did not look at her. 'I'm too old.'

'Bullshit.'

'And it's too hard.'

Her silence unnerved me. I glanced over at her; she was nodding.

'You were never ruthless.'

Another shaming rise of memory. Performing in a theatrical adaptation of *The Return of Martin Guerre* at Belvoir, overhearing Cate and Neil chatting, her saying, 'He's talented, and a nice guy, but he prefers the shadows,' and him exclaiming, 'Yes, yes, there's no fire in him!' The pity in both their voices.

I sipped the last of my water.

'Cees and I have bought a farm, a small place, near Deans Marsh. We're retiring there.'

Even as I said the words, they sounded stilted. We'd both finished our coffee. I didn't want another one.

‘What does he do?’

‘He’s an engineer, his passion is the environment. He was in parks management. He’s good at what he does and I’m sure he could work from anywhere.’ I could hear it, the pride returning to my voice. ‘He wants a farm and he wants to raise goats and he wants some peace.’ This time I placed my hand over hers. ‘Maybe we’re not old, Marlene, but we’re definitely not young.’

She didn’t move, yet I sensed her discomfort. I pretended to yawn and moved my hand away.

‘And how’s Jackson? Are you still both working for the unions?’

Her tone was dispassionate. ‘Jackson died five years ago. Cancer. It was fast. Thankfully it was fast.’

I didn’t move. I didn’t say anything. We no longer knew each other. She reached for the cigarettes, and this time she took one out of the packet and lit it. Her decision activated mine. I got up, and I grabbed her tight. There was the frightening moment of resistance – had I angered her? – and then she allowed me to embrace her. My face was in her hair, I smelt the lime scent of her shampoo, the dank odour of her sweat and the wafting plumes of tobacco. I released her.

She wiped her eyes. There were only a few tears.

‘I’m okay,’ she said, smiling again. ‘You know I’m a tough cunt.’

I sat back on the chair. ‘Yeah, you’re certainly that.’

‘It’s been hardest for Rena.’ She sucked on her cigarette. ‘Our daughter.’

‘How old is she?’

‘Twenty-seven.’

There was a magnificent fierceness to her mien as she sat there, blowing out a long draft of smoke, her back straight and rigid.

‘Jackson wanted kids. I wasn’t sure.’

She looked at me, the gaze unforgiving.

‘I was right. I’m not a very good mother.’

She won’t allow me to begin an objection.

‘Don’t say a fucking word. I’m not a terrible mother, I’m not a cruel or violent or vindictive parent. But being a mother bored the shit out of me. Jackson was a good father. He loved it. So I don’t carry any guilt.’ She winked at me. ‘You and I survived our parents, Rena can survive me.’

And we are not in our late fifties, we are in our late teens, and I am crying and trying to fight Mrs Vlahovic off her daughter, a woman transfigured into a banshee from her daughter’s stubbornness and defiance, a sponge sodden with soap water in her hands as she tries to slash the make-up from Marlene’s face, Mr Vlahovic banging his fists hard into his forehead behind us, shouting, ‘*Nemoj, nemoj, Marika!*’ And not long after that my own mother is howling and punching her own breasts, shouting, ‘He is killing me, Marlene, he is destroying me,’ and I am sobbing, and Marlene is saying, over and over again, ‘He’s no different, Eleni, he’s still your son, he still loves you and you still love him,’ and my mother is leaping from her chair, her face miraculously now free of tears, screaming at me, ‘*Ochi!* I don’t love him, I can never love what he is!’

Yes, we survived them and we buried them and we loved them and we know now that they loved us.

‘Rena will be okay,’ I said.

The tinny and muffled ringtone made us both jump. Marlene rummaged through her bag, grabbed her phone and glanced at it. She mouthed, ‘Sorry.’

‘Speak of the devil.’ There was a brightness to Marlene’s tone

as she spoke into the phone, a cheer that sounded hollow. She had turned her body away from me. I picked up my phone, opened my mail. I swiped and deleted.

‘She doesn’t have to pay me now. But she does have to pay me.’ Marlene’s voice dropped to a low burr. She was hunched over, and the suggestion of something meek in her posture saddened me. It aged her. ‘Not now,’ she continued, ‘we’ll speak about it later.’ The metal legs of the chair scraped across the cement as she moved further away from the table. I opened Google, typed in the words *the guardian*, tried to look fascinated as I scrolled. ‘I’m with an old friend, from high school.’ She mentioned my name. ‘You know ... the actor?’ Marlene clicked her tongue in annoyance. ‘You do know him,’ she insisted. I got up, pointed to the toilet.

The roof was a sheet of corrugated iron, and the heat was broiling. The small space reeked of urine. I pissed, flushed, and sprayed a sickly-sweet deodoriser over the toilet bowl. A pipe rattled and groaned as I turned on the tap; the weak stream of water was an ugly brown. I wiped my hands over my shorts and went back outside.

Marlene was holding her phone. She smiled listlessly as I took my seat.

‘I bought Rena a ticket to the Nick Cave concert at Hanging Rock for her birthday last month.’ There was that disquieting monotone in her voice. ‘Did you go?’

‘No, I wish I had.’

‘I thought it would be a nice mother-and-daughter thing to do. We don’t share a lot of things, but we do both love him.’ As Marlene sat up, there was the snap of anger in her voice, and the ire seemed to animate her. She no longer seemed old. ‘Anyway, she

asked if it was okay if I gave my ticket to her girlfriend, Ariana. Like a fuckwit, I said yes. But now they're both pissed off with me because I'm insisting that her friend pays me back the money for *her* ticket.' Her hand took the lighter. 'Am I being unfair?'

I thought back to our parents. Even though they hated the clothes we wore and how we cut our hair and the music we listened to and how Australian we were becoming, Dad would always slip twenty dollars in my pocket before I went out. And no matter whatever time we came home, even if it was dawn, Marlene's mother would be up, waiting for her.

'No, Marlene, you are not being unfair.'

She still smoked the same way she did as a young woman, vehemently, as if sucking the life out of her cigarettes.

'Remember that Birthday Party gig at the Ballroom?'

Her eyes flashed. 'That was amazing. I think that was the best speed I ever had.'

I nodded, and the sourness of the coffee I'd just had and the saltiness of the sweat on my lips tasted of that night so long ago, in the toilets of the club, when Cole and I had just snorted the drugs and the rush was building from a knot in the back of my head and exploding through my body. Cole's eyes were wide, shining, as he leaned in and kissed me. That first time. His sourness and his saltiness.

'I had to pull you and Cole out of the guys' dunny, remember? I thought we were going to miss the band.'

I laughed out loud. 'I was just thinking about that! You were furious, pushing and shoving everyone, making a beeline to the mosh pit. Cole and I just followed you.'

She was beaming. 'Yeah, I was always the best at getting up front.'

'Then they started playing 'Release the Bats' and Cole and I are

thrashing and pogo-ing and I turn around to see you with your arms crossed, looking daggers at the stage.' I winked at her. 'You hated that song.'

She was no longer smiling. 'No, I didn't.' Then she relented. 'Did I?' 'You thought they were taking the piss out of goths.'

She stabbed out her cigarette. 'I was right.' She shook with laughter. 'I was a bit of a self-righteous prick, wasn't I?'

'I met him once.'

Even as I uttered the words, I was embarrassed.

'Nick Cave?'

'Yeah. It was around the time I was cast in that Weir film.' I winced, and hesitated.

'Go on,' she said gently.

And I was prepared. To act, to perform. To recite a story that I had told over countless dinner tables, to embellish a small quiet moment and turn it into an anecdote.

Marlene was staring intently at me. I was not going to bullshit.

'It was an interview for a radio station in Sydney. I got there early, and he was already in the green room. He was smoking and offered me a cigarette. It was just a few minutes together, he asked me about the film. He was charming. Then some young guy came in and said, "It's time, Mr Cave".'

And how he had turned as he was leaving, mouthed the words, 'Good luck'. How enormous that polite and gracious gesture had been for me. I smiled at Marlene. 'That's it, not much of a story.'

'It's good to know he isn't a prick.'

I leaned across the table. 'Marlene, you said to me once that you'd been to a party in St Kilda and Cave was there with all these musos and they had a cassette tape of a woman being murdered.'

You said that all these musos were sitting around laughing at the woman's terror and that you were pissed off and shouted at them all. That you told them they were all fucking sexist degenerates and you stormed off.'

She didn't blink.

'It wasn't true.' She looked down and the sheepish cast of shame disguised the grey hair and the double chin and the deep wrinkles at the corners of her mouth. She looked so very young.

'It was probably a story I heard off someone and I wanted to make my own.' She shook her head violently, as if needing to dislodge the past. 'I thought I was just a daggy and ugly wog chick. I desperately wanted to be cool.'

I grabbed her hand, and this time didn't let go.

On leaving, we exchanged numbers, and she bought me a loaf of Orthodox bread for Christmas. On the street she kissed me goodbye, hard on the lips.

I was halfway down the freeway when I remembered the record. It was too late to turn back.

Cees was still at work. I wandered to our back room, where we keep all the old vinyl. I pulled out a copy of *Junkyard*, thought about wrapping it up and gifting it to Sonia. I sat and stared at the cover, at the gruesome heavy metal cartoon of the grinning monster riding the steampunk truck. I put it back and kept flicking through the records till I came across an old twelve-inch single of 'You Spin Me Round (Like a Record)', the faded green price tag from Brashs still stuck on the sleeve. I pulled it off the shelf and I held it for the longest time. Until I heard the key click in the door, until Cees came home.