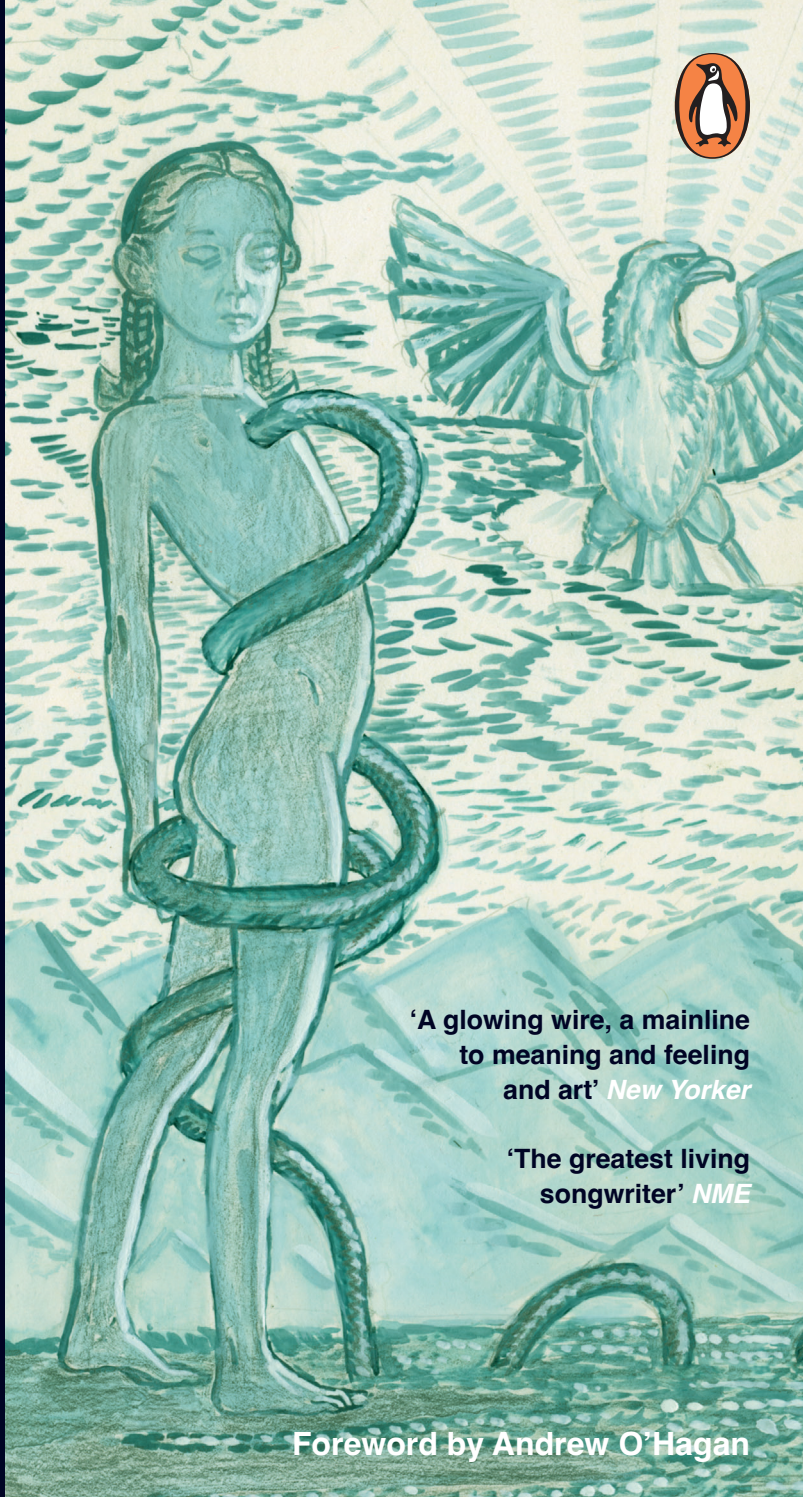




Nick Cave

The Complete Lyrics 1978–2022



**‘A glowing wire, a mainline
to meaning and feeling
and art’ *New Yorker***

**‘The greatest living
songwriter’ *NME***

Foreword by Andrew O’Hagan

PENGUIN BOOKS

THE COMPLETE LYRICS 1978–2022

Musician and author Nick Cave has been performing music for more than forty years and is best known as the songwriter and lead singer of Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds. Cave's body of work also covers a wider range of media and modes of expression including film score composition and ceramic sculpture.

‘And I only am escaped to tell thee’ – JOB

The Complete Lyrics 1978–2022

Nick Cave



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Foreword

Andrew O'Hagan

When you say a love song is haunting, you might mean several things:

- a. That you are frightened by its beauty.
- b. That you are altered by what it makes you recognize.
- c. That its refusal to go away amplifies your capacity for wonder.
- d. That the song is ageless.
- e. That its sound appears to repair the loss it identifies.
- f. That it serves up a load of pain you made yourself.
- g. That it makes you homesick for a place you have never been.
- h. All of the above. And more.

There are doctors of this particular philosophy. There are experts, gurus, poets of the form, whose work enlarges the spirit of these enquiries. But, for anybody who loves music, there will be a particular voice, a writer and performer whose body of work gives new dimensions to what we are talking about. For my money: Nick Cave. I can think of no other lyricist who goes so far, who digs so deep. For forty years, his sense of the sublime, his depiction of the invisible, the demented, the burning, the unforeseen, have served to explode all the rock clichés when it comes to imagining love. 'The sidewalks are full of love's lonely children,' he sang as a young punk. 'The sidewalk regrets that we had to kill them.' Take that, Cole Porter and Jacques Brel.

The other day, listening to ‘Waiting for You’ from his latest album *Ghosteen*, I felt Nick must surely be our chief modern elegist. With fierce imaginings, bright revelations, he never fails to keep the human close, the heart audible. Nick is a son of William Blake in our own dark forests, a curator of strange beasts. He is a fiction-maker of the first water, a self-searcher at the peak of his powers, and it is time to say, time for me anyhow, that his lyrics – so rich in the toils of love, so committed to memory and everlasting presence – are the best-made of his generation. Great writers don’t give you something to look at – they show you how to see. A writer’s job is not to defend what she believes but to animate what she can barely tolerate. As the poet Robert Duncan once said, ‘poetry’s function is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it.’ Nick Cave is among those rare birds that can fly through the ether they invent. He is not a collector of essences but an essence in himself, his lyrics forming a modern blues epic of love and loss.

When I was really young, about sixteen, living about twenty-five miles from Glasgow, I was only slowly realizing the Old Testament could be a work of everyday realism. But from a box bedroom you can greet the world, and John Peel’s radio show, at 10 p.m. on the dot, revealed to me a whole new manner of enchantment. On 9 April 1984, Peel broadcast a session with Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds, and I listened to it – well, I say listened. I inhabited the songs and the songs inhabited me, precisely, intuitively, shockingly. For a young man fresh to romance and with hopes of becoming a novelist, the lyrics were stunning. I’ll never forget the thrum of the bass coming into the programme, the antic piano, but it was the words of ‘Saint Huck’, painterly and precise, winnowing the sad interior, that struck me most. The dark outside my bedroom window never looked more inviting.

Was it his voice that was elevating the lyrics or the lyrics that were elevating his voice? Both, probably. I knew that Iggy Pop and Lou Reed and Kurt Weill and The Pop Group and Leonard Cohen and Allen Ginsberg and Edith Piaf and Jim Morrison and Captain Beefheart and Johnny Cash and the boys in Wire would have

loved this lyrical magic, these spiritual findings, these songs of men and misfortune and hullabaloo, this new literature, this loneliness-busting derangement of all the settled categories about love and ruin. The last song in the session was 'From Her to Eternity' and it brought our tiny house down. 'But ah know that to possess her,' he sang, 'Is therefore not to desire her.' My pals adored him; so did I. The tone of the Psalms, of liturgical experience raised to the level of ordinary human menace, shines from the centre of Nick's imagination, and twenty-five albums.

A person looking for true love is reaching for the divine. That is not the end of a problem but the very beginning of one, a beautiful, dreadful task. In Nick's lecture, 'The Secret Life of the Love Song', printed here in the book, he speaks about a strange manifestation of sadness in the writing of love songs. 'Writing allowed me direct access to my imagination, to inspiration and, ultimately, to God.' He seeks, as I suggested before, to actualize the scarcely imaginable, and that is the proper duty of an artist captivated by love, for love is not just a piece of luck we had but is often a catastrophe we made. When I think back, my first acquaintance with Nick Cave's writing arrived like a sort of permission to be an adult: he dignifies sadness, he blends melancholy into the colours of existence, setting us free not *from* pain, but allowing us the freedom to feel it and live on. To persist inside what he calls 'the clamour of love' – that is our opportunity and our curse.

Nothing is deeper than black ink. When you see these lyrics written down – and here we have everything, the whole torrid march towards the light – you truly see the progress of a passionate mind and a willing heart. Nick Cave has always had the soul of an Irish balladeer: think 'Lucy', think of 'Black Hair', the ceaseless, liturgical repetition of the words, the call to communion with the listener, sharing the loss. Think of 'Nobody's Baby Now' – 'She lives in my blood and skin' – and the uplifting soul of the bereft, an experience we can all recognize, the struggle to lay the ghost down. Think of 'Into My Arms', a modern prayer, a lullaby for all the lost lovers, all the children, all of you. A great lyricist makes

paths and tributaries for all our dreams, and like a walking angel he takes your hand, giving the sense, the illusion, if only for a song, that you are not alone.

Near the end of his life, I was in New Zealand with John Peel. We found ourselves in the rather hilarious position of being called upon, momentarily, to represent British culture. We weren't complaining, the hotels were nice and we had lots to talk about. On the way to Waiheke Island, we talked about our favourite records, and I asked him to name the greatest love song. 'There are too many,' he said, and I imagined he meant too many bands, too many shining ragamuffins of love, too many heartbroken geniuses remembering teenage kicks, too much Elmore James, too much of The White Stripes, too much by The Ramones, Joy Division and The Smiths. 'No,' he said. 'Too many by Nick Cave.'

Andrew O'Hagan
London, 2020

The Secret Life of the Love Song

West Country Girl

With a crooked smile and a heart-shaped face
Comes from the West Country where the birds sing bass
She's got a house-big heart where we all live
And plead and counsel and forgive
Her widow's peak, her lips I've kissed
Her glove of bones at her wrist
That I have held in my hand
Her Spanish fly and her monkey gland
Her Godly body and its fourteen stations
That I have embraced, her palpitations
Her unborn baby crying, 'Mummy'
Amongst the rubble of her body
Her lovely lidded eyes I've sipped
Her fingernails, all pink and chipped
Her accent which I'm told is 'broad'
That I have heard and has been poured
Into my human heart and filled me
With love, up to the brim, and killed me
And rebuilt me back anew
With something to look forward to
Well, who could ask much more than that?
A West Country girl with a big fat cat
That looks into her eyes of green
And meows, 'He loves you,' then meows again

That was a song called 'West Country Girl'. It is a Love Song.

It began, in its innocence, as a poem, written about two years ago in Australia, where the sun shines. I wrote it with my heart in my mouth, detailing in list form the physical details which drew me toward a particular person . . . the West Country Girl. It set forth my own personal criteria of beauty, my own particular truth about beauty, as angular, cruel and impoverished as it probably was. It was a list of things I loved, and, in

truth, a wretched exercise in flattery, designed to win the girl. And it worked and it didn't work. But the peculiar magic of the Love Song, if it has the heart to do it, is that it *endures* where the object of the song does not. It attaches itself to you and together you move through time. But it does more than that, for just as it is our task to move forward, to cast off our past, to change and to grow, in short, to forgive ourselves and each other, the Love Song holds within it an eerie intelligence all of its own – to reinvent the past and to lay it at the feet of the present.

'West Country Girl' began in innocence and in sunshine, as a simple poem about a girl. But it has done what all true Love Songs must do in order to survive, it has demanded the right to its own identity, its own life, its own truth. I've seen it grow and mutate with time. It presents itself now as a cautionary tale, as a list of ingredients in a witches' brew, it reads as a coroner's report, or a message on a sandwich-board worn by a wild-eyed man who states, 'The End of the World is at Hand.' It is a hoarse voice in the dark that croaks, 'Beware . . . beware . . . beware.'

Anyway, I'm getting ahead of myself. My name is Nick Cave, and I've got a few things to tell you.

People Ain't No Good

People just ain't no good
I think that's well understood
You can see it everywhere you look
People just ain't no good

We were married under cherry trees
Under blossom we made our vows
All the blossoms come sailing down
Through the streets and through the playgrounds

The sun would stream on the sheets
Awoken by the morning bird
We'd buy the Sunday newspapers
And never read a single word

People they ain't no good
People they ain't no good
People they ain't no good

Seasons came, seasons went
The winter stripped the blossoms bare
A different tree now lines the streets
Shaking its fists in the air

The winter slammed us like a fist
The windows rattling in the gales
To which she drew the curtains
Made out of her wedding veils

People they ain't no good
People they ain't no good
People they ain't no good

To our love send a dozen white lilies
To our love send a coffin of wood
To our love let all the pink-eyed pigeons coo
That people they just ain't no good
To our love send back all the letters
To our love a valentine of blood
To our love let all the jilted lovers cry
That people they just ain't no good

It ain't that in their hearts they're bad
They can comfort you, some even try
They nurse you when you're ill of health
They bury you when you go and die
It ain't that in their hearts they're bad
They'd stick by you if they could
But that's just bullshit, baby
People just ain't no good

People they ain't no good
People they ain't no good
People they ain't no good
People they ain't no good

I performed an earlier, more conservative, lo-tech version of this lecture at the Poetry Academy in Vienna last year. I was invited to go there and actually *teach* a group of adult students about song-writing. But first they wanted me to give a public lecture. The subject I chose was the Love Song, and in doing it – I mean, standing up in front of a crowd of people and *teaching, lecturing* – I was filled with a host of conflicting feelings. The strongest, most insistent of these feelings was one of abject *horror*. Horror, because my late father was an English-literature teacher at the highschool I attended back in Australia – you know, where the sun shines. I have very clear memories of being about twelve years old and sitting, as you are now, in a

classroom or hall, watching my father, who would be standing, up here, where I am standing, and thinking to myself, gloomily and miserably – for, in the main, I was a gloomy and miserable child – ‘It doesn’t really matter what I do with my life as long as I don’t end up like my father.’ Now, at forty-one years old, it would appear that there is virtually no action I can take that does not draw me closer to him, that does not make me more like him. At forty-one years of age I have become my father, and here I am, ladies and gentlemen, *teaching*.

Looking back over the last twenty years a certain clarity prevails. Amidst the madness and the mayhem, it would seem I have been banging on one particular drum. I see that my artistic life has centred around an attempt to articulate an almost palpable sense of loss which laid claim to my life. A great gaping hole was blasted out of my world by the unexpected death of my father when I was nineteen years old. The way I learned to fill this hole, this void, was to write. My father taught me this as if to prepare me for his own passing. Writing allowed me direct access to my imagination, to inspiration and, ultimately, to God. I found that through the use of language I was writing God into existence. Language became the blanket that I threw over the invisible man, which gave him shape and form. The actualizing of God through the medium of the Love Song remains my prime motivation as an artist. I found that language became a poultice to the wounds incurred by the death of my father. Language became a salve to longing.

The loss of my father created in my life a vacuum, a space in which my words began to float and collect and find their purpose. The great W. H. Auden said, ‘the so-called traumatic experience is not an accident, but the opportunity for which the child has been patiently waiting – had it not occurred, it would have found another – in order that its life become a serious matter.’ The death of my father was the ‘traumatic experience’ Auden talks about which left the hole for God to fill. How beautiful the notion that we create our own personal

catastrophes and that it is the creative forces within us that are instrumental in doing this. Here our creative impulses lie in ambush at the side of our lives, ready to leap forth and kick holes in it – holes through which inspiration can rise. We each have our need to create, and sorrow itself is a creative act.

Though the Love Song comes in many guises – songs of exaltation and praise, songs of rage and of despair, erotic songs, songs of abandonment and loss – they all address God, for it is the haunted premise of longing that the true Love Song inhabits. It is a howl in the void for love and for comfort, and it lives on the lips of the child crying for his mother. It is the song of the lover in need of their loved one, the raving of the lunatic supplicant petitioning his god. It is the cry of one chained to the earth and craving flight, a flight into inspiration and imagination and divinity.

The Love Song is the sound of our endeavours to become God-like, to rise up and above the earth-bound and the mediocre. I believe the Love Song to be a sad song. It is the noise of sorrow itself.

We all experience within us what the Portuguese call ‘*saudade*’, which translates as an inexplicable longing, an unnamed and enigmatic yearning of the soul, and it is this feeling that lives in the realms of imagination and inspiration and is the breeding ground for the sad song, for the Love Song. ‘*Saudade*’ is the desire to be transported from darkness into light, to be touched by the hand of that which is not of this world. The Love Song is the light of God, deep down, blasting up through our wounds.

In his brilliant lecture entitled ‘The Theory and Function of Duende’, Federico García Lorca attempts to shed some light on the eerie and inexplicable sadness that lives at the heart of certain works of art. ‘All that has dark sounds has “*duende*”’, he says, ‘that mysterious power that everyone feels but no philosopher can explain.’ In contemporary rock music, the area in which I operate, music seems less inclined to have at its soul, restless and quivering, the sadness that Lorca talks about.

Excitement, often; anger, sometimes – but true sadness, rarely. Bob Dylan has always had it. Leonard Cohen deals specifically with it. It pursues Van Morrison like a black dog and, though he tries to, he cannot escape it. Tom Waits and Neil Young can summon it. My friends The Dirty 3 have it by the bucket-load but, all in all, it would appear that *‘duende’* is too fragile to survive the compulsive modernity of the music industry. In the hysterical technocracy of modern music, sorrow is sent to the back of the class, where it sits, pissing its pants in mortal terror. Sadness or *‘duende’* needs space to breathe. Melancholy hates haste and floats in silence. I feel sorry for sadness, as we jump all over it, denying it its voice, and muscling it into the outer reaches. No wonder sorrow doesn’t smile much. No wonder sadness is so sad.

All Love Songs must contain *‘duende’* because the Love Song is never simply happy. It must first embrace the potential for pain. Those songs that speak of love, without having within their lines an ache or a sigh, are not Love Songs at all, but rather Hate Songs disguised as Love Songs and are not to be trusted. These songs deny us our human-ness and our God-given right to be sad, and the airwaves are littered with them. The Love Song must resonate with the whispers of sorrow and the echoes of grief. The writer who refuses to explore the darker regions of the heart will never be able to write convincingly about the wonder, the magic and the joy of love, for just as goodness cannot be trusted unless it has breathed the same air as evil – the enduring metaphor of Christ crucified between two criminals comes to mind here – so within the fabric of the Love Song, within its melody, its lyric, one must sense an acknowledgement of its capacity for suffering.

Sad Waters

Down the road I look and there runs Mary
Hair of gold and lips like cherries
We go down to the river where the willows weep
Take a naked root for a lovers' seat
That rose out of the bitten soil
But bound to the ground by creeping ivy coils
O Mary you have seduced my soul
Forever a hostage of your child's world

And then I ran my tin-cup heart along
The prison of her ribs
And with a toss of her curls
That little girl goes wading in
Rolling her dress up past her knee
Turning these waters into wine
Then she plaited all the willow vines

Mary in the shallows laughing
Over where the carp dart
Spooked by the new shadows that she cast
Across these sad waters and across my heart

Around the age of twenty, I started reading the Bible, and I found in the brutal prose of the Old Testament, in the feel of its words and its imagery, an endless source of inspiration, especially in the remarkable series of Love Songs/poems known as the Psalms. I found the Psalms, which deal directly with the relationship between man and God, teeming with all the clamorous desperation, longing, exhaltation, erotic violence and brutality that I could hope for. The Psalms are soaked in '*saudade*', drenched in '*duende*' and bathed in bloody-minded violence. In a lot of ways these songs became the blueprint for many of my more sadistic Love Songs. Psalm 137, a particular

favourite of mine, which was turned into a chart hit by the fab little band Boney M, is a perfect example of this.

Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea,
We wept, when we remembered Zion
We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof
For there they that carried us away captive required
Of us a song; and they that wasted us *required of us*
Mirth *saying*, Sing us *one* of the songs of Zion.
How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem. Let my right hand
Forget *her cunning*.
If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to
The roof of my mouth: If I prefer not Jerusalem above my
chief joy
Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the
Day of Jerusalem; who said Rase *it*, rase *it*, *even* to
The foundation thereof.
Daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed;
Happy *shall be be*, that rewardeth thee as thou hast
Served us.
Happy *shall be be*, that taketh and dasheth thy little
Ones against the stones.

Here, the poet finds himself captive in 'a strange land' and is forced to sing a song of Zion. He declares his love to his homeland and dreams of revenge. The psalm is ghastly in its violent sentiments, as he sings to his God for deliverance, and that he may be made happy by murdering the children of his enemies. What I found, time and time again in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, was that verses of rapture, of ecstasy and love could hold within them apparently opposite sentiments – hate, revenge, bloody-mindedness, etc. – these

sentiments were not mutually exclusive. This idea has left an enduring impression upon my song-writing.

The Love Song must be borne into the realm of the irrational, the absurd, the distracted, the melancholic, the obsessive and the insane, for the Love Song is the clamour of love itself, and love is, of course, a form of madness. Whether it is the love of God, or romantic erotic love – these are manifestations of our need to be torn away from the rational, to take leave of our senses, so to speak. Love Songs come in many forms and are written for a host of reasons, as declarations of love or revenge, to praise or to wound or to flatter – I have written songs for all these reasons – but ultimately the Love Song exists to fill, with language, the silence between ourselves and God, to decrease the distance between the temporal and the divine.

But, within the world of modern pop music, a world that deals ostensibly with the Love Song, true sorrow is just not welcome. Of course, there are exceptions, and occasionally a song comes along that hides behind its disposable plastic beat, a love lyric of truly devastating proportions. ‘Better the Devil You Know’, written by the hit-makers Stock, Aitken & Waterman and sung by the Australian pop sensation Kylie Minogue, is such a song. The disguising of the terror of love in a piece of mindless, innocuous pop music is an intriguing concept. ‘Better the Devil You Know’ contains one of pop music’s most violent and distressing love lyrics.

Better the Devil You Know

Say you won't leave me no more
I'll take you back again
No more excuses, no, no
'Cause I've heard them all before
A hundred times or more
I'll forgive and forget

If you say you'll never go
'Cause it's true what they say
Better the devil you know

Our love wasn't perfect
I know, I think I know, the score
You say you love me, O boy
I can't ask for more
I'll come if you should call
I'll be here every day
Waiting for your love to show
'Cause it's true what they say
It's better the devil you know

I'll take you back
I'll take you back again

When Kylie Minogue sings these words there is an innocence to her voice that makes the horror of this chilling lyric all the more compelling. The idea presented within this song – dark and sinister and sad – that love relationships are by nature abusive, and this abuse, be it physical or psychological, is welcomed and encouraged, shows how even the most seemingly harmless of Love Songs has the potential to hide terrible human truths. Like Prometheus chained to his rock, the eagle eating his liver night after night, Kylie becomes Love's sacrificial lamb, bleating an earnest invitation to the drooling, ravenous wolf, to devour her time and time again, all to a groovy techno beat. 'I'll take you back. I'll take you back again.' Indeed. Here the Love Song becomes a vehicle for a harrowing portrait of humanity, not dissimilar to the Old Testament Psalms. Both are messages to God that cry out into the yawning void, in anguish and self-loathing, for deliverance.

As I said earlier, my artistic life has centred around the desire or, more accurately, the need, to articulate the various feelings

of loss and longing that have whistled through my bones and hummed in my blood throughout my life. In the process I have written about 200 songs, the bulk of which I would say were Love Songs. Love Songs, and therefore, by my definition, sad songs. Out of this considerable mass of material, a handful of them rise above the others as true examples of all I have talked about. ‘Sad Waters’, ‘Black Hair’, ‘I Let Love In’, ‘Deanna’, ‘From Her To Eternity’, ‘Nobody’s Baby Now’, ‘Into My Arms’, ‘Lime Tree Arbour’, ‘Lucy’, ‘Straight To You’. I am proud of these songs. They are my gloomy, violent, dark-eyed children. They sit grimly on their own and do not play with the other songs. Mostly they were the offspring of complicated pregnancies and difficult and painful births. Most of them are rooted in direct personal experience and were conceived for a variety of reasons, but this rag-tag group of Love Songs are, at the death, all the same thing – lifelines thrown into the galaxies by a drowning man.

Here, ladies and gentlemen, is a new one.

Love Letter

I hold this letter in my hand
A plea, a petition, a kind of prayer
I hope it does as I have planned
Losing her again is more than I can bear
I kiss the cold, white envelope
I press my lips against her name
Two hundred words. We live in hope
The sky hangs heavy with rain

Love Letter Love Letter
Go get her Go get her
Love Letter Love Letter
Go tell her Go tell her

A wicked wind whips up the hill
A handful of hopeful words
I love her and I always will
The sky is ready to burst
Said something I did not mean to say
Said something I did not mean to say
Said something I did not mean to say
It all came out the wrong way

Love Letter Love Letter
Go get her Go get her
Love Letter Love Letter
Go tell her Go tell her

Rain your kisses down upon me
Rain your kisses down in storms
And for all who'll come before me
In your slowly fading forms
I'm going out of my mind
Will leave me standing in
The rain with a letter and a prayer
Whispered on the wind

Come back to me
Come back to me
O baby please come back to me

The reasons I feel compelled to write Love Songs are legion. Some of these became clearer to me when I sat down with a friend of mine who, for the sake of his anonymity, I will refer to as 'G'. 'G' and I admitted to each other that we both suffered from the psychological disorder that the medical profession terms 'Erotigraphomania'. Erotigraphomania is the obsessive desire to write Love Letters. 'G' shared with me the fact that he had written and sent, over the last five years, more than

7,000 Love Letters to his wife. My friend looked exhausted, and his shame was almost palpable. We discussed the power of the Love Letter and found that it was, not surprisingly, very similar to that of the Love Song. Both serve as extended meditations on one's beloved. Both serve to shorten the distance between the writer and the recipient. Both hold within them a permanence and power that the spoken word does not. Both are erotic exercises in themselves. Both have the potential to reinvent, through words, like Pygmalion with his self-created lover of stone, one's beloved. But more than that, both have the insidious power to imprison one's beloved, to bind their hands with love-lines, gag them, blind them, for words become the defining parameter that keeps the image of the loved one, imprisoned in a bondage of poetry. 'I have taken possession of you,' the Love Letter, the Love Song, whispers, 'for ever.' These stolen souls we set adrift like lost astronauts floating for eternity through the stratospheres of the divine. Me, I never trust a woman who writes letters, because I know that I myself cannot be trusted. Words endure, flesh does not. The poet will always have the upper hand. Me, I'm a soul-catcher for God. Here I come with my butterfly-net of words. Here I catch the chrysalis. Here I blow life into bodies and hurl them fluttering to the stars and the care of God.

I'd like to look finally at a song I wrote for the *Boatman's Call* album. It is called 'Far From Me', and I have a few things to tell you about it.

Far From Me

For you, dear, I was born
For you I was raised up
For you I've lived and for you I will die
For you I am dying now
You were my mad little lover
In a world where everybody fucks everybody else over

You who are so
Far from me
So far from me
Way across some cold neurotic sea
Far from me

I would talk to you of all manner of things
With a smile you would reply
Then the sun would leave your pretty face
And you'd retreat from the front of your eyes
I keep hearing that you're doing your best
I hope your heart beats happy in your infant breast
You are so far from me
Far from me
Far from me

There is no knowledge but I know it
There's nothing to learn from that vacant voice
That sails to me across the line
From the ridiculous to the sublime
It's good to hear you're doing so well
But really, can't you find somebody else that you can ring and
tell?
Did you ever care for me?
Were you ever there for me?
So far from me

You told me you'd stick by me
Through the thick and through the thin
Those were your very words
My fair-weather friend
You were my brave-hearted lover
At the first taste of trouble went running back to mother
So far from me
Far from me

Suspended in your bleak and fishless sea
Far from me
Far from me

'Far From Me' took four months to write, which was the duration of the relationship it describes.

The first verse was written in the first week of the affair and is full of all the heroic drama of new love, describing the totality of feeling whilst acknowledging its parallel pain – 'for you I'm dying now.' It sets the two lover-heroes against an uncaring world – 'a world that fucks everybody over' – and brings in the notion of the physical distance suggested in the title. Verse one, and all is well in the garden. But the thing is, 'Far From Me' had its own agenda and was not about to allow itself to be told what to do. The song, as if awaiting the inevitable 'traumatic experience', simply refused to let itself be completed until the catastrophe had occurred. Some songs are tricky like that, and it is wise to keep your wits about you when dealing with them. I find more often than not that the songs I write seem to know more about what's going on in my life than I do. I have pages and pages of final verses for this song, written while the relationship was still sailing happily along. One such verse went:

The Camellia, the Magnolia
Have such a pretty flower
And the bell from St Mary's
Informs us of the hour

Pretty words, innocent words, unaware that any day the bottom was about to drop out of the whole thing. As I wrote the final verse of 'Far From Me' it became clear that my life was being dictated by the largely destructive ordinance of the song itself, that it had its own inbuilt destiny, over which I had no control. In fact, I was an afterthought, a bit-part player in its sly,

mischievous and finally malicious vision of how the world should be.

Love Songs that attach themselves to actual experience, which are a poeticizing of real events, have a beauty unto themselves. They stay alive in the same way that memories do and, being alive, they grow up and undergo changes and develop. If a song is too weak to do that, if it is lacking in sufficient stamina and the will to endure, sadly, it will not survive. You'll come home one day and find it dead in the bottom of its cage. Its soul will have been reclaimed and all that will remain is a pile of useless words. A Love Song such as 'Far From Me' demanded a personality beyond the one I originally gave it, with the power to influence my own feelings and thoughts around the actual event itself. The songs that I have written that deal with past relationships have become the relationships themselves, heroically mutating with time and mythologizing the ordinary events of my life, lifting them from the temporal plane and blasting them way into the stars. As the relationship itself collapses, whimpering with exhaustion, the song breaks free of it and beats its wings heavenward. Such is the singular beauty of song-writing.

Twenty years of song-writing have now passed, and still the void gapes wide. Still the inexplicable sadness, the '*duende*', the '*saudade*', the divine discontent, persists, and perhaps it will continue until I see the face of God himself. But when Moses desired to see the face of God, he was answered that he may not endure it, that no man could see the face of God and live. Well, me, I don't mind. I'm happy to be sad. For the residue, cast off in this search, the songs themselves, my crooked brood of sad-eyed children, rally round and, in their way, protect me, comfort me and keep me alive. They are the companions of the soul that lead it into exile, that sate the overpowering yearning for that which is not of this world. The imagination demands an alternate world and through the writing of the Love Song one sits and dines with loss and longing, madness

and melancholy, ecstasy, magic and joy with equal measure of respect and gratitude.

'The Secret Life of the Love Song' was delivered as a lecture at the South Bank Centre, London, in 1999

A Note on the Albums

A list of songs is given at the beginning of each album in this book. Where a list is divided into two parts, the latter section refers to songs written around the same period as the album but which were used as either B-sides to singles, or in other projects.

Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds released a collection called *B-sides and Rarities* in 2005. There is no separate section for this album. The lyrics to these songs are published here according to the period in which they were written. There is, however, a separate section for *B-Sides and Rarities Part II*, released 2021.

Prayers on Fire (1981)

Zoo-Music Girl
Cry
Nick the Stripper
Figure of Fun
King Ink
A Dead Song
Yard
Just You and Me

Release the Bats
Mr Clarinet
Happy Birthday
The Friend Catcher
Kathy's Kisses

Zoo-Music Girl

Zoo-Music Girl Zoo-Music Girl

Our life together is a hollow tooth
Spit out the shells, spit out the shells
You know exactly what I'm talking about
Don't drag the orchestra into this thing
Rattle those sticks, rattle those sticks
The sound is beautiful, it's perfect!
The sound of her young legs in stockings
The rhythm of her walk, it's beautiful
Just let it twist, let it break

Let it buckle, let it bend

I want the noise of my Zoo-Music Girl

Zoo-Music Girl, Zoo-Music Girl

My body is a monster driven insane

My Heart is a fish toasted by flames

I kiss the hem of her skirt

We spend our lives in a box full of dirt

I murder her dress till it hurts

I murder her dress and she loves it

If there is one thing I desire in the world

Is to make love to my Zoo-Music Girl

Zoo-Music Girl Zoo-Music Girl

The sound is beautiful! It's perfect!

I call out her name in the night

Zoo-Music Girl! Zoo-Music Girl!

I call her by her family name

Zoo-Music Girl! Zoo-Music Girl!

Oh! God! Please let me die beneath her fists

Zoo-Music Girl! Zoo-Music Girl!

Zoo-Music Girl! Zoo-Music Girl!

Cry

When you walk outa here
When you walk out
I gotta fill up that space
Or fill up that no-space
I'll fill it up with tears
I'll fill it up with tears
I'll fill it up with tears
I'll fill it up with tears
Cry Cry Cry Cry
Where no fish can swim
Where no fish can swim
Where no-fish can swim
Where no-fish can
Cry Cry Cry

When you slam that door
When that door slams
I gotta fill up that space
And I'll pack my suitcase
I'll fill it up with clothes
Or fill it up with no-clothes
And I'll pack it up with tears

I'll pack it up with tears
Cry Cry Cry Cry
Where no fish can swim
Where no fish can swim
Where no-fish can swim
Cry Cry Cry

When you say goodbye
When you say goodbye
I'll dig myself a hole
And fill up that space
I'll fill it up with flesh
And I'll fill it up with no-flesh
I'll fill it up with tears
I'll fill it up with tears

Fish Swim Cry Fish Crryyy

Nick the Stripper

Nick the Stripper
Hideous to the eye
Hideous to the eye
He's a fat little insect
A fat little insect
And OOOOOOOOOH! here we go again

Nick the Stripper
Dances on all fours
Dances on all fours
He's in his birthday suit
He's in his birthday suit
and OOOOOOOOOH! here we go again

Nick the Stripper
Hideous to the eye
Hideous to the eye
He's a fat little insect
A fucked little insect
and OOOOOOOOOH! here we go again
Insect Insect Insect Insect

Figure of Fun

I am a figure of fun
Dead-pan and moribund
All the things I do are better left undone
I am a figure of fun

And I bake in the sun
I have no luck in Love
I have no luck in anything
I am a figure of fun

And I'm impressed by everyone
But I impress no one
It's irritating
I am a figure of fun

I am a figure of fun
I have money
But money isn't everything to a figure of
Fun fun fun fun fun fun

King Ink

King Ink strolls into town
He sniffs around

King Ink kicks off his stink-boot
Sand and soot and dust and dirt and
He's much bigger than you think
King Ink
King Ink, wake up, get up
Wake up, up, up, up, up, up
A bug crawls up the wall
King Ink feels like a bug
And he hates his rotten shell
Cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-cha
King Ink, get up, go forth
Wake up – what's in that room?
Wake up – what's in that house?
Express thyself, say something loudly
AAAAAAAH! What's in that room?
Sand and soot and dust and dirt
King Ink feels like a bug
Swimming in a soup-bowl
Oh! Yeah! Oh! Yeah! What a wonderful life
Fats Domino on the radio

A Dead Song (with Anita Lane)

(This is true)

Mister nothing said forever said

I can sing

Hit it! Make it a dead one

With words like

Blood, soldier, mother

OK OK

I want to sleep before the end

Which is impolite

Hit it! Make it a dead one

If nothing crops up

I'll give you a ring

You can sing the end

OK OK

Then I could get

All the little animals out of my room

Hit it! With a broom

OK OK

Put them in a big white sack

No visitors came

Hit it! WITH WORDS LIKE . . .

Thou shalt not

The End

Yard

In our yard
How many chickens can we count
On our fingers and toes
On their toes
Sitting on father's hole
Sitting on his chest
Crushing rocks of dirt
The earth is soft in our
Yard Yard
Stones in my shoes
And feet
Dragging them through museums
Where
Under glass
Refrigerate
Freeze
Hands and feet
And knobbly knees
Yard Yard

Just You and Me

First: I tried to kill it with a hammer
Thought that I could lose the head
Sure! We've eaten off the silver
(When even food was against us)
And then I tried to kill it in the bed
Second: I gagged it with a pillow
But awoke the nuns inside my head
They pounded their Goddy-Goddy fists
(From the inside – so from the outside)
I got good: I stuck it. Dead
Thirdly: I put my lips upon it
And blew a frost across its flat
I wrote upon its outside-surface
'Tonite we're on the outside-surface'
Just you and me girl: you and me and the fat

Release the Bats

Whooh Bite! Whooh Bite!
Release the bats! Release the bats!
Don't tell me that it doesn't hurt
A hundred fluttering in your skirt
Don't tell me that it doesn't hurt

My baby is all right
She doesn't mind a bit of dirt
She says 'Horror vampire bat bite'
She says 'Horror vampire
How I wish those bats would bite'
Whoooah Bite! Bite!

Release the bats! Release the bats!
Pump them up and explode the things
Her legs are chafed by sticky wings
(Sticky sticky little things)

My baby is a cool machine
She moves to the pulse of her generator
Says damn that sex supreme
She says damn that horror bat
Sex vampire, cool machine

Release the bats! Release the bats!

Baby is a cool machine
She moves to the pulse of a generator
She says damn that sex supreme

She says, she says damn that horror bat
Sex horror sex bat sex horror sex vampire
Sex bat horror vampire sex
Cool machine
Horror bat. Bite!
Cool machine. Bite!
Sex vampire. Bite!

Mr Clarinet

I have a friend in you, oh Mr Clarinet
You make me laugh, and then cry like the song of the clarinet
Marry me, marry me alive O
I put on my coat of trumpets
Will she be there? Is my piccolo on straight?

Her white stockings and red dress that goes
swish, swish swish around her legs of lace

Marry me, marry me alive O

Could you tell her
Would you tell her for me, oh Mr Clarinet
That I love her love her, oh love her
I love her but I cannot wait

Marry me, marry me alive O

I love her, love her, love her
Love her love her love her love her

Happy Birthday

It's a very happy day
We had lots of fun fun fun
And it's ice-cream and jelly
and a punch in the belly
How much can you throw over the walls?

And see how his face glows
It's a bike! What a surprise
It's a big bike. What a big surprise
It's a red bike. What a red surprise
Oh, what a surprise

But the best thing there
But the best thing there
Was the wonderful dog chair
Was the beautiful dog chair
That could count right up to ten
It could count right up to ten
It went woof, woof, woof, woof, woof
woof, woof, woof, woof, woof

And it's another happy day
He was born eleven years ago
And this year it's long trousers
and a very smart tie
Just think in five years he'll be shaving

And see how his face glows
It's a bike. What a surprise!
It's a samurai sword
What a metal surprise
He'll remember this day for the rest of his life

But the best thing there
But the best thing there
Is that fabulous dog chair
The immaculate dog chair
That could count right up to eleven
It could count right up to eleven
It went woof, woof, woof, woof, woof, woof
woof, woof, woof, woof, woof, woof

But the best thing there
But the best thing there
Was my darling the dog chair
But the rampaging dog chair
That could count right up to eleven
It could count right up to eleven

And it went round and round the house

The Friend Catcher

I: cigarette fingers
Puff and poke, puff and poke
And the smoke it touches the ground

You: your lungs in your wrists
They throb like trains
Choo choo choo choo
It's a prison of sound

See by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin
Hee-haw! Hee-haw! Hee-haw!
I can't see for smoke
So I poke around

I poke around

Kathy's Kisses

Kathy's kisses, they fall out of
Her mouth on to the floor, collect dust
I sweep them under the door

Junkyard (1982)

Big-Jesus-Trash-Can
Kiss Me Black
6'' Gold Blade
Kewpie Doll
Junkyard
She's Hit
Dead Joe
Hamlet (Pow, Pow, Pow)

Sometimes Pleasure Heads Must Burn

Big-Jesus-Trash-Can

Big-Jesus soul-mates trash-can
fucking rotten business this
both feet in the Bad-Boot
stiff in the crypt, baby, like a rock
rock-rock-rock

Big-Jesus soul-mates trash-can
pumped me fulla trash at least it smelt like trash
wears a suit of Gold (got greasy hair)
but God gave me Sex appeal

well-well-well-well-rock
well-well-well-well-rock
well-well-well-well-rock
well-well-well-well-rock
he drives a trash-can
he drives a trash-can
he drives a trash-can
he drives a trash-can
he's comin' to my town rock-rock-rock-
r-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-ck!

Big-Jesus-oil-King down in Texas
drives great holy tanks of Gold
Screams from heaven's Graveyard
American heads will roll in Texas
(roll like Daddies' Meat)
roll under those singing stars of Texas

well-well-well-well-rock
well-well-well-well-rock
well-well-well-well-rock
well-well-well-well-rock

he drives a trash—can
he drives a trash—can
he drives a trash—can
he drives a trash—can
He's comin' to my town, He's comin' to my town
He's comin' to my town, He's comin' to my town

Kiss Me Black

Now they put the stink on us
Throw us to the succubus
Fed us to the incubus
And brung in the Saprophagous
c'mon and kiss me black
I need to feel your lips around me
c'mon and kiss me black
Black as the pit in which you found me

She's like a dog you have to kick her
Sleeps like a swastika
And says 'everyone's a winner now
cos everyone's a sinner now'
come on and kiss me black
come and sail your ships around me
c'mon and kiss me black
Black as the sea in which you drowned me

C'mon and kiss me black
Run your rusty cutlass through me
C'mon and kiss me black
Kiss me black and then undo me

6" Gold Blade

I stuck a six-inch gold blade in the head of a girl

She lying through her teeth, him: on his back

Hands off this one, hands off! she cried

Grinning at me from hip to hip

Hands off, pretty baby, tough bone then so soft to slip

Ooh Yeah

I stuck a six-inch gold blade in the head of a girl

Shark's-fin slices sugar-bed slices that pretty red-head

I love you! now me! I love you!

Laughter, laughter

Oh baby, those skinny girls, they're so quick to murder

Ooh Yeah

Shake it baby, c'mon, shake, shake it baby

Shake

Shake

Shake

Shake

Kewpie Doll

Well I love that kewpie doll
Well I love that kewpie doll
Well I love that kewpie doll
Yeah I bought her in a show
I dressed her up in a cheap red cotton dress
But everything was either fished-out or spat-out
Fished-out or spat-out
Well I love that kewpie doll
But I could not make it stick
Well I love that kewpie doll
But I could not make it stick
Only she could save my soul
She put her hands inside of me
Well I love that kewpie doll
Dressed her in a cheap-red-cotton-dress
Fished it out now spat it out now
Spat it out in front of me
Well I love that kewpie doll
But I could not make it stick
Doll doll doll doll doll doll doll
I held her in my cheap arms
She believed in me, she believed in me
Her soul and my arms
Well I love that kewpie doll
I told her phoney stories
Well I love that kewpie doll
She believed in me
Doll doll doll doll doll doll doll
Kewpie on a stick
I can see her coming even now
Kewpie on a stick
I can see her walking to me even now

Well I love that kewpie doll
I can see her walking to me even now
Well I love that kewpie doll
I can see her walking to me even now
Well I love that kewpie doll
But I could not make it stick.

Junkyard

I am the King, I am the King, I am the King

One dead marine through the hatch
Scratch and scrape this heavenly body
Every inch of winning skin
There's garbage in honey's sack again

Honey Honey Honey Honey Honey
Come on and kiss me
Honey Honey Honey Honey Honey
Honey-child's taking over this place

Two dead marines standing in a line
Drink to me! this heavenly body
Every inch a winning thing

Honey Honey Honey Honey Honey
Come on and kiss me
Honey Honey Honey Honey Honey
Honey-child's taking over this place

Hack hack hack hack this heavenly
Yack yack yack yack yack goes junk-face
Scratch scrape scratch this winning skin
There's garbage in Honey's sack again
There's garbage in Honey's sack again
There's garbage in Honey's sack again
Garbage in honey Garbage in honey
Junkyard King Junkyard King
King King King King King

She's Hit

there is woman-pie in here
mr evangelist says she's hit
the best cook you ever had
you can't blame the good-woman now, dad
and you locked him up for twenty years
now there's action on the basement stairs
a monster half-man half-beast
hear the hatchet (grind grind)
pilgrim gets 1 hacked daughter
and all we guys get are forty hack reporters
uptown one hundred skirts are bleeding
mr evangelist says
she's hit ev'ry little bit
she's hit ev'ry little bit
now if only we could all grow wings and fly
sweet hatchet swing low son
I'm feeling pretty lonesome
christen the bastard jack dad
the head-shrinker is a quack
'anyone who'd wear their hair like that'
the vinyl is so cool, the conversation's cruel
hold my heart romeo it's in a rodeo
hold my head daddy-o it just won't go
and all the girls across the world
and all the girls across the world
are hit ev'ry little bit

Hamlet (Pow, Pow, Pow)

Hamlet's fishin' in the grave
Hamlet's fishin' in the grave
thru the custard bones and stuff
he ain't got no friends in there
he ain't got no friends in there
I believe our man's in love
Hamlet got a gun now
he wears a crucifix
he wears a crucifix
pow pow pow pow/pow pow pow pow
Hamlet moves so beautiful
Hamlet moves so beautiful
walking thru the flowers
who are hiding 'round the corners
He's movin' down the street now
he likes the look of that cadillac
he likes the look of that cadillac
pow pow pow pow/pow pow pow pow
Is this love some kinda love
Is this love some kinda love
Now he's movin' down my street
and he's coming to my house
crawling up my stairs
Wherefore art thou baby-face
Where-for-art-thou
pow pow pow pow/pow pow pow pow
Is this love
Is this love
Pow!
He shoot it inside
He shoot it inside

Pow!
Don't let 'em steal your heart away
he went and stole my heart POW!!
hey hey hey POW!!

Sometimes Pleasure Heads Must Burn

BU-U-U-U-U-U-U-RN! POP! POP!
BU-U-U-U-U-U-U-RN! POP! POP!
I reckon I'm a bit too close to this one
I reckon if I touch it might just burn
Flesh-heads like me just wax and melt
When my tongue touches titty's tongue in turn
Sometimes pleasure heads must
BU-U-U-U-U-U-U-RN! POP! POP!
BU-U-U-U-U-U-U-RN! POP! POP!
My brain tricked my hands to believe they were strong
In short, my hands became clubs to grind
I reckon I'm a bit too close to this one
Kiss me darling, kiss my eyes to blind
Kiss my clubs and witness what my knuckles find
BU-U-U-U-U-U-U-RN! POP! POP!
BU-U-U-U-U-U-U-RN! POP! POP!
I feel a little low, you know what I mean?
Buried neck-high in British snow
I reckon I'm a bit too close to this one
Shoot me darling, shoot me in the head and go
Ya! Ya! Teeth gone. Follow my trail back home
Ya! Ya! Teeth gone. Follow my trail back home
Ya! Ya! BU-U-U-U-U-U-U-RN! POP! POP!

The Bad Seed (1983)