

*'Spider's Lane'* Anthony Macris

*Spider's Lane* is a chapter from my novel-in-progress, *Great Western Highway*. In traditional novelistic terms, it deals with the novel's love story, as a young Sydney couple comes to grips with the decision to start a family in uncertain economic times, and explores themes of commitment and belonging in contemporary urban contexts. In more theoretical terms, it is an example of a literary figure I am developing, that of the affect sign. Drawing on Deleuze's conception of the representation of affect in Cinema, the chapter harnesses narrative (forward movement), setting, image and lyricism to create a tableau of affective sensation that is particular to novelistic representation. The central theme of *Great Western Highway* is the penetration of market forces into the social fabric of contemporary Western societies such as Australia. The novel also provides a model of structural innovation that revives experimentation within narrative form in contemporary Australian writing, which has traditionally been entrenched in realist modes. The research methodology of the project was highly interdisciplinary, involving engagements with Thatcherism; corporeal narratology (Punday); theories of the culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno); the French nouveau roman (Simon); Modernism (Joyce, Celine); and aspects of Postmodernism that deal with popular culture and self-reflexivity in the literary and media fields (Jameson, Warhol). The novel was written with the assistance of three New Work grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council, and highly commended in the NSW Writers' Fellowship 2000.



*Anthony Macris*

## Spider's Lane

The night before you leave London, you dream about Christina.

You're in Brisbane. You've been living together for two years. You're in love. You're following her from the bus stop on the main road to her parent's house tucked away in a quiet part of a hilly suburb. It's a cloudy day, but the skies are still huge above you, their bellies milk white, heavy with electricity. They move quickly and when the sun breaks through its rays strike the suburb with a slow dazzling flash. You follow her, reluctantly: dinner at her parents' house. You follow her along the white concrete blocks dull with the heat that seeps through the clouds. She wears a purple skirt so long it sweeps across the footpath. She crosses the bitumen streets with the quick strides of someone with short legs. She is excited: she's always excited when she's going to be surrounded by people she loves. She pays little attention to the combination of personalities – mother, brother, older sister: boyfriend, sister, older brother – they are people she loves and she wants you all to be together, whether you really want to be or not.

Soon, in a few months, you'll be flying to Europe, for how long you don't know, maybe a year, maybe forever. What is sure is that she has a return ticket, and that you don't. It's assumed that she plans to come back to see her parents for a while once a year is up: a return ticket is cheaper. You, you know you want to stay away much longer. It's never mentioned, this asymmetry of the tickets. Neither of you delves too deep. Neither of you wants to spoil the adventure.

Christina leads you through the suburb. Her purple skirt glows in the milky daylight. Its hem brushes over the tough blades of grass, which barely yield to the layers of light material. She wears an orange top, a squarish cut that emphasizes the gentle curves of her arms. Her hair is a blond bird's nest held together by a huge amber clip set at a sharp angle at the back of her head. Her skirt sweeps over the guttering, over the median strips with their cracked cat's-eyes, over the lines that divide the concrete blocks of the footpath. You follow her, reluctant

boyfriend, an evening at her parents' house, nice people, moved from the country to the city a generation ago, not great talkers, but then neither are you, or at least unless it's with people you're comfortable with. You're fed and entertained because you love their daughter. Parents have daughters, they grow up and find boyfriends, the parents invite them to dinner and you are on probation to become family. Of course daughters will bring home vain young men. Most young men are vain. Always have been, always will be. But they have to be a little full of themselves. In the beginning they need that layer of fat: it insulates them against life's disappointments. If they are lucky, the years will eat it away. They'll become lean, hard; they'll mature. But for the moment daughters bring home vain young men, and the parents put up with them. They are puffed up with their daughters' love, and they can't even see it. The parents just hope they appreciate it once they're old enough to understand.

It's your first love, so of course you don't appreciate it. Everybody knows it. Everybody knows that's one of the reasons it's doomed. You are living that sweetest of delusions: you are loved because you are so special. At last someone has realised your particular, unique specialness: in fact, they are lucky to have you. It doesn't occur to you you feel so special because someone has taken that greatest of risks: to let themselves love you as much as they can, despite all your shortcomings. And it doesn't occur to her that it is never a good idea to love as much as you are able. With such a love, with such a fierce, total love, delusions breed: they can't do anything else. They breed at an appalling rate. You are loved in spite of your shortcomings: soon you believe you have no shortcomings. How can someone so loved have shortcomings? And how can someone so loved return such a love?

Above you the clouds race. They break apart, hot light sweeps over you in great waves. You walk in a sharp-edged shadow that chases hers. In an instant the clouds close again and your shadows vanish in the milky heat. You follow her across the sloping hills, you look at the fine blond hairs on the nape of her neck, a V-shape that vanishes between her shoulder blades and that you love to brush up with your fingers. You follow her past the local shops, a small-business oasis, the local fruit'n'veg, the paper-shop, the dry cleaner's, a mini-mart, a small deli where you buy her mother a white paper bag full of ginger chocolates. The girl that serves you hardly takes her eyes off the TV that dangles from a ceiling bracket – it's meant to be a security device, but it's screening *I Love Lucy*. You all watch Lucille Ball pretend to be drunk. As usual while she serves you the shop girl keeps her eyes glued to the screen, but she never makes a mistake, she always manages to be polite in her aqua tank top and stonewash Levis. You immediately give the chocolates to Christina: you're too shy to give them to her mother yourself. You never know if her mother knows they're from you. Why can't you just give them to her yourself? It would be simple. All you would have to do is hand them over

and say 'I brought some of the ginger chocolates I know you like so much' or 'I've brought some chocolates we can have after dinner,' but it seems so contrived, so artificial, so glib. In the back of your mind is the thought that just two hours ago, that very afternoon, I had sex with your daughter, I touched her breasts and stroked her thighs and licked her pussy and then I screwed her. You gave birth to her, breastfed her, sent her to school with an apple, an orange, a cheese stick and some Vegemite sandwiches and now I screw her and when I'm not wearing a condom I pull it out at the last minute and come in her mouth or on her stomach or wherever she wants me to. How could such hardworking people not despise such mindless pleasure? No, you just can't give her mother the chocolates. You just can't do it.

You leave the shops and plunge deeper into the hilly suburb, past the red-brick bases topped with white weatherboard, past the driveways that rise off the footpath and vanish past picket fences into backyards dense with shrubs and flowerbeds and Hill's Hoists. Commodores, Sunbirds, and Datsun 120-Ys sleep under prefabricated carports, protected from the late afternoon sun. You follow her, reluctantly, she walks faster and faster the closer she gets to home. You panic a second and imagine falling back until the distance is so great that she can't see you and you can safely run away. Instead you say 'wait up' and put your arm around her waist. Her clothes are slightly damp with sweat and you can't imagine anything sweeter, the light cotton slightly damp with her sweat, fragrant with the residue of lemon-scented washing powder, faint but still sharp enough to cut deep into your senses, sharp enough to make you momentarily dizzy with sweet deep carnal love, and you say 'slow down for Chrissake' and she gives you a slightly cross look but then you put your arm around her waist and it's awkward walking like that because she won't slow down, she's nearly dragging you along, and you turn a corner deeper into the suburb, past the three-quarter acre blocks with white weatherboard houses and security doors that most people never bother to lock, and suddenly she says, as if it's always the first time, 'Spider's Lane!'

She breaks free from you and turns sharply to the right and vanishes between two houses. You follow her. Before you stretches a narrow lane flanked by thick layers of foliage. It's suddenly dark: the boughs of the trees arch over the lane and form a canopy that makes you feel as if you are in a forest. It's suddenly quiet: Christina's skirt brushes the ground and you hear the rustle of leaves and twigs. She turns her face to you and through the shadow you see her smile a delighted schoolgirl's smile: her shoes sweep through the leaves and twigs and pods that rustle and crackle as she hurries home with you trailing in her wake. Even though they are hidden by the boughs, you can feel the clouds above, feel them breaking apart, you feel them part even before the light hits: when you've grown up in these parts the rhythm of the light is a sixth sense. As it sweeps across the suburb

it works its way through the overarching boughs, it suffuses the leaves and makes them glow and transforms the lane into a luminous tunnel of greens. Shafts of light break through and speckle Christina with beams of silver. You follow her, your feet tramping the leaves, the twigs, the spoiling petals that the ants circle indifferently. As you walk the bushes close in, the boughs arch lower until you need to dodge the lower leaves, and you feel what you always dread: spiders' webs breaking across your forehead. Christina strides on: she is shorter than you and the webs barely reach her. You look up, even though you know you shouldn't. Layers of glinting webs stretch in every direction: they span across the lane, they rise into the vaulted ceiling of foliage. They are filled with spiders: tiny spiders that, as they spin, seem to be not only producing their webs, but also themselves; medium-sized spiders that scuttle from one end of their webs to the other: large spiders that, breaking the skyline, are motionless silhouettes. Your skin tightens with fear and you duck lower and you say 'Don't all these spider's bother you at all?' and Christina just laughs, her family has been using this lane most of her life and no one's been bitten yet. And she suddenly stops and you brush up against her you feel her breasts soft through the orange fabric, you feel her thighs, firm but also soft, through the purple cotton, you imagine the blond downy hair on her legs, so pale it's nearly invisible, and she laughs again and circles you in her arms and kisses you, and as you melt into those kisses you know you don't deserve your skin tingles with love and the fear that at any second you will feel tiny legs on your ear, the weight of a tiny bulbous body on your neck, you fear the prick of a spider bite that will send you into a panic – was it a redback?, was it harmless? – but despite that you slip your hand down the back of her skirt and with your fingertips caress the tops of her buttocks, while she slips her hands in your jeans pockets – she knows they're old and the pouches have worn out – she slips her hand over your cock and before you know it she's slipped it out again and she's leading you on: the boughs rise, the bitumen path re-emerges from under the leaves, and you're back on the footpath, reluctant boyfriend on his way to dinner at his girlfriend's parents' house, now soothed by a caress and a kiss.

Just before dinner, Christina vanishes. You sit in the kitchen with her mother, breathing in the apricot chicken that roasts in the oven behind you. The house is spare, functional, but not without decoration. There are hand-embroidered doilies on the armrests of the Jason recliner rocker, there are vases and family portraits on the rosewood sideboard. Christina's mother leads the small talk: now that the kids are all gone they're finally going to extend the sun deck and put up a pergola. Her husband's gift shop is bouncing back after a slow period: the year's been terribly slow but they've seen worse. He'll be home soon once he's shut up shop. Christina's father: totally devoted to his family, totally unknowable. In recent years he's become very fond of video. On the shelves behind the closed doors of the TV

cabinet are two boxed sets: *The World at War*, narrated by Laurence Olivier, and the westerns of John Wayne. You've only ever seen him watch them on Sunday afternoons, the afternoon light so strong that the screen is barely visible.

Christina's mother talks about the pergola. You sit and listen. You're not expected to say much.

After a polite interval you go and find Christina in her bedroom. She sits staring out the window, an aluminium rectangle that frames the dying day. She is completely sullen. The room she grew up in, the room she has left to live with you, is even barer than the rest of the house: the bareness of the child that has moved out, and has left only fibro walls painted in off-white acrylic, a lilac chenille bedspread with, when you look closely, rows of pile missing. The room is lit by a plain white oyster globe that hugs the ceiling, a glowing orb you've seen her father vacuum, his teeth clenched as he angles up the brush. Its powdery light leeches the orange from her top. Her purple skirt splays around her, a ring of crushed feathers. She stares through the glinting aluminium window frame, into the darkening sky. Her eyes are glassy with the dying milky light. It's the sorrow of twilight. It's a sickness of the soul that you'll never entirely understand: you only know that you are part of it, that you are causing it.

'What's wrong?' you ask, feeling totally useless. You know she won't answer, but you ask anyway. You feel her kisses sour in your mouth.

from the forthcoming *Capital, Volume One, Part Two (a novel)*

# Confessions & Memoirs



Written by  
**Wong & Myers**

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# Confessions of a Novelist

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and the editors, David Myers and Michael Wilding

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The third annual collection of *Best Stories Under the Sun* showcases Australia's emerging new writers, top essayists and prize-winning novelists, featuring winners of the Orange Prize, the Booker, the Miles Franklin, the *Australian-Vogel* Award, the Patrick White Award, the Victorian Premier's Award, the NSW Literary Award, the Queensland Premier's Literary Award, the Bicentennial Award, the National Book Council prize, the Ned Kelly Lifetime Achievement Award, the Royal Society of Literature Prize, the Banjo Paterson Short Story Prize, the *Sydney Morning Herald*-Dymock's New Fiction Prize, and many more.



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First published in 2006 by Central Queensland University Press

Distributed by:

CQU Press

PO Box 1615

Rockhampton Queensland 4700

Ph: (07) 4923 2520

Fax: (07) 4923 2525

Email: [cqupress@cqu.edu.au](mailto:cqupress@cqu.edu.au)

[www.outbackbooks.com](http://www.outbackbooks.com)

National Library of Australia

Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Confessions and Memoirs : Best Stories Under the Sun, Volume 3

ISBN 1 876780 90 8

I. Short stories, Australian.

I. Wilding, Michael 1942-

II. Myers, David A., 1942-

A823.40108

Typeset by Jane Dorrington in Adobe Garamond Pro 10.5

Printed by Watson Ferguson & Company, Brisbane

Front cover image courtesy of Sturt Krygsmann and *Weekend Australian*

Some of these pieces originally appeared in *Artlook*, *Blackwood's Magazine*, *Granta*, *Island*, *Southerly*, *The Weekend Australian*, and *Acts of Dog: Writers on the Divine Canine*.

Supported by the Literature Board of the Australia Council



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