



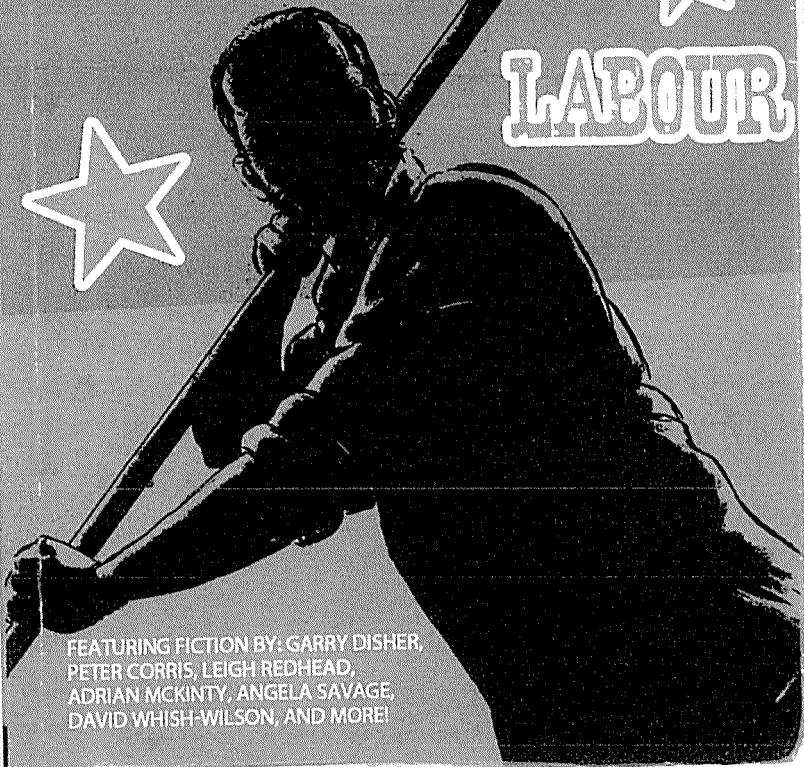
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"TAKE A GOOD SHARP BLADE TO THIS COLLECTION AND LET  
IT BLEED AUSSIE NOIR ALL OVER YOUR FLOOR."  
— LINDY CAMERON, SISTERS IN CRIME

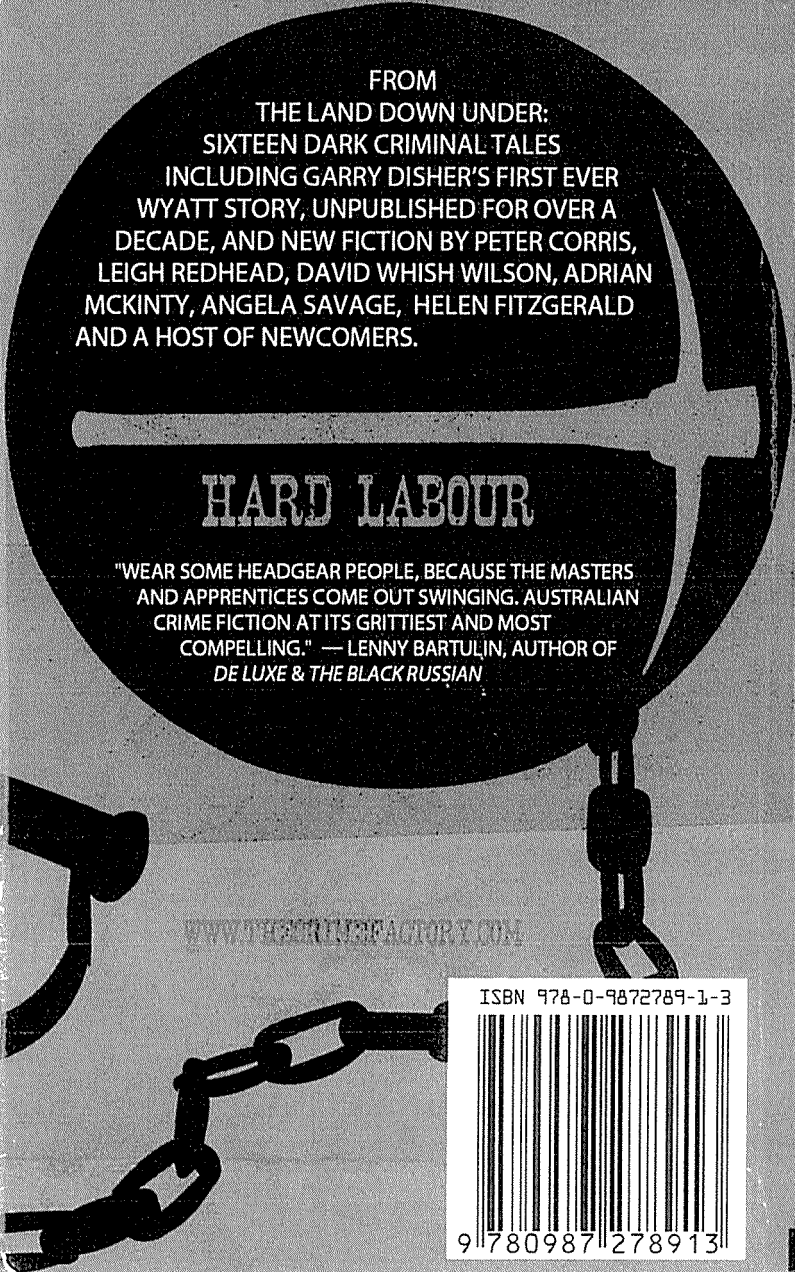
CRIME FACTORY  
PRESENTS

HARD

LABOUR



FEATURING FICTION BY: GARRY DISHER,  
PETER CORRIS, LEIGH REDHEAD,  
ADRIAN MCKINTY, ANGELA SAVAGE,  
DAVID WHISH-WILSON, AND MORE!



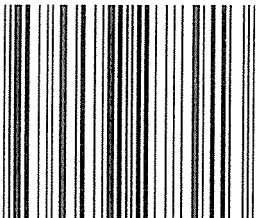
FROM  
THE LAND DOWN UNDER:  
SIXTEEN DARK CRIMINAL TALES  
INCLUDING GARRY DISHER'S FIRST EVER  
WYATT STORY, UNPUBLISHED FOR OVER A  
DECADE, AND NEW FICTION BY PETER CORRIS,  
LEIGH REDHEAD, DAVID WHISH WILSON, ADRIAN  
MCKINTY, ANGELA SAVAGE, HELEN FITZGERALD  
AND A HOST OF NEWCOMERS.

## HARD LABOUR

"WEAR SOME HEADGEAR PEOPLE, BECAUSE THE MASTERS  
AND APPRENTICES COME OUT SWINGING. AUSTRALIAN  
CRIME FICTION AT ITS GRITTIEST AND MOST  
COMPELLING." — LENNY BARTULIN, AUTHOR OF  
*DE LUXE & THE BLACK RUSSIAN*

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Machinery assembled in Melbourne, from  
Australian-made parts.

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caked. Flaming orange wheat had come to life in front of him, twisting and thrashing in a wind he couldn't feel, throwing off heat. Carl propped himself on an elbow. It wasn't wheat but fire. His truck was on fire. His boots and jeans were smoking, the flesh on his arms and face popping and lifting.

Carl pushed his heels into the dirt and scooted himself backwards until the burning vehicle receded into a gentle campfire over which he could warm up the pan of beans and sausages. Glenda came out of the bush with their two boys. He saw that a strand of hair had fallen from her ponytail and he wanted to kiss her.

Carl heard voices. He opened one of his eyes. Clouds were speeding across the sky. The truck was belching smoke. The voices came nearer. He looked around for Leon and Murray. Instead, he saw Glenda.

"Honey?" Carl said. "Is that you?"

Glenda squatted by his side and said, "Jesus aitch Christ, I don't believe it. Carl? Jesus, what the hell happened? Brendan, call an ambulance would you, we've got Carl Jensen over here and he's still alive."

"Glenda?"

"No, it's me, Frank, Frank Whitby. I'm here with Brendan and the CFA truck. Someone driving past saw the fire and called us out. Holy Mary mother of God, just hold on, can you hear me, Carl? Help is coming."

Carl nodded and went back to the campfire where Glenda was smiling at him and his boys were plucking sausages straight out of the pan. After lunch, they would go swimming, and then try their luck with the fishing rods to get redfin or cod for dinner.

## IN SAVAGE FREEDOM

David Wish-Wilson

*A father is God to his son.*

My father said that before I killed him, but he wasn't talking about us.

Him and his own father. His father's father. His father's father's father, perhaps.

Before I pulled the trigger on his .303.

\*

Today I leave Casuarina Prison after five years - no step-down into minimum.

Not because of what I've done, but what I know.

I'm a speed cook, forced to stay in the SHU, with the psychos, peds and catamites, to keep me away from my suitors. There are five bikie mobs in Perth and they all want to own me, despite my history with the needle. But I haven't done the time hard, not like my earlier stretches. Not when even the screws have watched all four seasons of *Breaking Bad* - the same screws who call me Heisenberg with a mocking respect, although I was always more Jesse Pinkman than Walter White.

Their respect isn't for me, the waster, but for the science of the thing. The working with explosive materials in confined spaces. The alchemy, what I see as chemistry, following a recipe. The transubstantiation of base materials into the manna of heaven, as another old crim described it.

I make no such claims, myself. Starting with Sulphate back in the eighties; bog-standard Crank, learnt from a smuggled copy of Uncle Fester's Cookbook, whose recipes I have adapted, improved over the years, the Ice I make is sought-after by the criminal and social elite who can afford it.

I don't come cheap, but that is simply the price of blood. I hear stories now and then. Like a gun manufacturer will hear stories. Like the brother of a cell-mate of mine who after a three day binge injected his cock and lost both legs to gangrene. Stories of psychosis and ruin. Violence and poverty visited upon innocents. You get the picture, or that side of it.

How do I feel about it? I don't know. And don't ask me again. I will only say that the very worst things I have done, I have done with the best of intentions.

Isn't that punishment enough?

My second son, Danny. The only person in the world I want to see. Waiting for me outside the prison gates, sun shearing off the bonnet of his Valiant Pacer.

This is a good sign. On the prison wireless I've heard Danny's running wild, working as a deckie for Gary Warner, although everyone knows what that means. Warner is the only non-bikie crim who, because of his Calabrian connections, gets to make speed and Ice and ecstasy, distributed through their insulated smack networks.

Warner is the same bloke who most pundits think offed my first son, Kevin, those five years back, after he ripped him off for a kilo of pure.

That Danny still has the Valiant means something. It was my gift, once he got his license, to celebrate his coming out of foster care, and it means that he hasn't gone too far off the rails.

Danny was thirteen the last time I went inside. *Keep your friends close, and enemies closer.* The kind of Machiavellian platitude that a thirteen year old needs to understand. Last thing I said to him. Danny never visited me in jail because I wouldn't allow it.

If he had, I wouldn't have told him any different. Play it smart, but don't let them stand over you. Once you're down, life will keep kicking.

Danny doesn't get out of the car. He's seen detective inspector Brett Ogilvie, smoking a rollie beside his fleet vehicle Falcon, perk of his shift to Federal Police. He's parked, deliberately, beside a black TRG mini-tank, stationed there in case of a riot. Like the US President's wartime speeches, backdropped by rows and rows of jug-jawed soldiers, a wallpaper of quiet menace.

This whole prison release thing is a movie cliché, but there you have it. The hard-looking kid in a muscle-car, the concerned cop, the sunlight on my pale skin, my squinting eyes.

Danny passes me some Oakley sunglasses, and the world goes feather-soft. Both of us ignore Ogilvie as we cruise down to the main road, but as we turn left towards Fremantle a black Hummer limo enters from the right. I keep my head down, but can't avoid Mastic's mutt face framed by panels of tinted glass, in the rear. He simply points at me, as the sergeant-at-arms of The Nongs is given to do, master to his minions. Mastic will have chilled beer in there, the kind that tastes like chemical soup, and some hard-faced prossies with plastic tits.

"Should we go back?" Danny asks. "I been hearin..."

"That he's been protecting me. I know. It's bullshit."

"I forgot to ask. You want to drive?"

"No. You drive."

\*

I saw it in Danny the moment he picked me up, but I hoped I was wrong. Two minutes inside his flat proved me right. Fit-pack on the coffee table, base of an upturned coke can for a spoon. He worked the powder into the water and drew up a shot, passed it to me. I shook my

head, looked at him coldly. Baby blue eyes and ice-cream skin, hair like finely blown toffee. Like his mother.

He looks hurt. All his childish needing to please, there on the surface. Softness, vulnerability, and it catches in my gut.

Because where I've come from, the first instinct is to squash it, in yourself and others. What the psychs call the learned behaviour.

And then it comes through, the deeper, stronger and longest held.

The moment of his birth.

My quiet, tender child.

My second son.

Now working the fit into the serpentine vein on the back of his hand, the puff of blood in the glass, driven home.

He smiles and caps the fit, lights a Styvie, slumps in his chair.

I can't take my eyes off him. My youngest boy, grown into a man. I barely notice what my hands are doing, although he watches closely. He is both in the first flush, but long gone, and yet there is time to catch him. After all these years, it is not far to go. To follow my child. That he not be alone. Wherever he assumes he is going.

Thinking that he knows where I've been.

\*

It's only when his friends arrive that the trouble starts. Two rat-faced fucks that are clearly his best mates, kids Kevin's age, early twenties. Juvie boys, the kind that Warner attracts. Strangely androgynous and PVC white, all the usual tats and labels. Dickhead hip-hop on the iPod dock. Porn on the laptop. Ice in the pipe. Laughter with a dull edge of malice. Eyes vague and fierce. They repulse me, disappoint me, but not only because I fear

their volatility. The kind I've been amongst these past five years. The kind as likely to stick a pencil in a sleeping man's ear, heel of the hand forcing it home, as to suck him off for a cigarette.

They can see what Danny is.

Danny, not like Kevin.

What else do they see in him?

One of them, the youngest, because I've just got out of prison, passes me the laptop. Tube-8. *Mongolian audition slut*, he says, and sneers. One look and I can see that it's a road-test, and the driver's red-lining her brutally. She's in a deal of pain, confusion. I close it, pass it back.

"Yeah, blah blah, right?" he says. "You get iPhones in there, from the screws, yeah? Danny, you ready?"

Danny takes the pipe and sucks it down. The smack was strong, and not because I'm green again. I can hardly lift my head. Danny is just as greedy on the pipe as they are, something I wouldn't have expected.

"Ready for what?"

"Never mind, old man. Stay here an' nod off, have a wank or sumpthin. Or I can load you that faggot hook-up site, whassit called? Anyways, we won't be long."

Danny can't meet my eyes. Starts gathering his shit, ciggies, wallet, knife. The other one is back from the bedroom, lugging a green sports bag heavy with iron.

I shake my head, start to rouse myself.

I've left Danny with his brother's world, a world that Kevin belonged to, mine before him. I feel like stabbing my fit into the kid's eyes. He can sense it, too, and laughs.

"Yo, Danny, your Dad is *fierce*."

Where I want to go. The only place I've been where my radar doesn't ping, once, twice every minute. Where I can sleep easy. The place where my father lies unburied, at the bottom of a mineshaft. Not a place I ever expected to

yearn for.

But there is peace there. \*

I wait behind the wheel of the stolen Camry sedan while they do the armed robs - three of them. Two servos and a late night chemist. Not a few K's from where they live.

Such is the life of a moron.

They whoop and rap and smoke the short drive back to the port city, down along the eerily quiet Capo D'Orlando Drive, through gritty sulphur halos and clanking marinas and the smells of diesel and antifoul and rotting seaweed. We park before the long line of Warner's crayboats and trawlers, strung with red and green halogen caps, decks awash in hard fluorescent light.

Danny and his friends divvy up the eight hundred cash, and transfer the weapons from the stolen car to a nearby Falcon ute, the rush gone now they're at work.

Prison is full of kids like this. There because they want to be, the stupid ones to prove themselves to others, the smarter for themselves.

Danny's not like the others. Not prison material, and his friends not the kind to stand by him, should he be marked out for special attention.

I hadn't allowed Danny to talk about what he was doing for Warner, either in the car or at his flat. Ogilvie would certainly have bugged the car, perhaps the flat. But I let the others in the Camry bray how they worked the presses for Warner, who'd been importing high-end E from Amsterdam, cutting it down by fifty percent and re-pressing his own pills with his own logo; Jagger lips.

The kids worked the presses all night, another shift worked days, cray season nearly over. Warner's fleet could easily get out into international water, to trawl up submersible barrels tagged with homing devices, his MO

now for close to two decades.

Danny and the kids expect me to take the Camry and leave, but when I don't, there is anticipation in their eyes. Mastic has offered to knock Warner for me, but because I've always refused, it's assumed that I intend to do him myself.

Warner has never denied killing my son, Kevin. \*

Warner strides down the dock towards me, white gumboots stained with fish-guts and scale, black boardies and skin-tight bluey, bunched forearms and hairy hunched shoulders, the body of a worker.

Danny stays beside, but the other kids draw back.

Warner right in my face, stale sweat and ashtray mouth, flecks of fish blood on his cheek, eyes yellow beneath the sulphur light, moths batting around our heads.

Ogilvie will be watching from nearby.

He knows our history, was a beat copper when Warner and I ran plantations for old Joe Italiano up in the Gascoyne. Warner married into the family, took on the fishing licenses as both a cover and a going concern, has done well, never gone to jail.

I've gone the way of most. Habit. Jail. Habit. Jail. But along the way I've taken on the trade, become the best at what I do.

A good cook excused things that put others in shallow graves.

Except for one thing.

Warner puts out his hand, but he's so close it's more like a jab to the stomach.

Ogilvie will be watching, long-lens camera at his eyeball. Who I choose will determine the copper's brief for the coming years, or as long as I last.



But Ogilvie is not the only one watching. Danny flinches when I take Warner's hand, something that is noticed by Warner. "You got work to do?"

Danny's face is unreadable, until he meets my eye. Disappointment. Disbelief. A flash of something else.

I have chosen Warner.

\*

Had in fact chosen him months earlier, when an emissary of Warner's was transferred into the SHU. A wiry old Noongar crim, with blurred tattoos and oiled rockabilly hair, large fighter's hands. He told me about Danny, his message not couched in threat. Said Warner thought I'd like to know. Because of that unspoken history of ours. Fathers both dockworkers, did time together at Freo jail, drifted into the only union that would have them, the Painters & Dockers, before my Dad went bush. Did he want me to hire Danny, or fuck him off?

Warner could obviously see that Danny was no hard nut, had his father's weakness for the powder, but missed his father's luck. I say luck, because like most junkies my age, it's always those around me who die, people like Danny's mother, like so many others. I survive, like a curse.

But not Danny. He was headed one of two ways - neither good.

Hire him, I'd said. Then nothing else. No news. No threats, or further importuning.

I'd appreciated that.

\*

I go back to Danny's flat and have a shot, drift quietly in my body, seated slumber, nodding bringing me round. Hours pass like the years have passed, my whole fucking life, sleepless but asleep, the old anaesthetic.

The deal is good. Warner's set-up is good. I'll cook

nights on a customised trawler, out on the Sound, when it's still. Plenty of ventilation, all the newest kit. The precursors there, dropped off in the shipping lanes, direct from India.

Ogilvie can't get to Warner, not with his connections. Warner has men in the Ports Authority, the local drug squad. The Federal coppers would work alone for this reason, but they would need boats and choppers to get to the floating lab, and Warner would hear.

Warner is also safe from The Nongs and the others, because of his father-in-law, even if I'm not. Mastic has boasted widely that if I don't work for him, then I won't work for anybody. Has put it about that I owe him, for his protection inside and now he'll have to demonstrate that he isn't full of shit. His signature demonstration involves a ballpein hammer.

I'll live on another boat, nearby the lab, safe as long as I don't leave the port. My plan is to work for a year, pocket the million, take Danny and head elsewhere, up North, or New Zealand, start again.

The old plan, never followed through.

The new promise, glowing dully behind closed eyes.

\*

The explosion at the port rocks the apartment, sets clarions in the street to wailing. From the kitchen I see flames down on Capo D'Orlando, fizzing white, incendiary secondary detonations, oil black streaks over the watercolour night sky.

The moment I think of Danny my legs weaken, and then I see him limp into the street. Vomit into a gutter. Limp towards the Pacer, pop the boot, drop in a canvas bag, lean his weight on the closed trunk.

I understand. Feel a surge of panic. Start grabbing stuff, hearing Danny's key in the lock.

Stand to face him.

"Warner's dead. Danny? Warner."

His face tells the truth. He's burned his neck, suppurating red blisters, what looks like a broken wrist wedged into his armpit, pupils dilated, in shock.

Eyes already on the coffee table, the fit-pack and powder.

I sit him down and fix him, watch his pupils screw inward, take the Pacer keys from his hand and help him to his feet.

\*

Dawn finds us out in the Mallee scrub, beyond the wheat-belt and into cattle country, headed north. The dirt reddens and the heat falls hard and granite mesas rise out of the dry plains and dry gulls. Beneath the gnarled trunks of the Mallee and Currajong and Corkwood the horizon fills with a floating carpet of pink and white everlastings, surreal. Danny is in a bad way, and I fix him twice in cutaways beneath the feathery shade of beefwood and quondong, but then the packet is done. I'd stopped at a twenty-four hour chemist on the way out of Bassendean, had bought downers, painkillers, burn-salves, bandages, whatever they had. The blankets from the beds in the flat. Stuff from the cache of stolen property in the bedroom cupboards, to trade perhaps, some cameras, binoculars and a telescope, a fucking leaf-blower, some mobiles and laptops, miscellaneous tools.

That was before I looked inside the bag in the boot. Saw the cash, banded and loose, range of colours, no time to count it—and a handgun, a .38 S&W snubnose, no bullets.

I pay for petrol with cash at Payne's Find roadhouse, buy food for a few days, put us back on the highway north. The vintage two-door Pacer is a distinctive ride, but

eats the road beyond the towns, a few more hours we're in Cue. I take a dirt road before we hit the main street, buildings like a stage-set in a Hollywood mirage, then head west towards the Rock, parachute of dust curling over the floodplain of poverty bush and salt-grass, the abandoned gold diggings of Big Bell on the horizon north.

We get to Wulga Rock when the sun is overhead, Danny still dazed and mute, angry because I'd chosen Warner, afraid of what he'd done. The Rock slopes high and red beside the road, granite dome filling the sky, plated like a half-buried turtle, a lone wedge-tail circling in the higher thermals. I drive the opposite direction over the graded lip of red gravel and twenty yards into the bush. From now there are no roads. I return to the lip and build it up again, sweep over our tracks with a mistletoe switch. It's slow going, lost in the low scrub, every now and then getting out to climb a beefwood, trying to catch a glimpse of the blue-grey monolith to the east, no name beyond what my father and his father called it, home.

\*

It takes four hours to drive the twenty K, at walking speed. Danny is too sick to get out and guide, and not wanting to stake a tyre, I circle round the fallen acacia and dry gullies over plains of purple mulla mulla and flannel bush and everlastings, knee-deep dry grass, plovers and bush-quail sailing off in brief clucking parabolas, waves of locusts rising before us like a parting sea. It's hot on the vinyl seats, but the setting sun to the west is the best compass I have. Working slowly through a clump of fruiting quondong, hundreds of green and red budgerigar chirruping above us, I see the sparrowhawk and know we're close. It glides above us, taking a good close look through unblinking eyes, circling before rising off the scrubline in an effortless arc. I remember that the

sparrowhawk feeds on the swallows at the rock, and follow it. Soon the broad red flank of the granite monolith looms before us, a couple of hundred metres high, unlikely as always in the broad flat plain, the red dirt around it as trackless as I hoped. We circle round to the eastern side, into the shade, looking for my father's camp, marked by a screen of casuarina and the quondong planted by my grandfather, its seeds buried beside jam wattle saplings, to feed their roots.

I drive the Pacer into the cleft of rock that curls beneath an overhang, invisible from the air, and turn off the ignition. Immediately the eerie silence settles over us, just the ticking of the overworked engine.

I help Danny climb out of his seat and sit him against the smooth trunk of a leaning redgum. Light him a cigarette and set off to get firewood, dragging the dry mallee boughs caked in dirt, a few sticks of sandalwood. I set a fire in the cave, in the ancient fireplace used for so many thousands of years that the rock has melted into a scoop, ochre handprint of a Wadjari child on the smooth wall above. When I leave the cave Danny's still slumped against the tree, but has lifted his sunnies, watching a young male bower-bird perform for him, flacking its wings in a fan dance, hopping on its thin legs.

The anger that made Danny do what I wouldn't, to Warner - is gone now. Won't meet my eye.

"What's that?" he asks.

"Bowerbird. Young male. No pink on its back. He's trying out his moves on you."

"So I shouldn't laugh."

"How's your neck? Your arm?"

"Fucking flies are bad."

"Wipe your arse with your shirttails, keeps the flies from your face."

"Really?"

"No."

I lift the collar of his shirt and pull back the gauze on his burn, still angry red but the blisters have stopped weeping. Important to keep the flies off, so I set about applying the salve over the dry powder I'd caked it with earlier, lay down some new gauze.

"That one of your Dad's sayings?" he asks.

"Good guess."

"Don't piss on my back and tell me it's raining."

"You remember that?"

"Sure. He's tighter than a stocking on a chicken's lip. Face like a pox-doctor's clerk."

Image of my father, face red with drink, propped up at the Fremantle Worker's Club, the idiom of his generation bustling in the air, laughter.

Before he went mad, wouldn't leave his room, pissed off out here with his rifle and a single bag of clothes.

"I ever tell you about this place?"

"No. You just told me stuff he'd told you, not about him. Ghurkhas still killing their own wounded in the Falklands, collecting the ears of enemies. How the Pommy soldiers in the first war used to have the price of their blanket taken out of their last pay-packet, if they got killed in battle."

"You need water?"

"I need Hammer."

"None left."

Danny's face goes ugly for a moment, brought back to normal with a strained effort. "S'alright. My fault. All this."

"Wait here. Watch the show."

The bower bird, who'd been silent while we talked, resumes his dance as I leave the camp, zebra finches techno thrumming in the mistletoe by the cave. I walk up

onto the rock, and climb through the fading light onto a ledge that looks over the desert, mallee scrub to the horizon in every direction, a mob of kangaroo grazing near the soak. The namma holes on the rock still hold fetid water, tadpoles squirming in the shallows; poor man's caviar my Dad used to call them, used to swallow them live and whole, as his father had taught him.

Beneath a slab of red granite streaked with quartz veins I pull out the oilcloth and sports bag, shovel and pick, ammo box filled with Dad's cutlery, ledgers, tools.

It takes two trips but I get the lot down to camp, leave it near the old fireplace, coals glowing. Unwrap the .303 from its oilcloth. Grease is clean and golden. No sign of rust. Not enough moisture in the dry desert air. Bullets dull brass in their cardboard cartridges, couple dozen of them. I load one into the breech and sight on the mob of goats that have come down the rock to observe, the billy goat coughing, staring at me down the sight, never seen a human before. I sight on the smallest kid, take in his colours, for later, when the food runs out. My father lived out here on goat and grass seed johnny-cakes, for months at a time. Quondong in season. Tadpoles. Frogs. Bush turkey. His father before him. Famous among local prospectors. So confident he'd found El Dorado that he'd traded a ten ounce nugget for a crate of sherry, before the hole went dry. It was when Grandpa died that my father followed him out here, worked the hole deeper into the granite and greenstone bands, gelignite and pick and shovel, mercury and cyanide extracted, right through summer. Dug out enough to pay for his smokes and bullets, but not much else. Everything listed in a shivery hand in his ledgers.

I take the rifle and the shovel and go and dig out the soak, hefting the dry sand that becomes damper, the rifle

laid over a rock beside me.

The soak begins to fill with muddy water, and I keep digging. I had a lot of time to think on the drive up. We could live out here, make furtive trips into town, pay with cash. This is somebody's land, part of a cattle station the size of Tasmania, no reason the owners would ever find us. My father and his father had never cared whose land it was, had always kept the .303 handy. This wasn't the kind of country you walked up on someone unannounced, even if you were the owner. Hunters out here. Prospectors. Fugitives.

But Warner is still alive, and Warner knows my father's diggings were near Cue. The logical place for a city-boy to run, with Danny. But Cue was eighty K to the east. Plenty of country between us. We would probably be safe here. Not a lot of other options.

It's a feudal world, the drug trade. My only other choice is to go to Mastic, bow and scrape, swear undying loyalty. Hope he can protect us.

Or go dog for Ogilvie, and hope for the same.

No legs in either option. Once I'm no use, they'll burn me to trade up, part of the game.

\*

The sun has nearly gone and the light softens in the warm shade. Tiny tree frogs begin their migration from the namma holes to the grass and nearest scrub. A babbler singing on the rock. The sparrowhawk flies over for another look.

I watch the water drain into the soak clear and sweet, lob the shovel into the grass and carry the rifle over to the camp. Danny's still leaning against the gum, staring up at the rock, at the fat retreating tail of a giant *bung ara*, belly scraping rhythmically on the rock, flicking tongue tasting the air.

"It walked right past me. Wasn't scared at all."

"Top of the food chain. Probably the same lizard I used to see here, twenty years ago. Dad used to shoot goat for it. The odd feral cat. Lives in a cleft of rock up there. A good sign. Keeps the snakes away."

"Talkin like a bushie already. What's the plan? Stay here for the night? I'm gettin real sick."

"Don't be an arse. If you'd killed him, we might go back, one day. Years from now."

"A hospital Morphine, for my bust wrist."

"Not a chance. We're here until I figure it out. I've got some pills."

Danny's face turns ugly again, and I know the look. Five years ago, Kevin sat in the same exact place, naked except for his jocks, bare feet in the dirt, coming off the meth, not caring about the flies in his mouth, his eyes, until he saw his chance, busted my head with a rock while I was asleep, got himself lost and dead out in the scrub.

I'd hidden the distributor arm of my Valiant Regal, and so he'd set off on foot, never made it to the road. It took me four days to track him, laying down a return trail with a stick in the dirt, my head spinning with concussion vertigo, but too late.

That was Kevin for you, leave his father for dead, but I won't be making the same mistake, twice. My grandfather's rifle, the same one I found by Kevin's corpse is now slung over my shoulder. Hard to believe that it was only five years ago, or that I wished Kevin had shot me. Kevin, always more trouble than he was worth. Mean and violent, enjoyed others' pain. The world better off without him, but. It wasn't easy to bury my eldest son.

Only Warner and Ogilvie knew Kevin was with me. Ogilvie, hoping to turn me, loading me for bitty possession

then telling me what Kevin had done. What Warner was going to do to Kevin, as payback for the theft. What I could do about it. He let me out on bail, to find Kevin and drag him up here, by force.

Ogilvie probably assumed I got Kevin away safe, why he was so disappointed when I got back, and gave him nothing on The Nongs, as I'd promised. Why he made sure I went inside, for the five stretch.

But Warner knew. He knew Kevin well enough to guess what had happened.

I'd always intended to tell Danny, when I thought he was ready. Truth is, I didn't think he had it in him, to burn Warner out as payback for Kevin.

He'd done it for me—instead of me, and right or wrong—I wanted Danny to feel proud of what he'd done, not ashamed.

"Can you walk?"

"Sure. But I need some pills."

"One pill, every few hours."

Danny's first time coming off. I've done it a hundred times, maybe more, and it will be hard to watch him suffer.

He thinks it's bad already.

Before it starts I want to show him the mine. We walk through fifty yards of scrub, ancient trees evenly spaced, has the feel of an orchard planted by a careful hand, everything radiant in the last warm light, to the edge of the mineshaft.

"Careful."

My hand across Danny's chest. Just a big hole in the ground, my Grandfather's hand-sawed boughs framing the edges, perfectly square, dug out with a pick and shovel.

"Why here?"

I shake my head. "I've always wondered that. Don't think my dad knew either. Just that it produced a bit, for his Dad. Between them, they worked it for close to twenty years."

"He died out here, didn't he?"

"Why would you think that?"

"Kevin told me."

"What the fuck would Kevin know?"

More than I gave him credit for. "We'll have a better look tomorrow. But first, what my father told me when I was your age. Don't wander. At first, all the trees look the same. It's easy to get lost, and hard to get found. In this heat, you'll last two days without water...three at the most."

"But the rock."

"You can be fifty metres from the rock in this scrub, not see it. Just do as I say. Don't wander off."

"Okay."

We're nearly back to the rock when I hear the chopper. It's gone dark enough for the searchlight to stand out against the red horizon, the beam of white light sweeping towards us.

We make it to the cave before the chopper sights us, turning slowly around the edge of the rock, looking for our camp, but the searchlight makes one thing clear.

A strong urge in me to run, draw attention away from Danny. Like the plover, dragging its fake broken wing on the ground, away from its nest.

It's a police helicopter, which means one of two things. Either Warner has a mate in the local coppers, out doing his bidding, perhaps even up there with a rifle, or else the fire at the wharf got too big for Warner to control. Meaning there's a general manhunt out for us. Meaning every copper in the state is on our tail.

If it's Warner pulling the strings, and they find us, we're dead.

I dose Danny with three pills at once, bed him down in a nest of blankets, leave him a pot of water, the rest of the food, scratch crude directions into the cave floor, should I never return.

Walk out into the night, rifle over my shoulder, the full moon rising over the eastern horizon, enough light to drive by.

It takes me five hours to make the road, following our earlier tracks, another hour to get into the Cue town site, make the roadhouse just before it closes. Fill up the Pacer, pay using Danny's credit card, make sure my picture on the servo surveillance video is clear. Do the same again at the bottle shop. Hope to Christ the coppers don't get me in town. I'll have to go down shooting. The strong possibility that one of them is owned by Warner. Don't want to be beaten to death in the Cue cells. Don't want to give up Danny's location. Don't want to *not* give it up, under torture - leave him out there alone, helpless.

I make small-talk with the bottle-shop owner, mention I'm camping at Wulga Rock, take my half-carton and leave. Watch from my car to see if he runs to the phone.

He doesn't, which is not a good sign.

Coppers are looking, but not asking.

I return along the dusty track beneath the risen moon and make camp not far from Wulga Rock. A big fire, within plain sight of the road, nearby the car. Pile a few bags under the last two blankets, on the ground by the fire, then walk back to the road with the leaf-blower, use it to blow away the car-tracks into the first fifty metres of bush the other side. When I've built up the graded lip again and I'm sure that our track is covered, I retreat back to the nearest flank of Wulga Rock with the rifle, spend a

night shivering and watching the road, herd of goats using the wallaby path behind me, coughing and snorting, my smell like an odd dream among them. I leave the rock only to keep the fire at the camp going, the urge to lay down and sleep strong.

Back in my stone eyrie I keep myself occupied cleaning the .303 by moonlight, with screwdriver and strips of my shirt, hope to hell the sight is still good. Count the stars coming out as the moon sinks to the horizon, as the inky darkness settles for an hour before the first flushes of dawn, there behind the distant lights of Cue.

I hear the chopper just before the sun spills red over the horizon, high up in the dark sky, just the distant syncopation amongst the winking stars, one of them moving slowly around the rock. I crawl beneath the nearest wedge of granite, to mask me from their infrared, and settle down to wait. I'd placed the two swags as near the fire as possible, the whole camp glowing white on their screen.

It's working as I hoped. One of Warner's copper stooges in Perth, alerting him to the time and place of Danny's credit card use, last night. The chopper sent out to confirm the campsite. Warner likely on a light plane these past hours, Perth to Meekatharra, the short drive from there to Cue.

He'll be coming armed, in company. He'll want his money back, but this isn't about money.

An execution.

An example.

Done himself.

The chopper circles then heads back to the town, dropping in altitude. I hunker down on the cold granite ledge and draw a bead over the plain, looking for plumes

of dust.

The thought of Danny, probably awake now, shivering and sick.

The certain knowledge that if I die, he dies too.

The last of us. The only good one.

I'm trying, but it doesn't feel real. The .303 heavy in my hands, the rifle my father taught me to use, when I was Danny's age.

And always the question I've been asking myself, ever since I decided to follow Danny – to never leave him, until he's safe, from my world, from me, my good intentions.

At what point did I pass from being the son, to the father? It wasn't at the boys' birth, or even during their childhood. I was no real parent. Kevin always a pain in the arse. But Danny, never far from my mind. Knowing I will not be able to die in peace.

Because my father did not die in peace.

The moment of his death the answer to my question. The moment I pulled the trigger, his eyes on mine, but grateful, I passed from being the son to the father. A father in a fatherless world. The godless world that he had lived in, when his own father had died. What my father meant.

My father had been out here, dying, alone, when I found him.

The cancer, right through him by the time I arrived, just out on remand, come to collect something I'd left, the only bloke I could trust.

He hadn't told anyone he was dying. He didn't have any meds. No transport to get into town. Too weak to walk the twenty K to the track, to hitch a ride.

It was already too late. The depth of his suffering. The sounds he made, rolling about like a skinned animal. The cancer in his brain. Helpless in his agony.

I broke parole and stayed with him. Couldn't leave him to go to town, for help, too far gone. Made him broth that he couldn't swallow. Fed him my own pills, useless.

Then the moment came. He was ready. Eyes became clear for a moment, drawn out of his delirium by the pain. Lost. Confused. Understood where he was. What was happening. His last act of will. Told me to do it.

His own hands, no good.

Told me that I could do it.

I knelt before him on the cave floor, the .303 barrel in his mouth, his eyes on mine, watering, afraid. A paste of snot and blood and shit and piss, mixed with the red dirt, in his hair, his eyes, in his bedding, all over his skin.

He said it then. "A father is God to his son."

\*

I hear the Hilux engine before I see it, the plume of dust rising out of the riverbed, settling over the red gum and casuarina grove, the car parked there amid the cover. One vehicle. No chopper. Cops keeping it at arm's length. Warner and one other, a Maori bloke I know, Morgan, who knows me, a good bloke who's come to do me in. Both armed with shining new shotties, a Sunday stroll, walk in the park, hunting the junkie and his junkie son, their navy blue jumpsuits like coppers' or miners' uniforms, black boots and caps, should there be any witnesses.

No witnesses out here.

I wait until they're in a sparse patch of cynic grass framed by a field of white everlasting, no cover beyond a few crumbling termite nests, shoot Morgan first, the crosshairs on his chest true, swing the bead onto Warner, who's pitched into the dirt, put a bullet into his shoulders, load another, put two more into each of them, in case they're wearing vests, watch their skulls' burst like

puffballs, red spores settling over them, then start running, down the flank of the covering rock, towards the dried riverbed, to get in behind their vehicle, in case there's a driver.

There isn't. The Hilux is parked on a carpet of casuarina needles, the tracks of emu and roo and goat in the dried mud around. Windows down, passenger seat reclined, Warner having snoozed on the drive in, the bastard.

Doesn't look like a rental. Or a copper's car, on loan. In the glove box I find the rego - a company car, Styx Gold Ltd, from a nearby mine, an Italiano company vehicle.

Ice coffee cartons on the floor pan, some bacon egg roll wrappers, breath mints, Warner's cigarettes.

On the back seat, an overnight bag, two new sleeping bags, dunny paper, some cash in a bum-bag, wank mags, a blue tarp and two shovels, a jerry-can of fuel.

Warner no mug.

He'd make me dig our grave, mine and Danny's, pile on wood then pour on the fuel. Burn us into ashes and bone rubble, cover us over.

Gone forever.

\*

I park the Hilux fifty metres into the bush, walk back over our track, build up the graded lip of gravel road and use the leaf-blower to cover our trail. The Valiant is waiting hidden in the river bed; it's rego plates in the tray of the Hilux.

Warner sits beside me on the drive to the rock, buckled in, reclined, the other bloke in the tray, wrapped in the tarp. Both of them bled out already, into the dirt.

I want to keep this car, for later. An Italiano company vehicle, unlikely they'll claim it as missing.

Would raise too many questions.



No sign of the chopper either. Same reason. The slightest sniff of something gone wrong, Warner's stooges will abandon him, start covering their tracks, deleting searches from computers, wiping the flight-logs of choppers, until his body is found.

But it will never be found.

Danny takes one look at what's inside the Toyota and says, "Oh, what a feeling."

Late afternoon. All day driving and walking. Parking the Hilux in the cave, before I walk back to Wulga Rock to collect the Pacer.

Now Warner and the other are in the front seat of the Valiant, strapped in, sightless eyes staring over the bonnet, beginning to smell bad.

Danny stands aside and smokes, says nothing as I roll the Valiant, slowly, carefully, over the lip of the mineshaft, wanting it to slide, which it does, crashing once or twice on the way down.

I have no idea how deep the shaft is, and I will never know. Danny helps me drag the firewood and tip it in. I put whole boughs down, mallee, beefwood, sandalwood, whatever is at hand. Pour over the fuel, follow it with a burning torch of poverty bush, stand back as the whump of heat rises in a vertical column of shimmering clear.

Keep feeding the fire, the compressed explosion of the Pacer's tank, the sound of crumbling dirt, superheated, the support boughs burning through.

The work of generations, collapsing in on itself, spume of red dust rising out of the shaft.

An end to it.

\*

I am tired and covered in blood, dirt, charcoal. Haven't slept for close to sixty hours. We retreat to the cave. No words are necessary. We'll camp here, a week or two.

perhaps a month. I'll hunt and cook. Danny will get clean.

Then we'll move. Enough cash to last a year, if we're careful.

A new start. New Zealand. Different line of work. Set Danny up with some kind of trade. Sit back and give him a chance.

The light in the cave is soft and red, creamy like a child's crayon drawing. There's nothing to do now but sleep, rest, live my father's hermit life for a while, walk the rock, feed the *bung ara*, watch the light over the desert change as the namma holes dry up, as the birds fly to the coast.

I feel it for the first time in a long while, my eyes upon my son, feeding the fire, my father's presence in the cave with us, and it's not the violence of our last moments which haunts me, but the feeling that he is looking over us, perhaps, and then I am asleep.

'Tattoos' won the 2011 Sisters in Crime Scarlet Stiletto Award. Angela lives in Melbourne. Her website is: <http://angelasavage.wordpress.com/>

**Cameron Ashley** is Crime Factory's Chief Editor. His stories have featured in numerous anthologies (including *D\*cked*, *The One That Got Away*, *Shotgun Honey: Both Barrels*, *Noir At The Bar*) and online journals.

**Greg Johnstone's** interest in crime fiction began with *The Hardy Boys*, and was watered by picking up the books his father left around the house and the Tarantino-inspired films of the mid to late 1990s. He is currently working on a novel about vengeance, guns and greyhounds entitled *Dapto Dogs*.

Born in Melbourne, Australia and one of thirteen children, **Helen FitzGerald** moved to Glasgow in 1991. She was a criminal justice social worker in Glasgow's notorious Barlinnie Prison before becoming a full-time writer. Her adult thrillers include *Dead Lovely*, *My Last Confession*, *Bloody Women*, *The Donor* (nominated for Davitt Award 2012) and *The Devil's Staircase* (Davitt award nominee 2010) which is currently being made into a feature film. Her books have been translated into numerous languages. Her first YA, *Amelia O'Donoghue Is So Not A Virgin*, was published in 2010. Her novella, *The Duplicate*, is out with Snubnose Press in April 2012. Her YA thriller, *Deviant*, is to be published in 2013 by Sohoteen. She is currently writing her new novel, *Cry*, for Faber and Faber, out 2013.

**JJ DeCeglie** is a 31 year old writer, born and bred in Fremantle, though currently living in Melbourne. His noir novel *Drawing Dead* is available on Kindle; a bunch of people, including Charles Ardai, Paul D Brazil, Jon Bassoff, Adrian McKinty, Peter Rozovsky, Mike Dennis and the Nerd of Noir all dug it real, real good. He also wrote

Australia's first poker novel, *Damned Good*.

**Deborah Sheldon's** fiction has appeared in various journals including *Crime Factory*, *Quadrant*, *Cottonmouth*, *Page Seventeen* and [untitled]. Scriptwriting credits include TV shows *State Coroner*, *Australia's Most Wanted*, and *Neighbours*; an original screenplay under option with Crawfords Australia; radio plays; and stage plays performed in Melbourne and Sydney. Other writing credits include feature articles for national magazines; non-fiction books (Reed Books, Random House); and award-winning medical writing such as the adolescent health CD ROM *SomaZone*, and the *Better Health Channel* website. Deb lives in Melbourne. Visit her at <http://deborahsheldon.wordpress.com>

**David Whish-Wilson** is the author of two novels, *The Summons* (2006) and *Line of Sight* (2010) which was short-listed for a Ned Kelly award. He's taught in the prison system for many years in Australia and Fiji, where he started the country's first prisoner writing program, which now operates in all Fijian prisons. He lives in South Fremantle, West Australia, with his partner and three kids, teaches at Curtin Uni and gets out to the desert when he can.

**Andrew Prentice** grew up on Sydney's northern beaches and wrote his first book at age nine as a way of avoiding art and craft class. He also played professional football and represented his country. He has worked as a university lecturer, disability worker, fitness camp counsellor, stunt double, entertainment manager, football coach, health educator and barman. In 2003, Andrew won the Sydney Writers Festival Pitching Competition for his novel *All Bets Are Off*. He has kept busy with contributions to *Crime Factory*, the sporting website *The Roar* and other online zines. He has four full-length novels