

"With *Shards*, author Shane Jiraiya Cummings and artist Andrew J. McKiernan take us on a guided tour of the darkest backroads of the imagination. Wonderfully moody and creepy."

—Jonathan Maberry, *Bram Stoker Award*-winning author of *Patient Zero*

SHARDS

DAMNED AND BURNING

BONUS E-CHAPBOOK

SHANE JIRAIYA
CUMMINGS

ILLUSTRATED BY

ANDREW J. MCKIERNAN

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BRIMSTONE PRESS

PO Box 4, Woodvale WA 6026, Australia
www.brimstonepress.com.au

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Illustrations copyright © Andrew J. McKiernan

Cover design by Andrew J. McKiernan and Shane Jiraiya Cummings

Layout and typesetting by Shane Jiraiya Cummings.

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All characters in this book are fictitious.
No reference to any living person is intended.

Published August 2009.

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Introduction

Flash fiction is an insidious artform. It pops up where readers least expect it. With the publication of *Shards*, I had said that it would be my last hurrah, of sorts, for flash fiction. No more very short stories. I would be focussing on novels and forging a career.

But like a Romero-esque zombie, flash fiction just keeps rising. Every time I looked at *Shards*, I remembered all the extra work Andrew J. McKiernan undertook in creating illustrations for stories that didn't make the final cut. It was a long road to publication and plans changed, so several excellent illustrations were omitted.

Shards: Damned and Burning fulfills two purposes. On the one hand, it is a sampler, offering two stories from *Shards* alongside four uncollected works (three never before published!). On the other hand, it is a showcase for some of Andrew's illustrations that would otherwise have never been seen by the public.

Damned and Burning can be properly considered an extension of *Shards* rather than a sequel. In gaming terms, it would be an expansion pack.

Damned and Burning is the missing chapter from *Shards*, or more accurately, a bonus chapter. It features the stories of the Hellbound: sinners, the condemned, those staring death in the face, and those suffering in eternal torment.

Read on, and if you've already read and enjoyed *Shards*, then consider this e-chapbook my thankyou gift. If you're new to flash fiction and like what you've read in this sampler, then I'd urge you to consider purchasing a copy of *Shards*.

If you still can't get enough of flash fiction, Brimstone Press' excellent anthologies *Book of Shadows*, *Black Box*, and *Shadow Box* are brilliant places to begin your hunt for more.

Shane Jiraiya Cummings

Damned
and
Burning



Wrack

I'll never forget that moment: Louise's eyes widened, a look I first took as wounded pride. But her eyes remained wide; her irises dilated, her nostrils flared, and her expression crossed the threshold into panic. A whimper caught in her throat, and an instant later, her cheeks bulged. She pressed her palm over her lips, acting a fraction of a second too late. A dribble of brown vomit escaped the corner of her mouth and trickled down the side of her chin.

Her face had never looked paler. Pale, like her sister Bella.

That moment, that's when the wrack took hold of our lives.

Louise ran to the bathroom. The sound of her emptying her guts for what seemed hours is another of those memories that will linger with me, although she never seemed to stop after that. Once the wrack took hold, she could barely keep her own spit down for long.

At least, it had interrupted our argument. It was ironic, really, because we'd been arguing about what to do if the wrack claimed one of us. The warnings had been on the TV for a week. Forget swine flu or SARS, this one was the plague to end them all. No cure. No explanations. No good news.

Louise's bag was half-packed when the wrack overtook her. She wanted to drive out to her Uncle Gary's shack in the bush, hoping to escape the madness—and maybe even me. She was convinced the wrack was God's punishment for the world's wicked ways. She saw no redemption.

Well, life sucker-punched her—and me not long after.

She'd been laid up in bed for days, all pale and tinged with green. The vomit had darkened to burgundy, and the pain had long set in. That's why it was called the wrack. The body shook,

the nerve ends burned, and every second of life became one painful son-of-a-bitch. I'd heard most people died because their bodies just gave up, the way torture victims died in the pauses between atrocities. With that sort of pain, everybody has a time limit.

I nursed Louise for all those days, despite my own wrack. I'd had the better of the vomiting and the painkillers were still able to soothe me. Louise's screams began on the second day. They had trailed off into whimpers by the fourth. Me, I held most of it back behind gritted teeth. When the painkillers stopped working, the cheap tequila and my cache of weed took over.

That day, day four, through my gritted teeth, enduring bleeding gums, the screaming muscles, and acid-fire piss, was when the epiphanies struck, one after the other.

We'd been together for fourteen months now, Louise and I, shared some great times, too, but that was a long time to put up with her turn-the-other-cheek mentality, her passivity that, at times, drove me mad. With her religious leanings and prudishness, she was no Bella. Her sister, my Belladonna, that dirty-sick bitch, my first. When Bella dumped me to screw some gym-junkie, we both knew it had nothing to do with some other guy. It was about control—her control over me. Dating her kid sister Louise had been the closest thing I could call revenge, but Louise's pretty eyes and soft looks, so unlike her sister, had drawn me in. Revenge dating became pleasant, a routine. That Bella refused to attend family gatherings with Louise and I was a sweetener. It meant I was inside both sisters, under their skin, one way or another.

But now, with Louise's pretty eyes sunken in bruised caverns, her skin translucent, vomit and spit crusting the side of her face, I realised my love for her was eclipsed by my desire to survive, to live.

That I still burned for Bella wasn't a surprise, but the realisation that I could abandon Louise for my self-preservation left me retching for half an hour. With my insides scoured and nothing but pain filling my mind, the rest fell into place almost by itself.

At first, I didn't know where my course was leading. Pain makes

the mind play strange, strange tricks. When I hauled myself, legs and arms afire, to the linen cupboard, I was delirious and had no idea what I was doing. I fumbled with the blanket, struggling to comprehend its purpose. Then the spare pillow fell free. As my hand clutched the pillow, the clench a fresh knot of pain, the epiphany I'd had earlier raised its ugly head, and slowly, inexorably, guided me to the bed.

Louise watched me every step of the way. Her body had doubled up, pinwheeling in pain beneath a sheet stained with her fluids. Through her little whimpers of pain, hoarse and subtly abrasive like over-rubbed sandpaper, her eyes tracked my progress to her. She stared at me, bruised and dirty-eyed, no longer pretty, barely human at all.

I like to think she welcomed the end of our relationship, especially the way her hand relaxed over mine a minute or two after I clamped the pillow onto her face. She was too wracked to cry out or scream, too weak to resist, too dry and empty to retch any further. My hand shook as I continued to press the pillow over her face, every breath a trial of fire and aches. In the haze of my own pain, I had no idea how long I stood rigid-limbed over her. I thought I heard a snap, but my ears were so dulled by inflammation; for all I knew, it could have been a bird striking the balcony window or my own sense of self-worth breaking.

The vitality fled my body when I eventually released my grip on the pillow. With my grip eased, black stars played in my peripheral vision and a high-pitch whined through my ears. As I slumped to the floor, my vision clouded by the black stars, I distinctly remember hearing an ambulance wailing through the streets. It was the first sound in days that I'd heard from the world outside our apartment.

I woke in an awkward huddle, staring up into Louise's dead eyes as she peek-a-booed from beneath the pillow that had claimed her life. I jumped at the sight, banging my elbow on the dresser. It was painful, jarring, but not the waves of pain that filled the previous days. I stood and felt strength in my legs that I barely

remembered. A few days of the wrack felt like a lifetime. Flexing fingers, rotating my elbows and shoulders, I could scarcely believe the wrack was losing its grip.

Something inside me had changed.

Troubled by merely stiff muscles, I crouched by Louise and removed the pillow from her face. Death had given her serenity but the wrack had taken an ugly toll—the bruises, the pinpricks on her cheeks and neck where blood vessels had burst, red fading to black, and those once-pretty but now sunken eyes. Her lips were blue, and her skin was finally as pale as Bella's. I brushed aside the matted hair that obscured her face. I felt a tear rise but rubbed it away, kissed my tear-stained finger and then applied it to those blue lips of hers. It was a small gesture, a meek gesture, but enough. It was all I would spare for her. I kept any remaining tears to myself.

I left her there, choosing to remember our time together and not the ending of it, choosing instead to discover how the rest of the world was coping.

Information was in short supply. As I stuffed my backpack with food, I flicked on the TV and found only one station still on the air. A newsreader wearing a face mask mumbled progress reports from around the globe, all of it inconclusive, but the look on his face told me all I needed to know. The fear there, the uncertainty, told me a cure was yet to be found. The way things were going, there soon wouldn't be enough people left with the know-how to cook up a cure.

With my newfound strength, I hefted my pack and pocketed the keys to Louise's car.

I was never religious and glad of it, but looking in on Louise one last time, at her tiny, ravaged frame, and that Bible she always kept on the dresser on her side of the bed, it left me wondering.

They say at the end times, the faithful will be tested, and the meek will inherit the earth.

As I headed downstairs to an empty street, listening to screams and agonies that tormented the neighbours, and distant gunshots,

clear as church bells, I came to believe that the faithful were being tested. The clarity of thought at that moment was like a burden lifted, like awakening from a dream.

Bella's apartment was across town. I started the car, leaving my girlfriend dead and cold in our bed, believing Bella, my Bella, would welcome me back. The price of her cure wouldn't bother her, I was sure. I couldn't even remember his name.

Redemption was only ever for the worthy. For those willing to make sacrifices. Louise never understood but Bella would, my nasty-beautiful Bella. I would show her how to find redemption, how to pass the testing of the faithful and overcome the wrack.

No, the meek would *not* inherit the earth.





Virgin in the Mist

She appeared in the mist of my bathroom mirror, her eyes haloed by the light, her face on the cusp of a scream or a prayer. My faith was strong when I told Father Morales about her. His faith was stronger when he told the Vatican.

Now the queues of worshippers, with their candles and incurable diseases, have taken over my house. Poor as I was, I now live on the streets—pushed out by droves of fanatics. All desperate for a glimpse of their vision or clutching for ‘holy relics’ such as my bathroom tiles. Anything to be close to her. The pilgrimage line to my bathroom fills the streets.

They run my hot water all day for a glimpse of the Virgin’s face. And they get it—her eyes ablaze in the fluorescent light, reflecting their convictions, their need. Like Father Morales and the Vatican Cardinals, they wonder at the expression on her face.

When I still cared and still had a home, I had asked the first pilgrims what they saw. They had offered only fervour, vagueness, and prayer.

But I know now. Life in the gutter has made it clear.

She’s laughing.

At me.





Nuclear Summer

I heard the announcement on the radio. The newsreader's voice, once so suave, cracked and faltered.

The missiles were already in the air, already locked on target.

Even as I listened, and realisation slowly dawned, the sounds of hysterical neighbours echoed through the street. Clattering pots, shouts, the squeal of tyres. I knew they were wasting their time.

The options were clear: a protracted nuclear winter—a fate of starvation and the inevitable wasting away from the radiation sickness—or a short, sharp nuclear summer.

So I slipped into my bikini, took a towel and the CD player up onto the roof, and relaxed as the world went mad.

To the sounds of the Beach Boys, I waited for the mother of all sun-tans.





On the Nature of Evil

“What do ya think evil really is?”
“Don’t know.” He picked at his encrusted fingernails with the tip of his switchblade. “The opposite of good?”

“Well, what’s good, then?”

“How the hell should I know? Sunshine and lollipops and cherry-scented shit?”

The drizzle plaguing the city was incessant. It had rained so long, people only remembered a clear blue sky like a hazy, optimistic dream. The alley behind Dirk’s Pawn Shop was as good a place as any for him to drown by degrees.

“No, serious. Don’t care ‘bout good. What’s evil?”

Glancing at his new companion, he could only shake his head. The hobo was saturated like a sewer rat as he huddled under a dubious cardboard shelter. At least he was spared from smelling the bum.

“Come on, fancy man in yer fancy clothes. You look like a smart one,” the hobo said.

“You really wanna know?” The knife slid deep beneath a fingernail, gouging into the soft flesh, but he didn’t wince. “To understand evil, you have to experience pure, unadulterated love and the self-loathing that comes from losing that love forever.”

“That’s bullshit. I used to know people, you know, from stuff on TV. They looked pretty fuckin’ happy with themselves to me. Hell, they reckon that psycho Manson was an evil son-of-a-bitch, and he was so fuckin’ happy with hisself you could land a plane on his big ole smile.”

“TV is always full of shit.”

“Like you, huh?”

“Well, you’re such a wisearse, why don’t you enlighten me?”

“Um, I dunno. Maybe evil’s like when yer born hatin’ yer mum or some shit like that.”

He laughed—a derisive snort that sounded like a Rottweiler’s bark or a serpent’s hiss. “You fuckwit. Thanks for that piece of pop psycho-babble crap. I suppose you ended up here because your mummy didn’t love you? Or maybe your daddy loved you a little too much? Boo fucking hoo!”

“Fuck you, creep! Take your perfect love and shove it up your arse!” The hobo gave him the finger with both hands. One of the hobo’s fingerless gloves was encrusted with muck.

“You wanna know what evil is? Huh? Here!” He whipped the dagger across the alley. It slid cleanly through his companion’s rags, hilt deep into his chest.

The hobo gurgled and convulsed, twitching like an electrocuted cat. Within seconds, he slumped dead, his blood mixing with the rain and ebbing down the stack of old newspapers used as a pillow.

He strode across to the hobo’s corpse and wrenched the switchblade free.

“You want to know what evil is?” He spat into the dead man’s face and then glanced skyward. “Evil is being forced to skulk in this alley putting up with all your bullshit while I’m being pissed on by God.”

He extracted the cleanest newspapers from beneath the corpse and strode away muttering curses. His flaming hoof prints steamed and spluttered in his wake.





A Reason to Murder

Pulling the knife from my belt, with cold, calculated ease, I find myself fascinated by the scraping. The scrape of leather surrendering to the hard, polished metal. Two substances, steel and hide, both soulless, both dead.

The metal of the blade never sustained life. Never felt blood course through veins nor served as a receptacle for pain sensors. The leather has. For an indeterminate number of days, months, and years, the hide was the skin of a living animal. Tough yet supple, it was part of the miracle of ensouled life. A miracle denied the steel blade.

Metal is the murderer and leather the unknowing accomplice. The leather once knew the joy of living, despite its now dreamless, lifeless state. Metal has never had that experience.

I plunge my blade, a shaft of dead metal, into living flesh. My flesh contains no explanation, only solace. Through my scars and sliced tissue, I offer the questing steel only riddles.

In others does the answer lie.

For one day, the metal will pierce a true heart, finding the life, the soul, it was denied.

An epiphany of the flesh inspired by nine inches of steel.



Infernal Gratitude

I recognised her when those spiny bastards dragged her through the flames, all blackened and slough-skinned at their jostling. The welcome wagon is always the same down here. Waking to fire, brimstone, and the sizzle of your own flesh is one hell of a shock to the system, and your daughter screamed like no other. One in a billion scream, hers. You don't forget vocal chords like that, not after what we'd shared topside. Hearing her screams brought me back to myself. There aren't enough words to thank you for that—and what you did.

I fought my way clear of the nails and the teeth of the swamp, the tide of limbs that had become my lot in this God-forsaken hole. Those tooth and claw porcupine monstrosities, the Malebranche, they never reckoned on the incentive your daughter gave me.

I tore through Legion's ranks to reach my prize, outberserked the berserk, ripped through the murderers and sadists, bloody and bare, knee-deep in the Stygian marsh and left to rot under a sun burning like a dying ember. The memory of your daughter's scream stirred something deep inside, something I thought I'd lost to the monotony of being torn to shreds each day. It reignited my fire, allowed me to reach the forest at the edge of the marsh after months and years of trying.

The porcupines had strung up my muse, my screaming princess, but I found her through the multitudes. The sound of her lured me into the heart of the wood, past the hounds and their whimpering prey, deep into thickets of sobs and screams.

She was hanged from a tree of her very own, like all the suicides, dangling and scratching with broken, bloody nails at her noose. Flies the size of fists gorged on her gashes. She sobbed, screamed,

and when I found her, she looked almost relieved to see me—but that didn't last long.

I killed her topside as sure as I'd strung that original noose myself, I know that. The memory of me cutting on her would have been the last thing on her mind before the scrabbling at her throat and those lasts gasps for air, the black stars and that sickness in the gut of knowing this is it, no turning back.

But you. You damned her. Was it a beef with the Church? Atheism? Laziness? The unbaptised, they're bound for here either way. That's the way of it. Death decides the particulars, not the destination. No salvation without that sprinkle of holy water, it seems.

Take heart. It's different down here. The intimacy is more intense. The pain, well, it grows on you, which means you have to try new things. Your daughter knows what I mean.

I feel like I can call you Mum and Dad now. I'd like to think of us as close, despite what you thought of me at the trial. I think you sensed our connection, your daughter's and mine, despite the outraged charade. You made it hard for me, at times, really hard, but I think I know how you felt on the inside. Stuff like that is clearer in hindsight. You'll see it, too, once you're dead. Your daughter has. She continues to inspire me every day.

She and I, we have a hell of a long time to reacquaint ourselves.

Thanks for everything.



Publication History

“Wrack” and “Virgin in the Mist” were first published in *Shards*.

“On the Nature of Evil” was first published in *Project M zine (Tantaloz issue)*.

“Nuclear Summer”, “A Reason to Murder”, and “Infernal Gratitude” are original to this chapbook.

Praise for SHARDS

“With *Shards*, author Shane Jiraiya Cummings and artist Andrew J. McKiernan take us on a guided tour of the darkest backroads of the imagination. It is wonderfully moody and creepy.”

– Jonathan Maberry, Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *Patient Zero* and *The Wolfman*

“Shane Jiraiya Cummings with *Shards* shows he is not only a master of the flash fiction style of writing but has pretty much written the definitive statement on how it should work. The collection is a strong statement on the validity of an internet-driven writing style and is a must have for any collector of Australian Dark Fiction.”

– Jeff Ritchie, *ScaryMinds*

“Cummings’ work possesses a Stephen King-like quality, creating rich and colourful characters in a handful of words... Well worth the read.”

– Mark Smith-Briggs, *HorrorScope*

“*Shards* cuts you right open and then sets about infecting the wound. Cummings’ prose is as the title suggests: short, sharp, and deadly. The tales themselves are relentless, battering you with their suggestive intensity or mocking with bleak humour. Add to this darkly disturbing illustrations by Andrew McKiernan and *Shards* is one hell of a nightmare.”

– Dr Marty Young, President, Australian Horror Writers Association.

“If flash fiction is the distinctive form of our internet age—and everything points that way—then I can’t think of a better demonstration of the art than *Shards*.”

– Richard Harland, award-winning author of *The Black Crusade* and *Worldshaker*.

“*Shards* offers a worthy selection of short-short stories that reflects the author’s prominence in the contemporary upsurge of ‘flash fiction’ among Australian horror writers. It is varied, the stories sometimes giving a short sharp jolt, sometimes evoking a creeping dread, and at other times, suggesting a world that has already slipped over into darkness. Fans of the short-short form will welcome this darkly entertaining foray into a world gone subtly—and at times, unsubtly—askew, from one of Australia’s ‘new bloods’ of horror. Combined with a wealth of evocative illustrations from Andrew J. McKiernan, *Shards* represents a unique horror experience.”

– Robert Hood, the ‘Godfather of Aussie Horror’ and award-winning author of *Creeping in Reptile Flesh*.

“*Shards* is a maelstrom of words and images that delivers intense stories and repeated sucker punches to the emotions.”

– Sharyn Lilley, Eneit Press.



Shards can be purchased online from Brimstone Press (www.brimstonepress.com.au) or selected Australian bookstores and online retailers.

Other Brimstone Press titles

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