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On Scars

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On Scars

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Description (Optional)

"On Scars" is a personal essay written about the varying perspectives of scars and my personal fascination with them. I was inspired by my own body's scars and how people typically react to seeing them. I want readers to develop a deeper understanding about scars as a bodily phenomenon as well as an emotional representation beyond the stereotypes impressed by Western culture.

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About the Contributor (Optional)

My name is Kari Morris, I'm 19 years old and I grew up in Seville, Ohio. I'm currently studying Psychology at Cedarville University and I'm hoping to pursue a career in professional counseling and creative writing. As a freshman in high school, I took my first writing course. I was bitten with the writing bug and I've been hooked ever since. I love expressing the controversial and calling out the elephant in the room through creative nonfiction. In my spare time, I like to play volleyball, lose myself in a good book, analyze movies, and overcome the inevitable list of three.

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On Scars

Kari Morris

If you were to look at me topless, you would see that my entire torso from the collarbone to the bottom of my ribcage is splashed with pale blotches that contrast my fair skin. Strangers who see me strutting down the pier in my triangle string bikini probably assume I was born with vitiligo or I am an unfortunate product of an interracial couples' poorly combined genes. But I wasn't born like this. My 'skin condition', as most people view it, is actually a very large compilation of scars that have grown with me over time.

When I was just over a year old, I found myself teetering through my grandmother's kitchen unsupervised, searching for something to amuse myself. As the legend goes, according to my parents, I saw a colorful gold-rimmed mug perched on the counter and I simply couldn't resist. From the poker table in the room next door, my mother heard a crash and a wail before rushing to find the aroma of freshly brewed coffee resonating in the entire room and her daughter, shirt stained brown, red faced and screaming next to a shattered mug. Despite giving me an immediate cool shower in the porcelain sink, the damage had already been done; I developed a second-degree burn that would become my first scar.

The body is a plastic surgeon constantly trying to mask the aesthetic imperfections of the skin. As soon as a wound surpasses the epidermic layer of the skin, the body commences construction to correct the mess we've made. First, a blood clot forms under the wound so the body doesn't bleed itself dry. Then, the wound scabs over for a time with the protein collagen weaving the wound shut. Slowly, fibroblast cells peel away the healthy tissue growing underneath the clot and replace it with scar tissue. When the

scab heals, the person is left with a smoother, discolored, genetically altered patch of skin called a scar.

I'm fascinated by scars. One of my favorite ice breaker games with strangers is to share scar stories. I love listening to the war accounts a person's body overcomes along the way.

Some people lie about their battle wounds to implicate significance. I went to high school with a pathological narcissist named Austin who tried to convince the lunch table he caught a jellyfish with his bare hands. His sole evidence of overcoming his adversary was a small red scar on his right hand. In all honesty, everyone knew he wasn't an exotic animal wrangler. He could've just broken a mug or fallen off his bicycle— we knew he was lying. Not that his scar is void of admirability; whether it is a battle wound from road rash after a death-defying motorcycle accident or simply jerking your hand and peeling back flesh instead of potato skin, no scar is insignificant.

Since my second-degree burn, I have accumulated countless other scars. Some are physical ailments, like the thin red indentation in my forehead that mirrors the line of symmetry for my face caused by my violent encounter with a cabinet. A few are medical mishaps such as the arthroscopic snake hole burrowed in my left shoulder blade or the unseen scars in my gums from the extraction of my wisdom. Some are emotional scars, which appear nonexistent on the surface but never stitch themselves shut in my psyche. However, my favorite scars are multi-purposed physioemotional scars, as I call them. They are my emotional scars that have been etched into my skin as a physical recount.

There are no scar types. All scars are the result of the same tissue process but the scar's appearance depends on the manner of the affliction. Scar 'types' are determined by appearance— scars are the same, only the names will change. Acne scars are caused by, you guessed it, acne. These

look like thin craters in the skin that will remind the afflicted of their oily teen years every time they see their reflection. Contracture scars are caused by burns. They can range from looking like simple discoloration to resembling a flame indented into the skin. These scars impair nerves, prevent hair follicle development, stunt sweat glands, and tighten the skin to the victim's body. Keloid scars grow similarly to cancerous tumors, the collagen proteins don't know when to stop. The scar from a 'normal' wound develops to be drastically larger than the original injury. These are more common among people with darker skin.

Westerners hate imperfections. Scarinex, Dermapen, Kelo-Cote, Mederma, Revitol, SkinMedica, hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent a year on scar removal treatment, creams, procedures. A bottle of concealer would work more effectively than some miracle cream, scar removal is a myth. Plastic surgeons have to create scars to correct scars; as soon as the wound is formed, the skin will never fully regenerate.

In healthy skin, proteins that form skin cells are aligned in a tangled, overlapping network of fibers. In scar tissue, on the other hand, fibers are running down a single one-way street with-out cross-traffic. The arrangement causes scars to feel, look, and behave differently than normal complexion.

Some ancient and modern African cultures go through the process of scarification as an expression of social status, political affiliation, artistic expression, spiritual identification, and family pride.

African women deliberately brand, cut, burn, puncture themselves to attract men. The scars represent passages in life. Scars on the stomach indicate a young woman's willingness and ability to bear children. As a woman matures, gets married, and has children, scars are added to her stomach.

Men view women's scars as a tactile enticement and proof the woman can withstand the pain of childbirth. If a young man has sisters, he has an obligation to his family to whip his sisters in the back to the point of scarification as a symbol of familial honor and coming of age.

Western culture would view self-mutilation as merit for in-patient psychiatric treatment, a mental illness.

Not all scars are tangible. The scars that leave no trace are the deepest cut wounds, the ones that fibroblasts and proteins can never hem back together. Scar tissue cannot mend a broken relationship with your parents, it cannot resurrect your grandparents; it cannot tug someone else's heart strings back to you. Scar tissues are useless for healing the only wounds that are worth sew-ing shut.

There are some scars that people insist to sweep under the rug. The ones caused by being raped, getting abused, seeing your father cry, having premarital sex, being robbed, experiencing divorce (whether firsthand or secondhand), being bullied, getting an abortion, self-mutilating, watching someone die. These scars cannot be seen or felt but they are etched into the soul far deeper than three layers of flesh can protect. The wounds are constantly opening and reopening, never to heal, but we insist to label them taboos and pretend they don't exist.

My favorite scars are on my right forearm. They are neatly and meticulously placed in a lattice that resembles a Chinese checkerboard. Each score has its own set of memories; a time, a place, a tool, a reason, a name. Late summer evening, by the fire pit, a scorching stick, a breakup, Jake. "Why don't you do something about.... those?" my roommate grimaced, feeling the smooth, thick tissue patch. Why should I try to erase my memories? Scars remind us who we are.

I think my scars are beautiful, something to flaunt and display like a trophy. However, more recently, I've filled

my wardrobe with baseball tees and crew necks to conceal my body's memoir. I'm not ashamed of scars, but they are not an appropriate dinner table discussion like I used to believe. I hate seeing people squirm in their seats and blatantly stare when I reach for the salt shaker and my sleeve rides up. "What, my scars?" I ask casually. They mumble quietly about the color of my shirt or the shape of my elbow and sink their head into their plates, avoiding further eye contact for the remainder of the meal. I guess some stories are better left untold.