

THE QUARRY

Jacob Harrison

SCARS

There is a documentary series called *History Cold Case*; a team of forensic anthropologists adapt techniques used for identifying murder victims to examine the bones of the long dead – Celtic bog sacrifices, Elizabethan pikemen, that sort of thing. They determine the cause of death and offer a glimpse into how these ordinary people lived but the most interesting and affecting part of the program comes when they reveal a lifelike mould of the person's face. I can't help thinking about what my bones might look like to a TV archaeologist, digging me up in a thousand years time. I definitely wouldn't be a textbook specimen of a 21st Century human; I've had many more cracks and dents than most individuals of our era. A dent above the right eye and an untreated broken jaw makes for an atypical skull; these injuries, combined with several cracked ribs and a fractured wrist, might suggest the skeleton of a warrior, or perhaps a stuntman.

Whatever the conclusion of this future cold case, they are unlikely to pick up on the soft tissue injuries that have shaped the landscape of my body. Like the geographical landscape, these fleshly ridges, ranges and valleys are constantly changing as a result of both exterior trauma and the internal movement of forces only partially understood and eroded by time. There is no need for carbon dating; my parade of various bandages, flints, slings and stitches in my photo record would prove to be a more accurate way to measure the passing of time.

Being an Elizabethan pikemen was clearly an unsafe working environment, Celtic bog sacrifice even more so, but being a media student comes with its own unique set of occupational challenges, especially for someone with a few body issues. Take this scene from an average day:

1 INT. STUDIO. DAY.

Light floods **JACOB**'s eyes as shadowy figures lurk behind tripods. The figures discuss where Jacob should place his left hand in relation to his right, which is holding a small box of toothpicks at chest height. A bead of sweat runs down the bridge of Jacob's nose, hesitates, then DRIP.

DIRECTOR

Sound! Left... lef- sorry right, *your* right... chin up... open your mouth. Ok that's good. Just wipe your for- yeah that's better.

CAMERA OPERATOR

Rolling!

DIRECTOR

Why is there so much light on his neck? No, Jack lower that red and bring it around so we can highlight his hands.

Jacob wipes more sweat off his forehead, making sure that the scars on his inner forearms remain angled away from the camera. The intense beams of the studio lights are not kind to those with things to hide.

It's tiring, but this scene plays out most days – maybe not a textbook example like this one, but I'm generally conscious of the scars on my right hand and forearms and waste too much energy on trying to hide them. Truth be told, clumsiness and drunkenness have taken a higher toll than any self-inflicted scar. Still they look scary, and now and then I notice an eye briefly trace the jagged landscape of my arms before

we both quickly look away. I understand the interest; in the sanitised and safety conscious first world, scars are an exotic, archaic curiosity. Scars – nasty, visible, gnarly scars - are an obsolete malady, like smallpox or polio. Other forms of body modification like tattoos and piercings are increasingly more visible and acceptable, but scars remain taboo.

It's easy to make up stories about my scars that people want to believe, that I want to believe. My biggest issue is that no matter which narrative I choose, these damn scars will be a part of it. Future partners will hound me about them; if or when I have children they will no doubt ask about the marks on Daddy's arms, and they won't believe he got them fighting jungle cats forever. I'm of the opinion that identity is fluid and multifaceted. I like being aloof, impermanent and conflicting, a living embodiment of cognitive dissonance. But I'm no flake, I'm no emo, and I'm not the person that made those marks anymore. This is why I like the idea of body modification. I could take charge of my body's narrative and do something about it. Somehow, could all my scars be put together to tell a cohesive story?

If I held up my right forearm for you, you would see the first part of the story in big ugly type - my largest scar. About twenty centimetres long and almost a centimetre wide in places, its colour fluctuates from white to pink to purple. How brave are you? If you take your finger and trace along the knobbly fire-bolt, you would feel how smooth it is to the touch, how it changes from a wide valley in places to a narrow ridge in others. Because the nerve damage runs deep in some places and shallow in others, I can't feel parts of the surface tissue but I can feel the muscle contract and release around the bone – it feels like there's a metal implant in my arm. Scars are rich with abstract sensory information but lack the detail to communicate their origin story.

It was after my flatmate's birthday and we were pretty drunk. A few weeks beforehand, my flatmate slipped over in the bathroom, falling onto the soap dish and leaving a jagged piece of porcelain jutting from the wall. I was in the bathroom, the floor was slippery – I fell into the bathtub cutting my arm open on the way down and knocking myself out. The next thing I remember I was in hospital, attached to an oxygen mask and various tubes. I had lost a lot of blood and I needed a transfusion. The police told my flatmate they hadn't seen so much blood outside of a murder scene – he had been questioned after the event, to rule out foul play. The scars on my wrists

were much less life threatening or painful; however faded, they cause me the most concern. On both my forearms, there are probably a dozen or so tiny horizontal lines. These little slices were not done on one occasion but represent a long and drawn out war of attrition; my large scar acts as a neon sign directing visiting eyes towards the battlefield.

I spoke to Psychologist Flora Vashinsky, who works in Community Mental Health, helping people with a variety of conditions and histories to find useful strategies to navigate life – myself included. Flora explained to me that people self-harm for lots of reasons. Some harm in attempted suicide. Others harm as a coping behaviour, as a release of the painful emotions they experience. Some harm to feel emotion; unable to feel in the here and now, they can only feel emotion by cutting or hurting themselves. For some it's a one-time extreme behaviour; for others it could be a routine, learnt way of coping with stress and emotions they can't deal with.

'There's an emotion behind the behaviour, then there's the thinking about how you do it, and for some it'll be extremely, extremely subconscious. The thing is with the cut, that's kind of the final result. Behind the cut we have emotions, we have thinking, and we have other events that have led up to the actual cut.'

For me, it was probably a combination of factors. Being unable to deal with unpleasant emotions and being unable to demonstrate those emotions was a big part of it – to save others worry and because I'm a big manly-man. Why I kept on coming back to cutting as a release valve was because it took so long to ask for help. I did talk to a professional to find out where those emotions are coming from and I'm learning better ways to deal with those emotions rather than harming myself. Which brings me back to why I want to do something about them.

'So what do you think about body modification? Tattoos, or deliberate scarification for example?'

'It depends on where it starts and stops. Is it just an addiction in the end, to the process of having the pain and endorphins and the rest of it fly? Is it something significant and there's reason behind it? Is it cultural? I'm sure if you asked someone in their late 80's who's a holocaust survivor about what their tattoo means to them, it's going to be different to somebody who has a butterfly on their ass.'

Humans have been using various techniques to mark their own skin and others' skin for as long as we have been humans. In ancient times people used branding to

mark criminals; in more recent times criminals tattooed serial numbers to mark people. In some cultures marks are used to show the caste identity or set of skills possessed; for some it is to mark an initiation into adulthood. In the last half century, counter-cultural movements in the west have adopted many forms of body modification from traditional societies, including scarification. With the advent of the Internet, disperse 'bod-mod' communities can now interact with each other, learning new techniques and methods, garnering inspiration from images posted by others. In the miscellaneous alternative scene of today, scarification is a mode of artistic self-expression, a collaboration between the scarification artist and body canvas. Likewise, the ritual of scarification might be deeply personal, the physical pain representing a personal threshold broken, or proof that they can endure.

The Internet can only teach so much about something so physical. To learn more I visited Polymorph Body Piercing Studio in Enmore. I spoke to co-owner Rob Valenti, himself proud owner of many a tattoo, piercing and scar, Rob's been a scarification artist for twelve years. I found that scarification is meaningful to both the body modification artist and the person having their body modified.

Over the past five years scarification has become more popular, through mainstream media and communities on the Internet. 'Five years ago I would say I had one or two, maybe three customers a year; this year I've already done about fifteen people.'

'Some people think it's quite barbaric, when it's not really as full-on as it seems. I think scarification is quite similar to tattooing in regard to sensation – it's not overly painful. When people hear the words 'scalpel', 'cutting' and 'scaring', their head instantly goes to this place of 'Holy fuck, that's really got to hurt.'

The interior of Polymorph is quite attractive, with nice hard wood floor and high ceilings. The walls are covered with contemporary art – Polymorph is also a gallery – and behind Rob's shoulder was the studio itself, where the magic happens, so to speak. 'What's it like performing scarification?' I asked.

'How do you verbalise it? Because you're doing something for someone that they really want to do, there's always that satisfaction when you're finished the work. People come in here shit scared ninety per cent of the time; by the time that they leave they're laughing, they're smiling and they're happy, and it makes me feel good because they're taking a piece of me away with them.'

I showed Rob my own scar, told him the story of how I got it. ‘Do you reckon much could be done about that?’

Rob leaned in and had a good look at my forearm, with the analytical eye of a sculptor viewing a newly cut stone. ‘I’m sure we could work something out. It would take a bit of drawing but yeah definitely. I’ve done it for people with facial scars from being in a fights or being glassed, I’ve added little bits and pieces to make it look a little more like a design than just a kind of messy scar. I’m sure if you wanted to, I could take a photo and draw something up?’ Rob took a photo and I’m looking forward to seeing what he comes up with and what new stories my scars may yet tell.

I wondered what others lived experience of scarification was like. You’re probably curious too. Then type, if you will, ‘scarification’ into Google and one of the first links that appears is to a video on YouTube by Gina and Keveen Gabet, documenting Keveen’s scarification. It’s quite a poignant video, perhaps not for the squeamish. Keveen and Gina live their philosophy of ‘Korakor’, a tribal/rural life in the hills of Oaxaca, Mexico, so I was very lucky to catch him via email.

Keveen replied, ‘Using my own flesh as a canvas is a beautiful act in itself. I do not believe I’m harming it or denaturing it. Quite the opposite; I’m writing my autobiography on it. I seem to collect scars the same way some collect clothes or cars. I love to remember scars, they each have a story... It has always been a great ice breaker and that is also how I fell in love with Gina. We compared scars when we met in India.’

I asked if he had any regret, Keveen answered, ‘When people ask me if I regret it, I can happily answer that it’s part of who I was back then...and fully respect and honour that! I don’t think I will do more extreme scarification though... Now, being an isolated farmer in the hills of Mexico, I collect new scars daily. From hammers, nails, bites...

Scaringly yours,

Keveen.

Maybe I am too concerned with how people see me and the stories they build from what they can see. Although, with the increased convergence of identities thanks to Facebook and other technologies, identity formation or ‘personal brand management’ is increasingly important and is played out in the public square. In this neoliberal context, being an active agent in the creation of one’s identity through the

choices an individual makes is the greatest good; the inability to construct one's own identity due to self-inflicted limitations is the ultimate failure, aside from death. Why should I not take charge of the story my body portrays? I may have unwittingly become the ultimate Randian hero.

But I doubt it, thankfully. We really have a limited capacity to shape how we are perceived by others; people make sense of the world based on their past experiences and pop culture mostly. It's more important what stories my scars tell me. On bad days, they tell stories of fear – fear of hospitals, of being locked up, my version of reality being discounted, being discriminated against, of being thought of as a flake, a risk, undateable, a broken thing. Other days I wear my scars as medals of honour, symbols of battles won. But it all happened so long ago. I look at them now and think, 'Well, I could have handled that better'. So, am I going to go through with the Scarification? Truthfully, I am leaning towards yes. If I do, it won't be to tell a story to other people. It will be just for me.