

## Secondary Intention

I see it happen before I feel it. The red apple  
catches the dull mandolin blade and  
without thinking I grasp the fruit, pushing  
it forward to unstick. My hand slips,  
passing across the bare edge. The soft curve  
of my thumb is gone, now replaced  
by wet, red flatness. The bloodslick chunk of flesh  
and nail lands atop neat red apple slices.  
Bright pain creeps in as I saturate the white towel,  
worried I will be late for anatomy lab

I never expected to come back to Iowa City  
after undergraduate. My memory fogs  
when I try to recall my time here, the space full  
of emptiness instead of experiences.  
I know that I studied biology. I know that I  
competed on the track and cross-country  
team. Most memories are aching dull and flat,  
but there are some I can't forget.

I can't forget the dinner before my first collegiate race,  
the coach standing up to give a speech,  
“Ladies, there are those of you here to eat, and those  
of you here to compete. Decide who you are.”  
We lost our appetites. We convinced each other  
we needed to shrink to be worthy.

I can't forget being publicly berated by our own  
athletic trainer for bringing up my hip pain.  
My running gait was reduced to a slow limp,  
I shrank and shrank and shrank and shrank.

I can't forget the doctor opening my MRI  
and the first thing I hear him say is  
“There goes your track season. You were close  
to breaking through your sacrum. Impressive”

I can't forget my coach coming in shortly after  
to tell me that “Of course you're hurt,  
you're so fat.” Instead of rest, I was required  
to continue training.

I can't forget over a year later the same trainer  
pulling me into a room, after I complained  
of new pain in my hip, "We think your pain  
is a psychiatric issue." I insisted on imaging,  
this time I had nearly broken through my hip socket.

Secondary intention describes an open wound  
healing from the bottom up. Abscesses  
gradually filling in the missing tissue with time,  
scarring over, making something new.

I see still see abscesses when Carolyn tells me  
she ran ten miles this morning to make  
the calories of going out to ice cream worth it.  
Simple joy, lost, infected, unhealed.

Or when Courtney and I compare memories.  
We want to remember, yet little  
comes easily. "Sometimes I don't understand  
how we lost the years," She says.

Or when Tayo, now a third-year resident,  
and I, a first year medical student.  
embrace after years apart from the track team  
and the first thing I hear from her  
"Wasn't being on the team here so traumatic."

I saturate the white towel and worry when  
the bleeding will stop. All bleeding  
stops eventually, right? How big was the piece  
I cut off? Can I still be a surgeon if I'm  
missing some thumb? I feel small and alone  
in my apartment until I remember I'm not  
alone. I call Margaret who comes to my rescue,  
showing up with an armful of gauze.  
She brings me to MERF and there I'm surrounded  
by more helpful friends with more supplies.  
Over the bathroom sink, my friends clean and dress  
my thumb and joke about how perfect  
my timing is with our anatomy unit. I catch a glance  
in the mirror. I'm happy, I'm present, I'm  
making memories worth remembering. I watch

as my thumb heals over the next few weeks,  
the wound shrinks. I can't replace what I lost,  
but I can instead look towards new joy.