

THOMAS KEARNES

Flesh Wound

You sliced your hand pretty good, the doctor says. He's a portly man with a hunched back. Finn squirms on the examination table, the doctor holding Finn's cut hand. I perch at the foot of the table, watching Finn's sneaker spin in tight, rapid circles.

He told me on the way to the Emergency Room that needles terrify him. I promised him it wouldn't come to that—but there was so much blood. The doctor threads the large, thick needle and ties a knot at the end of the black string.

Is this gonna hurt? Finn asks. The doctor says nothing.

This is my fucking fault. I'm a grad student directing my first one-act show. The moment Michael whipped out his real pocketknife while rehearsing the show's climax, I should've stopped the scene. But those two kids, Finn and Michael, they were in the zone. I imagined the professor scrawling a red-inked "A" across my grading sheet. Then Finn screamed, and moments later I ushered him through the lobby, Finn grasping a white towel bunched into a ball. We had to stop the bleeding.

The doctor calmly sutures the cut. Finn jerks his head to face the soothing gray wall opposite the doctor, anything to avoid witnessing the needle slip through his wound. I remember what convinced me to cast him. During his audition, he displayed an aching vulnerability, his voice trembling, his eyes glassy. Also, I knew his reputation around the theatre. Everyone had heard the rumors. I thought it enhanced his mystique. My insides quiver and shift; I want to vomit. Finn calls my name, his voice cracking. I lean over the examination table and ask what he needs. Just hold onto me, he says. Please, I need someone to hold me.

Blinking as if I'd stepped into blinding sunshine, I slowly process the request. All those ugly names shimmer through my mind: *faggot*, *closet case*, *freak*. Where do you—what do you want me to do? I ask.

Hold me anywhere. It doesn't matter.

I grasp his ankle as the doctor snips the thread and knots it. There you go, young man, he says. Don't you feel goofy for carrying on like a girl? After the nurse wraps Finn's hand in a ball-splint, I drive him to his dorm. When he hops out of my pickup, he smiles bashfully and asks, Guess this means you have to recast, huh? I gently tell him it's my problem. He shuts the door and shuffles up the stairs, holding his bandaged hand aloft.

I barrel down the highway to the apartment I share with Lisa. I tell her what happened, about dumbass Michael and his knife, about the blood. I don't tell her about holding Finn's leg. She embraces me, smooths my hair as if I were a wet dog. Moments later, we're naked. We fuck so hard her head smacks the coffee table. I come inside her then check for blood.

Thomas Kearnes is a 38-year-old author from Houston. His fiction has appeared in *Digital Americana Magazine*, *PANK*, *Sundog Lit*, *Storyglossia*, *Spork*, *The Ampersand Review*, *Word Riot*, *Eclectica*, *JMWW Journal*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *wigleaf*, *The Adroit Journal*, *3 AM Magazine*, *A cappella Zoo*, *Johnny America*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *Pantheon Magazine*, and elsewhere. He is a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee. His debut short-story collection, *Pretend I'm Not Here*, is now available from Musa Publishing and a second collection, *Promiscuous*, is available from JMS Books. He is an atheist and an Eagle Scout studying to become a substance abuse counselor.