

hollows

flash / stories

tommy dean



Alternating Current Press
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Hollows

Tommy Dean

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Table of Contents

Here	11
Hollows	13
Always the Alpha	16
A Thrumming Silence	22
Wave	25
An Approximation of Melody	27
A Weight of Risks	29
A Pondering of Velocity	
When You're Too Scared to Move	31
The Running of Blood	33
Among Their Skin	35
But They'd Never Believe Me	37
The Desire for Predictable Solitude	39
Rock, Paper, Scissors (The Bridge, Part 1)	41
A Small Act of Contrition	43
God's Eye	48
Without Permission	51
When the Waters Came	52
Finding Fame on Cautionary Billboards	54
Three Boys in the Woods	56
Swirling Mud Thicker than Smoke	
(The Bridge, Part 2)	60
Past Lives	62
We Take Our Better Where We Find It	64
Temporary Housing	66
Flames, Licking, Impossibly	68
We're Trying to Tell You	70
Carrying the Weight	73
Arriving	76

Ruthlessly, Denying	80
Just the Father	83
Baby, Alone	87
Filaments of Air	93
The Age of Quitters	95
Airbrushed (The Bridge, Part 3)	102
Righteous, Dapper, Famous	104
When Mono Was Part of the Equation	110
Open to an Ocean	113
Stitches Unraveling	116
Knocking	118
Covenants	120
If It Weren't for the Lights	122
If Even the Angels	124
Candy: A Teenage Gospel (The Bridge, Part 4)	126
Uncertain	134
You've Stopped	136
Naming the Darkness	138
About the Author	151
Author Acknowledgments	152
Previous Publication Credits	155
Colophon	157

Here

We all live poorly here. Use mail-in rebates at the hardware store, get drunk at Sammy's on Friday nights, and let our children run around in their underwear through our front yards. They wave flags, swords, and guns, practicing for the coming days when soldier is the only job that comes with benefits.

We all live insecurely here. Guns unlocked and loaded, resting oily beneath dusty bed-ruffles, front doors with deadbolts and chains, evidence of forced entry too cracked to paint over, pharmacy and liquor store heavily gated and watched by paid-by-the-hour security guards turtled in bulletproof vests.

We all live indignantly here. Dig up stop signs and hammer them into the walls above our beds, siphon cable from the trailer-court terminal, pull out surveyor stakes, force our pets to defecate on imaginary property lines, hoist cars onto jacks in our front drives, license plates conspicuously missing.

We all live rashly here. Spending the last of our paychecks on VFW fish-fry plates, McDonald's Happy Meals, and the spirits of amnesia: vodka, marijuana, and oxy. We roll through town, timing-belts squealing, humming along to 107.3 classic rock, looking anywhere but the fuel gauge,

hollering through the stripped-soul ache of being unknown. We race trains and semis, dart through intersections, collecting unacknowledged badges of goddamn luck, leaving rashes of side-panel paint everywhere we go.

We all live permanently here. Football Friday nights, performing-art-center dance recitals, candlelight vigils for missing tweens, bake-sale Saturdays for mission trips and recess equipment, petitions for crosswalks and longer traffic lights. Car crashes, lightning strikes, and messy affairs whisper through the corn-arrowed fields.

We all live ignorantly here. Making references to our ancestors, those who scattered the ashes of cultures they couldn't bring to a caged harmony. Claiming a land that was never promised, that seeps with miasmas of chemical cocktails, evolution feasting on its own tail. We stockpile weapons, hell-bent on protecting our ideals of liberty while riding the twin thoroughbreds of abhorrence and distrust, proclaiming an erosive happiness. This, we say, is the only way to live.

Hollows

We're lying in the middle of a cracked country road, fireflies blinking a message we're too human to understand. The gravel is hot on my shoulders, the sweat gathering and pasting grit from the tarmac onto my elbows and calves. My chest heaves from chasing you earlier, my throat raw from yelling your name. One look at the way your shoes are planted into the sticky surface of the road, your knees bent toward the sky, and I know this isn't a joke. You're too selfish, too heart-bent on possessing Jody like the Michael Jordan rookie card that you swear your dad bought you, but you've never let me see.

Shoulder to shoulder, you wave the lit end of a cigarette too close to my face. I regret daring you to buy them, regret giving you the money, wishing we were back at your trailer instead, arguing over the best way to hold the controller of your Super NES.

Your eyes are squeezed tight. I can hear you thinking her name. *Jody. Jody.* And because I love what you love—because I've watched you kiss her, I've watched you hold her hand, play with her hair, listened to you brag about the parts of her body that you swear only you've touched—I love her, too.

So I ask you what we're doing.

“We’re dying. Can’t you feel it?” your voice oozing with smoke rather than tears.

No, I want to say, but there’s a code here, a puzzle that expects something of me, from me, if I want to be your friend. But I feel too alive, too full of promises I’ve unwittingly made to myself, promises that I’m just starting to see you won’t keep.

Your mother lets you stay out all night on weekends while she looks for a new ex-husband. You’re sixteen years old, and she considers you adult enough to make your own mistakes. Heartbreak, it seems, is in your blood, passed down through a broken-limbed family tree that shakes its seeds into the wind, sprouting new relatives every fresh wedding season.

Basketballs glancing off the rim, car doors slamming, bike tires whizzing across broken streets, taken over by the whirl of crickets. The silence between us gathers like old men at the hardware store. Lately, you’ve been picking fights or not saying much at all. Telling me I’ll never make it in the NBA, that my voice is too off-key to sing along, that the song “I Swear” is really for girls, anyway. Your other friends, the ones with cars and fathers with drug problems, would rather brag about their factory jobs and their access to alcohol. While I’m left trying to master algebra, waiting for my first kiss, shooting free throw after free throw, wondering when you’ll come into town.

And as the set of headlights crests the hill, the car steadily downsloping, I look at your clenched eyes and know that this time you might go through with it. All I can think about is the park where you’ve left your basketball, your house key, your jagged teenage heart. Somehow I know that words won’t fix this, that it’s my turn for bravery. Lying here has been a waste, that I’m more than this friendship, and that maybe you are, too. But we’re too young to see what’s on the other side of our lives.

I get to my feet and stand in the light, the high-beams at this angle dominating the road ahead of us, and step over your body. For a second, I'm just another animal, caught in the glare of death's future. Rubber shrieks and sears as the car grinds to a stop three feet in front of my shins. A voice from talk radio muffled in the cab of the car is drowned out by the squelching of windshield wipers flapping across dry glass. The car horn bleats. The driver sinks the passenger-side tires into the weeded edge of the road, stopping alongside us, rolling down her window.

"You kids ... you assholes ... Your mothers ... God in heaven," she sputters.

You wait until the car rolls farther down the road before you start laughing. Giggles that pop out of your throat like carbonation bubbles in a glass of soda. You look up at me, the desperate joy back in your eyes. I reach out my hand, offering to help you, but you don't take it.

"Don't pout, kid," you say. "Nothing wrong with a little show. Am I right?"

You take off hard, almost skipping toward the park, while I watch the taillights of the car enter town, tree leaves shaking overhead. You turn around, walking backward, unafraid of what's in front of you.

"Come on," you say, as if nothing has happened.

I stand there, not quite counting, letting the distance between us add up for as long as it can, thirty, forty yards before I start running.

Always the Alpha

My boy, Tanner, has got himself in some mud up at the school. The principal, Mr. Holler, called me at work, and now I have to go and look that man in the eye and keep my temper. Hours of lost wages, insurance premiums on the rise, and we both know my boy probably did whatever they're accusing him of, but I can't let that man stare me down no more, or my own boy won't respect me at home. Raising boys is like training dogs. You're always the alpha, you never back down, and you demand respect.

When I get to the school, I have to wait for them to talk to me through that little box, peer at me from their camera, wait for the door to click before I can come in, like they don't know I'm coming, like they haven't seen me five times already before Christmas. Tanner is sitting up front, swiping on his iPad, smiling and winking at some girl, like he ain't worried at all. I may have thought that life was a joke, too, when I was his age, but at least I had the decency to keep the punch line to myself. I give him a curt nod, and the little shit laughs. I knows it's something the girl did or said, but if we'd been at home, I would have socked him one right in the mouth the way my daddy did to me. Hell, I'm standing there signing in, giving over my driver's license, smelling the glue and paint from the renovations my

tax dollars paid for, and I'm thinking my daddy was right for wailing on me so much.

The principal comes out like he's dressed for a funeral, tie clipped snugly to his sad blue button-down shirt, looking me a little too directly in the eye for our age gap, before shaking my hand firmly, but flatly, asking me and Tanner to come on back.

"Mr. Holler," I say, "I'd like us to talk first before we bring my boy in."

Tanner, standing next to me, his head already inching past mine when he stands straight, says, "As long as I'm home for supper," before sitting back down, resuming his flirting. It's an old family joke that used to be kind of sweet, but the boys—Tanner, especially—have turned it into some kind of mockery. I wave Mr. Holler toward his office.

Inside, the room is wide and airy, the school colors of blue and gold painted on the walls. There's Mr. Holler's diplomas and pictures of his kids. A football helmet from his one season at junior college before his knee got ripped to shreds by a 280-pound linebacker. In a town like ours, people know everything about the teachers and students at the school. We all shop at the same supermarkets, go to the same Applebee's, and hang out at the same lake in the summer.

"Mr. Timothy, I'm at a loss for what we can do about Tanner. This is the second boy he's punched in the last two months. Swears he didn't start it. Says he was sticking up for a girl, that the other boy was calling her names."

Sitting in this padded office chair, it feels so easy to give in. I'm bone tired, though this isn't different from any other working day. "It could be true. The boy sometimes has his reasons. He was gentle once."

Mr. Holler picks up a small football from his desk, grips the seams, his wrist flexing. The way he used to control that ball, the regret arched across his shoulders. We all

got burdens we carry like oxen, dragged through the world, circumstance our taskmaster, bringing down its whip when we stumble. “If he was just more like Jake,” Mr. Holler says. “Hell, if they all could run like Jake, we could do more for him. Let a few of these indiscretions slide.”

“Don’t say his name. I thought everybody knew that by now.”

Mr. Holler holds up his hands. “I’m sorry. Honestly, I miss the guy. Thought about joining myself, but after the scholarship ...”

The anger my daddy thought he’d beat out of me blooms like moss. I let the moment hang, reminding myself that Mr. Holler is just a kid putting on grown-up clothes. Jake was my oldest. He could hit the seam between tackles before the defense was even set, glancing off shoulder pads and outstretched hands. He led the state in touch-downs his senior year, but he never even got a chance to outrun that IED. The Humvee he was driving took the blast right over the center of the undercarriage. All that metal and bone and skin. We can’t even say his goddamn name at home.

“You can punish Tanner,” I say. “By God, that’s your right. But you know I got to raise a fuss first—otherwise, he’ll think I don’t care about him. That I’m too weak, that he could do whatever the hell he wants.”

“I can take a few threats. Maybe a few swear words. But remember I have to keep order around here, too. Those people out there,” he waves the football toward the door. “I need their respect. This job, Mr. Timothy, is a lot harder than I thought. And Tanner isn’t making it any easier.”

Mr. Holler gets on his phone and has the secretary send my boy in. Tanner walks in, tablet held in his hand, flopping against his thigh. He struts in front of me, taking the seat to my left. I catch a shallow whiff of what I think is Jake’s cologne, the kind Jake would use to hide the smell

of weed that swamped his room the year before he left for basic. Tanner slouches in the chair, iPad chittering in his lap, some moronic game flashing. I'd break the damn thing if it wouldn't cost me so much to repair it.

I snap the device out of his hands, my anger gearing up like water in a boiler, a few bubbles popping to the surface. Tanner just shrugs his shoulders as if he's untouchable, a smirk forming, waiting to see what he's put in motion. I turn toward the principal, shaking the tablet at him.

"You want your culprit? It's this technology. Fries their damn brains. Makes everything a goddamn video game. Nothing's real. Not pain. Especially not death. So, you want to suspend him, you go right ahead."

"Mr. Timothy, come on, sir. We talked about staying calm. Tanner, here, just needs ..."

I hear that word, *calm*, and I'd like to punch something or someone myself. Calm is the word used by the pretentious, *never had a bad day because I been handed everything my entire life*, but before I can get going, Tanner is standing, shouting. He knocks over the chair in his excitement to stand.

"Nobody here knows a goddamn thing about what I need. Nobody wants to be here except those prissy honors kids and the band freaks. You think I won't punch them again, you're wrong," Tanner says, pacing near the knocked-over chair.

Something is telling me that this is going to get out of control, that the little charade we rehearsed isn't going to happen, that Tanner always was the wild card in this situation, and like usual, I've misread his intentions.

Mr. Holler comes out from around his desk, hands open, palms up, a walking joke from one of those de-escalation videos they even make factory workers watch now. I'd laugh if it wasn't so insulting.

"You best stay behind that desk, *sir*," Tanner sneers,

his fists clenching with the rhythm of his heartbeat.

Everything is speeding up. I'm reminded with a jolt of Tanner at three, the way he'd run around the playground, a look of complete joy on his face, until he eventually smacked into some other kid, the way they'd fall and start crying, the way Tanner would tower over him, always curious at the other kid's pain, never sorry, the way Jake could get him to listen, and later when they were older, Tanner in fourth or fifth grade, the talks the boys'd have in private, before Tanner would apologize, Jake standing there with his hand on his brother's shoulder. We could all use Jake's hand now. Three is an unlucky number—someone always taking the other person's side, an odd man out, and as a father you hated the one left out to be your son.

"Now, Tanner, your father and I were talking before, and we agreed that if you'd just be a bit more like Jake ..."
Mr. Holler edges his way around the desk, his belt buckle creaking.

I stand up, and the bones from my ankles to my hips crack and pop. The pain is getting harder to ignore, the way it radiates the brain, little ozone holes in the thin layers of trust, patience, and gentleness that my mother tried to foster while my daddy wasn't looking. Daddy knew I had to have some rough and tumble in me, and boy, had he won.

"Tanner, get ready to run," I say.

"Wait. We agreed. Can we just wait?" Mr. Holler says.

"Do it, Dad," Tanner says, as if he knows what I'm up to.

And maybe he does, maybe he knows exactly when clenching a fist isn't enough, when knuckles have to make contact, erupting like the flame of an acetylene torch, when violence is the quickest answer. Tanner's voice almost stops me, but his pride spurs me forward. Mr. Holler steps back, his youth another reminder of my loss. How badly I want to hit him. Instead, I rake my hands across the edge

of his desk, sending the framed pictures crashing to the floor. How often we use glass to protect the things we care about when it's so easily broken. In the confusion, I grab Tanner underneath the shoulder and hustle him toward the door. I'm not sure what it means that I want so quickly to apologize and help Mr. Holler put his family back together, but there's no way to explain my grief.

When we get in the truck, I don't let it warm up. I rip the gear shift into reverse, tires squealing like I'm eighteen again. I know there will be hell to pay for this. You can't knock over a man's pictures of his children and not pay some kind of consequence, but I look over at Tanner, hoping to see the same thrill of adrenaline I feel, that camaraderie, of two guys finally tipped over the edge, his face flush with admiration—but whatever he may have felt fleeing that office is gone, his eyes mutely glaring at the screen, angry or bored, as if nothing abnormal has happened. And I'm left trying to name that feeling when you want to explain to your son that you know why he's doing this, the pain he's avoiding, but this knowledge won't stop either of us from hurting everyone else.

A Thrumming Silence

The day my brother died, I broke into my best friend's house. I skipped school that morning, feigning a stomach ache. I had taken several stool softeners the day before. My mother, a light sleeper, plagued only at night by anxiety that blanketed her like a muslin sheet, assumed that the constant flushing coming from my bathroom toilet was evidence of my flulike symptoms. This ruse wasn't my favorite way to fake sickness, but it was effective, and the symptoms usually wore off by noon. I'd then have the house to myself for four uninterrupted hours.

I must have heard the sirens that day, the entire town erupting in wailing chaos, but we never assume the emergency has anything to do with us. Our minds quickly account for the whereabouts of our family members, ticking off their usual placements, stuck in their settings like characters in a book. My mother was sitting behind her desk, typing numbers, balancing accounts; my father was at the elementary school, teaching science; and my brother was at the high school, tipped back in his chair, math quiz finished quickly, telling jokes that even his teachers laughed at, despite their warnings of detention if he didn't shut up.

I didn't exactly break into Ryan's house. I knew about the hide-a-key, how obviously fake the specked mica rock

looked among dull gray stones delivered one spring break when we were eight and were still excited by the loud rush of falling rocks from the bed of a dump truck. Turning the key, I wasn't afraid. There wasn't an alarm or even a dog, but just the thrumming silence of appliances. There was mystery among the familiar. I'd been in the house countless times, but never alone.

The police told us a week later, while we sat on the couch, a May sun streaming in through the window behind us, that witness accounts placed my brother on County Road 350 East, driving at reckless speeds.

"What's a reckless speed to a couple of grannies and an old farmer?" I ask the middle-aged cop, whose gray chest hair I could see through the bulge between the buttons of his uniform shirt.

Officer Fugit shook his head, while Dad escorted me to my room. Dad settled me on my bed, the comforter cold, his hand on my shoulder sweltering. "We're all in pain, Dylan," he said. "Your mother, she can't handle these kind of questions."

"You," I started, but the haunting was already behind his eyes. "Then we shouldn't expect any answers."

Most kids would brag about looking at their best friend's sister's underwear, or drinking the father's liquor, or unearthing the holstered handgun in the mother's unlocked nightstand. But you know where they found me? In Ryan's old playroom, the vintage toys scattered around me—Transformers, Ninja Turtles, He-Man, and G.I. Joe—arranged in an epic battle, a storyline I didn't want to give up, while my mother stood over me, breath ragged as a balloon that's come untied. Her wrists draped across my shoulders, twitching from the mechanical motion of typing.

I held up a Ninja Turtle, the red-masked one, and asked, "Do you remember this?"

We only made it three more months in that town. The rumors were a constant source of embarrassment for my father. Rumors of there being another vehicle, the image of black paint streaked across the bumper of my brother's car that the town sent off to the county dump to recycle and turn into sheet metal riveted to someone's roof. Hypotheses my father couldn't track down, no experiment he could conduct in his lab. My mother lost her nerve for numbers. The steady, plodding pace of a woodpecker at her computer fell silent as she sank into the sentimentality of watching Jimmy Stewart movies over and over, the disability from carpal tunnel obviously an excuse.

And then there was me, suddenly an only child, my brother's voice fading to a single word, "Dude," repeating throughout our new house, his only goddamn word echoing hollowly in the white noise of our abrupt but lasting grief.

A year later, I got a package in the mail. No sender identified, but the address familiar. I opened it cautiously in my room—this new house having only two bedrooms in order to keep the ghosts out—to find a set of Transformers, carefully packed in bubble wrap, the plasticized colors vibrant and unmarked. I placed them on my desk, mechanical arms outstretched, frozen in battle, waiting for someone to notice their struggle.





About the Author

Tommy Dean is the author of two flash-fiction chapbooks, *Special Like the People on TV* (Redbird Chapbooks, 2014) and *Covenants* (ELJ Editions, 2021). He lives in Indiana, where he is currently the editor at *Fractured Lit* and *Uncharted Magazine*. A graduate of the Queens University of Charlotte MFA program, he is currently working on a novel. A recipient of the 2019 Lascaux Prize in Short Fiction, his writing can be found in *Best Microfiction 2019* and *2020*, *Best Small Fictions 2019*, *Monkeybicycle*, and *Atticus Review*. He taught writing workshops for the Gotham Writers Workshop, the Barrelhouse Conversations and Connections conference, and the Lafayette Writers Workshop. Find him at tommydeanwriter.com and on Twitter at [@TommyDeanWriter](https://twitter.com/TommyDeanWriter).

Author

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Previous Publications

“Here” and “Carrying the Weight” were previously published in *New World Writing*.

“Hollows” was previously published in *The Lascaux Review*.

“Always the Alpha” was previously published in *Bull: Men’s Fiction* and *The Strand Magazine*.

“A Thrumming Silence” and “Ruthlessly, Denying” were previously published in *JMWW*.

“Wave” and “Finding Fame on Cautionary Billboards” were previously published in *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*.

“Rock, Paper, Scissors” was previously published in *Vestal Review*.

“A Small Act of Contrition” was previously published in *The MacGuffin*.

“God’s Eye” was previously published in *Split Lip Magazine*.

“Without Permission” was previously published in *Spry Literary Journal*.

“When the Waters Came” was previously published in *Cotton Xenomorph*.

“Three Boys in the Woods” was previously published in *(b)OINK*.

“We’re Trying to Tell You” was previously published in *Bull: Men’s Fiction*.

“Arriving” and “Filaments of Air” were previously published in *r.k.v.r.y.*

“Just the Father” was previously published in *The Avalon Literary Review*.

“Baby, Alone” was previously published in *Watershed Review*.

“The Age of Quitters” was previously published in *2 Bridges Review*.

“Airbrushed” was previously published in *Newfound*.

“When Mono Was Part of the Equation” was previously published in *Longleaf Review*.

“Open to an Ocean” was previously published in *X-Ray Literary Magazine*.

“Stitches Unraveling” was previously published in *New Flash Fiction Review*.

“Knocking” was previously published in *Pithead Chapel*.

“Covenants” was previously published in *The Citron Review*.

“If It Weren’t for the Lights” was previously published in *Claw & Blossom*.

“Candy: A Teenage Gospel” was previously published in *Lost Balloon*, *The Lascaux Review*, and *After the Pause*.

“You’ve Stopped” was previously published in *Pithead Chapel*, *Best Microfiction 2019*, and *Best Small Fictions 2019*.

Colophon

The edition you are holding is the First Edition of this publication.

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