

# "Witching" by Alix Hawley

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Alix Hawley is the author of the novel *All True, Not a Lie in It* and is the winner of the 2017 CBC Short Story Prize. (Mike Hawley)

**"Witching" by Alix Hawley is the winner of the 2017 CBC Short Story Prize.**

**As the winner of the 2017 CBC Short Story Prize, Alix Hawley will receive \$6,000 from the Canada Council for the Arts, will attend a 10-day writing residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity and will have her story published in Air Canada enRoute magazine.**

***Warning: This story contains graphic language.***

The second he came back he was different, although who else would have read it in him? The walk was his, the skin was his. The long face and dark hair and old, mildly surprised expression. He came out of the depth of the arrivals tunnel and stood in the airport fluorescence smiling, and the smile was mine, for me. He kissed me, he smelled the same. I waited. I waited.

Anybody would be changed. Read the stories of Vietnam. Those men who came back in pieces, legs off, eyes gone, not talking. Not just the ones who'd had their jaws blown away. Nobody talked. If pressed, they'd say there was nothing to talk about. If pressed harder, they'd say there was a lot of mud. That's all you'd get out of them, the mud.

I read a lot of those accounts before he came home. I felt like a student with a final exam looming.

I can't get much more out of Dylan. Except there wasn't mud in Afghanistan. Sand. Sand in your eyes and your mouth and all the crevices of your body. That's what he'd say. The word *crevices* was startling, weirdly tender, coming from him. He'd obviously thought it out.

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I keep thinking of the first plastic surgeries. Not the very earliest messes, the glass balls as breast implants, corpse ears stitched to living earless heads. I've read about those, too. But I mean the ones after the assorted horrors of World War I. The man missing his face after being burned to the bone. He got a wide strip of his chest cut out and slapped into rebirth as forehead and eyelids and nose. They kept the band attached to his torso with long tentacles of flesh until the blood supply was established. You could see the doctors' frustration with their material. It puckered, it glowered, it wouldn't lie the way they wanted it to lie.

Dylan is physically fine. He has a small blister on his heel that won't close up. It weeps like an

eye. He lets me put Band-Aids on it for him. He lets me do everything. He still goes running, he still eats tuna sandwiches, he folds his shirts in the same squares. But part of him is - misplaced. I think that's what I mean. I look at him, and some kind of threads are holding him down, as if he were a balloon in a parade, and the parade is in the desert, going on and on through the golden light and sand. Moving away forever. He doesn't twitch, he doesn't sit around hollow-eyed. He's fine, he's completely fine. He just comes out with odd words sometimes, a little British or something else, unlike him. *Crevices. Trousers. Sport. My heart laid bare.*

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I mean, you can watch *The Exorcist* and believe in the spinning head, but even churches say possession isn't real, it's a metaphor for something, being lost to God maybe. Dylan isn't lost, he's right here in his sweatpants, or sweat *trousers*, laying his heart bare. Or not. When he hugs me with his long arms, I know the hug and the arms, the sparse black hair on them and the backs of the hands, the pats and the *love yous*. His head doesn't spin, he's calm, he watches hockey with his feet up on the back of the couch, the same as ever. But in my mind I keep seeing a wasp nest, a grey papery shell, full of building and buzzing in some insect language. I have no idea what it means.

He doesn't move in his sleep. He says he doesn't have nightmares. He doesn't have dreams at all. He breathes steadily all night. I ask him about his sleep in the morning and he just smiles and stretches, clear-eyed as a kid.

Late last night he was on the couch with the dog and his laptop. When I came downstairs, I could see the screen, the naked women looking skilled and efficient at what they were doing to each other. Nothing weird. I said hi, and he turned around and smiled his old smile at me and went back to watching. I said, Come to bed.

He said, Look at this. Bodiless romance.

I said, I see plenty of bodies. Come on, it's late.

The women moved their limbs slowly, as if they were trapped in honey. Dylan said, The bodies don't matter. They're not the point.

Not the point of porn? What are you talking about?

I sat on the back of the couch and touched his shoulder. I said, Dylan - did you see bodies in Afghanistan?

He turned and looked at me, his face glowing blue in the laptop light. He said, Bodies are never the point. They're just vehicles for experiences.

This felt like a breakthrough. Before he shut his mouth, I climbed over the couch to kneel by his feet. I put my hand on his leg and said, Sweetheart, I'm here. You're home. We can talk. You can tell me everything.

He was still smiling, except it had turned puzzled, a little pitying. He said, Sure, Melly. I'm going to stay down here for a while, ok?

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Bodiless romance. I heard, all right. I sat up in bed alone. He used to call me Melly when we first got together, like I'd popped all saintly out of *Gone with the Wind*.

I tried to read a big novel. I thought about when I was young and obsessed with the Brontës, more with their lives than their novels. Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester left me pretty cold. But I'd thought a lot about Charlotte Brontë dying, the last of her young siblings, unable to believe she was going now that she was happy, married and pregnant at last. I'd cried a little at the time, reading about that. Why?

Maybe that's what Dylan was talking about. A wishful connection with somebody else, somebody real but impossible. Like watching them naked on a screen. Feeling like you understand them, although how can you? What did I know about being a writer dying of morning sickness in a Yorkshire parsonage in the 1850s?

Charlotte Brontë was angry, though. I got that. Life had no other plans for her: boom, the end. When she was dead, her dad cut up her letters and manuscripts to send to desperate fans seeking a piece of her handwriting. Any word, any mark, any piece of her. I'd be angry too.

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Dylan didn't come upstairs at all. This morning he's gone off somewhere, maybe his veterans' PTSD group, except he doesn't have PTSD. He just likes to go and hang out and have coffee, he says. That's mostly what they do there.

Now I'm so full of huge, startling rage, I'm going to collapse and die on the kitchen floor with my teeth bared to the gums. My pulse bangs in my head and my neck. I have to lean over the sink and run the tap icy onto my scalp.

What I want is - I want to drag him back from wherever he's gone, from the dead, only he's not dead. I want to cut all his clothes into voodoo pieces, shake him, duck him underwater, reassemble him. Only he's not broken either. That's the problem. He just kissed me goodbye and drove off at a normal speed, like a perfectly reasonable person.

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I take myself and the dog for a walk. A few of the neighbourhood houses have pumpkins squatting on their front steps. Up the block, two tiny girls are running around their yard in identical witch masks. One is holding a pink plastic Barbie broom above her head and screaming *Yaaaahhhh*.

Does Barbie do her own sweeping? The dog barks at the girl, or the broom. He didn't bark at Dylan at all when he came back, even though it had been more than a year.

The smaller girl falls over a lawn chair and howls for real, but she doesn't pull off the mask. The other crouches to peer at her through her own eye-holes. Maybe Dylan has a new face. Maybe he isn't Dylan. Body-snatched. Are there witches in Afghanistan?

The little girl goes on howling. I cough. My head is cold. The air swarms faintly smoky into my lungs. I think again of wasps, building away quietly, chewing wood into paper, making things into other things.

The dog whines. We walk. And Dylan drives past now, going very slowly up the street, watching for something. I feel his eyes pass through my body like X-rays. I feel myself vanish. A girl in a slouchy green cap is walking ahead and Dylan raises his hand, a small, private salute. The girl does the same. She looks about 16. Maybe 15. Maybe less.

The car nearly stops. The wheels grind forward, Dylan's mouth shapes words at the window. What words? Love? What?

*Vehicles for experiences.* Like what? Like this? Dylan. I see it now, how he loves being transformed by the war and the sand in his crevices. He's happy and it's a happiness I can't reach. I can't see around it.

Chimney smoke threads into the sky and I think of all the people ever left behind, praying for their World War I dead, trying to contact them through mediums in twilight parlour séances. *Don't you have anything to tell me?*

I think, too, of Charlotte Brontë's old dad cutting up all he had left of her and I get it. I get it. I do.