



Hailey Laine Johnson

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Bryce Milligan, the poet and writer, the publisher, the educator, the musician and intellectual was once my teacher, and he nearly killed a part of my spirit, and I feel like I've been dragging a corpse within me for far too long. When I was 14 and a freshman I was plucked out of my redneck school and selected to go to NESAs for creative writing. Childhood hopes and dreams, blah blah blah. When I was 14 he selected me to be his muse, which meant that he sequestered me from my classmates with a ring of privilege-- he secured me luncheons with famous writers, he gave me rare books, he wrote me songs and poetry about my breasts and my virginity, he sexualized me, he stole my ideas and made them his own. He had me call every night at 2 am on his private line and would keep me on the phone until 5 am-- he'd talk about life and philosophy and poetry and myth and then he talked about how he was going to leave his wife for me. He made me responsible for the quality of his work, as though I were the source of his writing, and I stupidly allowed this to go on—he kept me in a careful web of extreme adoration and reverence tinged with guilt, shame, and above all, complicity. He was careful to keep himself safe as he adjusted the control he had over me-- he'd talk about wanting to fuck me while never trying to make it a reality, he'd kiss my neck when no one was looking, he'd have me sit on his lap while he graded homework. I even went to his home for a class Christmas party and spent time with his wife, the weight of the guilt over what was happening pressing down on me. At that Christmas party he cornered me under mistletoe at the back of his house. He was over thirty years older than I am.

I did not have the strength to tell him no or to stop because of his authority and his power, and I felt like I had no right. I was always uncomfortable, scared, stupified, and I constantly blamed myself because I couldn't stop him. I accepted his gifts and the shelter of his favor because they were beautiful and they pulled me out of the doldrums of a working class, white trash childhood, and I watched as a monster spawned out of an offer to write me a song, which I thought was something he did for all of his students. Initially I thought I'd found a community and a real lifeline that would help me somehow transform myself into something better-- I was an insecure kid that had been bullied when I was younger and was now at a new school, and somehow I thought a teacher could be a friend. I didn't understand that I was quickly becoming an object under the control of a highly manipulative svengali wrapped in the shroud of a bard.

As things got more controlling and weird my body began to react-- my fingernails started to turn papery and slipping out of their nailbeds, I began having my first panic attacks, I became sickly. I once defied him by cutting all of my hair off— he fetishized my long hair, my skinniness. I gained weight in revolt. I remember waking up early in a delirium of tears and shame and taking all the gifts he gave to me out to the dumpster behind my parent's apartment and burning all of them in a little pile. I further defied him by telling on him when another student told me that he was going to get revenge on me if I said anything that got in his way of going to an Ivy League college. Bryce was allowed to leave his teaching position, but not before he could take me in front of my class and scream at me in front of my other classmates. I initially went to the head of NESAs, Dr. Judith York, and her exact words were "I am not hearing this." and she sent me away. She didn't give two fucks about what I went through. It wasn't until I went to the principal of Lee with tears running down my face that anyone did anything. I remember gripping at the arm of another student and feeling like I was going to black out when he yelled at me for exposing him. The stupid, irresponsible school made me attend his class while this was under investigation. I had to turn in reams of emails where he urged me to marry him (at 14), where he fantasized about me, where all matter of madness was fleshed out in words. The school allowed him to quit instead of getting fired, and he thereby kept his reputation clean. I spent years feeling guilty for what I did and for the role that I played. His students were like acolytes, and I was shunned from everything-- I became an enemy. I was actively bullied, threatened. The school's solution was to pull me out of class to do my studies sequestered in a glorified closet in the library, like a criminal. My parents didn't pull me out of school because they felt like doing so would make me a quitter, so I bore the weight of all of this and became extremely hostile, angry, stupid.

When I was 18 and living in Austin he contacted him to look for closure and he responded under the pretense of looking for forgiveness. He came to Austin and like a fool I agreed to meet with him to discuss what had happened and to make peace with not only him, but desperately with myself. Without warning I found the same patterns reinvigorated, this time with a vengeance. He talked me into going to his studio in San Antonio, he forced his tongue into my mouth in a dark alley next to his house, he'd call me and would beg me to masturbate while he listened on the phone-- which I resisted and declined, all the time wondering how the fuck this was happening again. He began showing up to my apartment without warning. One day he stood outside of my balcony and chucked rocks at my window for hours, as I sat quietly in my place wishing for him to leave. I got him to quit by having my friend's weed connect call him and threaten to kick his ass if he didn't stop.

I've tried to write in the darkness, I'd tried to be an artist, which was all I ever wanted, but I'm afraid to make any connections in that world because he is always there. People revere him, absolutely adore him. Two years ago I began teaching a writing course at Gemini Ink, and the day of our public reading he materialized. I had to sit in the same room as him, festering with electric agony. He read before us-- one of his brave, women-is-goddess poems, and he played the role of the feminist to a crowd of misty eyed sycophants. He did a reading on Donald Trump's Inauguration Day, decrying the sexual offender in chief, and no one called him on his hypocrisy. Of course I couldn't be there-- there are no readings that I feel safe to attend, no place for me to turn. I couldn't go to the Blue Stat because he lives down the street. I couldn't put my name on anything because he would know I was there. I was always having to keep one eye peeled in case he was there. I once almost ran into him at HEB and my knees locked in fear. Just seeing him made me so afraid that I would almost pass out.

He's out there right now with a secure reputation. He got off Scott free. The city of San Antonio gives him money. He's hailed a feminist. Why can't I let it go? I still can't write. For 17 years I couldn't make art. I'm haunted by what he did to me, to my self image, by what he made me feel about myself. No matter what I do I still see myself as unworthy of creating, communicating, and I'm terrified to make deep relationships in the arts because this could happen again. Bryce, you intimately hurt me. You damaged me. You very nearly broke me. And you got away with it for 17 years. You manipulated me, you twisted my self image so much that I didn't know up from down. It has taken me 17 years to undo the damage that you caused. You manipulated a child and fucked my brain up. And you are out there everyday without having to wear the stain that I carry. No more. Your time is up. [#metoo](#) [#timesup](#)