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Stepfamily

SUBMITTED BY
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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN PHOTOGRAPHY AND INTEGRATED MEDIA

LESLEY UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF ART AND
DESIGN

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Stepfamily

Work and Writing by Rebecca Chappelle

My work explores the evidence that contributed to my family's dysfunction and ultimately its collapse, brought on by my stepfather's own separate trauma and depression—complications that had been ingrained into his personality long before we entered his life. My images are constructions based on the events that took place during the period that he and my mother were married, in which time I had gone from my mid-teens to my early twenties, and my sister from kindergarten into eighth grade. A photographic narrative allows me to select the memories that are crucial to my and my audience's understanding of the events that took place—moments that have no photographic record, as a family reserves the taking of pictures for occasions meant to be remembered and looked back upon. With the creation of these photographs, I am able to investigate my experience with a man whose role as my father deteriorated as he was engulfed by his alcoholism and depression.

Each photograph in this body of work is an interpretation of the journey my family and I endured while attempting to share a life with my former stepfather, Sean—validating our previously untold experience. Scenes such as that of a child's scooter, an empty dust-covered table, evidence of an isolated man, are an attempt to portray an environment of unrelenting struggle and confrontation.

Influences

This body of work has been fueled, in large part, by the influences of those artists whose chosen subject matter aligns with my own, supporting the drive that has motivated me to pursue art as my lifelong career.

Julie Blackmon's most recent series, *Free Range*, depicts scenes of an eerie and chaotic family life. In many ways, it is reminiscent of the work of Ralph Eugene Meatyard, as they both choose to construct unnerving and sinister atmospheres in each of their photographs. The success of *Free Range* is a result of Blackmon's ability to both manipulate and carefully stage each photograph. In one image, *Holiday*, we see a small single-family home that is cluttered with decorations referencing Halloween and Christmas: a decaying pumpkin, a short strand of Christmas lights, a sparse pine tree lying on its side in the front yard. In the center of the image are two young children looking out toward the viewer, one pressed up against the window, naked except for his or her underwear, and the other with just the top of their head peeking above the window frame. The cloudless sky, paired with the addition of the yellowing grass and bare trees, makes the bright light feel cold. The daytime light causes the décor's usual enchantment to crumble; instead of the pleasing multicolored glow, we see the façade in a state of unraveling—the children watching as their favorite holidays get packed away into boxes. Blackmon's use of realistic domestic spaces in combination with characters and props that look like they had just been pulled from a doll house is a large part of what makes her work so compelling. The study of artists such as Julie Blackmon and Jeff Wall has inspired me to continue working with intentionality in the construction of each scene—enabling a stronger understanding of my narrative. The influence of Julie Blackmon's work has also been particularly vital as I have developed narrative scenes which utilize the interplay between the real and the constructed.

David Hilliard's photograph, *Wiser Than Despair* (from his body of work, *The Tale is True*) is an example of the strong sense of narrative often found in his work. In this image, we see two men in a domestic space, sitting together at a table. The character of the grey-haired man radiates an aura of earned seaworthiness—this can be seen both by the environment (the ocean is apparent through the window behind him), and in his nautical jacket. He is sitting, somewhat rigidly, reading what appears to be a dictionary or encyclopedia. The other, younger figure in the scene has a collection of books around him and is reading through them quickly, the pages in his hand still in the process of turning as the photograph was taken. The two men are mirroring each other and have a similar facial

expression, but there seems to be an uneasy relationship between them. Also, given Hilliard's use of multiple panels in his images, the men sit in two separate frames within the work, which allows the viewer to contemplate whether they had actually sat next to each other at all. *Wiser than Despair* can be read as a portrayal of generational differences between father and son, as well as the idea that many of our parents' traits become our own, even if the relationship is strained. Hilliard's photographs are not intended for us to believe they are snapshots, however, like Blackmon, he arranges his subjects in a way that alludes to a common moment within a home while still highlighting the complexities of a family. My photographs take on a similar approach in regards to subject matter and in some aspects, style, with my work also evoking feelings of drama within a family. My study of Hilliard's work has played a crucial role in determining my path as a visual artist.

In his body of work, *Pictures from Home*, Larry Sultan shows the life of his mother and father in their California residence. His images are an illustration of his aging parents' life, and have been made with a level of trust that only a son or daughter could capture of one's parents. *Reading at the Kitchen Table* captures Sultan's parents during a quiet moment as they share the newspaper. His father's mustard shirt echoes the floral wallpaper behind him, while Sultan's mother is dressed in the same shade of pink as the flower petals in the foreground. The surfaces of their dining room table and kitchen counter are lightly covered, depicting letters, newspapers, magazines, and a few other indistinguishable objects. The floral theme continues with their chandelier, large plants in the corner of the room, and art pieces on the wall. Each touch of nature feels like the hand of Sultan's mother. She likely cares for the plants in the same way that she cares for her husband, as many women of that generation do. My draw to *Pictures* is in Sultan's ability to exquisitely capture his parents' life by taking advantage of photography's inherent trait of making the commonplace extraordinary.



Santa Monica



Fractured



What Men Do, part one



The Ruin Was Within



Help



He Meant No Harm



One Way Out



Remains



What Men Do, part two



His Wound is Geography



There Are No Crimes Beyond Forgiveness

Prologue

Had I paid attention, I would have noticed that my dad's absence had left a void in my mom's life, and that Sean was there to fill it, entering our lives in the same way that a flood consumes the landscape. My mother, in her vulnerability, welcomed it.

My mother's and Sean's relationship began during a time in which my father was missing, not long after my parent's divorce had been finalized. I was fourteen and my sister, Charlotte, was four. During the evenings that they would talk on the phone—we were still living in North Carolina and he in Virginia—I was surrounded by the torment that I may never see my dad again; that he was somewhere strung out and homeless; that he was dead. Each night I longed for sleep so that my brain would have a few hours of relief, even though going to sleep meant muffling my sobs into my pillow so that my mom would not hear me from the next room.

Within two months of my dad's leaving, Mom and Sean were seeing each other almost every weekend. Charlotte and I were taken up to Virginia to stay at our dad's parents' house while Mom went to Sean's childhood home, with the '70s shag blue carpet and his late father's antique toy car collection. Otherwise, Sean drove the four hours to North Carolina to see our mom. During his stay, he'd take the opportunity to suggest I had been on the computer long enough, or to tell me, "Isn't it time for you to go to bed?" I listened. I'd never been much of a troublemaker. I honestly didn't hate this guy; more that I was just confused. In fact, I didn't think much of these out of place commands. As consumed as I was by my dad's absence, I didn't have time to devote the mental energy into what sort of person Sean might have been.

In spring of my freshman year of high school I received a letter from my dad with no return address. Then, at the beginning of summer, a phone call. He was in Fairfax County Detention Facility for stealing money from his parents, who chose to press charges. The fact that he was in jail barely fazed me. Hearing his voice and knowing he was alive was all that mattered.

A short time after this Sean and my mother were married, and we relocated to Virginia.

Chapter One: Sean

In his old room. His old furniture, his old bed. I'm about to start at his old high school, Charlotte at his old elementary school. Not until many years later did Mom tell me that when she first walked into his house she was surrounded by objects that had not been moved in years. He did not feel the need to explain why. He understood that some of those things would have to go in order to make room for us, but he did not lay his hands upon them. My mom took three boxes labeled, Keep, Donate, and Don't Know, and took each of those items, one by one, and asked where he would like to put them. I can see my mother's hands lifting an old picture frame off a battered end-table, unveiling the ring of dust below—the frame's glass so encased with dust that the image beneath is unrecognizable. I imagine Sean fighting between his urge to hold onto his father's possessions and the realization that marrying my mother meant breaking with the consistent and all-consuming grief that keeping those objects represented. I feel heartbroken for him, imagining how he must have felt once this project was finished. Like in one fell swoop he, the only son, had betrayed his father—the hero and patriarch of the Williams family. I'm not sure if he ever forgave us.

Chapter Two: Santa Monica

I was out of town, in Florida, when I received a call from my mom. As the sun blazed through the windshield, I listened to her voice, speaking in a tone filled with such panic and distress I felt instantly alarmed. She, my sister, and Sean were in California visiting Sean's family, staying at his mother's house. It was the final day of their trip and they were flying home later that afternoon. My mother, still in her hushed whisper, told me the trip had been gone better than expected, but on the previous day Sean had gotten more intoxicated than usual, as he had begun drinking before noon that morning. My mom said that by that evening Sean had launched into one of his tirades, the sort that happen most often after he had a few drinks in him. These pursuits consisted of him going through every room in the house searching for some element that may have been out of order, so that he would have the chance to control it. When he entered the master bedroom and found mom and Charlotte sitting on the bed together, Charlotte playing with her iPod, Sean erupted.

Sean advanced toward them and twisted Charlotte's wrist in order to yank the iPod from her grasp. He then grabbed her by the neck and physically pushed her from the room. Mom jumped off the bed and told him not to touch her and demanded that he apologize immediately. He then grabbed the top of my Mom's arms so hard she froze.

Still clutching her arms, he said, "I'll treat my daughter anyway I like."
Mom told him that he would not treat her daughter or any other child this way.

Pressing the phone hard against my ear, I asked her if Charlotte was okay. Mom said she wasn't sure.

"Is Sean still asleep?" I said.

Mom replied, "Yes. Everyone is."

Once back in Virginia, my mother hired an attorney and she and Charlotte moved out of Sean's house.

Chapter Three: What Men Do

Whether you traveled 100 miles to go hunting during the same weekend as my mother's birthday, 100 feet into the back yard, or down a flight of stairs into the basement—where we could still hear your voice and even what you were watching on TV—each step you took away from us, each time you avoided eye contact, was another confirmation of how you wished we would disappear. You didn't leave the house often, but on one occasion when you had left, Mom took me into the basement to show me where you had been keeping your empty liquor bottles.

The ceiling above the narrow staircase which leads to the basement is lined with old-fashioned wallpaper depicting cars from the early-mid 1900s. In a dark alcove on the left there is a drum set. (You let me play your drums once, and even gave me some tips, but that didn't happen again.) In the largest section of the room are two couches; on the one directly across from the TV I can see the outline of your pants' pockets from where you sit firm and unmoving. In the unfinished portion of the basement there is a stockpile of photographs in dusty frames and miscellaneous objects from both your and your father's childhood. The empty bottles of liquor were kept next to the water heater.

When I had to ask you something, I would stand at the top of those stairs to ensure our conversation was kept as short as possible. It wasn't a "man cave." There were no beer signs on the wall or anything kitschy. (It was your father's home, after all.) We used to watch movies together in that basement. I still remember how you kept the volume so low that we could just barely make out the words, and only if we stayed as quiet as possible. In the past you and Mom would religiously watch your favorite shows together in that basement. Then I unexpectedly came home once during a break and noticed that Mom remained upstairs in the living room, watching the shows you two usually watched together. I asked her why she wasn't in the basement. She just shrugged, apparently not having noticed the change herself.

Chapter Four: Forewarned

My family and I celebrated our Thanksgivings with Sean's older sister, LaNae, her husband Jeff, and their two children, who were around my age. They got up at the crack of dawn and drove down from New York on Thanksgiving morning. Sean's and Jeff's routine included isolating themselves in Sean's camper (away from the women); carrying with them shot glasses filled with bourbon which they would sip and refill, sip and refill; reminiscing about their fathers and the essence of the type of men who lived in their day; coming in and out of the house to get a fresh Coors Light or Busch; adding more freshly cut wood to the fire, trailing in leaves on the bottoms of their shoes; and constantly checking on "their" turkey, which always included some bossing around of my mother and Aunt LaNae. Thanksgiving gave Sean a chance to focus on something other than our behavior, as he was, predictably, too drunk to notice much by noon. At the time, I did not notice how drastically the domesticity of our home transformed when the Netters arrived. It became a male-centric world, filled with tired remarks that astonish me as I recall them.

I didn't always watch football with the rest of the family, and I remember on two separate Thanksgivings when my Aunt LaNae asked to talk to me about Sean while everyone else was still huddled around the TV. I think she felt obligated to warn at least one of us about her brother's inclination to ruin his life. On both of these occasions my Aunt walked into my room and sat next to me, already teary-eyed, on my bed. She told me about how many times Sean had messed up in the past; that my mom, Charlotte, and I were the best thing that had ever happened to him; and that she had begged Sean never to do anything that might screw this up. This same room had once been her brother's; it even had a few of his old posters still on the wall, which, somewhat out of character, he had let me keep. I wonder how many times my former aunt and stepfather had sat in this same room as kids, still free to change the outcome of their lives. I think LaNae, by trying to make me understand, was hoping to fix the outcome of his.

Chapter Five: Help

You know that line from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*? “Cameron is [wound] so tight that if you stuck a lump of coal up his ass, in two weeks you'd have a diamond.” My stepfather had a mine of repressed trauma, all of which he buried beneath his calm and rigid façade. He somehow maintained this composure throughout the majority of his life. He had never married before my mom, nor did he have any children of his own. He was foremost a functioning depressive rather than an alcoholic—that came later.

Sean's drinking surpassed normalcy a few months after he had been laid off. We didn't usually keep liquor in the house (just weekend beer for Sean and Mom's occasional glass of wine). As it crept closer to summer, adding a few more months onto Sean's unemployment, my mom picked up a bottle of Absolut in case she wanted to make a cocktail on a warm Saturday or Sunday. Kept in the door of the freezer, we almost forgot it was there. The small, indiscernible status marks on the side of the bottle began when my mom opened the freezer one afternoon and realized that over three quarters of the vodka was missing after less than a day. Speaking in a hushed tone, as she so often did when discussing Sean's mental state, Mom told me about the nearly empty bottle. I asked if she was sure it was close to full when she last put it away, and she replied, “Without a doubt.”

There were a few times in which Sean, feeling as though he was close to losing us, took my mother's pleading advice and got himself help from a doctor. During these brief interludes he would pull Charlotte aside and apologize to her for his actions, speak more openly about how he was feeling, and lose some of his overly-controlling edge. He would attempt to make these changes as quickly as possible, I think in order to prove that he had been capable of change all along. However, this newfound resilience dwindled fast. I remember once after he had been doing well on an anti-depressant, he suddenly decided to stop taking it. Perhaps he felt ashamed. It was in these moments that he would make his trips to the liquor store while no one was home, starting the pattern all over again.

Chapter Six: An Idea of a Father

Sean's house had a fire pit out back. He used to buy wood in bulk and then chop it himself behind the garage that stored his now immobile '69 Dodge Charger and all of his dad's old tools. These types of activities occupied him less and less as his depression worsened. He barely had the energy to eat or take a shower, let alone walk into the back yard and lift an axe.

There may have been a part of Sean that was relieved when it became clear that his marriage was over, but Mom said he was astonished when the divorce papers finally arrived.

I imagine that Sean lived a careful existence before we came along—in his static home; at his monotonous job; and with his family, whom he allowed to place him on the same pedestal where his father once stood. After my mother's and Sean's rapid commitment, followed by our equally rapid relocation, the three of us had become an unavoidable part of the life which he had previously kept at idle.

Our time in Sean's life feels now like a test which he was not able to overcome. I believe the reason is, in large part, due to the strain of knowing that in order for our family to have survived, it would have been up to him to look back into his past and search inward toward himself—I suspect nothing terrifies Sean more.

I had never felt any reservation about gaining a new father. My own dad was a person I had always been close to, but who had left the role of father-figure long ago. Sean seemed truly prepared for the challenge of fatherhood, and I could tell that he cared for my mother, Charlotte, and me deeply. I had first interpreted his demeanor as that of a disciplinarian, but the more I tried to get to know him, the more I realized that that façade was actually a slowly crumbling wall—a wall which he hoped we would never notice. Sean's greatest mistake was in thinking he could let us into his home, but keep us out of his life.

It is only in looking backward that I can begin to make sense of how the four of us functioned during that period of our lives, and identify how we struggled to hold onto that loosely-defined notion of family. This body of work has transformed my experience from hazy recollection into something that now exists within the framed edges of a photograph and the pages of a book. There is no real photographic record of our life with Sean during these fractured moments. Instead, I have constructed my interpretation of the evidence, and, in doing so, have attempted to depict a more complete portrayal of our experience.