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PROGRESS

Sarah Elizabeth Smith Carter



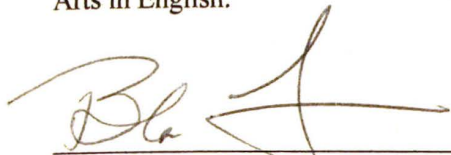
# Progress

A Thesis presented for the  
Master of Arts degree in English

Written by  
Sarah Elizabeth Smith Carter

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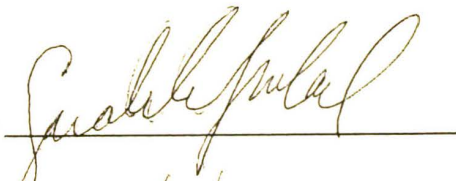
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## Foreword

This thesis is an experience of life through memoir and poetry. It exposes, reveals, and renews. Enjoy.

## Acknowledgements

I have been given an abundance of blessings throughout my life, and without those blessings, I would not have been able to conquer all of the trials and tribulations set in my path. Thank you God. I would also like to thank my parents who taught me to understand my own self-worth. This thesis would not have been possible without my husband, Patrick, who has sacrificed his time and energy to help me maintain our family and household. My children have also played an important role in my writing, and I expect they will continue to astonish me everyday.

I would like to thank the English Graduate Faculty at Austin Peay who have inspired and respected my writing, and who have encouraged me throughout the process of my education to strive for excellence. A special thanks to Dr. Blas Falconer who encouraged me to climb the tallest tree and not settle till I reached the highest branch; Amy Wright and Jill Eichorn who sacrificed their personal time to review all of my work; Jill Franks and Clark Maddux whose teaching skills are like no other; Dr. Ken Cervelli who will always have the motivation of the teacher I will strive for; David Guest who has enough optimism for the entire department; and Linda Davis who lent me her ear and time for an entire semester. Thank You.

*Progress*

## *The Moving Island*

I sleep, dreaming of  
that old black compass,  
closed by a gold metal clasp and lost  
somewhere in this house.  
It was his, and I don't want you  
to break it; I think he took it  
on the ocean.

I walk across the shoreline  
and watch the seagulls  
dive down into the water  
to retrieve mussels and clams.  
He always took us there,  
and we have never stopped going.  
The crashing of the waves,  
slows my blood.

He never went out west,  
so the compass points towards  
the thundering waves and  
broken jetties, it doesn't know  
the cacti and dry air.

I want to find a red forest,  
somewhere I have never been,  
and watch the sun's thick glaze  
spread over a coarse tree.  
I want the branches  
to hover above me,  
and I want to feel  
the rich, thick, bark  
come off in chunks,  
inside my palm—

Traveling now has become  
more difficult, and we  
have to make too many stops  
before we get anywhere.  
I wonder if it's really  
worth it.



## Platform

I received a horse on springs for my third Christmas; my father managed to put it together before morning, and hide it in the basement, so I wouldn't find it. When I woke up, I slid down our hardwood stairs, and as I peered over the banister, I saw the horse waiting in the middle of the living room. In my stocking feet, I skated across the wood floors to touch and inspect it. The horse was cold and metallic, made of an alloy metal like aluminum. It had a brownish-gray coloring, with red and white accents, and sat atop large springs, connected to a red platform holding everything together. I slowly climbed up on the horse, trying to maintain my grip on the smooth surface. As I straddled my legs over each side, I began to lean backwards and forwards to gain rocking momentum. It moved back and forth and back and forth, carrying me through the air like a ride at an amusement park. My soft brown hair whipped around my face, and my entire body went limp with the motion of the springs.

My father and mother had been taking pictures from the time I reached the bottom of the stairs; exchanging the camera, both of my parents stood in their bathrobes with a cup of coffee in whichever hand was free. They smiled at me and smiled at each other, proud and amused that they had chosen wisely for their only daughter. All other presents were left under the tree.

I began to feel my stomach rumble and my palms get slick; drops of sweat were sliding down my temples, and it became difficult to grip the handle bars attached to the horse's head. I slowly turned towards my parents and noticed their expression change from joy to concern. My father took one last

picture of me as I began to slow on the horse, waiting for it to finish its pull. I could not climb off before I leaned over and threw up all over the floor.

I began to cry, scared that I wasn't going to be able to get off, but my mother rushed over and grabbed me from the horse, cuddled me and began to gently place me on the sofa, as I again threw up, managing to miss her and myself. Shaking, scared, and sad, my mother nestled me up in some blankets while my father tried to clean up. I was tired and thirsty, wet with sweat and I watched as my mother flew into the kitchen to try and find something to calm my stomach.

As we sat on the sofa together that Christmas morning, my parents asked me if I remembered the night before and if I remembered walking around the dinner table at nanny and pappy's house, taking a sip out of everyone's drink. I did, and they both let out a mild sigh, a realization that what they thought was cute last night, had not actually been a good idea. It took them a while to explain to me why I was so sick, and why I really shouldn't play on my new horse sitting in the middle of the living room enticing me to climb up. I had my first hangover.

I don't recall ever seeing a sober relative at my grandparents' house during the Christmas holiday except for my uncle George, who by birth was mentally disabled, until my father became sober, and even then, we were the only three, until many years later.

As I get older, the memory fades, but the impact remains just as strong as it did that Christmas morning. As my children grow and mature, I keep each

moment that I can remember of my own childhood neatly cataloged away to help me be a better mother. I continue to worry about my son and daughter, and the impact that my decisions and actions will have on their lives. While I try to provide them with the most stable environment possible, I must still keep in mind that I turned out just fine, and my parents made plenty of mistakes.



## Circles

My mother was still holding my hand, guiding me. She opened the doors, rather, we opened the doors and walked into a large carpeted room with sofas and chairs everywhere; a lounge area, painted in white. She saw my father. He smiled at me from the oversized green chair as we walked over to meet him. It had been six weeks, and he leaned over and picked me up. It would be a new beginning for all of us. A life without alcohol or fighting. My mother wouldn't cry, and my father wouldn't yell. It could be like a dream, an unimaginable dream.

Nineteen years after John F. Kennedy's assassination, my mother delivered me in the downtown hospital where she worked. Growing up in Charm City without any siblings, I survived without any broken bones, even after two major car accidents. I baked hundreds of bagels and sold violins; counseling children and adolescents encouraged me to support teaching in inner city schools. I married young, although I didn't see my husband for the entire first year. I received a bachelor's degree in Psychology just before giving birth to a handsome little warrior. Tennessee inspired me to pursue my writing and after his second deployment, my husband still refuses poetry.

Another night without the warmth from your body, I have already lost count. I dream in circles as I wait for the moon to cease its endless orbit around our gazebo. Did you hear that? The cat jumped off the counter in the kitchen and it echoed in the staircase. The noises ripple through this empty house as I lie in bed listening to the bass from the cars as they drive down our street. I wonder if those people will be able to hear when they are older. I wonder if you will be able to hear me. I can still hear you breathe.

I started early, smoking at only thirteen- buying my own pack at fifteen. I never loved him, but at sixteen I thought I did and said goodbye to a gift you only give once. Cigarettes and Sex consumed my life for four years while I sorted out aspirations and expectations. I never realized how beautiful I was until I had given everything and started from scratch— numb and sore from a lack of my own appreciation. Those tiresome years wore out my body and faith, but they became the growth and development I needed to become a stronger woman with a stronger faith.

## Autumn

Past the eddies a man remains  
As his wrists take over  
The constant motion of  
Back and forth.

A distraction from the  
Green grass on the banks,  
The dank and musty smell from the woods,  
And the dead tree limb  
Encircled by crimson and golden leaves—

He releases his hold and  
The diaphanous line is swallowed  
By a temperate current.

### *309 Rossiter Avenue*

The rose bushes in your yard all died  
except one, that was dug up from the dirt  
and moved to a daughter's house, in the backseat  
of a car without restraint.

She still needs a part of you since she was the  
youngest one to grow and learn under your protection.  
The grass is yellowed and crisp since  
it doesn't storm here anymore and no one  
waters the flowers.

The brick oven in your backyard has crumbled  
and fallen apart from the lack of use. Without  
the garden, nature is bare and bleak, naked and dismissed.  
The animals still lie buried  
under the lavender and rosemary—  
The paint on the porch started chipping and peeling  
years ago, but now the rocking chair is gone  
and the porch is empty and there is no one here  
to watch it collapse.

The pine tree in the front yard has been trimmed,  
but still sways with the wind imagining it will be  
blown away. The concrete steps to the front door  
are broken and cracked.

It is quiet now.

The garage is empty—  
all of the tools thrown away or  
given to son and daughter  
who may be able to use them.

The driveway repaved not too long ago indicates  
time has gone by slowly, but the cast iron railing  
rusts and chips.

I miss you.

The sounds and smells still  
linger over the pine.

The daughter keeps her rose bush, safe in fresh  
dirt, placed there by her two young hands, waiting  
until spring when she hopes she will find a bud.



## *Footsteps of Sunday*

*"Blessed be the Lord my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight" Psalm 144*

She leaves on tiptoe,  
out of the brick house—  
The door closes gently as she silently steps down.

There is a note on the table  
explaining how she is tired of caring  
for her brother,

She is ready for something,  
Someone to wash over her frame of a skyscraper—the only  
one, out of three, that could endure the struggle between peanut butter and  
cream cheese.

Her dry limbs are tired and worn, cracking like the paint, peeling off her  
concrete porch.

She struggles to pull the pins and needles from her numb legs as  
she carries them out of the house, off the porch and onto the newly paved  
sidewalk.

She writes for today: The ever-present reminder of guilt  
fills her mother's pen and  
scratches her personalized stationery-

The water reaches around her to whisper in her ear:

There are two maple trees in your yard that will survive the winter,  
but the cherry blossom could die at any time.

She can only rake the leaves  
so many times

--

She fights the running current  
of the riptide as it pushes her further out to sea

As Sunday approaches,  
she begins to mend her dresses  
and pulls out the ironing board  
to remove any last creases.

She gathers up his belongings  
which are formed from loose remnants

of old material.

Her memories are filled with unexpected  
photographs, taken  
but forgotten,  
in a box,  
closed and hidden  
in a closet  
filled with moth balls.

follow                   The Horse, and its rider within the snow globe, have yet to  
  
                              where the footsteps of Sunday  
are unnoticed  
                              to someone outside.

## WASH

The Lines on your face  
move with the crease of your expressions  
and linger as you develop your next thought.  
They are not kind but entertain the meditation  
Of my mind.

I wash them by the river  
and hang them over a branch to dry.

Daylight fades as the sun sets over the mountains  
and adjusts into a black silk gown.  
You don't change the pout you have  
pushed onto your lips.

While I sit and watch you,  
I imagine where we could run  
and fall over one another,  
while we race to the edge of the water.

The river is cool after sunset; it ripples  
as you climb in. I watch your hair  
as you lean forward to feel the water  
glide across your face. When you turn,  
the round moon shines over your face



and your expression becomes blank;  
clean and smooth.

It is at that moment I realize  
how much I miss you.

## *October Before*

The Clock ticks  
As the hands turn  
As the Sun fades  
And the day ends.

The rain stops  
And the wind shifts  
As the Air settles  
On the damp leaves.

## *October After*

The Clock has stopped  
and I am late.

Sorry to  
Inconvenience you-

I hope you will  
participate.

## *Radishes*

When the long green pods are pulled off the vine early  
and not yet ready to be opened, the insides aren't formed,  
and aren't strong, and the pod has been opened, so now it  
is useless.

The dark orange root is yanked up out of the dirt without  
the necessary nourishment and it is weak and pale, it is  
small and pliable.

Hard, red, ill- seasoned sacs are snatched out of the earth  
before they have time to form their flavor,  
and now the market won't accept them.  
They have no place on the shelves.



A Day to Watch—

As the bamboo sways  
the lights change color, and I  
am left focusing—

### On My Child

A Harvest Moon is glowing bright  
Above the rooftops through the night.  
Tucked warm and safe in your bed  
The lullabies run through your head.

## *Indian Summer*

We should have uprooted those old holly  
bushes, and replanted them where they would  
have been appreciated. I always  
loved to make a berry and dirt stew; the  
thistles made good decorations for the  
holiday wreathes we put on the front door.  
Do you remember the mint, the flavor  
of the leaf placed whole, directly from bush  
to tongue, before we washed off all of the dirt?  
The brick on the side of the house  
made the sunlight reflect perfectly  
and gave the mint more flavor. I should plant some,  
now that I have the space for it. The spot  
next to the crooked fence along the side yard  
gets plenty of afternoon sun, but we  
would have to protect it from the dogs; they  
might trample over it. I can't help but think  
of our trip to Ireland as I hang  
the cloth diapers on the clothesline,  
their colors bright against the wooded yard.  
I didn't appreciate it as much  
as I do now. I'm sorry. I wish we could  
go back so I could remember

what the Guinness tasted like, straight from the tap  
in the empty pub, while the fire burned  
and the peat filled the air. That was the first,  
and last trip we ever took, just the three of us.  
It took nineteen years, but at least we got  
one in. I love the way the diapers make  
a brilliant rainbow across the backyard.

## *Layers of Formation*

We look for fossils and dinosaur bones  
today while we collect leaves, brown and  
orange from the lack of rain and incessant  
decay. You dig into the dry, brown mounds  
of dirt, that have formed a barrier next  
to the pathway, with a large peeling stick  
you pick up off the ground. The mounds of dirt  
are filled with millions of rocks and stones,  
that we carefully check for imprints and  
color. We break some in half so we can  
see the layers of formation, and the  
changes from the rough brown dirt, caked  
on the outside shell, to the smooth purple coating,  
safely protected from any type  
of outside weather. After we stumble on  
some hidden barbed wire in the leaves, you  
become scared of finding a snake  
camouflaged by the leaf cover.  
The sky slowly changes from  
a slight cloud cover to a foggy gray  
overhang that darkens as the minutes  
pass. The leaves turn backwards and their soft veins  
turn up; they begin preparing themselves

for the rain, as the wind swirls and wrestles  
around us. The storm is coming and we  
are ready, quietly waiting for it  
to cool us off. I silently think  
of an old friend, another fossil hunter  
who died two years ago; she overdosed,  
and I wonder if she ever realized it.

I stop walking, and sit down on the metal swing,  
overlooking the green shallow river,  
in desperate need of a downpour. I  
remember the last time I saw her, how  
we met at her parent's house almost ten  
years ago, and she was just as I  
remembered, with the long red hair,  
except older, and without worry.

I want to find another stone,  
a fossil, like the one we found as kids.  
I will never be able to find one  
with the imprint of two sea shells,  
but it might remind me of that summer day,  
when we were between my house  
and the old brick apartments, searching  
for something that would make us rich  
and famous, among the tall grass and old trees  
that were cut down years after she moved

away. We didn't become famous, so  
after the storm ends, we will dig again,  
among the dirt mounds, beneath the maple  
and oaks, continuously searching through  
dirty rocks, that when broken, reveal clean insides.



Alpha. Bravo. Charlie.- Come In, do you read me?

The relationship I have with my husband can be summed up by the night of our marriage. A few hours after we were married, I drove my new husband an hour away from our apartment so he could meet the three guys he was driving back to Georgia with in preparation for his first deployment. He had already been stationed there for three months, and he came home to marry me on a "three day pass." I wouldn't have a typical wedding night, so I went out to my favorite Irish pub with two of my bridesmaids, and my drinks were on the house. Our marriage began with his absence, and continues on.

It's hard to believe we are only on our third deployment. It seems like so many more because we have spent so much time apart. When he leaves it takes weeks to adjust, and many sleepless nights. Although over our multiple deployments, I have slowly become accustomed to his absence, and as a family, we have begun to get into a strong routine without him around. We go on with our daily lives and activities, and as the weeks pass by, I slowly forget how long he has been gone. It doesn't occur to me until I am driving down the road or having a quiet moment on the sofa, and then I realize how much he has missed out on over the past several months.

He left six months ago, two weeks after we moved into our new home, and two months before our daughter was born. He won't be home for another month, and his daughter will already be five months old; he will only be home to visit for fifteen days before leaving again for another four months. She will not know who he is until he comes home after a year deployment, and she will

be nine months old. Not only then will our daughter slowly absorb the mannerisms and tendencies of a new person, but our son will have to re-adjust to having his dad around, and having to share him.

The hardest part of each deployment is watching my children grow and advance through life without their father. He is missing so much of their lives and they are without a father figure. My son, who is three, about to turn four, stopped asking for his daddy after about three months. He used to tell everyone his daddy is at work, but now he doesn't talk about him unless something prompts the discussion. He used to want to call him, but that soon passed as well. When his father calls, my son doesn't want to talk. He misses his daddy, but is angry with him for not being home. It will take a lot of adjustment when his dad does finally return home, and they will have to start all over to develop a new relationship.

Thankfully, I don't struggle when he leaves as much as other wives whose husbands deploy just as frequently as mine. I feel as though once I start sleeping through the night, it is sometimes easier with him out of the house. There isn't as much laundry, I don't have to cook or clean as much, and there is one less person in the house that I have to pay attention to. I always seem to accomplish something while he is away, and I tend to look forward to that. During his first deployment I finished my Bachelor's degree, during his second tour, I started my Master's degree, and took care of our new son, and now I am working, taking care of our new daughter and finishing my Master's. I don't sit at home and waste my day away, because that would remind me of his

absence; I must remain busy and continue to look forward to whatever each day may bring.

This reunion is probably going to be worse than the last time he returned home from a fifteen month deployment. I have gotten used to sleeping alone, and now I have to listen to someone snore all night. I enjoy being the one who makes all the decisions, and now I will have to ask for his opinion. I enjoy my independence when he is gone, and now I will have to set it aside to wait until he leaves again.

I want him home with us, and I miss him, but I worry that our wonderful relationship is only wonderful because we only spend a year at a time together. His life has been put on hold, but ours has not; it has continued on without him. He has not been here to make his own adjustments, and when he returns home that will be a very hard transition for the entire family. He will be forced to accept things immediately that I have been able to learn over time, and that will just frustrate him as he tries to balance his life with a buried patience. Just as we have changed, he has as well, and we may never know just how much.

He allows me tiny glimpses of his life overseas, and I have to accept the new experiences that he has been forced to endure. He would never go into full detail but to spare me the visions I would not be able to remove from my mind. War, death, and pain have consumed his life over his three deployments, and every time he ventures home, I wonder if I will see a different man than the one that I married.

Even though he has spent more time away from our family than with us, his absence has created a strength and a bond that I'm not sure would exist if he never left. We have both grown during our time apart, and when he returns, we will all begin to develop a new understanding of who we are as a family. I hope that I can support him as he transitions from his role as a soldier to a father.

### *A Sonnet for My Husband*

You sleep on the red couch in our office,  
while I write our life. You have fallen  
asleep in your jeans and white t-shirt  
again, listening to the sound of the keys  
as I type. This is the time we spend together;  
never speaking, but I listen to your snores,  
and the sound of the cats running up  
and down the stairs, wondering if the dogs  
will jump up out of their sleep and chase them.  
Instead you change positions, stick your butt  
in the air and smother your face in the pillow.  
Your snores begin again as you fall asleep.  
This time is well spent, not arguing or laughing;  
silent, and appreciative of our quiet moment together.

You missed October—

The sky was clear and blue today, and while  
we were on the farm, I heard an eagle.

His call was magnified by the silence  
of the woods, outlining the vast land around  
us. It was an incredible sound that

I had never heard; he was declaring  
his freedom, and sacrifice. It almost  
sounded painful. I looked around and could  
not find him. He had quietly nestled  
himself among the old empty pines and  
peeling oaks. He chose to stay hidden, away  
from the ever changing world around him.



## Tuesday Evening

As I sit in front of a blank screen  
I hear the whispers overhead;  
you are reading to our son.  
The day ends and the moon arrives early.  
I know you are tired,  
but you take the time to satisfy  
one of us.  
For that, I thank you,  
Maybe tomorrow  
we can lie in the yard and enjoy  
the touch of the broken  
and dried feathers as they fall  
out of our maple.

## An Unknown Love—

The first time you opened your eyes, your dad  
was not there. Not because he didn't want  
to see you, but because he couldn't. He  
was thousands of miles away,  
in an open and vast destructive land,  
trying to save the only fifteen days  
the army would give him, for when we could  
all spend time together as a complete  
family. I know you will forgive him  
because you don't even realize  
he is gone. When he comes home to visit,  
I hope you enjoy his smell, his touch, his color,  
because I do, and he will need you to.  
He left two and a half months before you  
were born, and hasn't even had the chance  
to enjoy your smooth, soft, cottony skin,  
or the simple expressions you make when  
you wrinkle your brow, or turn your lip down  
before you start to cry. The first time you  
smiled, I realized just how many  
milestones you will reach before he is  
able to meet you. You will grow so fast

and he will miss the majority of  
your first year, but you will not stop just for  
him; you are strong willed, and will persevere  
through his absence with the strength that you have known  
since birth. I hope that for our reunion  
you will enjoy how he wraps you in his  
arms with an automatic protection;  
the never-ending fear that will keep you  
safe forever. You will instantly amaze him  
with your big, blue, clear eyes, and your lightly  
colored hair, so different from him. My  
genes must carry heavier, because you  
and your brother both look more like my side  
of the family. I am thankful that  
you are not experiencing what your  
brother is going through; his sadness and  
daily frustration of life without his  
father. The hardest part of watching  
both of you go through each day is knowing  
what else is missing. There is a space, a void,  
that can only be filled by your father.  
No one knows, unless they have experienced  
the endless quiet in the darkness.

You may at some point have to say goodbye,  
and wave a tired hand, but for now, I will  
solely carry that burden for both of us,  
so that you can enjoy the leaves and  
sunshine of the autumn winds as they blow.

*In order of the federal government—*

The pink,  
yellow, blue  
and green bows  
are sitting  
in the cubby hole.  
I can't help but wonder,  
if you will ever  
see her wear them.

The green one will  
look pretty  
if she has your eyes—  
I hope  
she has your eyes.  
I hope  
she looks at you  
with those eyes.

## Remorse

I know immediately, as I watch  
the government vehicle drive slowly  
down my street. They are searching house numbers  
on both sides, looking very carefully,  
as they torment their hidden viewers,  
waiting to see which house they will park  
in front of. They pass their target, and turn  
around in the cul de sac. I patiently  
keep still behind my blinds as I hold  
the baby close to my heart, and watch them  
park three doors down, across the street.  
They get out of their shiny white sedan,  
in their neatly pressed dress blues,  
and stand for a moment next to the car,  
only to adjust their uniforms,  
and nod at each other with a quick  
acceptance of their given task. One grabs  
a stack of white papers from the dashboard  
that must be a source of confirmation,  
and shuts the door. They walk, one behind the other,  
up the steps to the front door, and I  
take a deep breath as they ring the bell.



They stand motionless on the front porch  
for a moment and I look around to see  
if anyone else is watching this tragedy  
unfold. I watch for a minute more  
before the door opens, and the woman  
standing in the doorway, lets them inside.

## *Progress*

You accept the roses, but never  
thank me. You turn awkwardly  
away from me as you mumble  
underneath your breath. I ask why  
you don't like them.

I sometimes sit in the car while  
it is in the garage. I can read your  
poems while the dog runs in and out  
of the house, up and down the stairs.  
She is just as impatient as I.