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“KEEP THE INMOST ME BEHIND ITS VEIL:”  
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE’S MANIPULATION OF BOUNDARIES IN  
FICTION AS LESSONS IN CRAFT

A Thesis Presented

by

MOLLY MARY MCLAUGHLIN

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,  
University of Massachusetts Boston,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

June 2011

English Program

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## ABSTRACT

“KEEP THE INMOST ME BEHIND ITS VEIL:”

### NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE’S MANIPULATION OF BOUNDARIES IN FICTION AS LESSONS IN CRAFT

June 2011

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In a letter written after her husband’s death, Sophia Peabody Hawthorne spoke of a veil Nathaniel Hawthorne had drawn around himself during his life. This complicated metaphor is an echo from Hawthorne’s work and life, where the construction of boundaries that are solid but not opaque, allow the writer to conceal and draw attention to the art of concealment without revealing what, if anything, is hidden. That Hawthorne carefully considered what he would and would not reveal is clear in many of his works, and in pieces like “The Minister’s Black Veil,” where the act of concealment draws rather than deflects attention, he appears to be actively manipulating boundaries for the purposes of plot and characterization.

Also considered in this thesis is the preface to “The Scarlet Letter,” wherein Hawthorne blends the distinction between writer, narrator and character to varying degrees, so that the piece transitions smoothly from memoir to fiction. Hawthorne is released from responsibility as a player in the piece because he can claim it as fiction, but is able to maintain a foundation of truth by drawing on vivid personal memory throughout. Following this is a section on “The House of the Seven Gables” and the physical structure of the same name in Salem, Massachusetts, where the boundary between fiction and reality is uncertain and liminal space between worlds may be fully experienced. The two sections together examine Hawthorne’s masterful treatment of boundaries, genre and a writer’s role in his own works, with particular attention to the ways in which the three are intimately related.

The final section of this thesis contains three short stories with brief introductions that explore the treatment of boundaries in my own work. The pieces set their roots in memoir, but grew into fiction stories that allowed me greater freedom and depth as a writer. By including these pieces of my own work with the research-based thesis, I aim to illustrate how a close reading of Hawthorne’s work and intentions has allowed me to understand and enhance my own writing.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a town close enough to Salem to make field trips convenient, but not far enough that they would keep my class out of the classroom for a full day. This proximity to a place steeped in early American history, which formed the setting and inspiration for a great number of literary works, meant that I spent a considerable amount of time as a child in the city of Salem. At the time I felt that Salem was a city made up entirely of historical houses, cemeteries where names had long since worn off the stones, and museums to commemorate the victims of the Salem witch trials with varying levels of taste. Every house seemed to have a sign affixed to the front, naming some sea captain or merchant, and every street was named for the same long-established and long-gone family whose names had been erased from headstones but not from history.

“Hawthorne” was a name that hung vaguely throughout the city, printed on plaques and brochures, emblazoned on awnings and street signs, and rolling off the lips of various actors and tour guides. It was a name I grew up hearing, although I could not have positively identified its owner until I was older. Hawthorne might have been one of



the founding settlers of Salem, a victim of the witch trials, or possibly an architect, since he was so often associated with houses and buildings. Even after reading *The Scarlet Letter* in high school I was unsure of Nathaniel Hawthorne's role, since he claimed to be merely the editor of a factual story, yet he was listed as the author of a work of fiction.

Less than a year ago I enrolled in a course entitled "Literary Sites and Spaces," that aimed to examine the relationship between place and literature, focusing on the greater Boston area and its writers. An entire day of the week-long intensive course was dedicated to Hawthorne, with particular emphasis on *The House of the Seven Gables*. It was my first encounter with Hawthorne since my junior year of high school. My mother had been a tour guide at the House of the Seven Gables in Salem years before, and we had visited the site for Christmas and Halloween events, so most of my knowledge of the House was based on my fragmented memories and my mother's outdated tour. Hawthorne was, once again, a shadowy presence within the House, neither its owner nor its architect. Yet, his name was more closely tied to it than either the Turners or the Emmertons, both of whom laid some claim to the House. It was not until I was well into the novel, following its twisting plot and half-lit history, that I began to see more clearly how Hawthorne fit into the story, and into Salem as I knew it.

Hawthorne is everywhere in Salem. A huge, pensive statue of Hawthorne, seated on gnarled tree limbs and looking toward the harbor, faces down Hawthorne Boulevard, just two streets over from Herbert Street, where he spent much of his childhood. Behind him rises the grand Hawthorne Hotel, with a restaurant aptly named "Nathaniel's," and its own tales of haunting. On nearby Charter Street, at the Old Burying Point, the

Hawthorne grave stones have stood through weather and time, immediately next to Sophia Peabody's home. Hawthorne Boulevard connects Charter Street with Essex Street, where the Peabody Essex Museum hosts a special collection of Hawthorne materials, and the Old Town Pump Memorial commemorates Hawthorne's story, "A Rill from the Old Town Pump." I am sure that I was subconsciously aware of the name that kept appearing all over the city, but it was not until I finished *The House of the Seven Gables*, and began to understand his connection to and influence over its physical counterpart and Salem in general that I started to register Hawthorne's presence.

Hawthorne plays prominently in his own work as writer, narrator and character, each to varying degrees depending on the piece and the interpretation. It is the relationship between these roles and the distinction of boundaries between them, that seems to dictate Hawthorne's place within the piece, and the genre in which it is written. Hawthorne as a writer is a literary construction, a conscious and planned version of Hawthorne the person, and through this lens come narrators of variable resemblance to Hawthorne the writer. These narrators, particularly those of *The House of the Seven Gables* and "The Custom House," which serves as a preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, are not notably different from Hawthorne. Yet, they are telling tales of fiction posed as fact, therefore they are as involved in the fictional world they describe as any character is. In the former case the boundary is less certain, and Hawthorne crosses easily across it throughout the story, blending fiction and memoir. In the latter case, the progressive breaks between writer, narrator and character means that Hawthorne moves toward some

boundary between the roles and does not cross back, yet the boundary is difficult to locate precisely.

These tenuous thresholds allow Hawthorne to slip from memoir to fiction easily, so that the responsibility for the story falls on a narrator or character, who is a version of Hawthorne the writer, rather than falling upon the writer himself. Even the writer, who should be the true Hawthorne, seems to be an edited and constructed version. Sophia said of her husband that “the effect of his character, though so hidden from actual sight will be felt as long as his books last. It was the only way he chose to present himself to the world” (Hawthorne, Sophia). Herman Melville cited this hazy background of veiled meaning as an intentional move on Hawthorne’s part, saying that much of Hawthorne’s work appeared to be “directly calculated to deceive - egregiously deceive - the superficial skimmer of pages” (Bell 29). Even for his wife’s family, Hawthorne “liked to dramatize his favorite subject, himself” (Wineapple 103). Brenda Wineapple even suggests that Hawthorne elected not to publish several of his works in an early collection because they were “too revealing, too early, or too autobiographical,” indicating that Hawthorne was involved in a self-editing even as early as 1837 (Wineapple 92).

In a letter written after her husband’s death, Sophia Hawthorne spoke explicitly of a veil Nathaniel had drawn around himself during his life. It comes as no surprise that a writer known for reclusiveness and privacy should wish to conceal something of himself from public view, but the metaphor of the veil is far more complicated than a simple concealment. Sophia does not speak of a wall between her husband and the world, nor does the metaphor make use of a distinct boundary. Rather is a semitransparent division,

one that neither obstructs the wearer from view nor prevents him from looking out onto his world, albeit darkened. It is the same effect Hawthorne creates in his fiction, “a psychological insight that reveals even as it conceals,” so that what is hidden cannot be known, always just beyond the text and beyond the veil (Wineapple 84). The fact that an observer is not told what is not being shown is what makes the secret so enticing, or as the narrator asks in “The Minister’s Black Veil,” “what, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful?” (Hawthorne *Short Stories* 23).

The intentionality of the veil further complicates the metaphor of boundaries, as Hawthorne was at all times struggling both for fame and to remain veiled. Much of his early work, including his first novel, was published anonymously and remained unknown even to Sophia (Wineapple 69). The veil at once invites scrutiny and deflects the finding of satisfactory answers, so that the wearer is highly conspicuous but unknowable to all those on the other side. It is easy to see how “a veiled space creates an obsession with unveiling,” and Hawthorne seems to anticipate that “the concept of privacy always already implies the threat of intrusion by others,” and even relies on natural curiosity to strengthen the power of his veil (Shamir 763, 748) This duality would certainly suit a rejected and unrecognized Hawthorne, who was “weary of obscurity, but yet he shrank from observation” (Wineapple 77).

Like Parson Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil,” Hawthorne’s veil, by virtue of its delineation between public and private, invites curiosity. Also, like Hooper’s Elizabeth, Nathaniel’s Sophia “could discern nothing of the dreadful gloom that had so overawed the multitude,” but unlike her fictional counterpart, Sophia is content to leave it

in place (Hawthorne *Short Stories* 17). Perhaps for Sophia the mystery of the veil is less terrible, certain as she was that her husband “had no ‘worst to keep’,” and that any secret Nathaniel kept was his own to keep (Hawthorne, Sophia). It seems that Hawthorne deliberately constructed this semi-penetrable boundary between himself and his world, between writer, narrator and character.

In writing my own work I often find that pieces begin somewhere between memoir and fiction, and often contain elements of myself in narrator and character roles, and very often in later drafts I have sought to eliminate one genre so that a piece becomes entirely of the other. This has been problematic in that most of my fiction, particularly the pieces included later in this project, have stemmed from personal experience or conflict, so that they cannot be separated entirely from the emotions and experiences I know best.

During the fall of 2010 I was enrolled in both memoir and fiction workshops, so that I was writing and reading in both genres on a weekly basis. In terms of genre, it was easier to edit my memoir pieces, since I could simply rule out all that was not true. The fiction was more difficult because it was based on experiences I had had and could therefore describe and explore with characters entirely different from me, who would experience the same moment in a different way. But then, in terms of content the fiction work came more easily. Although the piece would be attached to me as a writer, the narrator and characters were fictional creations from whom I could claim great distance and thereby dismiss my personal association with the story. For as the “He/She: Switching Gender” chapter of *What If?* asserts, “as a writer of fiction you’re seriously handicapped if you can’t write convincingly about people unlike yourself” (Bernays 53).

The piece I was writing for the memoir workshop was an immense challenge because I was writing about a family member's ongoing illness, which kept the piece immediate and raw, and placed me firmly within it as writer, narrator and character who could not be removed if the story was to stay true. When I began the piece, and even in early drafts, I had planned to use it for this project, but like Hawthorne's early stories, I felt that my memoir was "too revealing, too early... too autobiographical" and I elected to include only fiction (Wineapple 92).

It would have been comforting, I think, to move between these boundaries of fiction and memoir, and of writer, narrator and character, to feel free to claim one moment as my own, and disguise another as belonging to a character rather than to myself. Hawthorne's masterful handling of these boundaries is apparent in almost all his works, but in *The House of the Seven Gables*, where fiction and reality blend into a narrative that has a basis in a real, physical place, but an almost entirely fictional story, and the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, which features Hawthorne in all three roles, eventually transforming from pure memoir to fiction, the master's hand is most evident. It is possible to locate an approximate point in "The Custom House" when Hawthorne shifts fully from memoir to fiction, but *The House of the Seven Gables* is a piece more homogenous in its mixing of genres. The boundary exists, for some details can be associated back to Hawthorne, but it is recrossed so often that it is difficult to tell which side he is on at any given moment.

Having spent substantial time researching Hawthorne and his works in preparation for the "Literary Sites and Spaces" course in the summer of 2010, I found the

issue of boundaries appearing repeatedly in reference to the writer's work and life. Physical manifestations appear when certain characters are able to pass easily where others are prohibited, or the division of an ancestral home or a veil is deliberately placed between characters and places. While these boundaries are interesting and certainly worth examining, it is the repetition of the metaphysical boundary that fascinated me. Most of his acquaintances and friends seemed to have known Hawthorne as reclusive and reserved, yet his sister, Elizabeth Manning Hawthorne, wrote that "if there was any gathering of people in the town he always went out. He liked a crowd" (Hawthorne, Elizabeth Manning). The notion that Hawthorne kept his true identity hidden and dramatized himself for the Peabody family, and Sophia's admission that "he gave all he wished to give" implies that the writer kept something of himself hidden, and Sophia protects this right, rhetorically posing the question, "who shall wrench any more from him?" (Hawthorne, Sophia). Not unlike the eponymous character of "The Minister's Black Veil," Hawthorne allowed the construction of his boundary to both draw attention to and deflect understanding of the man behind it. In addition, Hawthorne's skill in blending the genres of fiction and memoir, whereby he incorporates elements of his personal and familial history into tales of pure fancy, allows him to shift from writer to narrator to character. The boundary between genres is so fluid in Hawthorne's work because his identity in relation to the story is equally fluid, and he is not bound to one role or one genre for an entire piece.

It is this form, this amalgam of genres with clear moments of memoir and fiction and detectable but indistinct boundaries between, that I have emulated with my thesis.

What follows is not a work of uninterrupted academic writing, nor is it pure reflection, and although it has a section of fiction, that vast majority of the thesis is true. I have attempted what I would call an “intellectual memoir,” in that it focuses on the process and experience of studying Hawthorne and his work in a very personal way. Rather than simply conducting research and writing with all new editions as reference, I have spent time in downtown Salem, walking the route from the Custom House, through the House of the Seven Gables and Hawthorne’s birthplace, up Hawthorne Boulevard and through the Old Burying Point Cemetery. During the fall of 2010 I worked on a research assistantship in the rare books and manuscripts room of the Boston Public Library, reading and transcribing letters to, from and about Hawthorne and his writing. This was unlike research I had done before, distant and removed from the source, and instead I held the paper and sounded out the almost illegible words written 150 years ago. The letters presented themselves as their own boundary, a last wall to be climbed to get to the metaphysical significance behind them.

In the first chapter of this thesis I will examine the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, commonly called “The Custom House,” though it is not a piece entirely independent from the novel it precedes, as it provides explanation as to the story’s origins and informs readers as to Hawthorne’s role within it. Particular attention will be paid to the definite though indistinct boundary between memoir and fiction that divides this piece. My own understanding of Hawthorne’s role in both the preface and the novel plays a significant part in my analysis of the boundaries between genre and a writer’s role, so the chapter also contains short sections of memoir. Following this is a second analytical chapter that



focuses on boundaries in *The House of the Seven Gables*, taking into account how the physical House of the Seven Gables complicates the sense of place in the novel. Once again, this section contains substantial pieces of memoir concerning my experience in that physical House of the Seven Gables as a child and during the “Literary Sites and Spaces” course. Some confusion arose in the writing of this piece, since the literary house and the physical house are often similar but not quite interchangeable, so I will differentiate between them using italics. I will refer to the actual structure which may be visited in Salem as the “House,” and Hawthorne’s literary representation as the “*House*.”

Finally, the last chapter includes three of my own fiction stories, each accompanied by a short introduction describing its origin and the ways a study of Hawthorne’s writing has allowed me to understand and analyze my own work. The three pieces I have chosen may appear very dissimilar, as they are told from different perspectives by unrelated narrators encountering separate experiences, however each contains considerable portions of memoir. Two of the pieces actually began as memoir sketches before taking their current forms. As a writer, these were stories I wished to tell, and revisited a number of times. However, I was unwilling to pose myself as narrator or character in the telling of the memoir version for a number of reasons, and so made the conscious shift into fiction. Often it was a matter of discomfort, of knowing the pieces would be shared with a class or even a wider audience, and this knowledge impeded my ability to write with the honesty and candor that memoir demands. By removing myself from them and allowing the pieces to become fiction, I was able to build characters who

would react and learn from experiences differently than I had, which made for more interesting and often more insightful stories.

It is not uncommon for a reader to find a writer who speaks to them more deeply and more personally than others do. Across years, across oceans, and even from beyond the grave, a masterful writer reaches out to the hearts and minds of those who truly hear him speaking the words on the page. The writer of the introductory section to *The Love Letters of Nathaniel Hawthorne* defends the publication, saying “that any one can read these letters without a warmer, closer feeling for the ‘shy, grave Hawthorne’ seems impossible,” and that “there comes almost a conviction that he wrote them not merely for the woman waiting for the day when pledges should be sanctified, but with the half wish that all sympathetic spirits might see and know him as he was” (Hawthorne *Love Letters* xii). There was something more personal in the reading and research I conducted for this project than what I had experienced before. Reading Hawthorne in various forms and circumstances not only allowed me to understand his writing, but to begin to see beyond his veil and beyond my own.

CHAPTER 2  
FACT AND FANCY:  
HAWTHORNE'S CUSTOM HOUSE SKETCH

My first reading of *The Scarlet Letter* during my junior year of high school had ingrained in me little more than memorized themes and vocabulary words, as well as an uncertain impression of its enigmatic author. The curricula of every English class I had taken since elementary school were peppered with texts and films concerning the Salem witch trials, and I believed that after twelve years I had all the background I needed. I learned words like “scaffold” and “illuminated,” composed detailed synopses of each chapter, passed the exam and left *The Scarlet Letter* and Hawthorne behind me, the preface ignored and unread.

Based on the summary given by my English teachers, I understood *The Scarlet Letter* to be yet another account of the Salem witch trials, and the preface to be more context and background. I read the entire novel under this presumption, and was disappointed by the lack of witchcraft, and left puzzled by the sexual tension that ran

throughout. What I picked up from my teacher's explanation was that Hawthorne claimed to have found the manuscript in the Custom House and simply edited it for publication, a claim that I believed to be true. I took at face value the statement that Hawthorne was an "editor, or very little more," and paid little attention to the craft of the novel (Hawthorne *Scarlet Letter* 4).

Like so many other students who read *The Scarlet Letter* at an age when sexuality was forbidden territory, and shame was the product of social awkwardness rather than hidden sin, I missed the point. Hawthorne's expertly craft prose soared past me without leaving much of an impression, and "the social and political discourses of his texts" were lost on me (Hutner 261). I did not see how Hawthorne could be relevant to me, or how I could have anything "invested in seeing an author in a particular light" (Hutner 251). All along I felt that Hawthorne was saying more than I was hearing, but it was not until I returned to his work later, when I had the opportunity work with letters and another primary sources that I began to understand that Hawthorne "seems to be suggesting a secret reading of the text to those few who understand him" (Tew 20). It was an invitation behind Hawthorne's veil of fiction.

The Custom House sketch that precedes *The Scarlet Letter* represents an intersection of memoir and fiction, a boundary that is often unclear if apparent at all. It is one of the finest examples of Hawthorne's writing being "directly calculated to deceive," so that while he is ostensibly writing a memoir of his time in the Custom House, it is in this piece that "Hawthorne offers his most complete dramatization of his own experience of the creative process" (Bell 29; Eakin 346). Hawthorne himself insists that "all his

stories... combine fancy and fact even when he himself invented the facts,” making it very difficult to determine the point at which fancy and fact intersect (Wineapple 61). Hawthorne’s post in the Salem Custom House was true to his life, and to all appearances the writer, narrator and protagonist are one and the same at the start of the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*. The piece purports to be product of an “autobiographical impulse” that at once describes the decay of the once-thriving port city of Salem and the events leading to the finding and publishing of the manuscript of the novel (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 3). Hawthorne sets himself out as a harmless and passive surveyor “whose name is seldom heard and ... face hardly known” dropped among those “good old gentlemen” of inherited office and no great industry, content without any particular pleasures (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 9, 14). After several detailed and teasing sketches of the individuals who make up the ranks of the “venerable brotherhood,” Hawthorne edges toward the boundary between memoir and fiction, as the finding of the text of *The Scarlet Letter* moves the story forward (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 13). Memoir, especially when it lays such deep roots in Salem, seems to hold Hawthorne in place, while fiction pulls his writing forward.

In this latter part of “The Custom House” Hawthorne ceases to be the dry observer of official life and comes into a literary capacity. His writing is ignored by all with whom he conducts business, who have never “read a page of [Hawthorne’s] inditing, or would have cared a fig the more for [him] if they had read them all” (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 25). Having thus dismissed his literary standing with the other inhabitants of the Custom House, Hawthorne immediately compares himself to

Robert Burns and Geoffrey Chaucer, and drops in Shakespeare's name for good measure (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 26). What has heretofore been a sketch of life within the walls of the Custom House broadens into a discussion of literature, and how one's title affects one's place in the literary world. Hawthorne seems to suggest that one must claim the role of "writer" rather than "businessman," yet the character and narrator of this piece are decidedly more preoccupied with business than literature. However, by drawing parallels between himself and these other writers whose occupations led them on similar paths, Hawthorne has also established himself as the literary figurehead of the Custom House. A junior clerk, "who, it was whispered, occasionally covered a sheet of Uncle Sam's letter-paper with what (at the distance of a few yards) looked very much like poetry," seeks Hawthorne out and affirms his position (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 26).

The narrator Hawthorne also goes to great lengths to assure readers of the accuracy of his story, despite the truth that Hawthorne the writer is composing fiction. Michael Davitt Bell is more frank, directly calling Hawthorne out on the supposedly true story that "Hawthorne, of course, made up," but goes on to illustrate the many ways Hawthorne claims authority and truth in his tale (Bell 39). It is Hawthorne's successful attempt to "make the life outside the margins of the page particularized and deeply felt," which is, according to the more contemporary Rick Moody, the true office of the novel (qtd. in Cooley). Only after he has thus established himself does Hawthorne cross the boundary from memoir into fiction in the moment when he professes to discover what will become his novel.

The transition from memoir to fiction in this piece seems to suggest that a writer must, within the confines of the story, establish his authority to write it by purposefully taking on the appropriate role as writer, narrator or character. Although he has given readers more than twenty pages that cast him as the harmless surveyor, blown about in the political winds that grant and appropriate his post, readers would be aware of Hawthorne in his true literary role, making this groundwork redundant and unnecessary. Yet the Hawthorne who worked in the Customs House, the narrator and character Hawthornes in this piece, are younger, less publicly familiar versions of the writer, and they attempt to convince readers that they should be taken seriously, despite the fact that Hawthorne the writer was already being taken quite seriously. It is here, in the moment when Hawthorne the narrator makes these declarations, that the voice of the piece begins to shift, confirming Frank MacShane's analysis that the piece "lacks uniformity of tone and cohesiveness," which is true but also reasonable, considering the genre shift that is concurrent (qtd. in Eakin 346). Hawthorne the writer and narrator is separating from Hawthorne the character, and his tone adjusts accordingly.

Just at the boundary between memoir and fiction, Hawthorne takes a bold step from the static description and preoccupation with the past and into the scene-setting and narrative action that breathes life into his fiction. It is a return to the stark and beautiful imagery and sense of age already introduced in the start of the piece, when Hawthorne places readers on the pavement before the Custom House, which "has grass enough growing in its chinks to show that it has not, of late days, been worn by any multitudinous resort of business" (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 5). Similarly, the room

where the manuscript is found, “in spite of the aged cobwebs that festoon its dusky beams, appears still to await the labor of the carpenter and mason,” so that it brings readers back to the decrepit but functional state of the building and reminds us that no forward motion has actually passed since the opening pages (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 27). The piece has been as static as the place, and as static as the roles of writer, narrator and character. In this part of the story the narrative is set into motion, and we see Hawthorne active, in a particular situation unlike those he has already described. It is a moment set in the Custom House, with which we are now quite familiar, but since Hawthorne has led into it with his characteristic narrative style, it is clear that what follows will be in some way different from what came before.

Although he has fully slipped into fiction at the moment when the character of Hawthorne finds the document that becomes *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne the narrator still holds fast to details that ground the story in the reality of the preceding pages. The main premise of the story, that is the discovery of the document, is entirely fabricated, but Hawthorne’s attention to real details adds depth and dimension, so that readers are able to suspend their disbelief. Surveyor Pue, who was the actual surveyor in Salem long before Hawthorne, is the fictional composer of the manuscript, having engaged in the same activity as the now-fictionalized Hawthorne, as described by Hawthorne the narrator. This is the blurry boundary between memoir and fiction, where Hawthorne the character and Hawthorne the narrator split just as certainly as Surveyor Pue, who worked in the Custom House splits from the Surveyor Pue who composed *The Scarlet Letter*. The story has ceased to be true, but owing to Hawthorne’s careful crafting of the narrative, it still



has enough truth to fit effortlessly with the memoir leading up to it. It is as if Hawthorne's "fancy, sluggish with little use" in the last twenty-seven pages, is reluctant to let go of the "autobiographical impulse" and transition entirely into fiction (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 28, 3).

This piece is a rare example when a moment can be located when the passage from memoir to fiction is complete, since in other stories the boundary is crossed and recrossed continuously. The boundary in the Custom House sketch comes when the character Hawthorne discovers the illuminated scarlet letter and, "cogitating, among other hypotheses, whether the letter might not have been one of those decorations which the white men used to contrive ... I happened to place it on my breast" (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 31). At this moment the character Hawthorne has become physically attached to the story, to its most powerful symbol. A fictional character cannot be the focus of a memoir piece, and the story becomes pure fiction. The supernatural qualities of the letter, from which Hawthorne "experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron," place this part of the piece firmly and irreversibly in fiction (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 31).

Eakin goes so far as to say that Hawthorne the narrator in this piece is also a fictionalization, "as fully a literary creation as any of his characters," and though he does not classify the piece as fiction, he acknowledges that "the essay... shares the leading properties of [Hawthorne's] fiction" (347). The "certain aesthetic distance" that Eakin explores seems to coincide with the sometimes indistinct boundary between memoir and

fiction, as Hawthorne the narrator begins to withdraw from Hawthorne the character, all in the interest of establishing the piece as a work of fiction, rather than memoir (348). The narrator Hawthorne seems to be an intermediary between the writer and character Hawthornes, and the greatest influence on the genre of the piece. When the narrator is closest in identity to the writer, the piece is decidedly memoir, but the drift toward the character draws the piece toward fiction.

The sidewalk in front of the Custom House is still uneven cobblestone with “unthrifty grass” growing where it can, “its front is ornamented with a portico of half a dozen wooden pillars, supporting a balcony, beneath which a flight of wide granite steps descends towards the street” (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 5). Several places in Salem stand exactly as they were in the dusty centuries of their completion, but the Custom House not only looks the same, but evokes a feeling of age unlike many of the others. It is located on the quiet end of Derby Street, beyond where most traffic, apart from residents and lost tourists often approaches. Even the golden eagle, which is a replica of the wooden eagle Hawthorne describes, is frozen in its perch on the top of the building.

It is a place not entirely separate from Hawthorne’s literary Salem, yet its physical roots are deep in the real city. Facing the Custom House, if one can ignore the traffic and the cars parked around the back, Hawthorne does not seem one hundred fifty years away. Just turning around to face the harbor is like stepping forward in time, and crossing out of the semi-fictional space of Hawthorne’s “Custom House.” There is no “bustling wharf,” nor is the waterfront “burdened with decayed wooden warehouses.” (Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* 4). The three ancient wharves are carefully landscaped and long gravel

paths extend to the ends, traveled halfway by ambling tourists. Both the Custom House and the wharves retain elements of Hawthorne's Salem and the more modern city, but neither can be situated fully in either. Surely there must be a boundary where Hawthorne's Salem ends and physical Salem begins, but it is difficult to locate. Hawthorne is such an integral part of Salem, and Salem is inseparable from Hawthorne's work, that either may be, at any moment, a product of the other's fancy.

CHAPTER 3  
BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WORLDS:  
THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES AND  
*THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES*

My mother was once a tour guide at the House of the Seven Gables, in addition to her roles as teacher and field trip enthusiast, so that my visits to the House and its surrounding area were more frequent than most. Still, Hawthorne's connection to the House of the Seven Gables was as unclear to me as was his role in the city in general. His name was almost myth. The memories I have of visiting the House are dominated by close, dark rooms and short, shadowy corridors leading to hidden passageways and staircases where, on just the right nights, when the moon is a sliver over Salem Harbor, one must surely encounter ghosts. Although it must have been daytime, since the visitor center closes at seven o'clock, everything in the House seemed as dark as the impossibly haphazard cluster of chimneys and gables looming over perfectly maintained gardens that seemed to have robbed all color from the House's outer walls. Everything in the House

creaked and every voice could be heard from all other rooms, so that the whole structure seemed alive and breathing.

This is not the House of the Seven Gables that I visited in the summer of 2010, nor could it have truly been the House of the Seven Gables that I visited fifteen years earlier. Although the kitchen, with its vast fireplace, low ceiling and black floor, fit my memory precisely, the other rooms are bright and airy, decidedly livable and even luxurious, as if I had previously visited an entirely different House. My mistaken memories were validated when I learned that the House young Hawthorne visited was also a different House, existing between periods of seven-gabled fame, which seemed to leave him with impressions very similar to my own. There are two Houses of the Seven Gables at play in Salem, and while they connect and overlap in some places, there is a boundary between them where Hawthorne's mind creates liminal space belonging to both and neither.

The boundaries between fact and fantasy, author and narrator, memory and fancy are often tenuous in fiction, but rather than allowing these boundaries to inhibit his work, Hawthorne embraces and manipulates them. No binary opposition delineates the two terms; instead they blend together in Hawthorne's work, so that at times one is almost indistinguishable from the other. Given his connection to the city of Salem, it is not surprising that there are several walking tours of the city based entirely on Hawthorne's presence there, and many of the most interesting stops are more theoretical than physical places, or places that exist because of Hawthorne's literary influence. The Old Town Pump Memorial on Essex Street was constructed in direct reference to Hawthorne's "A

Rill from the Town Pump;” The Hawthorne Hotel is located behind the Hawthorne statue’s back on Hawthorne Boulevard; of course the House of the Seven Gables is a short walk from both of these, having survived the centuries and become a gem of historical preservation, and an amalgam of history, superstition and pure literary fiction.

A visit to the House of the Seven Gables, paired with a reading of the novel of the same name is a prime example of how a real physical location may cross the boundary into a textual space. Passing though the door of the House is the closest imaginable experience to stepping into the novel, and the story is not entirely extricable from the structure of the House. Only a small part of the House of the Seven Gables as it stands today is as it was when Hawthorne began to build a fictional space based on his experience there in his youth. The *House*, as it appears in *The House of the Seven Gables*, has become a literary entity as important to the novel as any character contained therein. Just as Hawthorne developed his story and expanded the *House* to fit his imagination, so the House was later expanded to represent what had become a largely abstract space. That the *House* was inspired by the House, and in turn the House was refashioned to the idea of the *House* creates a complicated relationship between the physical experience of a tour and the more intellectual experience of the novel.

Two of the most interesting additions to the House are hardly space themselves, but rather thresholds belonging not entirely to the House or the *House*, physical connections between physically disconnected places. These are the points where the boundaries between the two Houses are most clear and most complicated. The spaces beyond the boundaries were added to the structure by Caroline Emmerton during the

1908 renovations that also restored most of the seven gables, the one as a direct reference to the novel, and the other based on an inference Emmerton made from her reading (7gables.org). The shop-door, which is a source of extreme anxiety for Hepzibah throughout the novel, faces quiet, unremarkable Turner Street and opens into a carefully constructed cent-shop. This door is the only entrance visible without paying the admission price for a tour of the House, and is always “locked, bolted and barred” as tightly as in the moments before Hepzibah’s foray into shopkeeping (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 29). The second door is disguised as the back wall of a china closet in the formal dining room, and leads to a secret staircase in the center of the House, and while it is not mentioned in the novel it represents an intersection between the real, tangible House and its literary counterpart. Embedded within the physical structure of the House, this door is an unobtrusive portal to an entirely abstract space, the product of one reader’s interpretation of a work of fiction. Within the confines of the House in general, these doors create not only physical barriers, or just intermediate boundaries between rooms, but actual “liminal spaces” between world and House, House and *House* (Aronson 336).

At the height of the Turner family’s eminence, the House has boasted seven gables that were removed by the more conservative Ingersolls, leaving only three during Hawthorne’s lifetime (7gables.org). In the opening pages and throughout most of *The House of the Seven Gables*, the idea of a “venerable mansion,” possibly haunted by the ghost of its first inhabitant who would surely “darken the freshly plastered walls, and infect them early with the scent of an old and melancholy house,” is put forth in the way of description (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 9, 12). Changes to the structure are few and call

for the gravest consideration by generations of Pyncheons who look on disapprovingly from portraits and eaves, so that the general sense of closeness and decay grows and the impression of the *House* takes focus from the House.

Today's House of the Seven Gables exists largely in response to Hawthorne's work, a physical interpretation of the metaphysical space of the novel. For this reason it is often difficult to distinguish between the House and the *House*, especially after visiting the one and reading the other. Visitors to the House step over the threshold and enter a space where the physical and metaphysical merge into a structure that does not belong entirely to either. To pass from one room into the next is to pass from the tangible reality of the House into the immaterial experience of memory and textual reality of the *House of the Seven Gables* and beyond, past the veil into Hawthorne's mind.

### **The shop-door: closed entrance**

At one time, according to my mother's memories from her years of leading House of the Seven Gables tours, the starting point for the tour and the official entrance to the House was the shop-door on Turner Street, which is easily missed and sees more lost tourists looking for the sea than intentional visitors. The door is locked and barred, and this fact, paired with the painstakingly arranged window display, is a respectful nod to one of the early scenes of the novel. The arrangement of the room emulates the exact moment before Hepzibah "suddenly project[s] herself into the shop," with "nothing remain[ing], except to take down the bar from the shop-door, leaving the entrance free -



more than free - welcome, as if all were household friends - to every passer-by”  
(Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 37, 40).

The shop-door cut into the side of the *House* is much more than an indication of the degeneration of the Pyncheon name; for Hephzibah the door is a wound, a betrayal inflicted upon her by her ancestors. Reading the door as “a powerful trope for security, privacy and the individuality most of us find crucial to our spiritual well-being” indicates how seriously the shop-door comes to impact Hephzibah’s life (Ingersoll 3). Instead of guaranteeing her security, privacy and individuality, the “spurious interloper” of an ancestor has allowed the public access to Hephzibah’s sanctuary and prison (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 29). It is not the shop itself that has caused Hephzibah this agitation, but rather the door that will let the world come flooding in upon her. She has been forced to reopen a door that is “a borderline between the humanized space, the space that has been ‘tamed’ in its relationship to man and the space that is not domesticated,” and invites in the wild unpredictability beyond her orderly shop and home (Trojanowska 419).

### **Passageways for ghosts: Clifford’s secret staircase**

The tour guides at the House of the Seven Gables have been strained to step behind their tour groups in the dining room, popping a panel in the wall to reveal what purports to be a china closet. Those closest to the door are able to see as the guide dramatically springs the back wall open into a dark and dangerous-looking wooden staircase that curves up into the supporting beams of the House. The space is narrow and

the air is stale, and no one ever seems to want to be the first one up the stairs, as this is surely the place most likely to be haunted.

Clifford's appearance in the novel is problematic, in that he is observably present before Phoebe actually sees him. His voice and step seem to arrive at the *House* before his body, and the women hear him speak with "an unshaped sound, such as would be the utterance of feeling and sympathy, rather than of the intellect" (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 87). From this first unsettling experience and throughout the novel Clifford wanders spectrally in the *House* and gardens, yet is a solid human without apparent supernatural tendencies. Hawthorne offers no real explanation to his readers, only alluding to the shadowy nature of the *House* and the possibility of apparitions. Caroline Emmerton was quick to see this as a moment where Hawthorne's work "reveals even as it conceals," and finding no clear answers within the confines of the novel, added the staircase as an architectural interpretation of what Hawthorne did not quite say (Wineapple 84). Here is another bridge built between the physical structure of the House and the discarnate implications of the novel, a boundary unclear in its location though certain in its existence. Emmerton, who seems to have had sole and unquestioned authority over the renovation of the House, encountered the problem of Clifford's mysterious, almost apparitional movement in the novel and solved it by physical means. The secret staircase is her attempt to explain what Hawthorne may have kept behind the veil of his mind.

In serving as a boundary between these ideas and physical places, the disguised door is at once part of the tangible, even appearing contiguous with the rest of the House, and an inextricable part of the abstract without which it would not exist. It is a perfect

example of Aronson's discussion of the door as a liminal space belonging at once to both and neither spaces it connects (332). In addition to its function of connecting physical spaces, the door to the secret staircase serves as a more conceptual boundary. "To go through the door is to pass from one state of being, or one world, to another," namely from the world of the House, order and domesticity, to the world of thought, abstraction and interpretation (Aronson 336). To pass through the door that is not quite a wall is to enter the mind of a woman who tried to draw back the veil, if only for a moment, and interpret what she saw there into the structure of the House. She has effectively read the House as a text, and sought to explain it by physical means.

### **Entrance as barrier**

The House tour is laid out on a carefully planned route so that visitors enter and exit on the ground floor but pass through the second floor and attic without encountering other tour groups. It is always possible to hear other groups and guides walking and shifting the House under their feet, climbing the staircase and leaning over ropes into forbidden rooms. Those doors that allow access are left open wide and propped while others are blocked by rope barriers, and still other are closed and presumably locked. A visitor is given clear instruction, by way of these doors, which rooms he may access and which are off-limits. Despite the substantial number of open and roped doors, one is always curious to know what lies beyond those few that remain always closed. Aronson attributes this to the imagination, that "behind a door we can envisage anything," and that rather than ignoring what they are not permitted to see, visitors are more curious about

the closed doors than the open ones (Aronson 334). Just as the eponymous minister in Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" becomes a subject of the greatest scrutiny after he places an impenetrable boundary between himself and the world, so these closed doors invite visitors to wonder and infer about what lies just beyond them.

In the context of the novel, doors are hardly an obstacle for some, while for others they might as easily be solid walls. Doors fly open before Phoebe, locks give way easily, and she even exits the *House* without great conflict. Most notable is her departure for church on "one of those bright, calm Sabbaths, with its own hallowed atmosphere, when Heaven seems to diffuse itself over the earth's face in a solemn smile, no less sweet than solemn," as Hepzibah and Clifford watch from above (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 147). It is a day made for Phoebe, whose own bright calm belongs out in the air "with God's sweetest and tenderest sunshine in it," and she passes easily from the *House* into the world (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 147). There is no mention of any trouble with the front door, or even of Phoebe needing to open it herself. Ghostlike, "forth... from the portal of the old house, stepped Phoebe, putting up her small, green sunshade, and throwing upward a glance and smile of parting kindness to the faces at the arched window" (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 147). If Phoebe can pass through the front door and beneath the Pyncheon Elm so effortlessly, she may cross any threshold in the *House* as easily and with as little resistance. No door is closed to her, though it be locked against others.

In the same chapter Hepzibah and Clifford attempt what Phoebe has accomplished so easily and somehow fail. They are not permitted to cross the boundary of their ancestral home. Surely Clifford could not be unworthy to be in the Sabbath

atmosphere, “for his heart gushed out, as it were, and ran over his eyes, in delightful reverence for God, and kindly affection for his human brethren” (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 148). At the door, mysteriously closed behind Phoebe, they must exert greater effort, and the narrator specifically describes them working together as they “pulled open the front-door, and stept across the threshold” (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 148). This threshold, both literally and metaphorically, is “the passage between two spaces - two worlds” and is to be considered “a dangerous place” (Aronson 336). Thrust suddenly beyond the privacy of their shield, their home, and into “the presence of the whole world, and with mankind’s great and terrible eye upon them alone,” Hepzibah and Clifford have crossed the “bounds between order and chaos, between a world of rules and a world of alogical action” (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 148; Aronson 332). The pair belong to the *House*, behind the veil of their home, and thrust forth thus, find that they have no place in the world beyond.

At interesting passage follows this foray into the world beyond the *House*, where Hawthorne uses the idea of the door in a series of overlapping metaphors and literalism, all further complicating the attempted exit. Again, the door is specifically closed, and the *House* is transformed in much the same way the outside world has been by its opening. Much more than a closed door, the pair find themselves trapped by “the glimpse and breath of freedom which they had just snatched” before they realize that “their jailor had but left the door ajar, in mockery, and stood behind it, to watch them stealing out” (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 149). It is not in the *House* or the outside world where Hepzibah and Clifford experience this sense of being jailed; rather it is “at the threshold,

they felt [the jailor's] pitiless gripe upon them" (Hawthorne *Seven Gables* 149). The door, the liminal space between worlds imprisons the pair with the *House*, and what is contained within it cannot be integrated into the world outside.

Marianne Moore discusses the need for writers to present "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," which seems a fitting metaphor for *The House of the Seven Gables*. As a piece of fiction, the novel has a frame of the imaginary, set in a place that cannot be experienced fully in a physical sense, and populated with characters who do not appear in the records of the city. However, Hawthorne is present throughout, building the *House* from his memory and impressions of the House he knew and heard about, imbuing the story with a sense of reality and truth independent from his literary craft. Still, there is something more complicated than Moore's metaphor at work in Hawthorne's stories. It is not a simple case of fantasy peppering reality, or vice versa, rather the garden contains imaginary flowers on real stems, and real toads swallowing imaginary flies. The fiction comes from the truth, and the true grows from the fictional, and all of it relies on Hawthorne.

CHAPTER 4  
INTRODUCTION TO  
“MARTINI’S LAW”

The third dive of my Advanced Open Water scuba certification course was on the wreck of the *S.S. Yongala* in 2008, and it was a dive that changed me. I was forced to confront and overcome some of my greatest fears all combined in one dive to almost a hundred feet below the surface on an isolated wreck far from shore at night. Immediately following the dive I began to write, and the story has taken many forms since that time.

The fiction piece that follows, entitled “Martini’s Law,” is based on that series of dives. I have tried since 2008 to successfully explore the fear, excitement and emotion of diving at night in an unfamiliar ocean, where sharks and sea snakes may be anywhere, but always I have come up with pieces I could not share. Either they were too long and technical, focusing on the diving jargon that is so crucial to the physics and experience of diving, or else they were lost in subsurface discussions of mortality and fear in general. What the pieces had in common was their genre, which was always leaning heavily toward memoir rather than fiction. It was only when I made the conscious shift toward fiction that the piece began to take a form that felt both natural and effective.

Writing this piece as fiction rather than memoir allowed me to step back from the immediacy of a dive, and examine the reasons why diving tends to be a universally transcendental experience. Instead of simply writing the narrative of a dive, I was able to use the dive as a layer to another story. The piece became about isolation and addiction, themes I would not have been able to use truthfully in a memoir but seemed to fit in fiction. I have worked through various drafts of this piece for the past year, and through each one I understood better why “Martini’s Law” had to be fiction. The characters developed as I revised, and the current version, which concerns itself with family, alcoholism and letting go of the past, is far from where I began.

I have twice submitted this piece for workshop, and both times someone has suggested I read Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck” for a lesson in craft specific to dive stories. In fact, just before I began the first incarnation of the fiction version of “Martini’s Law,” I had been reading *Down Time: Great Writers on Diving*, which includes Rich’s poem. The collection of poetry and short stories ranges from light-hearted anecdotes to deep explorations of the human mind, and features writers as disparate as Jacques Cousteau, Michael Crichton and Dave Barry. Individual pieces caught my attention as I read, mostly those that used diving as a metaphor or entry into more complicated stories, but when I finished reading them all, it was the effect of the collection that remained with me.

The effect I was working toward is expressed in the introduction to *Down Time*, when Cayman Brac says that “conscious or subconscious, this search for something deeper is a part of why we dive,” and it is a part of why I chose to write about diving



(Brac vii). It is an experience that is at once isolating and invigorating, one that forces us to face and accept our mortality while confirming emphatically that we are alive. When this piece was memoir, there was nothing deeper than the dive. Once I allowed myself to slip entirely away from the roles of character and narrator, the story crossed into fiction and reached new depths.

CHAPTER 5  
MARTINI'S LAW

**Dive no.: 1** Jacques Cousteau called is the “rapture of the deep,” but nitrogen narcosis is as good as drunk. Eva has read the nitrogen narcosis section in her dive manual where the process is explained, but as the boat speeds across the Pacific toward the dive site, her stomach leaps with every wave. Someone has put on a video of a narced diver on the *S.S. Yongala* the year before, and the other divers laugh in the cabin as he hugs the smokestack and offers his regulator to a turtle. Eva hasn't been deep enough yet to get narced, but the dive leader warns the group that this will probably be the dive. This will be the first deep dive for most of them, and most are more excited than nervous. Nitrogen narcosis is as good as drunk, and Eva hasn't been drunk in years.

**Time in: 8:37** “Gotta let us know you're leaving, else we don't know you didn't come back!” The divemaster's wetsuit is peeled down to his waist like a banana as he thrusts the clipboard into Eva's hands. He sways with the boat but does not spill his beer. He will not be diving this morning. Eva signs her name beside her starting oxygen level

and the time before shuffling to the dive point. Below her the other divers bob at the surface, checking their equipment and waiting for the signal to submerge. Eva picks out her sister's face, smiling up at her, telling her everything will be alright. She runs through the dexterity exercise again. Touch 1, touch nose, touch 2, touch nose, touch 3 touch nose. Six seconds. Eva steps into nothing, feeling her flippers flex up against the air and water before she drops into shadowy silence.

**Date: March 23, 2008** Tonight will make three years since Eva saw the world slow down from behind the wheel of her sister's car. She shouldn't have been driving, but she'd had one less drink than Maria and taken the keys. When the road went left and Eva went straight for the tree Maria had thrown her arm across the car and her sister. As she drops into the Pacific, water and air crash against Eva's mask like shattering glass, clearing to reveal divers floating in space around her. One approaches and gives Eva the "OK" sign, which she returns. Maria runs hands over Eva's tank and buoyancy compensator, testing valves and double checking straps. Everything is secure and she gives Eva the signal that she is safe.

**Location: S.S. *Yongala*** A hundred twenty-two people died in the accident that sank the *Yongala* almost a century ago. They're all sealed into the echoing hull below. Touch 1, touch nose, touch 2, touch nose, touch 3, touch nose. Eight seconds. An accident is what the divemaster called it, but a hundred and twenty-two lives over seems like more than an accident. One life is an accident, or so Maria has assured Eva for the last three years.

**Weight belt: 10kg** Eva lets go a burst of air from her buoyancy compensator and feels the Pacific pushing her down. She waits to feel the nitrogen in her tank pour into her bloodstream, concentrating to produce the effect of nitrogen narcosis, but forty feet down she is still sober. Martini's Law equates every fifty vertical feet of seawater with one martini on an empty stomach.

**Depth: 29m/91.5ft** Her knees slide into the sandy bottom without a sound and Eva watches the tiny whorls of sand rise and settle as a ring of divers forms under the listing bow of the *Yongala*. The dive leader begins his rounds, testing everyone on the dexterity exercise. Eva's confidence builds with her impatience to be done, to be told she is fine and get back to diving. She has been warned that it is more difficult down here, just as walking a straight line is harder on a Friday night, but Eva is sure she can do the exercise as well down here as on the surface. She watches as the diver beside her has to restart twice before finishing. It is Eva's turn. Touch one, touch nose, touch 2, touch 3 -- no, touch 2, touch nose, touch nose -- no, touch nose, touch 3, touch nose. Sixteen seconds. Eva can feel the salt around her eyes and taste the air, cold and metallic. Maria reaches over and grabs Eva's hand. She would be smiling if she could move her mouth around the breathing tube -- regulator. Eva reminds herself it is a regulator and counts the breaths to the surface.

**Dive no.: 2** After a dive, all Eva tastes is salt, but the others are eating lunch so she joins them quietly. The others talk about how much longer the dexterity exercise took them at depth. For most, it was the first time being narced, and they are already enhancing their stories. They are eager to get back down to the wreck and the sensation. Maria eyes are closed and Eva sits beside her, feeling the world rock around them.

**Time in: 13:53** The divemaster is waiting with his clipboard and a fresh beer, though he seems less enthusiastic and rocks more than before. Eva signs her name and giant steps into empty air and churning water. All around her is a luminescent blue stretching into a deepening blue below, drawing nearer as she slides down the descent line. Afternoon above fades into twilight on the *Yongala* where color is muted and movement slowed.

**Depth: 27.4m/90ft** Eva looks up and off into the indistinct boundary of open water, where the sea swirls like liquid wind, as if someone has called her name. Maria's hand finds Eva's, pulling her back to the wreck. She does not let go as they descend, as they both get more narcosed, as they veer away from the group and come slowly back. There is no rush when narcosis sets in. There is no last moment of sobriety, no lost time to be bordered by hazy memories tomorrow. Eva could always tell which drink would push her over the edge, and even the morning after a blackout she could find her last memory, but on this dive there was no boundary to find. The ascent line runs from the bow of the *Yongala* up into the eerie translucence above, and Maria is nowhere to be found. Eva looks up at the other divers climbing like angels and those on her level, waiting to rise, but no Maria.

**Bottom time: 39 minutes** No time has passed on the surface. Divers are sunning themselves on the upper deck, and Eva finds Maria asleep, already out of her wetsuit and gear. Eva stays in the cabin, logging her dives and ignoring the fading daylight sucking the color from the sea.

**Dive no.: 3** The temperature has dropped with the sun, and Eva shivers in her damp wetsuit, waiting for her turn to dive. The sky and the ocean are completely dark now, the crisp silver of the moon hanging in the one and shattered on the restive surface of the other. The divemaster has zipped his wetsuit up to his neck under his dive gear.

Eva signs her name, holds her mask and steps out. The first two giant steps today ended quickly in rush of bright, cool water, but this time there is nothing and then liquid nothing.

**Time in: 21:13** Seven minutes to the time she'll never forget, the time burned into her mind for the past three years, the time flowing green from the dashboard clock onto Maria's unconscious face in the passenger seat. Eva's hand is ghostly white on the descent line and she grips it tight as if it could save her. As if in a moment the Pacific couldn't send her reeling into the endless darkness beyond her flashlight beam. Eva stares into the borderless sea, imagining how it would feel to let go and drift away from the others, tumbling through the night until her air runs out and she sinks to the bottom where no one would find her.

**Depth: 27.4m/90 ft.** The wreck is quieter now, and flashlight beams fall on frozen schools of silver fish, rays half-buried in white sand and turtles sleeping with one eye open and one flipped wrapped around soft coral branches. The group pauses while the divemaster points out a sea snake slithering through the water over their heads, but a flash of white over the *Yongala* catches Eva's attention. As quickly as it came the flash is gone and she struggles to orient herself. The second flash is brighter and closer, and Eva loses Maria in the dark that follows.

**Visibility: 3 meters** There is no sound as the shark passes over the *Yongala* near the bridge, and no wake follows it. Only Eva's slowing breath and the blood pounding through her ears ring in the silence. She holds her breath for a moment to listen, but at this depth carbon dioxide builds up fast and her lungs burn. The first breath is cold and



tastes of metal, but the burning fades as quickly as it came. She is floating above the bones of the victims of the wreck, the people she leaves behind as she follows the group up the ascent line.

**Bottom time: 29 minutes** It is as dark at the surface as it was at depth, but here someone helps Eva off with her gear and someone else had made dinner. The others are gathering with towels wrapped around their shoulders, every one of them looking like the shivering victim of some late night crash. They stand, chattering in the darkness with paper coffee cups in hand. Eva does not bother looking for the face she knows is not among them, lit by dying green glowsticks tied to tanks. In the morning, after the overnight journey back to shore, Eva will leave the boat alone, exactly as she had come.

CHAPTER 6  
INTRODUCTION TO  
UNEXPECTING

Several people I knew were having babies within a few months of each other, so that I was forced to make several pressured trips to baby superstores to prepare for the inevitable showers. On one trip in particular, the second in the span of a few weeks, I found myself standing in the back corner of the store, surrounded on all sides by walls and shelves of diapers. The shower invitation specified that there would be a “diaper raffle,” and I was to bring a package of diapers to be entered. After walking the length of the aisle twice, I called my mother, who had raised four of her own children, several of our friends and cousins, and dedicated her professional life to teaching early childhood education. I assumed she would know more than I did about diapers. As I had expected, she was able to talk me through the whole aisle.

“Unexpected” began as an in-class exercise for “Reading and Writing Fiction” in 2010. The assignment was to write a story entirely in dialogue between two characters,

where one character's secret was revealed to readers but not to the other character. The dialogue I wrote originally was between two sisters, who bore alarming similarity to myself and my sister, and it was clear that instead of revealing a secret, I had illustrated my own anxiety about babies and all they require. The story remained untouched for nearly a year after that realization, until I returned to it, trying to develop it into a longer piece for an advanced fiction workshop. In early drafts I felt that the character and plot development were limited not only by the single setting of the baby store, but by the protagonist, whose life and thoughts were no different outside the store. Her constant anxiety, regardless of her setting, would make it almost impossible for her to change or for the plot to advance significantly within the confines of the short story. She was also, despite drafts intended specifically to separate myself from the story, so similar to me that the piece was almost memoir.

The piece was an expression of this baffled anxiety, coupled with the inexplicable intuition others seemed to have and expect of me as a woman. Since it was based on a feeling that was, at the time, being substantiated almost daily, whenever the ubiquitous subject of babies came up, it was very difficult to separate myself from the story until I wrote the protagonist as a man. It was acceptable that he should be perplexed by the store and his wife's mysterious knowledge. Additionally, his entanglement with his wife's sister pushed the plot beyond the setting of the store. Fiction pulled the story forward.

One of the final and most challenging pieces of feedback I received was in regards to the last flashback scene, where much was implied but not much was shown. This was the last challenge of letting the story fall entirely into fiction. To write the scene

of the affair, in all its detail, was a new and daunting task, and as soon as it was posed I was flooded with thoughts of all the ways it could go wrong. It would be so easy to ruin a story with which I had spent time and for which I had developed protective feelings. Perhaps it was the latent Puritan propriety of growing up in New England that made me feel that I could not possibly write the scene more explicitly than I had. Elizabeth Benedict validated the myriad emotions I experienced regarding the revision of this scene, which may be the most significant in the story, saying that not just I, but other writers, “when we sit down to write a sex scene, our circuits can jam, our feelings of self-consciousness surge, and we might as well be beginning students of English as a second language” (Benedict 2). She goes on to offer advice on the craft of these scenes, professing that she doesn’t “believe that more sex scenes are better than fewer, nor that sex scenes should be long, elaborate, or explicit - *unless* that is what the work and the moment call for” (Benedict 3).

Once I had written and rewritten the scene, spending considerable time finding a balance, I felt that I had freed part of the story from itself. So much of the piece has to do with what goes unsaid and thereby misunderstood, that to gloss over this scene seemed a disservice, and counterproductive to the story. As Benedict says in the first line of the preface to her craft manual, and as I have come to see in this story, if not others, “sex matters” (Benedict xiii). The scene was yet another element of the story intended to draw the plot and characters forward, and writing it became a challenge of craft rather than of modesty.

## CHAPTER 7

### UNEXPECTEDING

James' chest clenched whenever he entered baby stores. At first he told himself it was the passage from frigid winter into the warm, baby powder-scented air of the store, but even now as spring was flowing in under the chill he still felt his body tighten and his breath catch. The car ride over had seen Jessica's mood swing with every turn, all excited planning giving way to silence and emptiness between them. As much as he hated to see her eyes mist over, James was always relieved when baby talk brought them to the resolution that they simply weren't ready to welcome a new life into theirs.

The claustrophobia was inexplicable in the vast warehouses where baby stores sprung up, and James had never experienced the regret he saw now in Jessica's eyes. She watched an expectant mother waddling after an unruly toddler who had snatched a plush sheep off a rack by the door and was sucking on its ear. He was caught and began to cry as his mother took the sheep away and jammed it back onto the display, glancing around

to check if anyone had seen. Jessica smiled and pulled a cart from the line just inside the door, handing it off to James.

The plush sheep were on sale, and James discovered that they played soft, tinkling lullabies and purported to encourage “more productive sleep” in newborns. They were cute, James admitted to himself, but while investigating what “productive sleep” meant he noticed the sticker on the back of the tag. Originally \$75, the sheep were on sale for \$50. He tried to replace it on the display, but Jessica had already noticed him and dropped a drool-free sheep into the enormous periwinkle shopping cart, smiling at him as if inviting him to challenge her.

“I’ve read about these.” She told him as she brought the cart around and headed down the nearest aisle. “I guess if you put them in with babies when they’re sleeping, they have a higher IQ or something.”

James had learned to expect information like this. He nodded, knowing that Jessica would otherwise dig up the article she was paraphrasing, if only to prove her point. Everything in this store was designed to be stimulating and educational, down to this floppy sheep with delicately closed eyes and a somber smile. Shaping a little life seemed more possible in these stores. Based on what he bought James could mold a child prodigy or give a baby learning disabilities, and every decision was crucial to that outcome. He could stand for days in front of play-mats designed for babies not even old enough to distinguish colors or shapes, tearing himself apart to figure out if a jungle or ocean theme would be the better option.

“I still can’t believe she’s pregnant.” Jessica sighed, pretending not to look at James, though he could see her eyes flash up at him. “I know I should be happy for her, but I’m kind of pissed she beat me to it. I mean, she’s younger than me, and she’s only been married a year.”

“Well, she and Ned have been trying all that time, we’ve kind of taken a break. Deborah’s practically an at-home mom already, and you know neither of us is prepared to do that right now.” Jessica raised her eyebrows at this, but left all talk of James’ declining contracting business, her lack of upward movement since the completion of her master’s degree and their passing opportunity for children all unsaid.

“Do you like the green or purple?” James stepped closer to the identical boxes of plastic baby bathtubs. “Let’s get purple. They’ll probably have a girl anyway.” Before he could shrug indifferently, noticing tiny stickers on the boxes indicating which color tub was enclosed, Jessica had lifted the box into the carriage.

“How do you know?”

“How do I know what?” She had moved on toward crib liners, and was weighing her preference for napping teddy bears or yawning dinosaurs.

“How do you know it’s going to be a girl? Isn’t it too early to tell?” James wasn’t sure how early was too early to tell, or even how someone *could* tell from the blobby shadows on an ultrasound. He had never seen a single baby in those pictures.

\* \* \*

*Jessica watched her sister intently as she spoke, soaking up every word with a smile. Deborah was beaming, her eyes fixed on James, who leaned forward on the sofa with his elbows on his knees and one hand wrapped around his chin. Ned was staring absently out the window into the backyard where snow still clung to the grass and tree trunks, defying the sun and Ned's attempts to erect a swing set. James was focused on the photograph on the coffee table in front of him, desperate to avoid the eyes of the others.*

*The picture was grainy and colorless, stamped with the date and time and a series of other nonsense numbers that intensified James' feeling that he was missing something. People cooed over these pictures. People pointed out fingers and toes, chuckled when they were told it was a boy, always making jokes about paternal inheritance. People saw people in these photographs, but James only saw patches of light and dark melding into what could as easily be a distant galaxy as a baby. He was reminded of those magic pictures that would morph from flat repetitions of a pattern into a three-dimensional image, if only he could stare long and carefully enough at their maddening order.*



*“So do you know what you’re having yet?” Jessica pulled the picture into her hands, forcing James to follow its path to her. She was smiling at Deborah, but her eyes twitched toward him just long enough to make him wonder if it really happened.*

*“No, we want to be surprised.” Deborah smiled at Ned, who smiled at the table. James knew Ned was barely registering the conversation happening around him, and he wished he could block it out that way. Ned had always been able to tune out the sisters, to let them talk and fight, somehow coming back at the end with a kiss for his wife and an encouraging smile for Jessica, something James could never manage. Even now, James hardly knew how to contribute to the conversation. If Deborah had said yes, that they were having a girl, he would have smiled but let her talk about the swing set they were building, and how the little one could probably have her curly pigtails and toothy grin. If it was a boy, James would have smiled and let Ned talk about building up his pitching arm early. Jessica smiled now at Deborah’s response and knew exactly what to say.*

*“Well then I can’t wait to meet Baby Larson.”*

*It was that simple. Baby Larson could be a little girl with red pigtails and freckles, laughing from the swing her father built, or a little boy throwing handfuls of sand over the edge of the sandbox. Either way, Jessica couldn’t wait.*

\* \* \*

“All the first kids in our family are girls.” Jessica replied, as if this were the most natural assumption to be made. “Should we get them a stroller? I think this store has one that matches the pack-and-play my mom got them.”

James followed her, wondering all the time what a pack-and-play was, and thought of his own family. He had never considered it before, but all the first children in his family were boys. Would that make a difference? Probably not, he told himself. It was a fifty-fifty shot and family tradition had nothing to do with it. He found Jessica in the stroller section.

“Ugh, I still can’t believe my little sister’s having a baby. I bet it’ll be a ginger like him.” James snorted and Jessica turned around.

“What’s so funny?”

“I think both parents have to have red hair to get a redhead.” That sounded right. Something to do with genetics and recessive traits.

“They do. Deborah’s hair is red. She just dyes it because she started going gray when she was nineteen.” Jessica turned back to the strollers just as the color drained from James’ face. He ran his hand through his own hair, suddenly conscious of how dark it was. Maybe the baby would be a ginger; maybe he was wrong about the redhead thing.

Jessica’s phone ringing jarred him from his thoughts, and he instinctively picked it up from her purse in the front of the cart. The name on the screen told him it was Deborah’s husband, and James felt his heart spasm with guilt just as it did whenever Ned’s name was mentioned.

\* \* \*

*James had never planned for this. He had trouble believing that anyone would, but here was Deborah, who had thought through every option and arrived at this one as the best. He knew she was watching him from across the table, where their coffee mugs were steaming and leaving rings of condensed vapor. He glanced up, noticing how much she reminded him of Jessica, although they had little in common physically. Jessica was darker, with waves of glossy hair always falling across her face. Deborah was trying to be her sister, her cheeks pink and uneven in an effort to conceal her pale skin, and though her hair was almost as dark as her sister's, it faded to a mixed auburn-gray an inch from the roots.*

*"I don't understand why you don't just get a donor." He said at last, looking up and past Deborah to the bare trees shivering in the fall wind outside the kitchen window. "You and Ned could go together and it'd be like it was him the whole time. I mean, I don't really know how all that stuff works, but at least you'd be doing it together."*

*"I can't do that to him." Deborah dropped her gaze. "He doesn't know, James. He doesn't know he's the problem."*

*“Well how do you know then? Didn’t he... get tested or whatever?”*

*“No, but I did. I wanted to be sure before I even suggested it. Everything’s fine with me, so it has to be him. I just can’t tell him. He’s already so frustrated, thinking it’s me.” Deborah reached across the table and took James’ hand. “Please do this for me. For us.”*

\* \* \*

Jessica glared at James as she snatched the phone out of his hand, getting to it just before it stopped ringing.

“Hey, Ned! What did she say? Sure, I’ll call her now.”

“What’s going on?” James tried to keep his voice steady, sure he was about to be found out. “Is everything ok?”

“I don’t know. I need to call Deb.” She pressed the phone to her ear and put her other hand on her hip. “Go pick some diapers for the raffle.”

“Why would anyone want to raffle diapers?”

“They don’t raffle diapers. Everyone brings a package and gets their name entered in a raffle to win -- Deb, hi!” Jessica shot him a foul look and pointed toward the diapers before she turned and walked away down the aisle, leaving James to wonder what someone could win from a diaper raffle.

James had expected a couple shelves of diapers, maybe half an aisle. As he stood in the back corner of the store, surrounded on all sides by diapers, he felt the same crushing panic he had experienced at the entrance. They were piled row upon row past his head, past where he could even reach, measured by weight, measured by absorbency, arranged by size, arranged by price, covered with flowers, covered with cartoon characters, made to look like jeans. Hundreds of babies of every age and color laughed at him from the shelves. He picked up the package nearest him and tried to decipher the meaning of the words on it. They were for “preemies,” babies up to six pounds. Six pounds. James imagined a baby the size of a bag of flour, imagined its body curled up with little knees poking into its little belly, little toes flexing against each other while little fingers, smaller than the first length of James’ pinky, explored a mushy mouth under squinting, tired eyes.

“Those are way too small.” Jessica had appeared around the corner and took the package from him, replacing it on the shelf. She picked up another package further down the row, these for babies between twelve and eighteen pounds. “Everyone will get her newborn diapers. She’ll be glad to have some bigger ones later.”

“Is everything alright?” Jessica did not look upset, so it seemed like a safe question.

“Yeah, Deb’s going for her ultrasound and she’s hormonal and Ned doesn’t know how to deal with her. Oh look! They have those jeans diapers!”

\* \* \*

*James' cell phone buzzed as the cashier rang his first item through at the grocery store. He saw it was Deborah and knew there was no getting out of this; he had already avoided her too long. He smiled apologetically at the teenage cashier and flipped the phone open.*

*"Hi, what's up?" He tried to sound surprised, as if he hadn't been expecting this call every day for the last two weeks. Maybe she had changed her mind. Maybe she wouldn't mention her plan and they could go on as if she had never asked him. Maybe Ned had come through and saved them both from what they were planning to do.*

*"Do you have a minute?" James swallowed hard. The cashier glanced up at him through her thick, pulpy lashes. She pulled a bag of oranges across the scale several times without the telltale beep of success, then sighed loudly and stabbed a number into the computer as she tossed the bag down the belt toward the bagger. Jessica had reminded him twice to get her oranges, hoping they would improve the vitamin C deficiency with which she had diagnosed herself at the onset of fall.*

*"Uh, sure. I can't really talk, but I can listen I guess."*

*“That’s fine, that’s what I want you to do. Ned just left. He’ll be done until Monday, and his next trip isn’t for another few months. He and I ... last night... well you know. I think now’s the time, if we’re going to do this.” She paused and James could hear her breathing, hoping he would speak. “James, I need to know.”*

*“I’ll be over in a little while.”*

\* \* \*

“I still just can’t believe I have to plan my little sister’s baby shower before she has one for me.” It was different words set to the same music, which James had been trying to tune out all day. He leaned against the overloaded carriage and did his best to ignore the array of breast pumps and breast pump accessories on the shelves beside him. It was more difficult to ignore the price cards just below them.

“Does that say two hundred dollars?” He asked as Jessica picked up a box and began reading the back. “Won’t it just do that by itself?”

Jessica finished reading and placed the pump on top of something called a “boppy,” which looked like a poorly designed pool float. She stared at him, visibly summoning what patience she had left.

“First of all, the baby is not an ‘it.’ Until we know if they’re having a boy or a girl, they baby is just ‘the baby.’ Secondly, sometimes the baby will breast feed,

sometimes the baby won't. This is for the times the baby won't. Or maybe if Deb wants a few minutes to herself, so someone else can feed it -- the baby. Thirdly, you know Deborah and Ned are having some money trouble, and since you and I have nothing else worth spending money on, yes, I am going to buy my sister a two hundred dollar breast pump that she won't and can't buy for herself. Is that ok with you? Can I buy my little sister a gift without you jumping down my throat?"

"Jess, I don't know how this stuff works. I was just asking. I'm happy to give Deborah whatever she needs, and I think it's great you're so supportive, I just want to know what this stuff is for since you seem to already know." She turned back to the shelf. He picked up a carrying case made by the same company as the pump, biting back his thoughts about breast feeding in public. "Do you think she'd need this too?"

\* \* \*

*James wasn't sure how they would begin. Should he have brought Deborah flowers? How would she answer the door? Would they sit for a while or just get straight into it? What if he lost his nerve? Worse, what if he kept his nerve but lost his ability? When it was all over would they lie together in silence or would one of them speak? What would they say to each other? How would he know when to leave? How would Jessica look at him when he came home?*



*Deborah would, of course, not answer the door in lingerie. Neither her personality nor the situation called for it, but James was slightly disappointed when the frosted glass swung open into the foyer, bright with autumn afternoon warmth, and he saw she was fully clothed. They stood for a moment in silence, she rearranging the coats on the rack, he inspecting the shoddy paint job on the moulding Ned had finally completed last week.*

*“I told Jess I was coming over to check that bathroom cabinet, so maybe I should take a look at that first. You know, in case she asks about it.” The idea had sounded less ridiculous when he thought it, but it got them up the stairs and into the bathroom adjoining the master bedroom. He knelt on the floor in front of the cabinet, opening and closing the door a few times. “That’s going to need to be re-hung. I’ll bring my tools over and fix it for you. I forgot to bring them today.”*

*She was on the bed when he stood and turned back to the bedroom. It was natural that she should be there, lying on her back on the far side, waiting for him to figure out what was wrong with the cabinet door. It was natural too, that he would lie beside her on his back, his head turned to look past her out the window into the backyard. In the back corner was a rectangular space cleared of plants and rocks, bordered on two sides by a wooden edging six inches above the ground.*

*“Ned’s building a sand-pit, and he’s going to put in a swing set when we have kids. He’s been working on it since we moved in.” James nodded, understanding what she meant. He thought of his own yard, how he would plant the border garden of phlox that his daughter would pick or his son destroy, only to see it return stronger and more*

*plentiful each year. Maybe he would put in a swing set too. Maybe he could ask Ned for advice on where to put it. James put that idea out his mind. He would never ask Ned for anything.*

*“Are you ready? I mean, are you still ok with...” It was comforting to know that Deborah was uncertain too. Her voice trailed off, but at least she was looking at him now. He took a last look out the window at Ned’s half-built sand-pit.*

*They both closed their eyes in the beginning, James imagining they were Jessica’s hands he felt running up his back and across his shoulders, and Deborah pretending it was Ned’s body that pressed against her on the flowered quilt. It was difficult to keep up the fantasy for long. Deborah was softer than Jessica and less sure, so that after several ineffective minutes James had to guide her hands down to him. She hesitated, and James opened his eyes to find her watching him.*

*James slid off the bed and began removing his clothes, hearing Deborah doing the same behind him. He waited until he heard the fabric of the bedding pulled back up over her before he turned around and burrowed under the quilt with her. He wished it was darker. Not because he didn’t want to see Deborah, who had turned on her side to face him with the quilt barely covering her chest, but because Jessica had always insisted they make love in the dark.*

*James turned to Deborah, willing himself to see Jessica in her face, but finding it hard to do. Deborah blushed when their eyes found each other, and her smile was not the broad, confident grin full of glistening white teeth and deep red lipstick Jessica flashed at him when she was truly happy, but a quite smirk where Deborah’s lips pressed so tightly*

*together that the corners turned down, though the lips curved up. She would not initiate this, James knew, and he raised a hand to brush the too-dark hair from her face.*

*He felt she hadn't expected him to kiss her, but it let him close his eyes and still feel her. Once he began she pulled him closer, her hands gripping his back more tightly with every minute. She held him like she needed him, like Jessica didn't, and James gave himself entirely to her.*

*It was easy, with her lips on his, her breath rushing against his face, when she was holding him so near. It was effortless for him to push himself on top of her under the quilt, and her body fit against his without resistance. There was no re-positioning, no Jessica maneuvering a displaced arm into a more comfortable position, no Ned asking sheepishly if Deborah was satisfied.*

*She held him against her the whole time so that he heard each fluttering breath and quiet sigh. He felt her hands pulling him down and her body pushing up to him, wanting the rhythm he poured into it. Without meaning to, lifted his head and looked into her eyes, glad to see her smiling. Whether she was glad he had agreed or simply enjoying the moment, her lips had parted and the corners turned up. She kissed his cheek when it was over.*

*James lay damp when Deborah took the quilt and her neatly piled clothes with her to the bathroom for a shower. She had left towels on the dresser beside the hamper, and he dressed and went to wait in the kitchen. It didn't seem right to leave without speaking to her, though he wasn't sure what he could possibly say.*

*“Do you know when you could come back to fix that cabinet? If it’s not fixed by the time Ned gets back I know he’ll try to fix it himself.” Deborah’s hair was damp and curly, finally as dark as her sister’s.*

*“I’ll come by in the next couple days to do it.” James responded, glad they were back to the cabinet door. Deborah nodded and walked him to the front door. He was down the two concrete steps and onto the front walk when she called out after him, loud enough for him to hear, but too quietly for anyone else.*

*“James, thank you.” He waved and ducked into his car, glad that Jessica had not called while he was inside.*

\* \* \*

“I think that’s just about everything. I mean, we want to leave some things for other people to get her.” Jessica read over the twenty-page registry again, checking off items as she went. “I just want to make sure she gets everything she needs.”

James started to make a comment about how their oversized shopping cart, which had now spilled into two carts, carried more than any baby could ever need, to say nothing of the other well-wishers who would be appropriately generous. He had learned to think quickly with Jessica, however, and stopped himself in time. “Well, we can always come back if we forgot anything.”

Jessica smiled at him for what felt like the first time all day and walked away to answer her ringing phone as James began unloading the carts onto the conveyor belt at the register. He could tell she was talking to Deborah, and he felt relief spread through his chest as a true smile grew on Jessica's face. She waved at him to stop unloading the carts, and he waited with an increasingly agitated cashier while Jessica finished her conversation and returned to them.

“Sorry, we're going to have to trade some of this stuff out. Deborah decided not to be surprised, and the baby is a boy.”

James grinned and began putting everything pink or purple back into one of the empty carts, all the while hoping more than ever Deborah's son would be born with red hair.

CHAPTER 8  
INTRODUCTION TO  
OTHER PEOPLE'S NAMES

Marianne Moore instructs writers of poetry to build “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” and her words are just as applicable to fiction (line 24). Earlier in this project I referred to Hawthorne’s complication of Moore’s metaphor as an illustration of how effectively a skilled writer can blend fiction and memoir so that each enhances the other. It is this effect that I have emulated in “Other People’s Names,” which contains significant proportions of both fiction and memoir elements, though the piece is firmly fiction.

This is the only piece in this section that did not begin as memoir, but like the others, it developed from a multi-part class assignment for “Reading and Writing Fiction.” The first assignment was simply to compose a short story for the following class. The next week the assignment was to use the last paragraph as the first paragraph in the next draft. When I revised the original story into this new version, I decided to also

keep the new first paragraph in at the end, so that the moment would be framed in two different ways depending on its position in the story.

Some of the feedback I received for “Other People’s Names” was related to the facts and fictions within it, and I was often surprised to find that what readers believed was “true” was actually the most fabricated part of the story. By inventing the most significant event of Gloria’s life and giving the narrative voice over to her, I hoped to establish myself as the writer only, to distance myself from the roles of narrator and character. However, since many of the notable details of the story are drawn from my own lived experience, I hesitate to say that I have entirely disconnected myself from these roles. The garden belongs to Gloria, but the toads are mine.

CHAPTER 9  
OTHER PEOPLE'S NAMES

It happened too fast for anyone to stop, and I watched, horrified, as the steam of red shot across Uncle Steve, missing him entirely, and became a stain that blossomed across my favorite white t-shirt. Under the wet coldness my lungs burned with the anger of the day, and I felt that they would catch fire and I would die of embarrassment right there in the bleacher seats of Fenway Park, and Uncle Steve could take my body back to my mother's house and explain to her how he had embarrassed me to death.

I didn't even want to go to the game, especially with Uncle Steve. He always smelled stuffy like old cigarettes and musky like older women's perfume, although I never saw him smoke or with a woman. I liked him better when he was Big Steve, years ago when he and my father would balance their beers on their guts at family parties and sing "Happy Birthday" at my mother, whether it was her birthday or not. I always laughed and sang along with them, but eventually the sun would set and my mother would put me to bed. When I got up in the morning my father and Big Steve would be



asleep in the living room, smelling stale and looking like they'd been in a fight they'd both lost.

When he showed up that morning, Uncle Steve was wearing the grey Red Sox jersey my mother had gotten embroidered with his name, though now it was three sizes too big and the red letters were fading and fraying. I remembered him wearing it to the game he and my father took me to when I was little enough for them to swing me up onto their shoulders and teach me the cheers I was never to repeat into front of mom. My father bought hot dogs for all three of us, and I had eaten mine because they were enjoying theirs. The memory of that hot dog, boiled in a box by a sweaty man in a ball park still made my stomach turn, and I promised myself that if Uncle Steve offered to buy me one, I would put my foot down and refuse.

He and mom were waiting for me in the kitchen, and I waited for her to tell me my shorts were too short and my shirt too tight, but before she could say anything, Uncle Steve stood up and put on his blue Red Sox hat. It looked like he hadn't washed it or his jersey since the game we went to with my father, and when he opened his arms for a hug, I turned to the refrigerator for a bottle of water. I wanted my mother to know exactly how hard this was going to be for me, and how big a favor I was doing her by going. Uncle Steve awkwardly dropped his arms and grinned at me.

"Ready, kiddo?" I hated that he still called me that. I was almost fourteen, practically old enough to drive, though I would never be caught driving my father's rickety Honda that had been collecting dust in the garage. I headed for the door, pausing

just long enough to roll my eyes back at my mother, who shot me a look to tell me I'd pay for it later. I knew Uncle Steve would follow me, but I didn't wait for him.

The green truck was unlocked, and when I climbed into the sun-bleached seat the fabric exhaled clouds of the same stale cigarette smell that hung around Uncle Steve. I closed my eyes as the smell filled my nose and lungs, remembering the first time I realized what it was, when the earthy scent of rotting leaves never cleared from the backyard mixed with something spicy rising from the forbidden tool shed. It clung to my father when he returned to the house later, wheezing into the kitchen where my mother didn't say a word about the smell she couldn't have missed.

Uncle Steve climbed into the driver's side of the truck, looking swamped by his jersey and the enormous cab. He smiled as I rolled down the window the moment the engine started. "That's probably the best plan." He kept grinning. "The AC's been on the fritz, and I think it finally kicked it this morning."

The house I lived in with my mother was right off what she called "old Route 1" and what Uncle Steve called "the road to nowhere." We didn't need gas, but we stopped at the station on the intersection of my street and the road to nowhere anyway. The owner always seemed to be there, and Uncle Steve talked with him about nothing while I glared at the \$2 bouquets of fake roses for sale by the register. I had a bunch of them on my bureau at home, a birthday gift from Uncle Steve last year. He startled me when he set down two styrofoam cups on the counter and pushed one closer to me.

"You'll like it. It's vanilla." I didn't care if it was vanilla or not, we both knew my mother would never let me drink coffee. She was sure it would stunt my growth, though I

was already taller than her and quickly outgrowing the shell-pink training bras she'd bought me last year. For a moment I thought Uncle Steve was testing me, that as soon as I reached for it he would snatch the cup back and drive me home to my mother, who would ground me for disobeying her. I picked up the coffee and headed back to the truck while Uncle Steve paid, desperate to look like I drank it all the time.

It was terrible. It tasted like someone ran flat Coke through a dirty sock before dumping in a whole bottle of vanilla syrup. I sipped it continuously through the whole ride, tasting its burned blackness all the way to Boston. When we arrived at Uncle Steve's favorite parking lot I threw the cup under the truck so he wouldn't notice it was still full. When I caught up with him he was talking to the lot attendant through the greasy window of his yellow booth.

"All set, kiddo?" Uncle Steve was grinning straight at me, along with the attendant. "Frank, this is my niece, Gloria. She's the one I told you about last time."

"Oh so *you're* the tennis star! Please to meet you!" He stuck his dirty hand through the tiny window, but I was so shocked and angry that Uncle Steve had told some toothless old man all about me that I just stared at him until he pulled his hand back in. "Well, uh, you folks better get going. Don't want them to start without you!"

The lot was a mile from Fenway, but Uncle Steve had insisted we park there so we wouldn't have to wait an hour for the people parked in front of us to leave before we could. For a while we were alone on the sidewalk, but as we walked people joined us from their favorite lots, tucked away down countless side streets, and eventually the

crowd swelled so large that the collective rumbling drowned out the baseball chatter Uncle Steve had kept up since we left the lot.

I looked up to find him gone, and I stopped and turned to look for him, feeling the crowd sweep past me. When I finally saw his face bobbing along toward me, it was colored with worry I had not seen there for years. I had seen the expression on my father's face when I was young, if I was sick or hurt, but I had only seen it on Uncle Steve when my mother was crying too hard to tell him what had happened.

He had taken my father's heart attack the hardest. He stopped drinking beer and eating red meat, and he stopped sleeping on our couch, all the things that had made him Big Steve. No one was surprised when he disappeared for a few months, but they were all happy when he came back thinner and quieter. I had always pretended not to care where he had gone, to make him think he hadn't hurt me and that I had never needed him there, but really I didn't know where he went. While he was gone no one said his name, and when he came back his name had changed. He had become Uncle Steve, and he was hurting.

By the time he got to me, smiling now that he had found me, I had convinced myself that he left me on purpose, and when he reached for my hand, the way he did when I was little and afraid of being lost, I pulled it away. I was embarrassed to be seen holding the hand of a man who would leave me behind right when I wanted him there, and he knew it. The same hurt that darkened his face the day he came back from wherever he had been, when I crossed my arms and would not welcome the man I did not

recognize, flashed across it now, and I was glad to see it. We walked the rest of the way and climbed the stairs to our seats in silence.

We could not have been further from the field, and the men in front of us joked that they'd be closer to the game if they'd stayed home. The sun was blocked for a few minutes now and then by the row of drunk college boys behind us who jumped up to shout at their favorite and most hated players so similarly that I could not tell who played for which team. For the first six innings I tuned out Uncle Steve as he rambled about the game and my mother and his truck, but at some point he started talking about my father and I sat up straighter. I didn't like when people talked about him, and I hated when they asked me to.

"You remember the game we took you to, don't you? Your dad got us great seats. I don't know how he got them, but they were great. Right down by the right field foul pole. Your mom didn't want us to take you, not that I blame her, but your dad told her we'd take care of you and he could always convince -- hey, are you hungry? Let me get you a hot dog." I had seen the vendor heaving his metal box up the concrete steps at the same moment, and hoped Uncle Steve wouldn't see him. Images of half-cooked hot dogs festering in lukewarm, day-old water swam through my head as I tried to refuse, but Uncle Steve had already signaled the vendor.

"Uncle Steve, I don't --" He had fished out his wallet from under the folds of his jersey. It was almost too late.

"Look, I know you didn't want to come today, but I'm glad you're here." He smiled at me, so that I couldn't find the right words. "You don't have to make excuses.

Your mom told me you didn't want to come, and I understand. Being here must remind you of your dad, and I know things have been really tough without him. Trust me, I know." The vendor was squirting ketchup onto the steaming hot dog as it soaked through the bun on his grimy, plastic-gloved hand. "I haven't been there for you guys as much as I should have --" I saw the ketchup bottle slip in his hand, and the vendor squeezed it just as Uncle Steve turned to face me.

It happened too fast for anyone to stop, and I watched, horrified, as the steam of red shot across Uncle Steve, missing him entirely, and became a stain that blossomed across my favorite white t-shirt. Under the wet coldness my lungs burned with the anger of the day, and I felt that they would catch fire and I stared at the enormous stain without realizing my mouth was hanging open. I looked up to Uncle Steve, ready to let him have it in front of the hot dog vendor and the drunk college boys and all of Fenway Park if he had my father's stupid grin on his face. Instead I saw that his mouth hung open in the same silently shocked expression as mine.

"I'm... Gloria... I'm so sorry."

Once I started laughing, I couldn't stop. Uncle Steve and the hot dog vendor stared at me, covered in watery ketchup from a hot dog I never wanted, their faces fixed in anxious shock, and I laughed harder. Uncle Steve didn't know what to do, but as he paid the vendor for the hot dogs we wouldn't eat, he started laughing too.

We laughed because the drunk college boys behind us no longer pronounced the names of the players, and instead were screaming nonsense in hoarse, beer-soaked voices. We laughed because they would leave here and sleep on other people's couches

wearing jerseys embroidered with other people's names. We laughed because I spent the whole day trying to hate Uncle Steve, but he would wrap me in his jersey when the sun went down behind us, and when I fell asleep in the truck, waiting for the car parked in front of us to leave, Uncle Steve would carry me upstairs and put me to bed in my mother's house.

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### CRITICAL

- Aronson, Arnold. "Their Exits and Their Entrances: Getting a Handle on Doors." *New Theatre Quarterly* 20.4 [80] (2004): 331-340. MLA International Bibliography. EBSCO. Web. 29 July 2010.p
- Aronson writes on the use of doors in a theatrical context, beginning with Aeschylus' use of doors as a barrier beyond which action could be imagined but not seen. Although the article was printed in "New Theatre Quarterly," much of its discussion of doors is applicable to the use of physical boundaries in a dramatic sense.
- Bell, Michael Davitt. "Arts of Deception: Hawthorne, 'Romance,' and The Scarlet Letter." *New Essays on The Scarlet Letter*. 29-56. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985. MLA International Bibliography. EBSCO. Web. 22 Feb. 2011.
- This piece discusses the ways Hawthorne manipulates language and genre to create pieces of seemingly innocuous fiction that are actually "subversive and anarchic." Bell makes particular



note that this manipulation was an intentional choice Hawthorne made, that he purposefully wrote fiction ostensibly concerned with moral and allegorical matters, while laying deep the roots of deceptive themes.

Bosco, Ronald, Jillmarie Murphy, eds. *Hawthorne in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007. Print.

This biography is composed entirely of the memories by which Hawthorne's contemporaries defined him to the world. It contains no whole pieces by Hawthorne himself, and instead uses the sketches and impressions he promoted by his writing and self-construction. The contributions range from Hawthorne's family and friends to his publishers and literary associates.

Cooley, Martha. "Novel Anxiety: Notes from the Genre-War Trenches." *The Writer's Chronicle* March/April 2011. 18-26. Print.

This article is more recent and speaks specifically about the state of the novel today, however it draws its arguments largely from the discussion of the novel as it once was. A declaration from a fellow writer that the novel as a form has lost its influence and relevance is followed by a lengthy defense of the form for its ability to move and inform as nonfiction alone may not. Also included is a discussion of a "hybrid form, immune from the need for an accurate appendix or any other such apparatus," which has been a peculiar struggle in the writing of this project as well.

Eakin, Paul John. "Hawthorne's Imagination and the Structure of 'The Custom-House'." *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 43.3 (1971): 346-358. MLA International Bibliography. EBSCO. Web. 28 Feb. 2011.

This article is an indispensable discussion on the structure of "The Custom House" and how Hawthorne used it to regulate and free his writing. Eakin is especially interested in how the piece functions as in indirect commentary by Hawthorne on his own writing process.

Hutner, Gordon. "Whose Hawthorne?." *The Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Ed. Richard H. Millington. Cambridge University Press, 2004. Cambridge Collections Online. Cambridge University Press. 14 December 2010.

In this article Hutner analyzes Lionel Trilling's essay "Our Hawthorne" (later republished as "Hawthorne in Our Time") for

the ways readers' understanding of a perennial writer changes in response to cultural shifts. He specifically cites why an audience located in a specific time and place might "have a great deal invested in seeing an author in a particular light," highlighting the cultural bias that could make a writer more relevant to one group over another. The two sections, "'Our' Hawthorne" and "Your Hawthorne," bring Hutner to an analysis of the different but no less meaningful ways Hawthorne's writing may be understood by more contemporary readers.

Ingersoll, Earl G. "The Trope of Doors in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *LATCH: A Journal for the Study of the Literary Artifact in Theory, Culture, or History* 2. (2009): 1- 16. MLA International Bibliography. EBSCO. Web. 29 July 2010.

This piece is tailored to discussion on another work, but the metaphors Ingersoll discusses are not constrained to Atwood's novel. The article illustrates how doors are used as metaphorical boundaries and barriers, which may be extended to the protection and privacy of the body. In application to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Ingersoll's article has been used primarily for discussion of Hepzibah.

Murphy, Emily A. *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Salem: A Walking Tour of Literary Salem in the Early Nineteenth Century*. Fort Washington, Pennsylvania: Eastern National, 2007. Print.

The walking tour guide contains historical information and a context for experiencing Hawthorne's Salem. Physical places and more theoretical connections to Hawthorne are cited on the tour, which extends from the downtown area and beyond into the city.

Shamir, Milette. "Hawthorne's Romance and the Right to Privacy." *American Quarterly* 49.4 (1997): 746-779. MLA International Bibliography. EBSCO. Web. 26 Oct. 2010.

Drawing from legal and literary analyses, Shamir conducts an examination of the individual's right to privacy in current time as well as in Hawthorne's. *The House of the Seven Gables* is the primary work discussed, however Shamir also discusses "The Minister's Black Veil," which uses the same metaphor mentioned by Sophia Hawthorne in reference to her husband after his death. It is the boundary between an individual's privacy and the public's right to know that is carefully examined in this piece, and Shamir touches on this boundary in Hawthorne's life as well as his work.

Tew, Arnold G. "Hawthorne's P. P.: Behind the Comic Mask." *Nathaniel*

Hawthorne Review 20.1 (1994): 18-23. MLA International Bibliography. EBSCO. Web. 3 Mar. 2011.

This piece draws parallels between “The Custom House” “Memoirs of P.P., Clerk of this Parish,” written by Alexander Pope and John Gay, from which Hawthorne is supposed to have drawn inspiration. Tew leads a detailed exploration of the reasons and advantages of creating a comic persona for the telling of a story that purports to be memoir. He comes to the conclusion that with “the comic turn that the essay takes . . . protects its author from the conflict raging around and within him.”

Trojanowska, Tamara. "Behind the Open Space." *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes: An Interdisciplinary Journal Devoted to Central and Eastern Europe* 38.3-4 (1996): 419-427. MLA International Bibliography. EBSCO. Web. 29 Aug. 2010.

Trojanowska discusses not only the physicality of doors, but the spaces they connect and how barriers contextualize the space on either side. The door as a metaphor may be imprisoning, protective or some combination of the two.

The House of the Seven Gables. 8 Aug. 2010 <<http://www.7gables.org/index.htm>>.

The House of the Seven Gables website incorporates historical and literary information, supplementing the official House tour. Great detail is also given regarding the renovations to the House orchestrated by Caroline Emmerton in response to the novel.

Wineapple, Brenda. Hawthorne: A Life. New York: Random House, 2003.

Wineapple’s biography has quickly become a staple of critical writing on Nathaniel Hawthorne. It follows his life through the lenses of his own writing, his family’s impressions, and his lesser known failures in literature and love. Wineapple places Hawthorne in the context of his own writing, his own city, and the canon of American literature.

## CRAFT

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Benedict, Elizabeth. *The Joy of Writing Sex: A Guide for Fiction Writers*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2002.

Bernays, Anne, and Pamela Painter. *What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers: Third Edition*. Boston: Longman, 2010.  
Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1985.  
Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.