

Writing Hermit Crab Poems

Hermit Crabs are born without shells so they borrow or, more accurately, steal the shell of another creature. Essayist Brenda Miller borrowed this name to describe essays that take their shape from other forms of writing, and we're borrowing it from her to apply to poems. Think of William Carlos Williams' famous, "This is Just to Say," a poem written as a note of apology. We can write poems in the form of grocery lists, recipes, text message chains, rejection letters... Together, we'll explore sample poems, generate a list of possibilities, and create new work using this technique.

--Ona Gritz and Daniel Simpson

This Is Just To Say by William Carlos Williams

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Obit by Victoria Chang

Optimism—died on August 3, 2015, a slow death into a pavement. At what point does a raindrop accept its falling? The moment the cloud begins to buckle under it or the moment the ground pierces it and breaks its shape? In December, my mother had her helper prepare a Chinese hot pot feast. My mother said it would probably be her last Christmas. I laughed at her. She yelled at my father all night. I put a fish ball in my mouth. My optimism covered the whole ball as if the fish had never died, had never been gutted and rolled into a humiliating shape. To acknowledge death is to acknowledge that we must take another shape.

Cargo by Ada Limón (letter to Natalie Diaz)

I wish I could write to you from underwater,
the warm bath covering my ears—
one of which has three marks in the exact
shape of a triangle, my own atmosphere's asterism.

Last night, the fire-engine sirens were so loud
they drowned out even the constant bluster
of the inbound freight trains. Did I tell you,
the R. J. Corman Railroad runs five hundred feet from us?

Before everything shifted and I aged into this body,
my grandparents lived above San Timoteo Canyon,
where the Southern Pacific Railroad roared each scorching
California summer day. I'd watch for the trains,
howling as they came.

Manuel is in Chicago today, and we've both admitted
that we're travelling with our passports now.
Reports of ICE raids and both of our bloods
are requiring new medication.

I wish we could go back to the windy dock,
drinking pink wine and talking smack.
Now it's gray and pitchfork.

The supermarket here is full of grass seed, like spring
might actually come, but I don't know. And you?

I heard from a friend that you're still working on saving
words. All I've been working on is napping, and maybe
being kinder to others, to myself.

Just this morning, I saw seven cardinals brash and bold
as sin in a leafless tree. I let them be for a long while before
I shook the air and screwed it all up just by being alive, too.

Am I braver than those birds?

Do you ever wonder what the trains carry? Aluminum ingots,
plastic, brick, corn syrup, limestone, fury, alcohol, joy.

All the world is moving, even sand from one shore to another is being shuttled. I live my life half afraid, and half shouting at the trains when they thunder by. This letter to you is both.

Directions by Billy Collins

You know the brick path in back of the house,
the one you see from the kitchen window,
the one that bends around the far end of the garden
where all the yellow primroses are?
And you know how if you leave the path
and walk up into the woods you come
to a heap of rocks, probably pushed
down during the horrors of the Ice Age,
and a grove of tall hemlocks, dark green now
against the light-brown fallen leaves?
And farther on, you know
the small footbridge with the broken railing
and if you go beyond that you arrive
at the bottom of that sheep's head hill?
Well, if you start climbing, and you
might have to grab hold of a sapling
when the going gets steep,
you will eventually come to a long stone
ridge with a border of pine trees
which is as high as you can go
and a good enough place to stop.
The best time is late afternoon
when the sun strobes through
the columns of trees as you are hiking up,
and when you find an agreeable rock
to sit on, you will be able to see
the light pouring down into the woods
and breaking into the shapes and tones
of things and you will hear nothing
but a sprig of birdsong or the leafy
falling of a cone or nut through the trees,
and if this is your day you might even
spot a hare or feel the wing-beats of geese
driving overhead toward some destination.
But it is hard to speak of these things
how the voices of light enter the body
and begin to recite their stories
how the earth holds us painfully against
its breast made of humus and brambles
how we who will soon be gone regard

the entities that continue to return
greener than ever, spring water flowing
through a meadow and the shadows of clouds
passing over the hills and the ground
where we stand in the tremble of thought
taking the vast outside into ourselves.
Still, let me know before you set out.
Come knock on my door
and I will walk with you as far as the garden
with one hand on your shoulder.
I will even watch after you and not turn back
to the house until you disappear
into the crowd of maple and ash,
heading up toward the hill,
piercing the ground with your stick.

Instructions by Neil Gaiman

Touch the wooden gate in the wall you never
saw before.
Say "please" before you open the latch,
go through,
walk down the path.
A red metal imp hangs from the green-painted
front door,
as a knocker,
do not touch it; it will bite your fingers.
Walk through the house. Take nothing. Eat
nothing.
However, if any creature tells you that it hungers,
feed it.
If it tells you that it is dirty,
clean it.
If it cries to you that it hurts,
if you can,
ease its pain.

From the back garden you will be able to see the
wild wood.
The deep well you walk past leads to Winter's
realm;
there is another land at the bottom of it.
If you turn around here,
you can walk back, safely;
you will lose no face. I will think no less of you.

Once through the garden you will be in the
wood.
The trees are old. Eyes peer from the under-
growth.
Beneath a twisted oak sits an old woman. She
may ask for something;
give it to her. She
will point the way to the castle.
Inside it are three princesses.
Do not trust the youngest. Walk on.
In the clearing beyond the castle the twelve
months sit about a fire,
warming their feet, exchanging tales.
They may do favors for you, if you are polite.
You may pick strawberries in December's frost.

Trust the wolves, but do not tell them where
you are going.

The river can be crossed by the ferry. The ferry-
man will take you.

(The answer to his question is this:

*If he hands the oar to his passenger, he will be free to
leave the boat.*

Only tell him this from a safe distance.)

If an eagle gives you a feather, keep it safe.
Remember: that giants sleep too soundly; that
witches are often betrayed by their appetites;
dragons have one soft spot, somewhere, always;
hearts can be well-hidden,
and you betray them with your tongue.

Do not be jealous of your sister.
Know that diamonds and roses
are as uncomfortable when they tumble from
one's lips as toads and frogs:
colder, too, and sharper, and they cut.
Remember your name.
Do not lose hope — what you seek will be found.
Trust ghosts. Trust those that you have helped
to help you in their turn.
Trust dreams.
Trust your heart, and trust your story.
When you come back, return the way you came.
Favors will be returned, debts will be repaid.
Do not forget your manners.
Do not look back.
Ride the wise eagle (you shall not fall).
Ride the silver fish (you will not drown).
Ride the grey wolf (hold tightly to his fur).

*There is a worm at the heart of the tower; that is
why it will not stand.*

When you reach the little house, the place your
journey started,
you will recognize it, although it will seem
much smaller than you remember.
Walk up the path, and through the garden gate
you never saw before but once.
And then go home. Or make a home.
And rest.

How to Be Happy: Another Memo to Myself by Stephen Dunn

You start with your own body
then move outward, but not too far.
Never try to please a city, for example.
Nor will the easy intimacy
in small towns ever satisfy that need
you have only whispered in the dark.
A woman is a beginning.
She need not be pretty, but must know
how to make her own ceilings
out of all that's beautiful in her.
Together you must love to exchange
gifts in the night, and agree
on the superfluity of ribbons,
the fine violence of breaking out
of yourselves. No matter,
it's doubtful she will be enough for you,
or you for her. You must have friends
of both sexes. When you get together
you must feel everyone has brought
his fierce privacy with him
and is ready to share it. Prepare
yourself though to keep something back;
there's a center in you
you are simply a comedian
without. Beyond this, it's advisable
to have a skill. Learn how to make something:
food, a shoe box, a good day.
Remember, finally, there are few pleasures
that aren't as local as your fingertips.
Never go to Europe for a cathedral.
In large groups, create a corner
in the middle of the room.

My Father's Only Recipe by Kim Liao

First, take pork spare ribs. Hack them up with an impossibly large cleaver into bite-sized pieces. Rub them with a proprietary mix of star anise, black beans, garlic, soy sauce, hoisin sauce, ginger, and secrets. Never ask him what happened in Taiwan, or why his mother never spoke the name of her former husband again.

Marinate for at least two hours, but preferably overnight, or maybe 23 years. He never felt the need to tell his daughter where this recipe came from.

She would discover its origins on her own, when it began to haunt her, when she realized that finding his family's past was her only path forward—although she would shy away from the search when she was too frightened.

That's okay. Let it marinate. She will find her way back when she can't stand the thought of him never seeing her complete the search for their family.

Cook. She doesn't remember how—what level of heat, how long—because it's been so long since her father made this dish for her. But she's mastered enough recipes to imagine that he would sear the ribs on high heat, getting some crispy caramelization, and then transfer them to a crock pot to simmer low and slow.

The spareribs gradually yield, growing tender, secrets seeping into every crevice, until they are buttery soft and falling off the bone.

Ode on a Shopping List Found in Last Season's Shorts by Rita Dove

Wedge into a pocket, this folded paper scrap
has been flattened to a pink-tinged patch –
faint echo to the orange plaid cotton shorts
that even back then barely cupped my butt.

Milk tops the chart. Then bottled water,
crackers, paper towels: staples bought in bulk,
my husband's jurisdiction – meaning
we must have made several stops, together.

Then why is "Home Depot" scratched out but
not the light bulb we would have found there?
Batteries for him, styling gel for me,
emery boards, wasp spray, glycerin for shine:

What contingencies were we equipping for,
why were we running everywhere at once?
And now I see it: Ritter Sport, Almond Joy,
Mars Bars and Neccos for the father

whose ravenous sweet tooth was not what
killed him. In the summer of that last birthday
who could have known there would be
no more road trips to buy for, no place to go but

home? I'll never wear these shorts again.

Wanted: Biological Father by Sarah Hanner
(spare time or full-time)*

Single, thirty-something woman seeks biological father. Must be: tall, 6'2" or above. A thick head of hair. Funny by accident—a lovable flop. Swedish descent, but English accent preferred. Royal blood a huge plus. Kind and gentle like Bob Ross. Suave, sophisticated, and street smart like Humphrey Bogart. Intellectual in a Carl Sagan kind of way. Speaks Mandarin. A pianist so gifted, Bill Evans would weep. Spiritual, but not religious—may consider Buddhism. Comes with: an architecturally appropriate house in the Swedish archipelago and a fully staffed dude ranch in Colorado. Pilot's license. Private jets and helicopters required. No other kids. Wife is fine as long as she has a sense of humor and supports your new found obsession—me. The following excuses and only the following excuses are acceptable to explain lifelong absence: Saved Tibet. Aliens erased memory. Important: must love dogs.

*In the event Biological Father is found deceased, please kindly reprint ad copy below.

Wanted: Boyfriend
(spare or full-time)

Single, thirty-something woman seeks boyfriend to fill in the gaping, festering and impossible wound inflicted by paternal abandonment. Must possess an earnest willingness to embody the traits and characteristics of an unrealistic and wildly romanticized version of a biological father. You believe sports are for philistines, but you're a huge fan of my incredible ability to cope with childhood trauma, which, when I remark, is with all the ease and grace of a dying pigeon, you will fervently refute, reminding me of my strength under extraordinary circumstances. My active participation in copious amount of meaningless sex with other men throughout our relationship will ignite in you a sense of healthy competition. My binge drinking is only a normal part of societal pressure to fit in. My unwarranted and uncontrollable fits of rage prove how passionate I am. In response to the pregnancies I aborted over the years, you offer me steadfast reassurance that my abortions were not, in fact, evidence of my inherent unworthiness and/or inability to mother myself, let alone a child. Nor were those choices crippling mistakes born of a fatherless monster. Rather, they were speed bumps on the road to healthy maturation and learning. Important: must love dogs.

We Regret to Inform You by Brenda Miller

The following letters, though never written, are based on real events. Any resemblance to the author's life and the people she has known is purely intentional.

April 12, 1970

Dear Young Artist:

Thank you for your attempt to draw a tree. We appreciate your efforts, especially the way you sat patiently on the sidewalk, gazing at that tree for an hour before setting pen to paper, and the many quick strokes of charcoal you executed with enthusiasm. But your smudges look nothing like a tree. In fact, they look like nothing at all, and the pleasure and pride you take in the work are not enough to redeem it. We are pleased to offer you remedial training in the arts, but we cannot accept your "drawing" for display.

With regret and best wishes,

The Art Class
Andasol Avenue Elementary School

February 12, 1973

Dear Ninth-Grade Girl:

We regret to inform you that no suitable match has been found to accompany you to the school dance. The volume of requests we receive makes individual feedback impossible, but please know that you were given careful consideration. Do feel free to attend on your own, perhaps with another rejectee, and stand awkwardly in a corner with a glass of warm punch in your sweaty hand. Watching others have a good time is excellent preparation for the roles you will play in the future.

Best,

The Boys' Council of Patrick Henry Junior High

October 13, 1973

Dear Tenth-Grader:

Thank you for your application to be the girlfriend of one of our star basketball players. As you can imagine, we have received hundreds of similar requests and so cannot possibly respond personally to every one. This letter is to inform you that you have not been chosen for one of the coveted positions, but we do invite you to continue hanging around the lockers as if you belong there. This selfless act will help the team members learn the art of ignoring lovesick girls.

Sincerely,

The Granada Hills Highlanders

P.S.: Though your brother is one of the star players, we could not take this familial relationship into account. Sorry to say no! Please do try out for one of the rebound-girlfriend positions in the future.

November 15, 1975

Dear Prospective Dancer:

Thank you for trying out to be a Highland Dancer. Although we know you looked forward to wearing the cute kilt and argyle kneesocks, the crisp white dress shirt and the tasseled shoes, we regret to inform you that you did not make the cut into the second round of auditions. Some girls simply are not coordinated enough to be a member of this elite troupe. It's not your fault; you just haven't quite "grown into" your body yet. We wish you the best of luck in finding your niche elsewhere.

With regret,

The Highland Dance Team
Granada Hills High School

January 15, 1977

Dear Future Thespian:

Thank you for choosing drama as your major at Cal State Northridge. Although we are not the most prestigious acting school in the greater Los Angeles area, we do take pride in having a rigorous curriculum that requires all students to be fluent in diction, singing, movement arts, and a certain indefinable "something," *a je ne sais quoi* that gives a young woman presence on the stage.

Unfortunately you do not have what it takes to be a star and will always be relegated to the "second girl" or the waitress with one or two lines that you'll belt out with imperfect timing. We understand that in high school you got to play Emily in *Our Town*, watching the townsfolk from your perch in the afterlife, and that you once had a leading role in *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, but you delivered your lines too earnestly and were too eager to please.

We appreciate that you love turning into someone else for the space of an hour or so, and that you feel exhilarated once you hit your mark. But your lisping voice and rather clumsy gestures force us to look elsewhere for a leading lady.

You might have more luck in a behind-the-scenes role — perhaps writing? It's come to our attention that you once wrote a one-act play called *Backstage*, which consisted of two stagehands waiting for the stage manager to arrive; the manager never arrives, and even the play itself is an illusion! Cute.

With best wishes,

The Drama Department
Cal State Northridge

December 10, 1978

Dear College Dropout:

Thank you for the short time you spent with us. We understand that you have decided to terminate your stay, a decision that seems completely reasonable, given the circumstances. After all, who knew that the semester you decided to enroll at UC Berkeley would be so tumultuous. That unsavory business with Jim Jones and his Bay Area followers left us all reeling. And then Harvey Milk was shot, a blast that reverberated across the bay. It truly did feel as if the world were falling apart — we know that. We understand why you took refuge in the music of the Grateful Dead, dancing until you felt yourself leave your body, caught up in their brand of enlightenment. But you do realize that's a delusion, right?

And given that you were a drama major, struggling on a campus well-known for histrionics and unrest — well, it's only understandable that you'd need some time to "find yourself." You're really too young to be in such a big city on your own. When you had your exit interview with the dean of students, you were completely inarticulate about your reasons for leaving, perhaps because you still have no idea what they are. You know there is a boy you might love in Santa Cruz. You fed him peanuts at a Dead show. You imagine playing house with him, living there in the shadows of tall trees.

But of course you couldn't say that to the dean, as he swiveled in his chair, looking so official in his gray suit. He clasped his hands on the oak desk and waited for you to explain yourself. His office looked out on the quad, where you'd heard the Talking Heads play just a week earlier, and beyond that the dorm where the gentleman you know only as "Pink Cloud" provided you with LSD, which you took in order to experience more fully the secrets the Dead whispered in your ear. You told the dean none of this, but simply shrugged your shoulders and began to cry, at which point he cleared his throat and wished you luck.

We regret to inform you that it will be quite a while before you grow up, and it will take some cataclysmic events in your life before you really begin to find the role that suits you. In any case, we wish you the best in all your future educational endeavors.

Sincerely,

UC Berkeley Registrar

October 26, 1979

Dear Potential Mom:

Thank you for providing a host home for each of us during the few weeks we stayed in residence. It was lovely but, in the end, didn't quite work out. Though we tried to be unobtrusive in our exit, the narrowness of your fallopian tubes made some damage unavoidable. Sorry about that. You know you were too young to have children anyway, right? And you know it wasn't your fault, not really.

(Though you could have been a *tad* more careful in your carnal acts. But no matter. Water under the bridge.)

We enjoyed our brief stay in your body and wish you the best of luck in conceiving children in the future.

With gratitude,
Ira and Isabelle

November 3, 1979

Dear Patient:

We regret to inform you that, due to reproductive abnormalities, you will not be able to conceive children. *Barren* is not a word we use these days, but you may use it if you so choose. Your two miscarriages were merely symptoms of these abnormalities, which we surmise were acquired in utero. It's not your fault, but you may choose to take this misfortune as a sign of God's displeasure and torture yourself with guilt and self-loathing for many years to come.

All the best,
Student Health Center
Humboldt State University

June 2, 1982

Dear Little Raven:

Thank you for your three-year audition to serve as the white girlfriend and savior to a Native American man twelve years your senior. Your persistence has been admirable, but we regret to inform you that we can no longer use your services.

Yes, we appreciate the fact that you smoked tobacco in a cherrywood pipe and wore a turquoise eagle around your neck. You listened to drums and chanting for hours on end and read *Black Elk Speaks* and got yourself an "Indian name." These efforts have all been noted. But the role of "pseudo-Native American white girl" is not one we can recommend you for.

We appreciate the many times you took this man to the hospital or let him borrow your car, your money, your time. But we're sure that if you take a good hard look at your performance, you'll see that you were using this relationship as punishment for your past sins. That kind of arrangement is never good for anyone. So we bid you farewell and wish you the best of luck as you seek spiritual salvation elsewhere.

Sincerely,
Yurok Elders

May 23, 1986

Dear Gatekeeper:

Thank you for your four years of service with Orr Hot Springs Resort, and in particular your role as live-in girlfriend to one of our more depressed shareholders. We also appreciate your services as godmother to our resident toddler and confidante to his parents (a relationship that did, ahem, *transgress* some boundaries, but you shaped up when this was pointed out).

So it is with great sadness that we must inform you that your services are no longer required. This dismissal in no way reflects upon your job performance. (Well, you could have cleaned the lodge a little better and been a little more thorough when it was your turn to scrub the bathhouse.) It's simply time for you to move on.

Please pack your meager belongings into the car you bought for two hundred dollars. Please do not dramatically extend the farewells, wandering the property to "say goodbye" to inanimate objects, to the gardens, to Tub Room #2, where you spent so many mornings immersed in yourself. Please do not throw the I Ching to determine your next steps or read the tarot or take Ecstasy. Simply get into your car and chug up the mountain road at first light. You will feel a sensation of tearing — like a ligament ripped from the bone — but don't worry. This is normal. You will head north. You will be fine. You will find the role that suits you.

Namaste,

Orr Hot Springs Resort
Ukiah, California

April 14, 1994

Dear Potential Wife:

Thank you for your application to be my spouse. While I see much to admire here, I regret to inform you that you do not meet my needs at this time.

I do want to commend you for your efforts over the past five years. You did your best, but your anxiety made it difficult to proceed. Even so, we did love our coffee in the morning, our home-cooked meals in the evening, and our travels through the Middle East. (Let's just forget the argument we had while walking the walls of the Old City in Jerusalem. Water under the bridge.)

You laughed at my jokes; thanks for that. And of course it was fun being fledgling writers together, before reality intervened.

Try to remember that we loved the only way we could: not perfectly, nor entirely well, but genuinely. I adored your lisp and the little mole above your lip. I touched your scars, and you touched mine. We tried. But at some point in a relationship you shouldn't have to try so hard, right?

It may just be bad timing. Best wishes in your future matrimonial endeavors. I'm sure your talents will be put to good use elsewhere. I hope we can remain friends.

Your Grad-School Boyfriend

June 30, 1999

Dear Applicant:

Thank you for your query about assuming the role of our stepmother. Although we found your résumé impressive, we regret to inform you that we have decided not to fill the position this year. You did ask for feedback on your application, so we have the following to suggest:

1. You do not yet understand the delicate emotional dynamic that rules a divorced father's relationship with his children. The children will always, *always*, come first, trumping any needs you may have. You will understand this in a few years, but for now you still require some training.
 2. Though you have sacrificed your time and energy to support this family, it's become clear that your desire to be a stepmother stems from some deep-seated wound in yourself, a wound you are trying to heal. We have enough to deal with — an absent mother, a frazzled father. We don't need your traumas in the mix.
 3. Seeing the movie *Stepmom* is not an actual tutorial on stepparenting.
 4. On Mother's Day you should not have expected flowers, gifts, or even a thank-you. You are not our mother.
 5. You are still a little delusional about the potential here for a long-term relationship. Our father is not ready to commit so soon after a messy divorce. (This should have been obvious to you when he refused to hold your hand, saying that it made him feel claustrophobic.)
- We hope this feedback is helpful, and we wish you the best in your future parenting endeavors.

XXX OOO

Your Boyfriend's Daughters

January 3, 2007

Dear New Dog Owner:

Congratulations on adopting your first dog! She will surely provide hours of love and enjoyment and be a wonderful addition to your family.

Here are a few tips:

1. A dog is not a child, even if you do call yourself “Mom.” Yes, other people will now know you as “Abbe’s mom,” and you’ll take a great deal of foolish pride in this. But, remember, a dog is not a child.
2. Though a dog is not a child, you will need to plan your life around this creature: food, water, companionship, play dates, illnesses. Yes, there will be illnesses. You will need to make crucial decisions while in tears at the vet’s office. You may need to empty your savings account to insure that your dog is no longer in pain.
3. You will at some point say to yourself: *I don’t need to date; I have my dog.* Be very careful about repeating this statement in public.
4. You will grow fond of this dog and overlook her shortcomings, her flaws. (Really, they are so few.) Why can’t you do this with a man?
5. A pet’s love, contrary to popular belief, is not unconditional. There are many conditions: expensive food, regular walks, toys, your undivided attention.
6. A dog such as Abbe makes a terrific all-natural antidepressant. At some level, of course, you already know this; otherwise you wouldn’t have spent so much time on Petfinder.com rather than Match.com. When you are with her, you will feel as if something were being repaired in your body, like a ligament rejoining the bone.
7. At times you’ll feel rejected by Abbe. Don’t worry, this is normal. Though she is very friendly, Abbe needs her space sometimes. (As do we all!)
8. You will train to be a therapy-dog team, providing companionship and affection to people in hospitals and nursing homes. Though Abbe will be better at it than you are, you’ll enjoy sitting by her side as she is petted by strangers young and old. You’ll stay quiet and simply observe, playing a background role, finding satisfaction in this. You’ll understand that such therapy is as much for you as it is for them.

Once again, congratulations on taking on this huge responsibility. It’s an indication of maturity, of finding your niche and settling into your life as it is.

Best wishes,

Furbaby Pet Rescue of Whatcom County