The "Hermit Crab" Essay (excerpt) by Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola

Where we…live, in the Pacific Northwest, there's a beautiful place called Deception Pass. Deception Pass is prone to extreme tides, and in the tide pools you can often find hermit crabs skulking about. They look a lot like cartoon characters, hiding inside a shell, lifting up that shell to take it with them when they go for cover. They move a few inches, then crouch down and stop, become only a shell again. Then they tilt, waver, and scurry away.

A hermit crab is a strange animal, born without the armor to protect its soft, exposed abdomen. And so it spends its life occupying the empty, often beautiful, shells left behind by snails or other mollusks. It reanimates these shells, making of them a strange, new hybrid creature that has its own particular beauty, its own way of moving through the tide pools and among the rocks. Each one will be slightly different, depending on the type of shell it decides to inhabit.

In honor of these wonderful creatures and the transformative habitat in which they live, we've dubbed a particular form of lyric essay the hermit crab essay. This kind of essay appropriates other forms as an outer covering, to protect its soft, vulnerable underbelly. It is an essay that deals with material that seems born without its own carapace—material that is soft, exposed, and tender, and must look elsewhere to find the form that will best contain it.

The "shells" come where you can find them, anywhere out in the world. They may borrow from fiction and poetry, but they also don't hesitate to armor themselves in more mundane structures, such as the descriptions in a mail-order catalog or the entries in a checkbook register.

Choose one of the following prompts

1. Write an essay/poem in the form of a how-to guide using the second-person voice. You can turn anything into a how-to.
2. Choose a field guide to the natural world as your model. Write an essay/poem in the form of a field guide, inserting your own experience in this format.
3. Write an essay/poem in the form of an interview or as a series of letters.
4. Brainstorm a list of all the forms in the outer world that you could use as a hermit crab essay/poem model. Examples include crossword puzzle clues, horoscopes, fortune cookies, letters to the editor, and missing kids flyers. Choose one of these forms and begin an essay/poem, using your own material to flesh out the "shell." Let the word choices and tone of your shell dictate your own approach to your topic. How would the vague cheeriness of fortune-cookie fortunes or horoscopes inform your family or relationship tale?
5. Write a list of the topics/issues in your life that are "forbidden" to speak about, the things you could never write. Choose one of these, and then begin to write about it in a hermit crab form.