

ENGL 248  
Professor Linda Peterson

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Kathryn Mathis

Mid-winter Walk on the Beach

by Kathryn Mathis

A warm April breeze pulled at my hair as I scaled the dunes one last time. For as long as I could remember, my family had made this yearly migration south to nestle for a few days of summer sun in the midst of the cruelest month. But tomorrow we would leave the island and probably not come back, as my family's spring breaks would no longer coincide with mine once I went away to college in the fall. I reached the top of the sandy hill, kicking an abandoned sand-bucket out of the way, and began to half-walk, half-slide down the other side towards the flat expanse of the beach. The city of towels, umbrellas, and chairs that had earlier covered this plain had disappeared, as if engulfed by the tide. I stretched out my towel and sat down to watch the sea swallow the sun as Cancer replaced it in the night sky. The temperature was at that perfect point at which the border between the air and your skin blurs. I dug my toes into the sand, only to pull back when I noticed something move near my feet. It was a blue land crab (*Cardisoma guanhumi*), coming out of its hole and beginning its night watch. The crab wasn't alone, though; like slow and awkward sentinels, his brothers began to make their way across the sand, stopping every so often to inspect some suspect shell or pile of seaweed.

A little closer to the water I noticed a slower pilgrim, a Caribbean hermit crab (*Coenobita clypeatus*) dragging itself along, leaving a little furrow in the wet sand. One of the sentries came too close, and the hermit crab quickly collapsed back into its shell, drew up its shield, and brandished its pincher claw. Not seeming to notice, the larger crab continued on its way. After

waiting for a moment, the hermit crab probed the air with its feelers, like a blind man knocking at the ground in front of him for ledges or obstacles. Finding his path clear from obstruction, he drew back his facemask and poked out his legs and eyestalks, once again pulling himself slowly forward across the beach. At first I thought the crab was simply scouring the sand for some bit of food or water, but as it came to rest once more, this time without any enemy in sight, I realized that the little knight was on a more serious quest. He stopped next to a greenish shell, slightly larger than his current white one. But as he came to rest, he withdrew and shielded his face once more. I thought for a moment that maybe I had been too quick to assume that the crab had ambitions to storm and claim the walls of this new castle. But then the crab reared back, exposing his eyes, legs, and claw, held high like a sword in front of him, and then, all at once, the crab's bare back and tail followed. The hermit stood naked in the moonlight. Without his armor he was particularly ugly. He was no longer recognizable as a hermit crab. Instead he was a jumble of armored limbs with a soft, fleshy tail dragging behind. He was a grotesque mixture of shell and skin, like some evolutionary misstep between a worm and a lobster.

The hermit crab darted forward, apparently able to move more quickly when not carrying his heavy shield. Before he could reach his destination, though, I reached down and picked up the new shell. The naked crab stood stunned for a moment as I rolled the shell over in the palm of my hand. In one swift move, I had stripped him to his barest essentials. I had robbed him of shield, hearth, bed, and gate. Though this is not to say that I had technically taken anything away that was vital or organic to the crab. He could've lived, swum, dug, and made little crabs without the shell. I hadn't taken away that which made him a crab, but at the same time in removing his suit I had stolen his identity. Without the hermitage the hermit became just a crab, and barely even that, by the pitiful looks of him.

Can the hermit crab exist outside his suit? Hermit crabs are not born into shells. They actually spend much of their young lives swimming free. If a crab survives his childhood, though, he realizes at some point in his adolescence that it is dangerous to live exposed. He suddenly wants a front to retreat behind, a suit to keep his soft naked back protected and hidden from view. The first shell does not grow naturally from the crab, but is manufactured by his neighbors. The crab comes to shore and searches for a suit that he thinks will best provide for and protect him. He chooses the shell, but must then conform to it. The crab does not dictate the shape of the shell, but instead the shell dictates the growth of the crab. If the shell twists to the right, the back of the crab will spiral to the right. If the crab picks up a hollow piece of bamboo, his back will grow straight as the rod itself.

Sometimes, I'm told, the crab doesn't even go in search of its new shell; instead the shell comes to him. The crab will see one of his brothers, lust after his shell, and rip it from his back.

I could picture the battle. Two crabs would spot each other across the sand and wobble towards each other, like off-balance jousters struggling to stay on their mounts. One would grab at the shell of the other, shaking it, while trying to keep his own limbs from being ripped from his body. After a long siege the loser would concede his castle and limp naked into the shadows. The victor would claim his prize, slipping into the new armor and scuttling away once he was sure that the cut suited him. A moment later the loser would re-emerge and put on the abandoned shell, body and pride wounded, but still clothed, just now in green rather than white.

But even without war, the crab pursues his spoils: bigger, shinier covers for his back. His first shell fits well when he puts it on, but then it slowly begins to pinch at the crab. He realizes that his current suit is too constraining, that he has naturally outgrown it. The crab then lays down this first suit, his schoolboy uniform, and steps outside to give himself room to grow.

Then, outside his shell, the crab becomes unsure of himself. He is a larger and stronger, but more recognizable target than he was in his youth. It is in that moment of bareness, when the crab can't return to his old suit and he hasn't yet found firm ground in his new one, that he feels most vulnerable. He imagines his heel is bared to the monsters of the world: the seagulls that might come to peck at his soft underbelly, the waves that might carry him away from the firm ground of home, and the Birkenstock-clad heel of a giant that might come down to crush his head.

The leggy bug in front of me was at just such an impasse. He shifted back towards his abandoned home, but clearly he was going to have trouble returning there. I held up the new shell, the home that I had plucked from his grasp. The moonlight glinted off of its pearly interior, making it glow blue, purple, pink, and green. Looking back at the crab I felt guilty, like a thief or peeping-Tom. As slowly as I could, I bent down and placed the shell back on the ground. The crab scuttled farther away, and so I stepped back. A minute passed and then another, and I began to worry that by touching the shell I had somehow tainted it, like a nest that is disturbed, making the mother bird refuse to return home. I didn't want to be responsible for the inadvertent death of the hermit crab because I had disrupted his transition. Another minute passed, and the hermit crab thought better of his situation and lurched towards the shell. Apparently he was not so easily turned from his prize. He reached the rim and then pushed, lifted, pulled, and twisted his way backwards into the shell.

He was finally able to curl back into his new castle, leaving just his fat club of a pincher to guard the gate.

Satisfied, I looked up. The sun was entirely hidden from view now. The blue land crabs continued to scramble across the beach, popping in and out of invisible holes in the sand that I

imagined led down to underground fortresses. I shivered, suddenly feeling cold in my bathing suit and towel. I picked up my sweater, shaking out the sand, and pulled it over my head, then turned and headed back over the dune towards the house.

### Analysis of Midwinter Walk on the Beach

The basic structure of this piece is drawn from that of Thoreau's "ant war" section in "Brute Neighbors." In this passage Thoreau demonstrates how a nature writer can use personification of nature, specifically of animals, to comment on aspects of human nature. This trope works in two ways. It both broadens Thoreau's perspective and creates a conceit that metaphorically undermines human actions.

First, the personification of animals changes Thoreau's perspective. Thoreau is able to step outside of the society in which the events are taking place in order to view them more impartially, one of the overarching goals of *Walden*. In my model example, the "ants" section, Thoreau views epic warfare from a distant, godlike perspective. He even goes so far as to metaphorically scrutinize the combatants by placing them under a microscope. Thus, by stepping back he finds a more scientific and objective view of events. Similarly, I take the perspective of an observer outside of the hermit crab world in my piece.

Thoreau then uses classical and historical allusions to juxtapose his objective scientific view of the battle with the more romantic view of warfare that he gets from classical literature. Thoreau seems to exalt the ant war by comparing it to the warfare found in epics such as *The Iliad*. He says of one ant, "Or perchance he was some Achilles, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had now returned to avenge or rescue his Patroclus."<sup>1</sup>\* But then he undermines this heroic vision by picking up the ants, carrying them away, and putting them under a microscope.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry D. Thoreau, "Brute Neighbors" in *Walden*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 229.

\* All other references are also from this version of *Walden* unless noted to be otherwise.

Something that is huge and epic is suddenly pared down to something tiny and inconsequential. Thus Thoreau never directly criticizes war, but by linking it to the ant war he does hint that, when looked at objectively, warfare may not be as romantic as we might like to think it is.

In “Midwinter Walk...” I try to create a similar effect by personifying hermit crabs, comparing them to knights and warriors while also giving an objective, scientific view of their habits and life cycle. Like knights, warriors, and men in general, the hermit crabs find identity and security in their material possessions, their shell. They will even violently fight to gain or protect a shell. From a scientific viewpoint though, the shell is not the hermit crab’s identity, and so maybe a hermit crab’s life and identity should not revolve around its shell. This hint suggests that maybe man also places more importance on his clothes and material possessions than is natural or healthy.

I thought it was also worthwhile to use Thoreau’s tendency to call upon mythological allusions not just to create a contrast to the scientific viewpoint, but also to add depth and meaning to descriptions. For example, in “Ponds” Thoreau combines the images of several creation stories including the Eden story, a classical fountain, and local American Indian folklore. First he says that, “Perhaps on that spring morning when Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden Walden Pond was already in existence,” (179), and then that, “Who knows in how many unremembered nations’ literatures this has been the Castalian Fountain?” (179), and finally “anciently the Indians were holding a pow-wow upon a hill here...” (182). These references change the character of the pond, they make it pure by connecting it to Eden and the folk story in which foul language is washed away, and they make it inspirational by connecting it to the Castalian Fountain. Similarly, references to Greco-Roman myth add to my piece.

First I try to reference the myth of the zodiac sign Cancer. I call this myth to mind through the time of year in which the story takes place, the statement that the naked crab could be crushed under a “Birkenstock-clad heel,” and the imagined battle between the two crabs for a shell. Cancer is most visible at night in the winter in the northern hemisphere, hence “Midwinter Walk...” According to the myth, Hera, the wife of Zeus, sent a crab to distract Hercules while he battled the Hydra as one of his tasks. The crab pinched at his feet, but Hercules then crushed the crab beneath his heel. To reward the crab’s loyalty Hera placed the crab in the sky as the constellation Cancer.

The Cancer myth can be read as slightly ironic because the crab did not do anything particularly noble and was quickly dispatched of by Hercules, but it was nonetheless immortalized. It did die on a mission for Hera, but the mission was malicious and unlikely to succeed in the first place. So is the crab’s selflessness noble or foolish? In my piece, the battle between the two crabs is equally ambiguous.

The battle is compared to a joust or a siege, using metaphor and simile to link it to epic battles, such as the siege of Troy in *The Iliad*. At the end of the crab battle the victor claims his prize, but neither crab is better off than when it started. Their shells are not really any better or worse than those they had originally, just a different color. They’ve risked life and limb to senselessly exchange material goods. Thus by calling into question the nobility of the crab siege, I attempt to question the nobility of other sieges, such as those described in epic poetry. *The Iliad*, after all, is the story of an entire war that is fought for the sake of a single woman.

These were the structures in Thoreau’s *Walden* that I tried to focus on the most intently. I also tried to incorporate other ideas such as the life cycle as an organizing structure, and epic lists in the description of the crab’s armor, but these were less important to the piece.