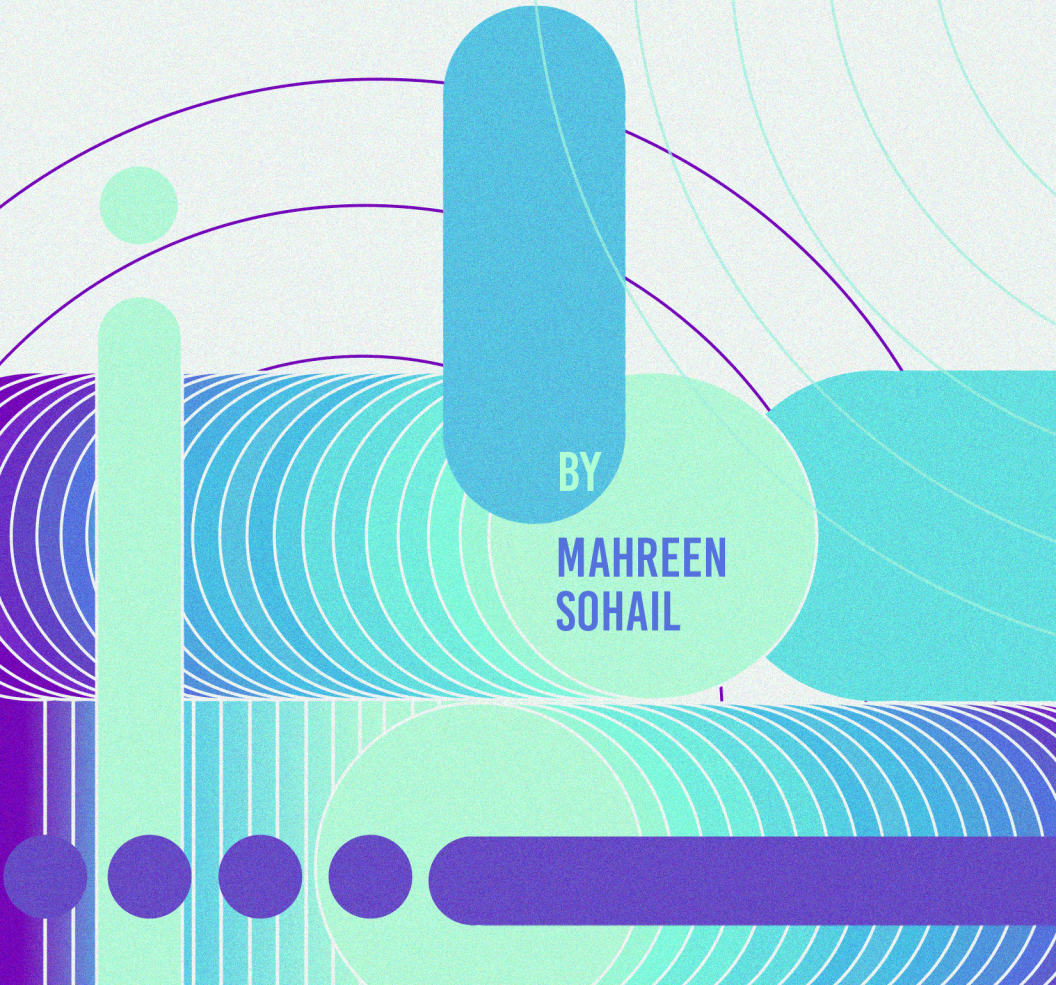
CRAFT CHAPS

AN EXPANSIVE PLACE



BY

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Some months before I found out I was pregnant, I thought I had problems. For example, my short story collection was on submission and my agent kept forwarding me rejections. Over a period of six months, these arrived in my inbox, vague and apologetic— *While Mahreen is very talented, we would not know how to place this as a lead title.* It was hard for me to tell whether the book was just objectively bad, and editors were trying to let me down gently, or if they really were flummoxed on how to market my book as a lead title. I remember telling my friends, *I just want some constructive criticism, you know? It's hard to know what to do with these so-close-but-not-yet kind of sorrys.* As if the universe was listening, one day, a clear, blazing *no* landed in my inbox. The line that I would think about for the next few months stood out: *I wish I was seeing more variety in terms of the story she wants to tell. I'd love to see Mahreen work through what feels like the one story she is grappling with and move to a more expansive place.*

Prompt: Write about the rejection that has made you think the most about your writing.

About exactly a year ago, when I was about three months pregnant, I began to read Annie Ernaux to prepare for the coming change in my life. This made logical sense at the time. I'd started her novel *A Frozen Woman* after I had mentioned to a friend that I was trying to read more about how women existed in marriages. After I found out I was pregnant, I realized I wanted a playbook on how to be an artist and remain present in my relationships. I reasoned that if I knew about all the traps lying ahead of me, it would be harder for me to get caught in them after I had a child.

My husband bought me Annie Ernaux's entire collected works. I devoured them during the months that my body expanded to make room for the new life we were readying for, both literally and metaphorically. I thought about the words *an expansive place* during this time. It seemed Ernaux did lose herself in early motherhood. From *The Years*:

> The thoughts she considers real come to her when she is alone or taking the child for a walk in the stroller…Real thoughts plumb the depths of transient sensations, impossible to communicate. These are the things her book would be made of, if she had the time to write, but she no longer even has time to read. In her diary, which she rarely opens, as if it posed a threat to the family unit and she were no longer entitled to an inner life, she writes, "I have no ideas at all. I don't try to explain my life anymore" and "I'm a petite bourgeoisie who has arrived." She feels she has deviated from her former goals, as if her only progress in life were of the material kind.
>
> *(Ernaux, p. 93)*

I wanted a different answer to what Ernaux was offering so I kept reading, book after book, mostly non-fiction. I read her in translation. I thought a lot about how her books related to my own fiction. Then the baby came.

Prompt: Write about the impediments in your life that stop you from writing. Family, work, children? In your writing, think through to the end of this period and beyond.

In reality, after I gave birth, I became a rage monster.

Simple things set off little fires of anger inside me. For example, at the pool I passed the sign that said *CAUTION! Watch children closely at all times. Children can drown in seconds. Your child's safety is YOUR RESPONSIBILITY,* and I was filled with rage. The sign seemed to be suggesting that if my child drowned it would be my fault. I felt at fault for most things in the first few weeks and months after giving birth. I was ashamed when I let my child cry for more than two minutes, I was ashamed when I became impatient at how long breastfeeding took, I was ashamed when I imagined them dying horrible deaths I was unable to prevent, I was angry that they seemed to smile at my husband and my mother more than they smiled at me, even though both told me they couldn't smile yet, those were just involuntary muscle spasms. I was even angry that the world seemed too small to contain my love for them.

In those early months postpartum I began to swim. I thought it would help me regain my sanity, build my stamina up again, for what? I waited to move into the more expansive place. Sometimes my head quieted as I swam lap after lap and I thought, *I have wanted to be a mother forever, but I don't feel very different.* With trepidation, I began a new short story. I felt maybe my writing would change, suddenly I would begin writing about a bigger world. The first sentence of my first short story after giving birth was: *After having a baby the woman became a rage monster.* As I wrote a strange thing happened. The story was not a story about a woman becoming a mother, as I had thought it would be. Instead, it became a story about the woman's mother, the child's grandmother. In this way, the story surprised me but also led me down an oft-trodden, narrow path that the editor had pointed to in her rejection: all the women in my stories are daughters first, worried about their ageing parents. And when I try to coax myself to write something new—*Let's write about a boy now*—suddenly the boy has a sister and the sister is a daughter and she is worried about how her brother is treating their mother unfairly and so on and so on.

***

I keep coming back to the question of how to be a daughter in this world. And the tension that drives some of my work is perfectly encapsulated by Amy Hempel in her *Paris Review* interview where she expounds upon two types of narrative pressure: "I have to tell you this," or "whatever I do, I can't tell you this." Once I've written a short story, I look at it again to see how the piece shifts between these two gears. I've heard the workshop auto-bot mantra of "show don't tell," but I often think, if there must be a mantra, perhaps a more useful one would be "hide and/or tell".

I believe most writers have a sense of the question they are spending their writing life circling. That the editor who rejected my story collection was able to perceive my question made me feel ashamed. Clearly my hiding, telling, different narrators, different parents, different plots, weren't working well enough to hide what I was really interested in, and this made me feel like a crude, less nuanced writer.

As I read Ernaux methodically, it became clear that she too was secretly writing about one thing dressed up as many different things. She seemed most obsessed with how she became the person she was. Over and over, in her non-fiction, I saw the same things feature: the grocery store where her parents worked while she was growing up, her going away to college, her relationship with her parents, class mobility. Here is a passage from *A Woman's Story*—in my opinion, her most beautiful work. Ernaux opens the book with the fact of her mother's death:

> My mother died on Monday 7 April in the old people's home attached to the hospital at Pointoise, where I had installed her two years previously.
>
> *(Ernaux, p.1)*

For eight pages, she describes with a clinician's precision what happened after her mother's death, and then towards the end of these pages, when she is describing the funeral:

> My mother's coffin was brought forward. When it was lowered into the pit, the men holding the ropes told me to step forward so that I could see it slide down into the hole. A few meters away, the

> gravedigger was waiting with his spade. He had a ruddy complexion and was wearing blue overalls, a beret, and boots...
>
> The family insisted that I eat something before I left. My mother's sister had arranged for us to have lunch at a restaurant after the funeral. I decided to stay. I felt this was something I could still do for my mother. The service was slow, we talked about work and the children. Occasionally we mentioned my mother. They said to me, "What was the point of her going on like that." They all thought it was a good thing she had died. The absolute certainty of this statement is something I cannot understand. I drove back home in the evening. Everything was definitely over.
>
> (Ernaux, p.8)

In the short, clear sentences explaining the logical sequence of events, we see a writer trying to get down things exactly as they happened–*whatever I do I have to tell you this*–but the lack of emotion on the page is what is standing in here for *whatever I do I cannot tell you this*. Ernaux only arrives at the awful part, the unsayable thing, at the end:

> Everything was definitely over.

And here, in my reading of it, she means both the funeral and her life as she once knew it. The book is filled with this ebb and flow (I cannot recommend it enough). If you are worried about writing the same thing over and over again, I highly recommend reading all of Ernaux in consecutive order, though I suspect reading many writers' works in this way would reveal the same thing: there is a subject they are spending their time worrying about. And reading a writer's life's work together also brings another thing to light. Books written over a period of time—by the same writer and circling the same subject—build on top of each other. Taken together, the work becomes evidence in the excavation of a single topic that illuminates the interests of a single person. The job of a writer is to ensure that this topic becomes interesting to other people too. A writer working at the top of their game can do that again and again, and that becomes the expanded place.

Prompt: Make a list of secret obsessions you want to write about but never do. Why don't you write about these topics?

Ernaux's books and her writing are deliberately written in a way that places her as part of a time, country, and social class. The book jacket of the copy of *The Years* I have reads:

> *The Years* is a personal narrative of the period 1941 to 2006 told through the lens of memory…

In this book, Ernaux excavates decades, writes history in stream of consciousness, but the center of the book remains her foremost project: a single-minded accounting of her own life as an artist, a mother, a wife, and a daughter.

From *The Years* again, after her divorce:

> Because in her refound solitude she discovers thoughts and feelings that married life had thrown into shadow, the idea has come to her to write "a kind of woman's destiny," set between 1940 and 1985. It would be something like Maupassant's *A Life* and convey the passage of time inside and outside herself, in History, a "total novel" that would end her dispossession of people and things: parents and husband, children who leave home, furniture that is sold.
>
> *(Ernaux, pp.150-151)*

This total claim of herself and her own story was something I envied. When I had started my MFA in the United States about thirteen years ago, I had agonized over writing stories that were specific to who I was—woman, daughter, South Asian. I'd worried they would become fodder for generalization by (admittedly, mostly) imaginary readers. I worried so much about not being reductive that I submitted opaque and minimalist pieces for workshop. When I returned to Pakistan, I wrote my characters in the voice of contemporary white writers I was reading. I wondered if this counted as defamiliarization. I spent a lot of time trying to quantify how Pakistani my writing was and trying to make sure the right people were reading it for the right reasons. I did not, however, feel guilty about writing stories from the perspective of Pakistani characters because I was living in the country.

Five years later, I moved abroad (*only for a year,* I told myself) but I maintained ties—my mother was still in Pakistan, I visited every six months—and I still felt I was not that *other* diasporic writer. I had previously read these writers with some trepidation. I felt they were trying to lay claim to territory that was not rightly theirs.

And then suddenly, without noticing how it had happened, one day I was part of the diaspora: I had moved and been away for a few years, married a man who was not Pakistani. We had a child who was half Pakistani. Without realizing it, I had, to my mind, lost the measure of authenticity that I believed came from living in a place. Suddenly I was an outsider, writing about insider lives, and for some time this was destabilizing, but one of the gifts of reading Annie Ernaux was learning to appreciate that the center of a story is the thing that interests you, and the things around it—identity, class, politics—move around that center. Another question from *The Years*:

> And how would she organize the accumulated memory of events, and news items, and the thousands of days that have conveyed to her the present?
>
> *(Ernaux, p. 151)*

The comforting thing about reading a writer who questions the past that has *conveyed to her the present* is that she is finally *in* the present. She has emerged on the other side of all that sense-making.

All the hours of labor inside and outside the home and grappling with how to remain an artist has resulted in the art I am holding in my hands.

Maybe it is unfortunate that I spend mental energy on questions related to identity. This same mental energy could better serve my writing. However, for better or for worse, this too expands my world. As do other things in my life. This is the first thing I've written since my child was born. They're six months old now and I'm less enraged all the time. I read more. I take them to the pool. I am slowly getting back to the page. The early draft of a new story is about a mother and daughter, but this one is different from the rest because now I'm a daughter who's also a mother.

Prompt: Go for a swim.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mahreen Sohail has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College where she studied as a Fulbright scholar. Her work has appeared in *Guernica, Granta, Pushcart Prize Anthology (XLII), A Public Space*, and elsewhere. She was previously a Charles Pick Fellow at the University of East Anglia in Norwich (UK), and is a recipient of fellowships from MacDowell, Yaddo and Hedgebrook. Her first collection of short stories is forthcoming from A Public Space.