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Review: A poet confronts her youth

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Shaheen Dil's third poetry collection, "Letters to My Younger Self," is a memoir-in-verse that is concise, direct, and propulsive as it marshals insight and sensitivity — and photos — covering the first two-and-a-half decades of Dil's life in sixty pages.

Dil was born in Bangladesh and now lives in Pittsburgh. Having worked in academia and banking, she devotes her retired labor to poetry. Her reflexive search for self is defined in the first letter/poem, sent from Pittsburgh in 2024.

Dil begins by asking Choiti — her childhood nickname — "Where do you end and I begin?" and concludes by flipping the question, "Where might I end and you begin again?," to great effect. Dil speculates to Choiti that "….your love of ritual started" with a first language lesson that combined Bengali elements with the Muslim "Bismillah" ceremony. (The poet explains this, and other key aspects of Bengali language and culture, in a very useful appendix.) But as much as ceremony, ritual and culture dominate, in "Letter 2," a memory from age three reminds her that "you were always dancing / to… / music unheard by others."

Dil recalls visiting the prison where Abbu, her father, spent years for promoting the Bengali National Language Movement. Her father, already absent much, then disappeared after a divorce.

Dil chronicles this time through moments with her younger sister, Saku. On the veranda they "played tiddlywinks / with cowrie shells," and also witnessed Ammu — her mother — and Abbu "shouting, flinging pots. // Embedded in that instant the next fifty years – / their rift, / your future lives."

There is an allegorical nature to the discord Choiti saw and experienced; she names a servant boy who stole from them, then writes that "Shoaib wasn't really his name….// But this story could be true of all Shoaibs."

In "Letter 11," she juxtaposes "the joy" of riding an elephant in 1959 with concern about the "cruelties" behind her mother's purchase of a jewelry box "inlaid with ivory." The next year she

was brought to Ann Arbor, Michigan, and threw herself headlong into homework, American food — "how you loved those Twinkies"— and exploring with friends.

Choiti and Saku travel to Lahore in 1962 to visit their mother's new family, but arrive "six months after Mom," in order to give "skeptical in-laws time to know her, / unclouded by divorce, / two daughters living evidence of that shame." The tensions continue. After returning to America, she recounts how it may have been "the color of our skin" which led to her and Saku being the only high school forensics team members to have a room to themselves at their first away tournament.

College at Vassar brought vast freedom to explore "boys, wine, movies," but also being told by a faculty advisor that not much mattered, "since we would all marry and have children." To boys bused in from Yale and Princeton "you were an exotic distraction. // …a brown girl in a white world, / but you didn't know it."

In graduate school in DC, Dil dates, reads "The Feminine Mystique," and eats calamari for the first time. She attends Mass with a Catholic friend and "longed to belong to that pageantry! If only Islam had glamor."

The book winds down with Dil meeting her soon-to-be-husband Clark at Princeton — she "argued with a guy across the / table, / so supremely annoying the discussion never ended — / even half a century later."

Her stepfather, a mentor to her, disowned her for agreeing to marry a Jewish man, but her mother attended the wedding anyway, on a day with "the sun relentless."

"Restless" and "relentless" describe the Shaheen Dil who gets brought back to life in "Letters to My Younger Self."The vagaries of time and place, of different cultures, religions, and the subjugation of women, keep Choiti firmly mythical despite her clear connection to the present-day Shaheen. No longer must the poet worry that "I am waking in a world you can't yet reach."

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