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Episode Description:

Poet Shaheen Dil speaks with Katy Giebenhain about what sparked the writing of her verse memoir. Dil was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She now lives in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Her poetry collections include Acts of Deference, The Boat-Maker's Art, and, most recently, Letters to My Younger Self. Her BA in English is from Vassar College. She holds a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University and a Ph.D. in International Relations from Princeton University. Dil's career started in academia, then shifted to banking and consulting. All along she's been writing poetry. But for many years that was her secret. Luckily, we are now able to read her poems in journals and books, and to hear her at public readings.

Transcript

Speaker 1 00:00

United Lutheran Seminary presents the Seminary Explorers podcast: conversations on faith, art, people, politics, theology, life, and more, with voices from around the corner and around the globe.

Katy G. 00:16

Welcome to the Seminary Explorers. I'm Katy Gebenhain. My guest is poet Shaheen Dil. She was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and now lives in Pittsburgh. Dil has published three collections of poetry: Acts of Deference, The Boatmaker's Art, and most recently Letters to My Younger Self. Her B.A. is from Vassar College. She holds a master's degree from Johns Hopkins, and her Ph.D. is from Princeton. Dil's career started in academia, then shifted for many years to banking and later to consulting. All along, she's been writing poetry, but for many years that was her secret. Luckily, we are now able to read her poems in journals and books, and to hear her at readings. Along with her sister, she manages a school for girls in Kuril. Shaheen, welcome to the Seminary Explorers.

Shaheen D. 01:18

Thank you so much, Katie. It's a pleasure to be here.

Katy G. 01:22

So Rainer Maria Rilke's book *Letters to a Young Poet* and your children both played a role in inspiring this newest collection. Could you tell us something about that?

Shaheen D. 01:33

Yes, most of the time the poems that I write are sort of idea based. I'm not saying they're conceptual poetry, but they're the way I work through ideas and experiences. But there's a lot of German literature in my house since my husband is a Germanist, and one of the things that I read through his collection is Rilke's letters to a younger poet. And as I was reading this, it occurred to me that some of the poems that I have been writing, even though they were about ideas and experiences, were actually addressed to my younger self. Ah.

Shaheen D. 02:13

So from that idea, then emerged this latest collection, where I start, where I speak to my young self, who I realized is a part of me, but yet is very different. And this particular book starts with my earliest memory from when I was four years old, and ends with my marriage to my husband some 24, you know, 20 years later.

Katy G. 02:41

Okay.

Shaheen D. 02:42

So it's more of a memoir in verse, very different from any of my other works.

Katy G. 02:50

Would you mind giving us a sample, like right off the bat? You have a poem from the from the collection.

Shaheen D. 02:56

Yes, I'll start out with two very short poems. The introductory poem in which I address Choyti. Choiti is my nickname from childhood. It is a shortened endearment of the month of April or Choitro in Bangladesh. Okay, and so I'm addressing Choiti from current day Pittsburgh, dear Choiti, where do you end and I begin? I know the bend in the road you can't yet see, what lies past the hill rising. You are prancing in tall grass. I am waking in a world you can't yet reach. What was yours? I now call mine. Suspecting things may be the other way around. Where might I end and you begin again? Love, Shaheen.

Katy G. 03:57

Ah, thank you. The the bend in the road you cannot yet see.

Shaheen D. 04:04

So this next letter is my earliest memory. It includes a memory of my father Shamsul Hak. I only have two memories of him because most of my childhood he spent imprisoned for his political activities for the Bangla National Language Movement, which eventually led to the independence of Bangladesh, he was imprisoned first by the British and then by the Pakistanis for his political activities. So I remember

him in Old Taka, East Pakistan, 1954. My earliest memory: he is speaking to a crowd of 10s of 1000s in Armitage, which is a field where many political activities speeches were given. Letter three. I remember you on a stage in Armitagela Maidan, in a blue silk garara trimmed. With gold, you hid behind the podium where Abu stood. He spoke into a megaphone to a crowd beyond your ability to count, my ability to imagine. You were four, thrilled for the rare treat of going somewhere with Abu, you couldn't understand his words. I can't remember them. Only that dazzle of night and sound, distant glory, the warmth of Abu near, his voice a storm, the fields echoing thunder.

Katy G. 05:42

Oh wow! And it's incredible that you're excited to be with him, even though you're having to share him with everyone, right? You rarely had him to yourself.

Shaheen D. 05:54

I had, I almost never had him to myself, and I mentioned the blue silk garara, which because he picked that, and you know he dressed me, and it was just a very special occasion for me because he wasn't around.

Katy G. 06:11

I think often we underestimate what it means to have a country of origin change. There are plenty of people who, for various reasons, are living in another country than where they were born, but it is, you know, you're talking about East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh. So not only have you undergone a lot of changes in your life, but this the country that you remember literally isn't the same country. What might you say to people who have spent like their entire lives in in one country and perhaps just for vacations been elsewhere, but not really gone through such a fundamental identity shift as this?

Shaheen D. 06:59

I mean, I think I feel that sometimes I'm a stranger, no matter where I am, because I have lived in so many different places. Not only old Taka, which was in East Pakistan, New Taka, which is in Bangladesh. I also spent four years of my life in Lahore, West Pakistan, and all of these involved language shifts, because in Bangladesh we speak Bengali, but in Lahore they spoke Urdu and Punjabi. When my mother first brought us to the United States, for only two years I was eight, didn't speak any English, and I had to learn English to speak English very quickly. Although I could read English, so all of these, you know, language affects the way you think. So as I move from city to city, I think in different languages, and that affects my perception of things. And I think it's difficult for someone who has spent their whole life speaking one language and is accustomed to one accustomed to one way of thinking. It's perhaps hard for them to understand the sort of the complexity, maybe even the dysmorphia of living in several languages, which is really like living in several skins at the same time.

Katy G. 08:28

That's that is a brilliant way to put it. Several skins at one time, because it's still you. These different dimensions. One of the other things about the the choice of the letters, these sort of epistles, you know, to your younger self. Could you say something about your children because they are well? They they

grew up in a household with people who had grown up in other countries, right? And there is there's a type of legacy that you're preserving from them, and they're like your granddaughter now, for example. Was it kind of an accident that you realized this that this would be a book that would that would be really useful to them, or was it part of the the origin of why you wrote the poems,

Shaheen D. 09:21

I think subconsciously, maybe even it was part of my wanting to explain to them who I am and where I came from. As my children grew older, they did ask me, you know, what was it like being in Taka? What was it like growing up in in Lahore, what was it like being in Ann Arbor in 1960? All of these are mysterious to them, and I explain these anecdotes to them. I also recollect that I asked my mother the same things because even though she grew up in very old Taka under in the when it was under. India, when it was part of India,

Katy G. 10:02

okay,

Shaheen D. 10:03

and I regret I didn't ask her more. Now my mother was also a writer; she was an academic and a writer, and so she has written memoirs and she's written travelogs and letters. And I'm very happy I have that history because otherwise I wouldn't understand where she came from, some of the letters in my book are actually referring to stories that she told me, and so I wanted to leave that kind of explanation, if you like, for my children. And although they, you know, read my earlier books and like loyal children, sort of. They said they liked them. I think this was the first book that they really said, "Oh, wow, mom! So this is where you come from. I think it was important to them. So even if nobody else ever reads this book, it is important to me because my children and my grandchildren will will remember me, and actually, they will also remember my mother and my father and my grandmother, who are also characters in this book.

Katy G. 11:11

Well, and there's a way that a poem can do this, which is different than sort of directly answering a question, and also the way that it's captured and that it is something that is available in print-that is also a distinction. Just the way that a that a poem is put together, yeah, it's it's very it's very different. I'm also so interested in the fact not only that your mother was a writer, and that she had also written memoirs. You have these stories and this information from her, but you also have the example, right? The fact that it would occur to you to be sort of capturing things and thinking about them and processing them-that's also kind of unusual to have in and to have a woman in the household doing this. So what what a striking early example for you, even if you didn't realize it until you were much older.

Shaheen D. 12:13

I also have to point out something is very different from the way my children or most American children grow up. When I was born in 1951 in Dhaka, nobody had televisions. We did not have a working, a

functioning television in our house until I was a senior in high school. I think we had a really old cast-off TV once in middle school, but it really didn't get very much except snow, and I remember the only TV I watched in middle school was going over to my friend's home to watch Star Trek. But the value of not having any television in the home is that my sister and I entertained each other by reading and by writing. We were always allowed to go to the library. We each checked out the maximum number of books that we were allowed to every Saturday, and we were usually done by Wednesday. Wow! And even though it was a weeknight, we begged to go back to the library to get another set of books for the next weekend. So that was so we read, we read sort of very broadly for children, and we probably read books that children our age today don't read because they have. That's not their only form of entertainment. Okay, I mean I learned English through reading Jane Austen and Dickens and Lord Byron, and you know Tennyson, and you know I read I read Shakespeare. That's how I learned English. Also, I'm afraid my mother and stepfather during the summers did not let us just go out and play all day. Every morning we had to do a couple of hours of math and write one essay. So, so we had to do some math and some writing every morning, and then we were allowed to, you know. Then my mother would fix us sandwiches, and we'd get on our bikes, and this was in Ann Arbor, and we'd go off all day. But we did work for you know probably three hours every morning, and we learned to write. My sister learned to write very pithy essays because she wanted to be done and out of there. It took me longer, and I hated it. But I also sometimes wrote poems because that was my. I had to write. They didn't care what I wrote. It could be an essay. It could be a poem. And I veered more naturally to poetry. So I got in the habit of thinking through words and through poets because my childhood was spent reading and writing. And by the way, it wasn't-it wasn't a trauma. It was fun. It was entertaining. We had a, you know, a lot of imagine. Games we would memorize poems and recite them to each other and so on and so forth. So,

Katy G. 15:06

making your own fun.

Shaheen D. 15:08

Yeah.

Katy G. 15:08

Well, and that's what people have done for centuries. Actually, is making your own fun with what's what's available. Is there anything that has surprised you since the book has come out and you've done some readings and some interviews, and just people who have read it, whether they're strangers or people that you know. Is there anything that has, I don't know, that that's kind of surprised you, or that you've just noticed?

Shaheen D. 15:35

Well, I noticed the reception for this book was very different from my first two. I think people read and appreciated my first two, but it was a very different type of audience. I think other poets liked my first two books, and other people at readings. You know, I I do a lot of readings both in Pittsburgh and elsewhere. I think they enjoyed them, but they they're challenging. They are not necessarily accessible

poets, poems, and that's not deliberate. It's because I grew up with the habit of writing only for myself. It wasn't really until my 40s that anyone besides me saw my poems, except when I was very young and my parents saw them because my husband discovered them, and he and a couple of poet friends persuaded me to make them public. So this habit of writing for myself means that I'm referring to, as I said, these many skins, these many worlds in which I live. They're all in my poems. I could not take them out, because then it wouldn't be authentically me. But it does make my poems very challenging for most people.

Katy G. 16:48

Okay,

Shaheen D. 16:49

unless I gloss them heavily and sort of have so many sort of footnotes and explanations that also makes them challenging. This last book, because it's in memoir form, even though I'm referring to things which might be strange to an American audience, because of the fact that it's a narrative, and because it's historical, many people whom I would have never expected to even read my books sort of got in touch with me and said some of my former students at Mount Holyoke, for example, found my book on the internet and then wrote to me and said, I couldn't put it down. I read it all through in one full soup, and I don't think they even ever touched any of my other books. This is the only one that they read, so it appeals, I think to a broader audience because it's more accessible, it's more personal, it's perhaps I don't know. Maybe it's something that speaks to other people. Maybe even though it's from one one different kind of world, other people sort of recognize their own childhood experiences in it.

Katy G. 18:00

Yes, and that's a good point because other people, even if it's not geography, there are certain things in the arcs of all of our lives that changes. You know, very extreme changes, external, internal, and when that resonates with people, it can resonate with someone who has who has grown up in a very different area, but there's still there's a there's a sort of universal truth about this. What are you working on now? What are what sort of poems are you writing, or what are you thinking about now? I'm afraid

Shaheen D. 18:34

I'm back to my usual bad habits, writing poems about ideas that intrigue me, my latest collection I think is going to be called Conatus, which is based upon Baruch Spinoza concept of every living entity attempts to strive to continue and to better oneself, and so there are back to the more challenging poems. There's not very much about me or my life in them, but I find them interesting. I find them challenge. You know, I I find it fun to write poems like that. So it'll be back to the usual. However, I have an idea for another volume, which I'm also working on simultaneously, and I think I'm going to call that one family recipes.

Katy G. 19:25

Okay,

Shaheen D. 19:26

because it'll continue with all the recipes that I learned from my mother and my aunt and my older cousins, which are recipes for Bengali food.

Katy G. 19:36

Okay,

Shaheen D. 19:37

and I have some of them written in my mother's beautiful little hand, and on yellowing pieces of paper, on my aunt's recipes, which I had to write down because she was cooking, and I just had to guess what she was doing because she never measured anything and she never wrote anything down. So it was, you know, my estimation, and. I realized that these recipes and the way they taught me cooking was also a way of passing on generational wisdom and generational culture and things like that. So, it'll pick up, sort of in my early 20s where I left off in letters, and then continue hopefully for another couple of decades. Ah,

Katy G. 20:21

excellent. Do you have a taste of anything you could leave us with?

Shaheen D. 20:26

Sure, I'll I'll I'll read something from my new collection. This is a. I don't write poems which are really overtly political, but I think you might find this has some political ramifications. This poem is called Contagion. Listen, you can hear water pounding on the banks of the Megna, the river spread out like a virus. I stand on the forest path where foxes flick their gray tails and vanish. The mynah perches on a branch. The bulbul is mute. The lamentation of trees silent, piercing. The wind through the leaves blows to the water, troubling houseboats in their moorings, pushing nokas to where the fish flock. I can tell you that fish do not swim alone. Purple herons cluster on the river's edge. The rafts of ducks skim the water's face. I can tell you that even the solitary tiger seeks company at times, and wolves can die of loneliness. Just as the pilgrim on his knees sends prayers, the dervish dances his plea. Funeral pyres on the ghat spew smoke, like smoke everywhere. Kyiv, Darfur, Negev, Gaza. We inhale the smoke and breathe as if the black fumes won't kill, as if the devastation elsewhere won't seep everywhere. I listen for the testimonies of grief, for loved ones lost, for ones not found, for the found who wish to remain unfound, for lives we could have saved, for lives we could have

Katy G. 22:44

lived. Ah, exquisite! Thank you, thank you so much. You have been listening to the Seminary Explorers. My guest has been poet Shaheen Dil. Thank you so much for your time, Shaheen. Visit her website at shaheendil.com. Thank you.

Shaheen D. 23:08

Thank you, Katie.

The Seminary Explores Podcast “From Dhaka to Pittsburgh: A Poet’s Journey”

Released August 24, 2026

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Speaker 2 23:11

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