

2020

# Life Writing Prize

SR SHAH



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THE WORD

LIFE WRITING PRIZE LONGLIST 2020

## **Mink Lashes**

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I sullenly watched a small child walk across a glass plate bearing an assortment of small glass bangles. She could cut her feet up bad. She played around the ankles of aunties, sisters, grannies, and mothers as they somehow managed to superficially ignore the child. Their attentions held by food on plates and twisted necklaces resting on a cousin's nape. But the child was never without super-vision. My mother tapped me on my shoulder gently,

*I had been here for three days. For a wedding, a cousin's. I decided to surprise mum with a visit and throw a curveball at her disappointment in me. Three days ago, the vibe had been one of joyful confusion. Having used imbecilic energy for fun rather than insolence, I played a prank on her. I pretended, after her hard work in selecting fabrics and beaming with pride that her only daughter would be attending this wedding in Frankfurt with the extended family, that I was unable to make it. It was semi-true, anyway. I travelled to the wrong airport on the day of my flight and thanked every God for the chance to travel back to Hackney and smoke up for another evening of peace. I, an adult, somewhat unwittingly travelled to Stansted instead of Luton. Here's the part that we agree on: my subconscious was in survival mode and simply did not want to go. I wasn't let off the hook, by any means. My brother sent me money straight away to book a flight for the next day. It was a sweet compromise. I had one more evening with spliffs and red wine before travelling first class to Germany, to then travel to*

*Berlin and stay with a lover. I was perpetually lost in a haze of musical algorithms, ambling towards a week-long performance of sobriety and marital networking. My brother and I took this opportunity to feign my resignation from attending this wedding. Oh, mother was positively livid. Her flaky, unreliable, artistic, and queer daughter has once again proven a public disappointment. Fortunately, she had taken all her anger out on the present family so that when I crept up behind her as she sliced onions, I was able to finally take nothing but joy and pride.*

*As I stealthily rolled underneath windows and tiptoed in through the door from my brother's car, who had showered and shaved to go to "the pharmacy for something," I marvelled for a brief second at this vision of my mother caught off guard. This perfectly coiffed, always ready, blesser of children is natural. Her round cheeks almost gently breathed with a relaxation and her eyes shone bright. I stared at the way she cupped onions in her hand and lovingly sliced them open, as though presenting a gift or sacrifice. For a moment, all I wanted was to touch her hand. I had to wrench myself away from that moment that muffled my ears with a reluctance to bring my feet back onto the ground. Excited as I was to surprise her by proving I'm not a heartless piece of shit, I didn't want to ever stop gazing at this sweaty, small woman with frizzy hair laughing with her sister and daughter in law. Cutting up those fucking onions.*

*"What do you know about Newton, anyway, Wahaj? Of course gravity exists, you can barely float in the water!"*

*"I think we should take him to the Dead Sea, Mum."*

*The knife, along with my mother, whipped around violently with a shriek and a fall to the floor. Propelled upwards, she looked a ghostly vision before burying her face in her hands, shoulders shaking with sobs or surprise. I had never felt prouder. This had been the first time I was able to reduce my own mother to tears of happiness.*

“You okay, beta?”

“Ji, mum. Just a headache.”

“Eat some food, jaan.”

“I’ve already eaten. I’m not too hungry.”

“Mum...”

“Ji beta?”

“Why doesn’t Uncle keep in touch with his white daughters? He’s dying as we sit here looking at him. If they need a dad he should be a dad, right?”

“Well, beta, your uncle also has a son from a Bengali woman before this English lady. They had moved to Pakistan. What did he want his current wife to do? What did his daughters want from a father taking a new wife who was their age? You’re all hardheads from your dad’s side of the family. But he was the one at the end of the day who tried keeping the family together. It just took your dad getting terminal cancer for him to admit that. Now he’s gone and we’re left with oceans of unsaid words.”

Nodded. Sometimes I just needed encouragement to remember dead men

fondly, away from violent stories and scandals. I had kept a part of my nine-year-old soul protected from the harsh realities of adult life, that we all do things we're not proud of. Mum tenderly touched my face that was covered by a luminous green to counteract the redness upon my cheek. A colour wheel of cover ups. A knowledge shared by wizards and makeup artists and renaissance painters. I smarted ever so slightly. We watched the baby rattle the cheap bangles around and I scooped her up as a candelabra narrowly missed colliding with her head. We were at a mendhi and the decorative bride was about to arrive. Before then, drumming, clapping, and a lot of bad singing. The off-beat rhythms reminded me of twilight conversations on the roof in Punjabi villages. A Christian, Muslim, and Sikh flag would flutter around us, shrinking in comparison to the rising kites and growing moon. In this family, time and space is mercury-like, a shape shifter. Smells and sounds interweave with memories and almost certain futures, so I wasn't entirely sure if I was in Frankfurt, Lahore, or London. I wondered briefly as I looked at my mother, her freckles covered by makeup green, blue, flesh, and then white, as if this was their magic. A subtle witchcraft. A distortion of time and space. I wondered if my severance from the family at times expelled me from these abilities, and other times I was certain my mother's fierce love is what draws me back each time.

I feel like a borderline rapist at weddings. I had felt this from a young age. Even though I didn't know the inner workings of harems, irrespective of violent cult classics consumed from seven, I felt as though the bride might as well be naked and taking bids. Which I suppose is counter intuitive to the wedding. But the stark contrast between keeping a woman hidden from the wandering eyes of boys and men and the proud display of a woman about to be fucked for the first time unsettled me as a child. It still does. Am I looking upon a woman who has signed her life away for some social convention? And what am I going to do when the convention inevitably falls upon me? I knew what to do. I left home a few years back.

After violent sex I'd observe myself in the mirror smoking whatever. I would wonder if when I turn 40, would I regret never marrying who my family said to marry? When I'm around them and at these weddings, those thoughts disappear miraculously. For a religion that boasts modesty, we do have a load of coded peep-shows that embody —

“OW!”

A small child pulled my hair. Filled with the light of my mother, I didn't mind. I let them play. The child looked up at me with big eyes through a mass of thin and curly hair and asked me,

“Are you the same aunty with the short hair? You look different. Like a princess now.”

“I am the same aunty. I went to the beauty parlour today and she put something underneath my hair to make it look bigger. She also did my makeup. Do you like it? I don't. I look like a ghost. Am I scary? BOO!”

The child squealed with delight and ran off before falling over a glass table. The witchcraft is back because this is a regular occurrence and I have never seen any of the babies wounded. Constantly enthralled with the fluid motions of light reflected from tinsel and fake gold necklaces from within a stuffy living room, unable to step out for a smoke in a begrudging complacency. *Alhumdulillah*. *Bismillah*, a mother would say if their child wobbled precariously on a chair before swooping in to save them. An incantation or a protective spell floats among us as we occupy these different levels of being, of eating, of understanding why we're here. Mum and I had spent 3 hours earlier getting our hair and makeup done up to standards. I walked into the parlour to service my automated-body. I wanted to be well oiled, updated, and shiny for the pictures. I wanted to

be a trophy. I want to be locked away in a glass cage for everyone to look at where I don't need to do anything ever again and everyone can look but they can't touch and I don't care if they laugh at my naked body because it's my naked

*"I'd like glitter on top of the gold please. Here's the foundation I use, for reference. Please don't make me white like a dulhan, I like to look a bit tanned, stay true to my skin tone."*

*"Got it."*

*"Also, add maroon-red to the brown. I'd like a nude lip with pink undertones and a contour. Blend the contour around my jawline properly because I know I look like I have a slim face but the triple-chin always shows through in pictures."*

*"Theek hai, jawab."*

*"Hair. Add some bumps and backcomb it so it's a beehive. I'm going for the classic Pakistani/drag look so mama's happy. I'm wearing this suit, see? She chose the fabrics and designed it herself. You see the gold isn't a bright one, it's muted and is leaning towards white. I want that in the inner corner of my eyes. Also, do you have mink lashes?"*

I had long since learned to talk in a no-nonsense manner with Pakistani beauticians. You need to say exactly what you want or they'll go on a creative journey which will leave you looking like eighty-year-old porcelain kept in your gran's basement. The far-removed beauty construction that is less opinion based, and more standard based. I always thought the men were queer because they chased after women who looked like queens. They could all tell there's something different about me. But I can't help

flirting, even with men, which elicits a glimmer of hope in countless eyes. I had over two-hundred pins in my hair, eyelashes that boasted three inches, staggering heels, and earrings that weighed my head down a pound on each side. I would jokingly complain about the pressures of being a woman to the younger children because I could get away with it. If I had made jokes about gender to the elders, I would have been hit for acting up. The bride had entered at this point, and the room fell silent to watch her. Like eager perverts undressing her with their eyes and moral convention.

“I think I was too harsh on you. All the girls are wearing tops that are above the knee and short coats. Everyone’s more relaxed these days. I was harsh, forcing you to wear the headscarf and burqa after your father died.”

Her trailing duppata caught onto her stiletto, hindering the pilgrimage to the garish purple and pink stage, adorned with summer flowers orange and yellow. They were fake. The flowers are the only thing I like about weddings, so I was affronted to smell plastic. Her lips pulled back in a semi-grimace, semi-smirk. I could see the foundation collecting upon each of her pores, causing her skin to look bumpy. The beautician should have used a smoothing primer after exfoliating. Even if it’s not a facial, you want your work to look good. It never does. The slightly older girls were throwing real rose petals over her head as she walked, flanked by two old ladies, with a stoic energy, as though she was walking to her death. She seemed happy enough. We all do. I looked at the girls and wondered what they could be if their biological clock wasn’t defined by age old traditions that we can’t even make sense of anymore. I wondered what truths we were running from. What horrible reality would come from letting these women unbind themselves and be able to run full pelt. I stared at the bride, and she looked at me. I did not smile.

“Mum, don’t, it’s fine.”

What was I doing? Didn't I want this acknowledgement that will ease the passage for accountability? Damn my diplomacy. I can't bear to see someone apologise for the trauma they've caused me. In my eyes, it makes them as pathetic as I see myself. I didn't want my mother snivelling. She needed to be the high priestess who stalks her children's dreams like a jaguar, a beacon of hope and resoluteness. God damn, this apology that's coming is going to make me feel sick. I wanted to run away from this sudden reveal of broken childhood. Of sexualising my eleven-year-old body. I didn't want to hear the times I wasn't able to stay in my house alone due to builders working in the garden. I didn't want this to erupt into a fountain that poured forth these fucking truths that

FUCK YOU. FUCK YOU AND YOUR FUCKING MODESTY.  
FUCK YOU FOR NOT TEACHING ME THAT I CAN SAY  
NO TO MEN. FUCK YOU ALL FOR TEACHING ME THAT  
WHATEVER A MAN WANTS HE GETS. I'VE BEEN RAPED  
BY THREE MEN BY THE AGE OF TWENTY-TWO AND I  
COULDN'T EVEN TELL YOU ABOUT THE ABORTION I  
HAD INSTEAD I PRETENDED I WAS AT COLLEGE FOR  
THE WHOLE DAY AND I WAS EXPERIENCING SOME  
MILD CRAMPS I JUST NEEDED TO BE ALONE BECAUSE  
I KNEW IN YEARS TO COME THIS WOULD REPEAT AND  
I'D BE A BROKEN MESS THINKING IF I JUST STAYED  
UNDER THE VEIL I'D BE

“Laiken, it's the truth.”

“I suppose. But it's okay. Not too much damage. I suppose you don't know how I feel about most things.”

She nodded enthusiastically. The crutch that all lovers use. We just don't

know what you're thinking, babe, how do we reach you? No cunt reaches me. I willed the water to become gin or vodka, and wanted to hug myself for behaving like a child.

“You kept running away.”

*You kept locking me in.*

The dance begins. A wonderful thing, a marvel in the diaspora. The audience are passive. Half of them, the main event, are in the other room with the groom waiting to join us for an hour of painfully awkward photos. The trick is to toe the line between friend and family. Keep complimenting her on her parenting, usher away any notion of apology. For I, your daughter, cannot demand this. It must be given.

“I'm in therapy, you know.”

I paused to look at her to gauge her reaction. She nodded; I was allowed to continue. I was surprised my heart wasn't beating faster. I remember when she flushed my anti-psychotics down the toilet after I had a miscarriage and called the ambulance to section me. But right now, I'm observing my body with a cool steeliness, like I observe most things. I've had my tears about the abortions, the rapes, the miscarriages, the fucking stupidity of a bright young girl who trusts anything that's beyond the veil.

“I think it's interesting that none of you can believe I love you, let alone think about you. And here I am, every week for one hour, just trying to make sense of it all.”

“But what does family have to do with your sickness?”

Down with the sickness. Here we go. I feel like I can apply pressure to the breaks on this one.

“I was very confused when dad died. Everything was changing. Family, my body, we moved.”

“But we all loved you the best we could after your father passed.”

I guess I toed the line towards friend a bit too eagerly.

“Sure. I mean then my brother left which set off more abandonment stuff.”

You can't tell her about the other stuff. You can't. She said she'll split your legs in half with a knife when she caught you with that woman. Remember when she said she'd slice you down the middle and throw one half of your carcass on the street as a degrading spectacle and the other to hell? When you wore that tank top and she ripped it off your body and locked you out of the house for three hours one cold October night? Just play along.

“I guess I just have stuff to figure out. It's confusing as a nine-year-old. Trust me on that.”

She nodded. We stared at each other for a while before we were both shaken by a cousin of mine wanting to take photos before we ate greasy tikka. I felt desperate. I wanted to fall into the arms of my partner overseas even though I was desperate to run away and so close to suffocating the romance for good. I wanted to smell her hair and taste her breasts before we got lost for a few hours, resurfacing to fix each other a drink or a spliff, dancing to slow jams. I wanted to be back in south-east London where I could sit and stare at the trees for an hour uninterrupted unless someone asked for change which I would normally give them. I wanted her to kiss my neck and open me up, I wanted to just run —

A crash. We whipped our heads around and saw glass on the floor. Our instincts can tell us within a second if this was violent or a mistake. It was the former. I whispered to my sister in law, what's going on? She said uncle doesn't approve of the bride and groom sitting together before the papers are signed. It's ungodly. I couldn't help but smirk at the theatrics. Any way to make the wedding about us, and righteously so. It's what I'm doing, isn't it? The man hurriedly collected his wife and children and made a hasty exit. Well, he waited for his wife to get all three small children ready as he stood at the doorway with a stony face. I giggled.

“So who are you going to Berlin with?”

My face was coated in steam from the chicken and rice. Children had eased into their games and women were talking about their friends. A few men had snuck out for a cigarette and I longed to join them. I had lived outside of this gender binary for so long, evading its grasp and I felt like a mug for becoming subservient again. Inside was cramped, it was getting hot. I felt restricted. I could feel a wild personality creeping up my spine which I berated quietly and carried on.

“Myself. I've always wanted to check it out. Seems pretty artsy.”

*I'm travelling alone to defy the law of God which pressures the hyper-surveillance of women, actually.*

“And what will you be doing?”

*I know you're going to do unspeakable, ungodly things.*

“Checking out the Berlin Wall and some museums.”

*Recording sex tapes and taking acid to open a ceremony of divine feminine lust and using psychedelics to process trauma and free our minds, man.*

My mother ushered me over where she was speaking to a woman. Mandatory salaam. She worked me over with a look and asked what I do. Makeup, teach. I write sometimes. Just graduated with a masters. Her voice was such a murmur and her pronunciation was lazy, but I got the gist. *Sort her out. You need to send her to another family while you still can.* I laughed it off with a few jokes before sitting back down and ignoring it all.

*Sambaalo:* Pack it up. Put it away. Look after it. A thing you would do with delicate china or a sentimental ornament.

I tried not to pay attention. But it grabbed me. I could see my mother and uncle talking in low, serious voices in the hallway. She kept glancing back at me with a worried look on her face. I recognise this widower's expression. She was calculating how to defend our honour whilst allowing me to live. But there's not too much she can control without a husband so brothers and uncles have their fair say. She shook her head at me slightly as I got up to join them, which I ignored. I was going to Berlin as an act of defiance, in their fucking faces. A big girl now, not the little child who cried when her uncle shouted at her. A huge gulp of hot milk gushing down this seven-year-old chest, flowing forth from a mouth agape in pained despair, mixed in with salty tears. The chest heaving in retches, leading to a silence lasting just over a decade.

Funny how we remember the feeling of the consequence, but for the life of me I still cannot remember what I did wrong. I remember the beastly face of a big man looming over me with a rage in his eyes I have since locked away in nightmares. Funny, how we bury the cause of the trigger deep into our psyches to be gently coaxed out by degree-bearing psychiatrists. Funny that, the feeling of pain is psychologically whisked around our minds and renders it inevitable. The inevitability, or perverse lust for the collision of a hand incoming five minutes from now, the backs of white-hot knuckles rearranging the face my father had given me during my time in Berlin.

Hell, perhaps I was a bad girl.

I began resenting the small child and all the fantastical, tender magic surrounding her in a bubble of protection. I then began to recall associating that bubble with a prison. To pop, break, shatter, ruin. After years of dedicated catastrophe, I had broken out. Pressing my hands within the cracks and scooping the shards out with my first two fingers on each hand.

Perhaps I was a really bad girl.

On the bus to Berlin from Frankfurt, a smile coyly plays around my mouth to complement the dull ache of my jaw that my uncle's fist collided with two hours ago. If ever there was a good reason to smirk in the face of a monster and perform a graceful stroll to the suitcase to deftly close the door behind me, it's after a public assault. I relished in it. I have to smirk to stop myself from sobbing.

## BIOGRAPHY

**SR SHAH** is a working class queer Muslim poet and philosopher hailing from South London. They are interested in the dynamics between poetry and death, the abundance of London, and honouring migrant histories. They have had their Instagram philosophy series exhibited at VFDalston for “unfinished,” and host a quarterly literary event, “untitled.” By day, they are a makeup artist.