

Alien in America

In this country, I am always burning. My skin blazes into brown autumn, tanning more than it does under the Indian sun. Here, everything is blinding white and fragile. I wear my kajal thick and black under my eyes. The first American boy who kisses my lashes says I ruined the mood by asking too many questions. On the walk home, I ask a flock of geese which cultural code I got wrong. The next day, a professor defends a white racist, saying, *But he is a Buddhist*. Someone at the bus stop compliments my wild black hair. I see myself reflected in her white stare – half devil, half child. Growing up, I was *fair* for the Mamas who wanted me to marry their boys, *pink* for the men who sucked the hues from my cheeks. By now, I have shed so much color, and I am still becoming a woman. Learning to apologize for the anger my brown skin holds. Not to offer food to strangers, and to say things like, *Sorry, but what is a Sharpie?* Meanwhile, the berries outside my window burst into purple song. Mama calls from Delhi, complaining that the bulbuls on the Ashoka trees are cacophonous at dawn. I skip the bus and start walking to university, wearing my kajal thick, and my black hair long.