

**BLACK COUNTRY**  
**by Kayla Cook**

## **Election Day**

They didn't tell you the American Dream was  
Ankles that throb as you try to sleep from  
Working doubles, over 60 hrs a week

Starry-eyed over the next price tag that will help you  
Keep up with the Joneses but the  
Joneses can't even keep up with themselves anymore

"The land of the fee" doesn't know the word "free"  
Or "affordable" and if you so much as think to question  
Why you have to work so hard just to breathe the air in your body-box apartment,  
Mr. American Flag Socks in Nike Slides wearing Daddy's Christmas Gift Air Pods will  
Breathe down your neck,  
"Don't look for handouts—Pick yourself up by your bootstraps"  
He is so busy spitting in your face, he doesn't look down to see your bare feet

Alarm rings—Get on the good foot (or whatever foot left)  
Drink carcinogens in your daily drink  
"But it won't hurt you," articles say  
What would your cancer patient mother think of the news if she were alive today?

Today's newspaper heading:  
"Key moments from the Betsy Ross-Uncle Sam Hearing"  
(He was ruled "Innocent")  
You knew there was a reason those "I want you" posters left a bad taste in your mouth  
(Or is it the carcinogens they told you not to worry about)  
You shrug, jaded by another All-American morning  
"There's always that one uncle," you say, turn the page, and  
Printed in large ink letters:  
"Where are they now?"  
Followed by a picture of Lady Liberty herself

Mouth wide shut  
Because there's no other way,  
Clock in and wait on  
Election day

## nose / hair / mouth

my friend from kindergarten  
told me she knew i was black  
because of  
my nose/  
friend from middle school said  
my hair/  
friend from high school said  
my mouth—  
(but not the words that come out)

ok, so which is it?  
which feature outs a secret i never tried or would ever want  
to keep?

nose flares,  
take a deep breath when a rap song comes on.  
hear new strangers shout out that word we have been called  
one too many times? (are we really gonna go there tonight?)

hair shakes along with my head when they ask  
to touch my hair. or worse, don't ask at all.  
(do i look like i'm standing on an auction block?)

my mouth turns down at  
"i don't like pda," said in reply to reaching for his hand,  
but i'm about 99.9% sure i'll be used  
as a source to cite later.  
("i can't be racist—i dated a black girl!")

we are not your proof / excuse / trophy—  
fad / trend / entertainment / or only made worthy  
through your eyes.

and, no, we don't use a "really small curling iron" every morning by the way or  
have to re-braid each braid every day.  
these tan don't wash off.  
these voices do more than sing  
your praises—we work / fight / and make new  
systems to earn our own.

noses wrinkle from laughter at a family dinner when  
someone tells a "running on cp time" joke because  
only we can joke like that.

hair shakes now the way it did then when a mom / dad / or aunt would play  
the jackson 5 / the commodores / or marvin gaye  
except this time without a crown of barrettes or hair baubles at the end of our braids and,  
unfortunately, maybe without the family member too.

our mouths try to smile and sing at the same time  
sitting in a congregation that is  
basically all family singing  
“ain’t gonna let no rock” / “so many wonderful things” / or “soon and very soon” along to the  
piano and tambourine,  
so loud that the people at the white church across the way swore our little building would  
shake—

let it shake, let them hear.  
whether everyone there believed in God or not, we all  
believed in those  
songs because they were ours—  
(and there’s only so much in this world a group of black people can truly call our own)—  
and for a moment i felt  
free in a space where i could fully be me.

nose / hair / mouth  
these are the words that come out.

## Independence Day

The baked goods on Independence Day stained  
my teeth, causing cotton-mouth that prevented my speech.  
The bomb pops melted in this new age Freedom Summer  
sun, sealing my fingers in a permanent fist.  
I kept that balled up fist in earlier years in that small, small town,  
Deep in my hoodie pocket  
But it was there,  
Waiting to raise up one day.

Did the red and blue frosting stick to the roofs of their mouths  
Like it did to mine?  
Of course not.  
They washed it down with a glass on All-American lemonade from a stand.  
Fifty cents. Two quarters. Maybe five dimes.  
Black problems washed away and swallowed for 50 cents. 50 seconds.  
How much is the cost of being seen as fully human?  
How much is the cost to be seen as innocent, relatable, a friend, American?  
How much time must be spent recycling old ways and old ties?

I can't hide my fist anymore. My blazer doesn't have pockets.  
And the next time I am offered treats  
Covered in excessive amounts of red and white to cover the truth,  
I will not open up.

## Exercising Power

A game, an exercise for all who can read this,  
The rules are simple:  
All players form a circle then strike a pose  
Quicker than the striking of a match to show  
Power.

Other players go before me. Young bodies  
Form fists then freeze, signifying striking blows  
Point bows and arrows,  
Raise guns from holsters,  
Kick, stab, and choke—

Then it's my turn.  
I pull a knife from air then heave it high above my opponent's head and—  
(Or is it a sword or a scythe?)  
Hold my pose until the next power-override.

Once all players choose a pose, we are told  
We are no different than the other players from all over America  
(Alabama, California, Utah, New Mexico—)  
All were the same,  
All turned to violence for every single pose.

We feel respective pangs in our chests,  
Regretting that not one, not one player  
Kneeled in prayer,  
Removed a weapon, or  
Offered an open palm thrust forward as if to say, "stop."

"Power equates violence," all players were conditioned to believe.  
We all consider this exercising of power a lesson learned:  
We must work to unlearn and relearn,  
Reimagine,  
Rethink  
The 5-letter word  
That runs our country  
And other countries across the globe.

Over 7 billion players.  
Over 7 billion chances.  
Restart the exercise.