

Wilkinson, C. (2021). *Perfect Black*. University Press of Kentucky.

Review by Michelle B. Gaffey

In the final pages of her multi-award-winning book of poetry, *Perfect Black*, Crystal Wilkinson announces that ‘People are always surprised that black people reside in the hills of Appalachia.’

In this compilation of poems and lyric essays, Wilkinson challenges and deepens our understanding of what it means to be working-class and Appalachian. In *Perfect Black*, we see no miners or loggers, no factory or mill workers, aside from an allusion to the Great Migration in ‘Bones.’ We do see men and women working with their hands, yes, but the working-class lives poetically rendered here are on tobacco farms, in kitchens, and in other people’s homes. And they live on Black ancestral land in Appalachia, a region that is still frequently characterized by white cultures rooted in Scotch-Irish, English, and German traditions. In many ways, *Perfect Black* is a much-needed poetic response to this oversimplification of Appalachia.

Moments of profound loss and deep joy ground *Perfect Black*, which won both the Tillie Olsen Award for Creative Writing from the Working-Class Studies Association and an NAACP Image Award in 2022. Rising from the intersecting identities of class, race, and gender, the poems and stories chronicle a young girl’s coming-of-age with her voice, a girl who initially chose to unlearn the ‘accent that carried a map from the boonies’ of her rural Appalachian home. But this girl ultimately realizes ‘that being country [is] as much a part of [her] as being black or being a woman.’ These poems and essays weave various cadences in a poignant and beautifully composed indictment of white supremacy and, to use a term from Roxane Gay, ‘rapist culture.’

Perfect Black follows a loose structure, with part I mapping the ‘terrain’ of a young girl’s growing up, from being raised by her grandparents on a tobacco farm, to her infrequent visits with her mother who lived with schizophrenia, to her budding sexual desire, and to the repeated violation of her young body.

The lyrics of part I often work metaphorically to create crisp images; the opening poem, ‘Terrain,’ reveals a mature woman who has traveled away from home, donning a ‘voice [that] has moved downhill to the flatland a time or two.’ Still, she knows she’s been ‘country all [her] life’: she is ‘plain old brown bag, oak & twig, mud pies & gut-wrenching gospel in the throats of old tobacco brown men.’

Sexual assault is a frequent subject in these early poems, first introduced in ‘Baptism.’ Throughout this poem the young girl directly addresses her readers, inviting us to ‘see’ her as she ‘stand[s] in the water up to [her] knees.’ After the ‘Bible is handed to the deacon,’ we bear witness to something terrible, yet unnamed. She beckons us:

See me submerged in the cold creek water

that seeps into my nostrils
tastes like danger in my mouth

The innuendo here is clear with the poem's juxtaposition of the words 'deacon,' 'mouth,' and 'danger.' Then, in 'Dig If You Will the Picture,' this young girl confirms that she learned to keep secrets: listening to Prince behind closed doors and experiencing her sexual awakening—all while being sexually violated by a church leader and the 'white boys at school.'

Readers also discover in part I that the young girl's grandmother was often her 'lifeboat' and safe 'harbor.' In the first of the 'Water Witch' poems, for example, she recounts a story about 'salvation' from her grandmother's point of view with regional expressions that Wilkinson transcribes with due diligence:

When the horses took off with the wagon
& my grandbaby inside, i chased it.
My legs nigh on seventy, moved like a lightning twenty—
...
& old Trigger stopped,
stood still & straight, real proud,
cutting his black eyes like he was saying
You old sumbitch, i showed you.
I lifted the baby out, rested her on the ground—safe.

While themes, images, and even lines of poems are echoed throughout the next section, part II more directly addresses the pernicious effects of racism and white supremacy. Wilkinson reflects upon the embodied 'rage / that seeps through' the 'pores' of Black women, the 'arias' and 'sacred songs' that remind us:

of every unfed mouth
of every furious word
of every strap across every back
of every lover gone unloved
of every black woman's breast
sucked dry until it cracks
& bleeds

She also dreams of a time in the future when 'nobody [is] afraid' of a 'gang / one million strong' of Black boys and men:

This gang
they walked the streets in great numbers

& nobody cuddled their purses

This gang
they stood up

& spoke up
when justice showed
its true colors

& the SWAT team didn't come

Part II culminates in Wilkinson's perfectly composed acceptance and celebration of her 'full lips...wide hips...dreadlocks...high cheekbones.' She refers to her Appalachian 'twang' with enjambed images and colloquialisms; her home language is 'distinctively wood burning stove, come in & sit a spell, patchwork quilt, summer swimming hole, sweet iced tea, you are always welcome here...warm.'

The reverence she has for her ancestral mothers, her voice, and her body is amplified throughout part III of *Perfect Black*. In 'Bloodroot,' Wilkinson begins by honoring the young girls of her childhood. Together, they 'daydreamed' about growing up when 'horizon-kissed feathers / would float newborns / into the fleshy round of [their] bellies.'

These childhood fantasies of motherhood and 'imaginary husbands' mature into reflections on trusting partnerships grounded in love—love that is deeply felt and joyfully celebrated within the lines of her poetry. 'Witness,' for example, offers a series of conditional statements to craft a love song to Wilkinson's partner, Ron Davis, who provided stunning illustrations for the book, often to extend the embodied experiences within the poems. Presumably addressing Davis, Wilkinson writes, 'if you just could have seen the hair rise up / on granddaddy's arm like that, like offerings to god, / when his elbow touched hers...then you'd know how much i love you.'

In a later poem, she reiterates that this man has danced his way into her heart, a familiar idiom recast with playful wordplay reminiscent of poems in Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary*; she tells him:

All day long
you lindy-hop
through my mind

But most memorable in part III are her poems and essays about the 'women that make [her] a woman,' the 'strong sisters' who 'kiss sense into [her] head sometimes.' Wilkinson's 'Praise Song for the Kitchen Ghosts' is a tremendous achievement, pulling together many of the themes from throughout the book. But the anchor of this lyric essay is food or, rather, sustenance and love. She integrates conversations with cousins and aunts about recipes that have nourished her family's soul for generations. These recipes, sometimes written down, sometimes recalled orally, transmit her women ancestors' knowledge and wisdom about community, fortitude, and the quiet power of land and food rituals.

Overall, Wilkinson's poems and essays celebrate all that is abundantly and perfectly Appalachian, woman-centered, and Black. For her readers from rural Appalachia, especially those of us who have moved away from home, her book is a gift to help us recall swimming holes and lightning bugs, canned beans and 'dinner' at mid-day. But her ability to craft palpable story poems to make

visible the Black working-class lives of rural Appalachia—all while speaking truth to power and to those who may feel unheard or unseen—makes *Perfect Black* a necessary addition to libraries and classrooms across the country.

Reviewer Bio

Michelle B. Gaffey grew up in a northern Appalachian town known for powdered metal production, outdoor sporting, and elk viewing. Her research focuses on documentary poetry and poetics and, more recently, literary representations of adoption in the works of Octavia E. Butler. Michelle currently lives and works in northern Virginia.