

On the Difficulty of Discussing Poetry with My Reasonably Socially Conscious Mother

I.

When I learned that Wallace Stevens had called
Gwendolyn Brooks “the coon,” my first thought was:
Peter Quince at a Klan rally? Appalled;
Reflections on paganism don’t cause
Any great worry when you don’t value your
Fellow man too much, I guess. Wallace: the
Complacency wasn’t just in the peignoir.
I have his words inscribed on my skin. A
Needle, eyeless, put the text in place. At
Twenty seven it seemed I’d always need
Those words in dark times. But tricky, now: that
Gospel I found lies inside of his screed.
My mom shrugs. “They’re all flawed, can’t always win.”
She doesn’t have a racist in her skin.

II.

“*Wokeness* belongs only to people who
Have known subjugation,” says my mom, “And
The shame of having *privilege* belongs to
Those who all insist it can’t exist.” Grand
Gesture: you can afford to give away
All that Caucasian good fortune that you
Were born into. All it took was to say
The shame belongs to those who do not know.
Magnanimous of you! To shift the gift,
The whitest elephant within the stack,
Into the arms of those who would not lift
The texts I’d recommend. “Oh yes, he’s black!
Heard him on *Fresh Air*. Charming interview.”
Terri Gross. Of course. As “unwoke” as you.