

## Telephone Conversation

Wole Soyinka

- The price seemed reasonable, location  
Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived  
Off premises. Nothing remained  
But self-confession. “Madam,” I warned,  
5 “I hate a wasted journey—I am African.”  
Silence. Silenced transmission of  
Pressurized good-breeding. Voice, when it came,  
Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled  
Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was, foully.
- 10 “HOW DARK?” . . . I had not misheard . . . “ARE YOU LIGHT  
OR VERY DARK?” Button B. Button A. Stench  
Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.  
Red booth. Red pillar-box. Red double-tiered  
Omnibus squelching tar. It was real! Shamed  
15 By ill-mannered silence, surrender  
Pushed dumbfoundment to beg simplification.  
Considerate she was, varying the emphasis—
- “ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?” Revelation came.  
“You mean—like plain or milk chocolate?”  
20 Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light  
Impersonality. Rapidly, wavelength adjusted,  
I chose. “West African sepia”—and as an afterthought,  
“Down in my passport.” Silence for spectroscopic  
Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent  
25 Hard on the mouthpiece. “WHAT’S THAT?” conceding,  
“DON’T KNOW WHAT THAT IS.” “Like brunette.”
- “THAT’S DARK, ISN’T IT?” “Not altogether.  
Facially, I am brunette, but madam, you should see  
The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet  
30 Are a peroxide blonde. Friction, caused—  
Foolishly, madam—by sitting down, has turned  
My bottom raven black—One moment madam!”—sensing  
Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap  
About my ears—“Madam,” I pleaded, “wouldn’t you rather  
35 See for yourself?”