Telephone Conversation

The price seemed reasonable, location

Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived

Off premises. Nothing remained

But self-confession. “Madam”, I warned,

“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 piped. Caught I was, foully.

“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

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?”

Her accent was clinical, crushing in its light

Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,

I chose. “West African sepia” – and as afterthought,

“Down in my passport.” Silence for spectroscopic

Flight of fancy, till truthfulness changed her accent

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

Are a peroxide blond. 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

See for yourself?”

Wole Soyinka

\*Button A – Buttons which had to be pressed when using a telephone in a public booth. Such

telephones are no longer in use.