Years before, I had read a passage by V.S. Naipaul which has stayed with me ever since. I have never been able to find it again, so this account is from memory. In his incomparable prose Naipaul describes a demonstration. He is in a hotel room, somewhere in Africa or South America; he looks down and see people marching past. To his surprise, the sight fills him with an obscure longing, a kind of melancholy; he is aware of a wish to go out, join, to merge his concerns with theirs. Yet he knows he never will; it is simply not in his nature to join crowds.

For many years I read everything of Naipaul's I could lay my hands on; I couldn't have enough of him. I read him with the intimate, appalled attention that one reserves for one's most skilful interlocutors. It was he who first made it possible for me to think of myself as a writer, working in English.

I remembered that passage because I believed that I, too, was not a joiner, and in Naipaul's pitiless mirror I thought I had seen an aspect of myself rendered visible. Yet as this forlon little group marched out of the shelter of the compound I did not hesitate for a moment: without a second thought, I joined.

The march headed first for Lajpat Nagar, a busy commercial area, a mile or so away. I knew the area. Though it was in New Delhi, its streets resembled the older parts of the city, where small cramped shops tended to spill out on to the footpaths.

We were shouting slogans as we marched: hoary Gandhian staples of peace and brotherhood from half a century before. Then, suddenly, we were confronted with a starkly familiar spectacle, an image of twentieth-century urban horror: burned-out cars, their ransacked interiors visible through smashed windows; debris and rubble everywhere. Blackened pots had been strewn along the street. A cinema had been gutted, and the charred faces of film stars stared out at us from half-burned posters.

As I think back to that march, my memory breaks down, details dissolve. I recently telephoned some friends who had been there. Their memories are similar to mine in only one respect: they too, clung to one scene while successful ridding their minds of the rest.

The scene my memory preserved is of a moment when it seemed inevitable that we would be attacked.

Rounding a corner, we found ourselves facing a crowd that was larger and more determined-looking than any other crowds we had encountered. On each previous occasion, we had prevailed by marching at the thugs and engaging them directly, in dialogues that turned quickly into extended shouting matches. In every instance we had succeeded in facing them down. But this particular mob was intent on confrontation. As its members advanced on us, brandishing knives and steel rods, we stopped. Our voices grew louder as they came toward us; a kind of rapture descended on us, exhilaration in anticipation of a climax. We braced for the attack, leaning forward as though into a wind.

And then something happened that I have never completely understood. Nothing was said; there was no signal, nor was there any break in the rhythm of our chanting. But suddenly, all the women in our group—and the women made up more than half of the group's numbers—stepped out and surrounded the men; their saris and kameezes became a thin, fluttering barrier, a wall around us. They turned to face the approaching men, challenging them, daring them to attack.

The thugs took a few more steps towards us and then faltered, confused. A moment later, they were gone.

17

Telephone Conversation

Wole Soyinka

Wole Soyinka (1935-) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, the first black African to do so. He was born near Ibadan in Western Nigeria in 1935 and educated in Nigeria and at Leeds University in England. A leading figure in African drama, he founded the Orisun theatre company in 1964. Soyinka is a playwright, an actor and teacher of drama and literature as well as a poet and essayist. In 1975, he became Professor of Comparative Literature at Ife University in Nigeria in 1975 and Professor of African Studies and Theatre at Cornell University in 1988. He has been imprisoned more than once for his criticism of the Nigerian government. Some of his works were banned, and he has been forced to spend periods of exile abroad. During one of these, in 1997, the military regime passed a death sentence on him, which was afterwards revoked, enabling him to return to Nigeria in 1998.

Soyinka's plays range from comedy to tragedy and from political satire to the theatre of the absurd. Among his well-known plays are *The Road* (1965) and *Death and the King's Horsemen* (1975). His poems include *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967), *Poems from Prison* (1969), *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972) and *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1988). His autobiographical work, *The Man Dies* (1973) covers the period of his political imprisonment in Nigeria. Soyinka has also published a collection of essays *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976).

From *Literature, Structure, Sound and Sense*. Edited by L. Perrine & T.R. Arp. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983.

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 tipped. 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 dumbfounded 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 assent was clinical, crushing in its light
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,
I chose. 'West Africa sepia'—and as afterthought,
'Down in my passport.' Silence for spectroscopic
Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged 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 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
See for yourself?'

NOTES

Line 7. **good-breeding:** The polite manners expected of a person from an upper-class family. In England a person's accent is often a strong indicator not only of social class but of dress, taste and habits.

Lines 11-14. Public telephone booths in England used to be painted red, and the old-style ones required the user to push Buttons A and B to put in coins and make connections. Pillar boxes for posting mail, and buses, especially in London, are also red.

QUESTIONS

1. What causes the first episode of silence in the poem? Why is the landlady's good-breeding 'pressurized'? What estimation of her does the poet make during her silence?
2. In the second episode of silence, why is the speaker dumbfounded? What forces him to break the silence? What 'surrender' has taken place?
3. The poet refers to the telephone booth as 'public-hide and-speak.' He mentions 'self-confession.' Do these two phrases indicate a feeling of shame or embarrassment?
4. The writer describes his colour as 'West African sepia.' This silences the landlady. Why? Why does the writer produce so many fanciful names for shades of colours, like 'milk chocolate' and 'peroxide blonde'?