

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS

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C

Tom McCarthy

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## About the Book

*C* follows the short, intense life of Serge Carrefax, a man who – as his name suggests – surges into the electric modernity of the early twentieth century, transfixed by the technologies that will obliterate him.

Born to the sound of one of the very earliest experimental wireless stations, Serge finds himself steeped in a weird world of transmissions, whose very air seems filled with cryptic and poetic signals of all kinds. What follows is a stunning tour de force in which the eerily idyllic settings of pre-war Europe give way to the exhilarating flight paths of the front line aeroplane radio operator, then the prison camps of Germany, the drug-fuelled London of the roaring twenties and, finally, the ancient tombs of Egypt.

## About the Author

Tom McCarthy was born in 1969 and grew up in London. His creation, in 1999, of the International Necronautical Society (INS) has led to publications, installations and exhibitions in galleries and museums around the world, from Tate Britain and the ICA in London to The Drawing Center in New York. He regularly writes on literature and art for publications including the *New York Times*, the *London Review of Books* and *Artforum*.

ALSO BY TOM McCARTHY

*Remainder*

*Men in Space*

*Tintin and the Secret of Literature*

FOR EVA STENRAM

TOM McCARTHY

C

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

Ourselves must we beneath the Couch of Earth  
Descend, ourselves to make a Couch—for  
whom?

—OMAR KHAYYÁM



ONE

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**Caul**

DR. LEARMONT, NEWLY APPOINTED general practitioner for the districts of West Masedown and New Eliry, rocks and jolts on the front seat of a trap as it descends the lightly sloping path of Versoie House. He has sore buttocks: the seat's hard and uncushioned. His companion, Mr. Dean of Hudson and Dean Deliveries (Lydium and Environs Since 1868), doesn't seem to feel any discomfort. His glazed eyes stare vaguely ahead; his leathery hands, reins woven through their fingers, hover just above his knees. The rattle of glass bottles and the fricative rasp of copper wire against more copper wire rise from the trap's back and, mixing with the click and shuffle of the horse's hooves on gravel, hang undisturbed about the still September air. Above the vehicle tall conifers rise straight and inert as columns. Higher, much further out, black birds whirr silently beneath a concave vault of sky.

Between the doctor's legs are wedged a brown case and a black inhaling apparatus. In his hand he holds a yellow piece of paper. He's scrutinising this, perplexed, as best he can. From time to time he glances up from it to peer through the curtain of conifers, which reveal, then quickly conceal again, glimpses of mown grass and rows of smaller trees with white fruit and green and red foliage. There's movement around these: small limbs reaching, touching

and separating in a semi-regular pattern, as though practising a butterfly or breaststroke.

The trap rolls through a hanging pall of wood smoke, then turns, clearing the conifers. Now Learmont can see that the limbs belong to children, four or five of them, playing some kind of game. They stand in a loose circle, raising their arms and patting their hands together. Their lips are moving, but no sound's emerging from them. Occasionally a squawk of laughter ricochets around the orchard, but it's hard to tell which child it's coming from. Besides, the laughter doesn't sound quite right. It sounds distorted, slightly warped—ventriloquised almost, as though piped in from somewhere else. None of the children seem to notice his arrival; none of them, in fact, seem to be aware of their own individual presence outside and beyond that of the moving circle, their separateness given over to its fleshy choreography of multiplied, entwining bodies.

Without jerking the reins or speaking to the horse, Mr. Dean pulls the trap to a halt. Beside it, to its right, a narrow, still stream lies in front of a tall garden wall over which, from the far side, ferns and wisteria are spilling. To the trap's left, a veined set of rose-bush stems and branches, flowers gone, clings to another wall. The wood-smoke pall comes from beyond this. So, too, does an old man with a rake, emerging from a doorway in the wall to shunt a wheelbarrow across the gravel.

"Hello!" Learmont calls out to him. "Hello?"

The old man stops, sets down his wheelbarrow and looks back at Learmont.

"Can you tell me where to find the main house? The entrance?"

The old man gestures with his free hand: *over there*. Then, taking up the handle of his wheelbarrow once more, he shuffles past the trap towards the orchard. Learmont listens as his footsteps die away. Eventually he turns to Mr. Dean and says:

“Silent as a tomb.”

Mr. Dean shrugs. Dr. Learmont climbs down onto the gravel, shakes his legs and looks around. The old man seemed to be pointing beyond the overspilling garden wall. This, too, has a small doorway in it.

“Why don’t you wait here?” Learmont suggests to Mr. Dean. “I’ll go and find—” he holds his yellow paper up and scrutinises it again—“this Mr. Carrefax.”

Mr. Dean nods. Dr. Learmont takes his case and inhaler, steps onto a strip of grass and crosses a small wooden bridge above the moat-like stream. Then, lowering his head beneath wisteria that manage to brush it nonetheless, he walks through the doorway.

Inside the garden are chrysanthemums, irises, tulips and anemones, all stacked and tumbling over one another on both sides of a path of uneven mosaic paving stones. Learmont follows the path towards a passageway formed by hedges and a roof of trellis strung with poisonberries and some kind of wiry, light-brown vine whose strands lead off to what look like stables. As he nears the passageway, he can hear a buzzing sound. He stops and listens. It seems to be coming from the stables: an intermittent, mechanical buzz. Learmont thinks of going in and asking the people operating the machinery for more directions, but, reasoning that it might be running on its own, decides instead to continue following the path. This forks to the right and, after passing through a doorway in another wall, splits into a maze-pattern that unfolds across a lawn on whose far side stands another wall containing yet another doorway. Learmont strides across the lawn and steps through this third doorway, which deposits him onto the edge of the orchard he saw as he first arrived. The large, lightly sloping gravel path he descended with Mr. Dean is now on the orchard’s far side, half-hidden by the conifers; a smaller footpath, on which he’s now standing, lies perpendicular to this, between the garden’s outer wall and

the orchard's lower edge. The children are still there, wrapped up in their mute pantomime. Learmont runs his eye beyond them: the rows of small, white-fruited trees give over to an unkempt lawn that, after sixty yards or so, turns into a field on which the odd sheep grazes. The field rises to a ridge; a telegraph line runs across this, then falls down the far side, away from view.

Learmont glances at his paper once again, then turns to his left and follows the footpath along the garden's outer wall—until he eventually finds, at the end of this, the house.

## ii

He rings the bell, then steps back and looks up at the building. Its front is overgrown with ivy that has started to turn red. He rings the bell again, bringing his ear up to the door. This time someone's heard it: he can hear footsteps approaching. A maid opens for him. She looks flustered: her hair is dishevelled, her sleeves rolled up and her hands and brow wet. A girl of three or four stands behind her, holding a towel. Both maid and girl look at Learmont's case and inhaler.

"Delivery?" the maid asks.

"Well, I ... yes," he answers, holding up his paper. "I've come to—"

A man appears from within the house and pushes his way past the maid and child.

"Zinc and selenium?" he barks out.

"That's in the trap," Learmont replies. "But I came with it to—"

"And acid? And the reels of copper?" the man interrupts. He's portly and his voice is booming. He must be forty, forty-four. "Came to—what?"

"I came to deliver the baby."

"Came to—ah, yes! Deliver: of course! Splendid! You can ... Yes, let's see ... Maureen can show you where ... You say the copper's in the drive?"

"Beyond the ..." Dr. Learmont tries to point back past the gardens, but he can't remember which direction he's just come from.

"And there's a man there with it? Perhaps you could help us to—"

"Sir ..." the maid says.

"Maureen—what?" the man replies. Maureen gasps at him exasperatedly. He stares at her for a few seconds and then slaps his thigh and tells her: "No, of course: you take the doctor to her. Is everything ...?"

"Fine, sir," Maureen informs him. "Thanks for your concern."

"Splendid!" he booms. "Well, you just carry on. Maureen will see to it that you have everything you ... Is that the telegram?"

He's looking at Learmont's yellow paper, his eyes glowing with excitement.

"I was a little confused ..." Learmont begins, but the man grabs the paper off him and begins to read aloud:

" '... expected next twenty-four hours' ... good ... 'parturient in labour since last night ...' Excellent! 'Parturient,' each letter crystal clear!"

"We weren't quite sure as to the provenance ..."

"What—provenance? Hang on: what's this? 'Doctor refuested as soon as ...'? 'Refuested'? What's that for a damn word?"

"Sir!" Maureen says.

"She's heard much worse," he barks. " 'Refuested'? I've been ... That blasted key!"

"Sweet Jesus!" says Maureen. She turns to the child and takes the towel from her. Another woman appears from the hallway, carrying a tray of biscuits out towards the orchard

and trailing in her wake a cat. "Go with Miss Hubbard," Maureen tells the child.

"... *F* ... *Q* ..." the man mumbles, then, barking again: "Provenance?"

"We weren't quite sure of the telegram's provenance," Learmont explains. "It didn't originate in the post office down the road in Lydium, yet it seemed to come down the same line which—"

"Miss Hubbard," the man says, "wait."

The second woman pauses in the doorway. "Yes, Mr. Carrefax?" she asks.

"Miss Hubbard, I can't hear the children speaking," he tells her.

"They're playing, Mr. Carrefax," she replies.

"Are you sure they're not signing?"

"I told them that's not allowed. I think they—"

"What? Told them? Telling them won't do it on its own! You have to *make* them speak. All the time!"

The child is reaching her arm up to the tray of biscuits. The cat is watching the child's efforts closely, still and tense. Maureen takes Learmont's sleeve and starts to pull him into the house.

"The provenance, good doctor, is right here!" Mr. Carrefax booms at him as he squeezes past. "*F* and *Q* notwithstanding. Disappointing. Fixable. The copper! In the drive, you say?"

"There's a man waiting in a—"

"Splendid! Miss Hubbard, if I can't hear them I'll think they're signing."

"I'll do what I can, Mr. Carrefax," Miss Hubbard tells him.

"At all times!" he barks at her. "I want to hear them *speak*!"

He strides out with her, heading for the drive. The child follows the biscuits, and the cat follows the child. Maureen leads Dr. Learmont in the other direction, up the staircase.

There's a tapestry hanging above this, a silk weaving that depicts either this same staircase or one very similar to it. They cross the landing at the top and step into a room. A second tapestry hangs on the wall of this: another picture woven in silk, this time of an Oriental scene in which pony-tailed peasants reach up into trees full of the same white fruit as the ones in the orchard. Lower down the tapestry, beneath the trees, more peasants are unravelling dark balls. Beneath them, in the room itself, a woman lies supine on a bed. A bearing-down sheet has been tied around the mattress, but the woman isn't clutching this. She's lying back quite peacefully, although her thick brown hair is wet with sweat. A second maid sits beside her on a chair, holding her hand. The woman in the bed smiles vaguely at Learmont.

"Mrs. Carrefax?" he asks her.

She nods. Dr. Learmont sets down his canister and, opening his case across the bed, asks:

"How far apart are your contractions?"

"Three minutes," she tells him. Her voice is soft and grainy. There's something slightly unusual about it, something beyond fatigue, that Learmont can't quite place: it's not a foreign voice, but not quite native, either. He takes her blood pressure. As he removes the strap her body is seized by a new contraction. Her face scrunches, her mouth opens, but no scream or shout comes from it: just a low, barely perceptible growling. The contraction lasts for ten or fifteen seconds.

"Painful?" Learmont asks her when it's over.

"It is as though I had been poisoned," she replies. She turns her head away from him and gazes through the window at the sky.

"Have you been taking any painkillers?" he asks.

She doesn't answer. He repeats the question.

"She has to see you speaking," the bedside maid tells him.



“What?”

“She has to see your lips move, sir. She’s deaf.”

He leans over the bed and waves his hand in front of Mrs. Carrefax’s face; she turns her head towards him. He repeats his question once more. She seems to understand it, but just smiles vaguely back at him again.

“Small doses of laudanum, sir,” the bedside maid says.

“I prefer chloroform,” Learmont says.

Mrs. Carrefax’s eyes light up. Her soft, grainy, strange voice utters the word “Chlorodyne?”

“No, *chloroform*,” Learmont tells her, pronouncing the name clearly and emphatically. He takes a gauze mask from his case and, fixing this to the end of his inhaler’s tube, straps it round Mrs. Carrefax’s face. He opens a valve on the canister’s neck; a long, slow hissing seeps out as the gas makes its way along the canvas corridor towards her mouth and nose. The muscles in Mrs. Carrefax’s cheeks slacken; her pupils dilate. After half a minute Learmont closes the valve and unstraps the mask. A second contraction soon follows; again the woman’s body seizes up, but her face registers less pain. He refixes the mask, administers more chloroform and watches the silent features further slacken and dilate beneath their gag. When he removes it again, she begins to murmur:

“... un fleuve ... un serpent d’eau noir ...”

“What’s that?” he asks.

“It is like a fall of velvet,” she tells him. “Black velvet ... covering a camera ...”

“That’s the chloroform,” he says.

“... a camera,” she tells him, “looking in the dark ... There is a river with a water snake, swimming towards me ... More.” Her hand releases the bedside maid’s and gestures to the canister.

“I don’t want to knock you out completely,” Dr. Learmont says. “I’ll let you—”

"Sophie!" Maureen gasps. Learmont follows her eyes towards the doorway. The child is standing in it, watching. Maureen walks over and plants herself in front of her, blocking her view of the room. "You shouldn't be here!" she scolds—then, softening, scoops her up into her arms and says: "We'll go and help Frieda make the kenno." As Learmont listens to her heavy footsteps descending the staircase, another contraction takes hold of Mrs. Carrefax. He takes from his case a bottle of carbolic acid and tells the bedside maid to go and fetch him olive oil.

"Olive oil, sir?" she repeats.

"Yes," he answers, rolling up his sleeves. "Not long to wait now."

But there is long to wait: all afternoon, and more. He leaves the room twice: once to stretch his legs in the hallway, from whose window he watches Mr. Carrefax and Mr. Dean carrying the coils of copper wire and crates of bottles through the walled-in garden to the stables; once to eat some sandwiches the maids have knocked up for him. He administers more chloroform and hears, above the hiss, the sound of Mr. Dean's trap making its way up the gravel path, departing. The contractions continue; Mrs. Carrefax dips into and out of her twilight sleep. Dusk turns into evening, then night.

The final pushes come at half past two. The bedside maid holds Mrs. Carrefax's shoulders, Mrs. Carrefax grips the bearing-down sheet and the baby's head appears between her legs—or rather, half-appears behind a glistening film of plasma, a skin-membrane. Learmont has heard of this phenomenon but never witnessed it before: the baby has a caul. The amniotic bag envelops the entire head, a silky hood. As soon as the baby's fully out, Learmont pinches this away from its skin and peels it upwards from the neck, removing it. He washes off the green-and-red mess covering the rest of the body, ties and

cuts the cord, wraps the baby in a sheet and hands it to the mother.

"A boy," he tells her. "Now we need to get your afterbirth out."

He starts filling a syringe with epithemalodine. When it's ready, he takes the baby back from her and places him in the maid's hands. The baby starts to cry.

"This will sting a little," Learmont says, tapping the air bubbles out. He straps the gauze mask to the mother's face again and turns the chloroform back on, then shoots the epithemalodine into the folds of her vagina. Her body flinches; her back arches, then relaxes into the bed again. The placenta follows shortly afterwards. Learmont turns the valve off, looks down at the muffled woman and tells her:

"I'll get rid of this—unless you want to bury it. Some people do. Some people even fry it up and eat it. And the caul is meant to be a sign of—"

But she cuts him short with a gesture of her hand towards the canister.

"It can't hurt, I suppose," he says. "We'll give it a couple more minutes." He turns the valve back on. Mrs. Carrefax's eyes warm and widen. The baby stops crying. For a long while the room is silent but for the hiss of the chloroform and, quieter than this, the intermittent mechanical buzzing he heard earlier, floating in from outside, from the stables.

### iii

At dawn he's fed a breakfast of kippers, eggs and bread. When he's finished Maureen tells him that Mr. Carrefax would like to see him.

"Where is he?" Learmont asks her.

She snorts and answers: "In his workshop, of course. Follow the house round to the left and you'll find it, through

a doorway in the garden wall."

There's dew on the grass and snakes of mist about the tree trunks in the orchard where the children were playing yesterday. Following the perimeter of the house as instructed, Learmont turns away from the orchard and, walking towards a part of the estate he didn't cross on his way in, passes some kind of enclosed park. A gate is set in its tall wall, its columns topped with obelisk-shaped carvings. Behind the wall, taller, conker trees loom, their leaves all big and yellow. The park drops away as the ivy-coated house wall turns and leads him across a neat lawn held in by low walls, then onwards through a further wall of hedge onto a smaller, unmown lawn around whose far side lime trees stand. He picks a very quiet buzzing sound up as he moves across this, but it's not the same as the buzzing he heard coming from the stables: this one seems less agitated, less electrical. He understands why as he comes to the lawn's far side: beehives are set among the limes. He skirts these and passes through a second hedge-wall to emerge into a sub-section of garden in which a rectangular trough-pond sits absolutely still, covered in pea-green slime. At the far end of this sub-section, a door leads back into the walled-in garden he arrived through yesterday. He tries it, but it's locked. He can hear a metallic snipping sound on the other side.

"Mr. Carrefax?" he calls.

The metallic snipping stops and Mr. Carrefax's voice booms back:

"What? Who's that?"

"The doctor," Learmont calls back. "The baby's fine and well."

"Fine and—what? I've misplaced the key to this door, I'm afraid. You'll have to come in through the far side. Follow the wall round."

It's not apparent how to do this: the wall's so overgrown with ivy and with bushes extending outwards like

buttresses that it's hard to tell where it leads. Learmont detours away from it into a long avenue of conker trees behind which lies an apple orchard. The avenue takes him towards a set of smaller houses, but before he reaches these he picks the wall up again, emerging from still swirls of tangled hedge to turn and run beside the narrow, moat-like stream that he crossed yesterday; eventually it passes the same wooden bridge and presents to him, once he's re-crossed this, the same small doorway. He's come full circle. He bows his head again, steps back through the wisteria onto uneven mosaic paving and moves once more between the rows of stacked-up tulips and chrysanthemums.

The purple of the irises seems stronger, more intense that it did yesterday. The passageway formed by the hedges and trellis seems more closed-in, more laced-over. The wiry, light-brown vines that split from the poisonberries and run off towards the stables seem to have multiplied. When he arrives beneath them he sees that they're not vines at all: they're strands of copper wire, and more have been strung up since yesterday. The coils that came with him in Hudson and Dean's trap are spilling unravelled from the stables' entrances. Mr. Carrefax is standing over one with metal cutters, measuring a length.

"Hold this," he tells Learmont, handing him one end.

Dr. Learmont obeys. Mr. Carrefax paces from the stable to a point on the trellis, paying out the length as he goes.

"Twelve feet, I'd say. Remember that. You hungry?"

"I've had eggs and kippers and—"

"Kippers and—what? Take kenno with me. There's some groaning malt as well. Splendid stuff!"

He leads Learmont into one of the stables. Benches of machinery lie under shelves on which sit rows of instruments: telegraph tappers, telephone receivers, large phonograph machines with strips of paper hanging from them, wax cylinders, bottles, objects and instruments whose name and function he can only guess at. On a work

table, among metal shavings, are a jug of dark brown liquid, two mugs and some cheesecake. Wiping his hands on a cloth whose surface looks no cleaner than they are, Mr. Carrefax cuts two slices of the cheesecake with a knife, hands one to the doctor, then pours out two mugs of malt.

"Breakfast, lunch, dinner—who knows? Haven't slept all night," he tells Learmont. "Your health, Doctor!"

The malt's refreshing; the cheesecake is rich and sharp. The two men eat and drink in silence for a moment.

"I've fixed it," Mr. Carrefax tells Dr. Learmont after a while.

"Fixed what?" Learmont asks.

"The *F* and *Q* fir—quirk, I mean. It wouldn't have happened if I'd run the wire all the way from here up to the public lines uninterrupted."

"I'm not sure I understand," Learmont says.

"Aha!" booms Mr. Carrefax. He places a firm hand on Learmont's back and marches him out to the workshop's entrance. "Look!" he says, pointing up at the trails of copper running over their heads to merge with the curling poisonberries on the trellis. "Where do you think they end?"

Learmont's eyes follow the trellis to the wall and the locked door on whose far side he stood five minutes ago. Among the billowing mesh of ivy and bushes stands a kind of metal weathercock. The wires are wound around the base of this like serpents.

"They end there?" he asks.

"Aha!" booms Carrefax again. "Yes—and no! The wires end, but the *signal* jumps onwards! Five feet, for the moment. With this copper I'll be able to increase it to ten—fifteen even. It's been jumped further, mind you. That Italian is out on Salisbury Plain right now, with all his towers and masts and kites ... He's in with the Post Office, you see? Got all the funding. Always the way! A mentor—nod, wink here and there: probably a Freemason. The new

birth will bear his name no doubt, when it comes. Boy or girl?"

"The baby? A boy."

"Splendid! Splendid! Have some more malt and kenno. Came out smoothly? The girl had to be dragged out. Virtually needed toys set at the foot of the bed before she'd show."

"It took a while, but he came calmly in the end. He had a caul."

"Had a—what? A cold?"

"A caul. A veil around his head: a kind of web. It's meant to bring good luck—especially to sailors."

"Sailors? I tell you, Doctor: get this damn thing working and they won't need luck. There'll be a web around the world for them to send their signals down. You came with the delivery trap?"

"Yes. The telegraph company's woman had taken both your messages, so she knew Hudson and Dean were sending a man down."

"Splendid! You need transport back, though."

"Lydium's not far. I can walk there and take a train."

"No need to walk!" booms Mr. Carrefax. "I'll telegraph for a new trap to come and fetch you."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Dr. Learmont tells him. "The walk will clear my head."

"Will clear your—what? I wouldn't hear of it! Go back into the house. Rest while I jump your orders clear over the wall."

Dr. Learmont obeys. He's too tired not to. He walks back through the irises and chrysanthemums, across the narrow stream, along the avenue of conker trees. The black birds are still whirring high above them; Learmont can't tell if they've multiplied or if it's just his tiredness breaking the sky's dome into slow-moving dots. Inside the house, he gathers his possessions back into his case. He can't find the

phials of epithemalodine or the codeine pills, but it's not important: there are plenty more back in the surgery.

The baby's feeding; its mother sits up in the bed, calm and contented, while the bedside maid combs her hair, unravelling it like the Chinese women pulling at their strange dark balls in the silk tapestry above them. Maureen stands at the foot of the bed; in front of her, enfolded in her arms, the girl watches her brother silently. They all watch silently: the room is silent but for the clicking lips of the sucking baby and the copper buzzing rising from the garden.



IN THE BEGINNING," says Simeon Carrefax, standing on a small raised podium in Schoolroom One, "—in the beginning, ladies and gentlemen, was the Word."

His audience, a gaggle of the parents of prospective pupils at the Versoie Day School for the Deaf, sit squeezed into the schoolroom's child-size chairs. Miss Hubbard stands behind them at the back of the room, her gaze darting nervously between Carrefax and a box full of small pieces of lead piping lying by her feet.

"The Word was with God," Carrefax continues, "and the Word was God. Which is to say: speech is divine. Speech itself breathed the earth into being—and breathed life into it, that it in turn may breathe and speak. What, I ask you, are the rising and falling of its mountains and its valleys or the constant heaving of its seas but breath? What are the winds that rush and swirl around it, now one way, now another? What are the jets of steam that gush from geysers or the spray that issues from the blow-holes of whales? And which man who has stood beside the torrent of a waterfall or, pausing in a wood, has heard the whisper of the leaves, the chirp and clamour of the birds, can deny that he has heard earth speaking?"

His eyes sweep the room intently. As they fall on individual parents, the latter cast their own eyes to the floor, or fix them on a wall-mounted whiteboard behind

Carrefax. Here, drawn in charcoal across cotton-backed ground glass, a diagram shows plates, hinges, corridors and levers locked together in an intricate formation that suggests an irrigation system or the mechanism of a crane.

“And we, ladies and gentlemen: do we not also move to the same gasping and exhaling rhythm? Is not our spirit, truly named, *suspirio*? Breathing, we live; speaking, we partake of the sublime. In our conversing each one with the other—listening, responding—we form our attachments: friendships, enmities and loves. It is through our participation in the realm of speech that we become moral, learn to respect the law, to understand another’s pain, and to expand and fortify our faculties through the great edifices of the arts and sciences: poetry, reason, argument, discourse. Speech is the method and the measure of our flowering into bloom. It is the currency and current of our congress in the world and all the crackling wonders of its institutions and exchanges.”

He pauses, and the parents grow aware of their own breathing, suddenly loud and ponderous in the quiet of the schoolroom. He draws his head and shoulders back and continues:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to call myself an oralist. I count among my intellectual forebears Deschamps, Heinicke, Gérando and the great Alexander Bell. The human body,” he says, turning half-round to tap his knuckles on the whiteboard’s glass, “is a mechanism. When its engine-room, the thorax, a bone-girt vault for heart and lungs whose very floor and walls are constantly in motion—when this chamber exerts pressure sufficient to force open the trap-door set into its ceiling and send air rushing outwards through the windpipe, sound ensues. It’s as simple as that. Children!” He turns to face a row of three boys and a girl who have been sitting quietly on the side of the podium, opens the palm of his right hand and raises it firmly. “Up!”

The children rise from their chairs. Like a conductor Carrefax holds his hands out and then shoves them forwards, quivering in the air in front of him—and all four children break into a chorus made up of a single word:

*“Haaaaaaa.”*

The sound is long, drawn out and without harmony or intonation. A few seconds into it several prospective parents shift in their small seats, adjusting their positions. The children’s eyes stare straight ahead, vacant, as though entranced, or taken over by a set of ghosts; their shoulders, drawn back as they launched into their utterance, slowly crumple and deflate as it fades out. Carrefax draws his hands back again, then once more shoves them quivering forwards and the children moan again:

*“Haaaaaaa.”*

The sound, the second time round, seems like a response, a weary, empty answer to a hollow question. Carrefax’s hands draw it out for as long as they can, all the while trembling from the effort. Eventually, though, the children’s voices start to shudder, then to break down into groans, which die away as the inarticulate spirits that have seized their bodies give up and relinquish them again.

“Children,” says Carrefax, turning his palms to face the podium’s boards, “down!”

The children sit back in their chairs. Carrefax points at them and announces:

“When these four children came to my school, each of them was held to be not only deaf but also mute. What? Yes, *mute*: doubly afflicted. And yet how erroneous the diagnosis! Are you, sir, considered mute due to your lack of proficiency in the Mandarin tongue? Or you, madam, because you never speak Estonian and, beyond that, remain entirely ignorant of the very existence of Quichua, the language of the remote Inca people of the Andean cordillera?”

He fixes two prospective parents with his gaze. They look slightly alarmed and shake their heads.

"Of course not! No human born with thorax, throat and mouth is incapable of speaking these or any other languages! Yet how would you come to speak a tongue that you had never been exposed to, tried on, tested? So is it for the deaf child with English. Speech is not a given: it must be wrung from him, wrenched out. The body's motor must be set to work, its engine-parts aligned, fine-tuned to one another. Miss Hubbard."

Blushing, Miss Hubbard crouches down beside her box and, picking up the short lengths of lead piping, starts distributing these around the room.

"Gentlemen and ladies," Carrefax instructs the prospective parents, "press your lips firmly together and blow air between them."

The prospective parents look at one another.

"Do it!" Carrefax commands. "Compress your lips, like so—*hmmm*—and blow air through them."

He half-raises his hands in front of him again. Slowly, the prospective parents purse their lips, take deep breaths, then expel these through them like so many toddlers making farting sounds at table. As the sounds fill the room, the parents' faces redden with the strain, or with embarrassment, or both.

"It is a far-from-pleasant sound, I think you'll all agree," announces Carrefax above the tuneless rasping. "A fly trapped in a glass sounds no less gracious. But now take the length of pipe you each have in your hand and, making once again your buzz, bring the tube firmly to your lips. Go on."

The prospective parents obey. As each one presses the tube to their mouth, the flatulent rasps give over to clear, trumpet-like notes.

"Splendid!" booms Carrefax. "Now tighten your lips further." The prospective parents do this and the notes rise

in pitch. "Wonderful! Now you, sir, and you, madam, loosen yours two notches while the others hold them tight." They comply; the high-pitched notes become offset by deeper ones. "Magnificent!" roars Carrefax. "We have a brass band here, no less! What symphonies we could compose! Miss Hubbard."

Miss Hubbard moves around the classroom gathering the instruments back from their players.

"Were we to pay a visit to the finest opera singer," Carrefax announces, "and, secreting ourselves among the curtains and décor of the opera house armed with a sword, rush out onto the stage right in the middle of her most enchanting aria to cut her head off in mid-song with one sharp, well-aimed blow—Splendid! Yes, what? Were we to do this, her headless neck, while air still rushed through it, would issue forth a sound just like your buzzing lips denuded of their pipes. Well, in the same way, deaf children ... deaf children are like headless opera singers inasmuch as, inasmuch as ..."

There's a pause while he searches for his next words; then a clang as Miss Hubbard drops a length of lead pipe to the floor. Prospective parents turn to look at her. She curtsies to pick it up; Carrefax clears his throat and continues:

"Our job here is to restore to the deaf child the function of his pipes and all their stops: the larynx with its valves; the timbre-moulding pharynx; the pillar-supported palate which, depressed, hangs like a veil before the nares; and so on. Speech, like song, is but the mechanical result of certain adjustments of the vocal organs. If we explain to deaf children the correct adjustments of the organs they possess, *they will speak*. Timothy, Samuel and Felicity—" he points to three of his four protégés, opens his palm and resolutely raises it towards the ceiling—"up!"

The two boys and the girl rise once more. Carrefax conducts them with one hand this time, using it to sculpt

precise shapes and positions in the air in front of him, repeating a sequence which is mirrored in the looping series of sounds that spill from the children in unison:

*"Ah ee o ee, ah ee o ee, ah ee o ee ..."*

He lets the sequence run through several times, then brings it to a halt with a decapitating slice.

"Here, with the mere sinking and lifting of the palate, we already have the base for a range of words. Timothy." He singles out a boy with freckles and, pinching his own ear between his fingers, draws from the boy the utterance:

*"Ee-ah."*

"Splendid! Good lad!" he booms. Then, taking a piece of charcoal, he writes on the board the word *area* before pointing to the girl. "Felicity."

Felicity pronounces the progression *"aih-ree-ah."* Its second syllable is expelled with a heavy breath.

"Splendid again!" booms Carrefax. He turns back to the board, wipes out *area* and writes in its place *eerie*. "Samuel."

The round, blond Samuel reads the word aloud. Again a heavy exhalation flushes out the *"rie."* Carrefax nods at him contentedly, turns to his audience and tells them:

*"Ear, area, eerie: the slightest command of our vocal apparatus opens up for us the wherewithal to indicate the body's organs, to conceive of blocks of space, to name the southernmost of North America's Great Lakes and to express the air of mystery that clouds our dreams. How much more of a blossoming of our verbal powers arises when we bring into play the tongue, which flicks against the palate's ceiling like the brush of Michelangelo against the Sistine Chapel's still-wet plaster, or the lips which frame the masterpieces crafted in our throats and mouths—and, in so doing, attract, as temples to the pilgrims of our eyes. How right is Romeo, upon his first meeting with Juliet, to shun her palmistry! Our lips communicate, not our hands. Watch this profoundly deaf child read mine—and*