

ELIAS VORPAHL



THE WORD TROVE



*For in the end,
all we are doing is seeking
to weave poetry into life,
to find poetry in life itself.*

Taken from a letter written by Michael Ende
to his friend Peter Boccarius, dated 24 June 1949

FOR DIANA



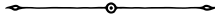
PROLOGUE

The old man took up his quill. Now he knew how the story should begin. How he'd despaired, aware of how fleeting his discovery was! His mind had been full of so many details, but he hadn't been able to stitch them all together. Something vital had been missing. But today, he knew what to do. He paced up and down the little hut one last time, glancing at the sheets of paper covered in scribbled notes. This time, he didn't simply add to them. Instead, he sat down at his desk, dipped his quill in the inkpot and wrote: 'The old man took up his quill ...'



CHAPTER

ONE



Speechlessness

The Word woke up. The little letter on its right syllable had gone completely numb. It threw off its blanket and stretched its syllables until all the weariness had gone out of them. Then it got up slowly, dressed, yawned and went into the kitchen, where its parents had laid the table for breakfast.

Its father lowered his newspaper. "While you've been sleeping the day away, the world's got a darned sight crazier," he announced.

The Word skirted around the table and gave its mother a kiss. "Why?" it asked. "What's happened?"

"They've increased the defence budget again. If things carry on like this, all our research at the Institute will soon just be about finding ways to protect wordkind from humanity. It's absurd!"

"So there are ways?" said the Word, biting off a mouthful of toast.

"Of protecting ourselves, you mean?" Its father sized it up from left to right. His child's wordlets had touched a nerve. "We words don't need to protect ourselves. What we really need to be doing is thinking about how to get more humans to read and write. Writing embodies us in our purest form, in absolute clarity. But when we're spoken, we get lost in meaninglessness. That's where the real danger lies."

"Daaad, please!" The Word rolled its eyes.

"Let's change the subject," its mother chimed in. "Have you seen who's going to be hosting the Linguistic Games this year?"

"No. But let me finish, it's important. If humans stop reading us, we'll be forgotten. Words will disappear, and our world will cease to exist."

"Dad, no one *seriously* believes that words need humans.

You're the only one who thinks that. Have you ever heard of a word just disappearing off the face of the earth? No: all you ever hear about are terrible stories in the newspapers about words who've been spoken out loud, getting mangled and garbled and deformed. Why would anyone believe you?"

"The Linguistics are going to be hosted by Wordsmith again this year," offered the Word's mother once more – but nobody was listening.

"It's not about belief," said the Word's father. "It's about facts, proven by research. We can't just demonise human beings. We need them; they read and write us. They enable us to exist. Without them, our world would disappear much more quickly than we think."

"Enough! I've had enough of this! Everything's always about you and your research! Have you ever once thought about us? You built our whole house to look like a giant book, just to get your message across to the rest of the world! Do you know how ridiculous that is? How ridiculous all my friends think it is?" The Word jumped up from the table.

"I thought you liked this house! Come along now, don't get your vowels in a twist. Sit down and we can talk about this."

"No!" the Word retorted. It left its parents at the breakfast table and stormed out of the house.

Why did Dad always have to be so stubborn about his research? The house wasn't the issue at all. It was a lovely house, and the Word couldn't care less what anyone else said or thought. It was just annoying the way Dad was always so convinced of his own opinion.

The Word followed the wide road that led to his friend

Deaf's house. Other words would probably have been overawed by the sheer size of the house, but the Word had known *Deaf* since they were very young, and it strode confidently through the open gate. The servants spotted the Word as it approached the front door, and immediately busied themselves with preparations to welcome their master's guest. They arranged themselves in two long rows outside the double doors of the Great Hall. The Word greeted some of the servants whom it knew by sight. But despite being friends with *Deaf* for so long, it still didn't know all their names – there were just too many of them. The Word entered the Great Hall, which was *Deaf's* favourite room because it was the most spacious. The servants filed in behind it in a long line and formed a large circle around the room, standing one behind the other. The words which *Deaf* tended to use most often stood right at the front. In the centre of the hall was a podium, and on it a leather armchair. *Deaf* sat in the chair and prepared for their conversation by doing stretching exercises with his fingers. When the Word reached the podium, *Deaf* pointed to a word in the front row of the circle of servants. The word called out its own name:

“I!”

Then *Deaf* pointed to another word. This too shouted its name: “Was!”

Deaf swivelled in his chair and pointed to another word standing in the circle right behind him.

“Hoping ...”

And so it went on: *Deaf* pointed to eight of his servants in turn, and they all announced their names one after the other to form a sentence: “I was hoping you would drop by again.”

“It is great to see you,” said the Word.

Deaf spun around in his chair, surveying the whole of the circle. His servants stepped out of the circle in a certain order – first the word *It*, then the word *Is*, and finally the word *You*.

Deaf watched the words as they presented themselves. He knew all their names, and nodded in understanding. The Word went up to the podium and embraced his friend.



The Word proceeded to tell him what had just happened at home. Deaf was a good listener. He swivelled on his armchair, watching attentively and taking note of each word as it stepped forward. When the Word had finished speaking, Deaf pointed to his servants one by one to compose sentences:

“Your dad is always the same.”

The words called out their names.

“It is such a contradiction,” Deaf went on. “The rest of the world tries to stay as far away as possible from humans, and yet your dad insists we cannot do without them. How can that be?”

“I know. And even if it’s true, and we do need humans, how can we ever win them over? And how can we protect ourselves against them?”

The word *Protect* was standing quite a long way back, so it took a while for it to come all the way to the front.

Deaf replied: “I can’t tell you how to win them over.” The word *I* was out of breath from all the leaping around and shouting it was having to do. “But I can tell you a few ways to keep humans at bay.”

“How?” asked the Word.

Its dad had often talked of the dangers of being spoken out loud, and the importance of being read by a human being. But he’d never said anything about how that worked in practice. He was a researcher, and had devoted his life to studying theoretical matters.

Deaf looked at his friend for a moment, then started to swivel on his chair again, composing more sentences.

“When I was younger, for a long time I wanted to be somebody else. This hall did not exist then, and I had no servants. I was a young word who could neither hear nor speak.”

The Word already knew the story. Deaf came from a very rich family, but one who didn’t make a show of their wealth. The family had built this huge mansion solely for their deaf child, so that there would be enough room for all the word-servants. Ever since he was little, Deaf had had to learn to form words in his own special way. But many words found it too complicated and laborious to communicate like this, which meant Deaf didn’t have many friends he could talk to. The Word, on the other hand, was not bothered by Deaf’s unusual way of speaking. It had always loved puzzles and brainteasers, and when it had met Deaf, their first few conversations had felt a little bit like that.

“What are you getting at?” asked the Word.

“When I was younger, I often wished I could just fade away, become transparent to the world and the words in it. I tried every possible combination to achieve this, until one day I finally succeeded.”

“Succeeded in what?”

“I rearranged myself.”

“Rearranged yourself?” the Word echoed.

“Yes. If you want to protect yourself against humans, you need to be rare – you need to become a word that is seldom used. A foreign word, perhaps. Become cumbersome. Become a word that people do not use because nobody understands it. Become ugly: become an off-putting word.”

Deaf had worked himself up into a frenzy. He pointed around the room in every direction. More and more words from the second and third rows called out their names, and when even that was not enough, more servants were called into the hall. It was hot and crowded. Only by standing high up on the podium could Deaf single out the words he needed.

“Every word has to find its own way to protect itself. If you become complicated, they will only use you rarely. Try to be difficult, unpronounceable, a tongue-twister. Then humans will fear you, instead of you fearing them. Change yourself, rearrange yourself, become something different!”

The Word stared blankly at its friend. “But how does that work, Deaf? How can I rearrange myself?”

At that moment something happened, something nobody could have expected – not the Word, not Deaf, and certainly not the hundreds of servants who were now crammed into the hall. It was Deaf who turned, fear dawning in his eyes, and suddenly pointed not at the servants but at the entrance to the hall. Two creatures were standing there, slender and

straight-backed. None of the words in the room had ever seen them before, but they'd heard the stories and they all knew exactly what those creatures were. Vocal cords.

The cords stood motionless. Deaf wanted to say something, but there wasn't a single word he could call upon. Everyone in the hall was staring at the cords, poised erect in the doorway.

Then panic broke out. The words were so tightly packed together that they started to jostle each other. Those closest to the door surged backwards to escape the cords. Some of the words cried out. A few had fallen over and were desperately trying to get up again.

In the midst of all this chaos, the cords began to move. They contracted, stretched, contracted and stretched again. Then came the suction. Words were swept off their feet and skidded across the floor towards the opening that had appeared between the cords.

The first word – Deaf recognised *It* – was about to slip between the cords. The little word could not resist the suction, and neither could the others. More and more words began to disappear until whole clusters of them went tumbling into the chasm between the cords.

The armchair toppled and fell off the podium, and Deaf landed with a thud on the floor beside the Word. The force of the suction drew them both towards the cords. The Word tried to resist and hold on, but there was nothing to hold on to. Deaf clung to the podium with one hand, and grabbed his friend's wrist with the other. For a moment, they were able to resist the suction's pull.

There were hardly any words left in the hall now. Deaf looked into his friend's eyes, tears streaming down his face.

They had no way of speaking to each other anymore, but they didn't need to – they understood each other perfectly. The Word had tears in its eyes too. Then Deaf's strength failed him. His grip on the Word loosened, and it was swept away by the suction. Horrified, Deaf saw his friend being swallowed up by the vocal cords. A moment later, he let go of the armchair himself and went hurtling towards the cords.

The suction had stopped and the cords had vanished. It was quiet. Deaf lay curled up on the cold floor of the empty hall. It had been a long time since Deaf had felt so out of place. In fact, the word lying there on the floor of the hall was not Deaf anymore at all. Deaf hadn't had time to explain to his friend how words could rearrange themselves. His friend had disappeared, spoken out loud by a human being. But Deaf had managed to save himself. Just as he was being sucked towards the vocal cords, he'd rearranged himself. Deaf had become *Fade*. The suction had stopped, and the vocal cords had vanished. They'd overlooked him – just as he'd been overlooked as a child once he'd finally figured out how to rearrange himself.

It had been wonderful back then, at first. After rearranging himself to *Fade* for the very first time, he'd found he could hear and speak just like other words. He could finally do without his servants and leave his parents' mansion without losing the ability to communicate. It was all he'd ever wished for. But the more time he'd spent as *Fade*, the less at home he'd felt in this new world that had opened up to him. Other words took centre stage here, had opinions, shared ideas. He, meanwhile, stood on the sidelines and felt ignored. He knew what it meant to be Deaf; but what did it mean

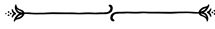
to be Fade? He'd fallen silent once more – not because he couldn't speak, but because he increasingly felt that what he had to say didn't matter.

Realisation had gradually dawned on him: just because he hadn't been able to speak like the other words didn't mean he'd actually wanted to *be* someone else. As Deaf, he hadn't had many friends, but the few he'd had – they really had *heard* him, he felt, in spite of his speechlessness. It was then that he'd decided never to rearrange himself again. It was his destiny to be a mute word, and he would accept his destiny. But then the vocal cords had come along, and now here he was. He'd been forced to become Fade, yet again.

He thought about all this as he lay there crying on the cold floor of the hall. He thought about all that he had lost – his servants, his unique way of communicating with other words ... and worst of all, his best friend, whom he had been unable to protect.

CHAPTER

TWO



Beginning & End



Warm and cold winds kept blowing in the Word's face from opposite directions, alternating every few seconds. Warm. Cold. Warm. Cold.

A foul smell was hanging in the dark air. The Word felt tight cords cutting into its syllables. It couldn't feel the ground beneath it, and seemed to be suspended in mid-air. Warm. Cold. Warm. Cold. It heard, very clearly, the voices of other words. Wherever it was, the Word was not alone.

"Out! Out! Let me out!" it heard.

Then, from a different direction, "What's going on?"

"Be quiet!" another word called out.

"Quiet? Quiet?!" asked another.

The Word tried to move, but the cords immediately tightened around its syllables.

"Argh!" it exclaimed.

"Don't struggle. There's nothing we can do," said a word from beside it.

The Word held still, and the straps loosened a little.

"You'll see for yourself in a second."

Then light came flooding in. Instinctively, the Word screwed up its eyes, but opened them again a moment later, curious to see where it was. It looked up to see a shaft crisscrossed by a web of knotted cords, in which various words were suspended. Here and there, the Word recognised some of Deaf's servants. *Can* was hanging from a cord nearby, and close to it was an indecisive-looking word called *Perhaps*. The Word itself was encircled by two long cords. They felt moist against its skin.

"The cords are going to catapult us up there," the word next to it said. He had worked for Deaf too, the Word was sure of it. What was his name again ...?

“*H... H... Hint!*” The name came back to it.

“You’ve got a good memory,” said Hint. Then he added, with urgency in his voice: “Now listen. You won’t have much time. You’re going to get catapulted up there, and when it happens you have to take a deep breath, as deep as you can. Remember, there’s no point putting up a fight.” The light disappeared again, and the shaft was plunged into darkness once more. “Oh and try not to listen to the screams. You have to block them out.”

“What’s going to happen to me up there?” asked the Word in terror, as the two cords suddenly started to tighten around its syllables again.

“You’re about to be spoken!” it heard Hint say.

Then the cords that had been wrapped around the Word gave a sudden jolt. For a moment it flew upwards through the air towards the top of the shaft. It forced itself to take a deep breath. Then it crashed into a pool of liquid, hitting the surface so hard that all the breath was knocked out of it. The Word spluttered and flailed frantically, trying to stay afloat in the viscous liquid, but to no avail. The liquid was making its letters heavy and numb. The Word sank like a stone, fighting for every little bit of oxygen it could get. When the Word reached the bottom of the pool, the ground began to quake beneath its feet and the liquid ebbed away.

The Word gasped for breath. It lay exhausted on the rough, furry ground, which was gently vibrating. Cautiously, the Word opened its eyes, still gluey from the liquid. It blinked a few times until it could see more clearly. A cold wind was blowing in its face from the opening that lay ahead of it. Beyond the opening was a sheer drop. A handful of words lay between the Word and the abyss. One of them,

sprawled on the ground, right next to the edge, was almost unrecognisable. *It* was covered in scratches and bruises, its mouth glued shut, its eyeballs sunk deep in their sockets. The short word's breathing was shallow.

After that, everything happened very fast. The rough ground beneath them shunted the words closer to the edge of the abyss, abruptly drew back and gave *It* a quick, sharp shove in the back.

"IIIIIT!" The cry resounded through the space, earsplittingly loud. It echoed off the walls, making it even louder. It was a deep, pure cry that came from the word's very being. Forced out by a human, *It* had shouted itself.

It had disappeared, and it wasn't long before two more words followed suit, yelling out their names as they went. The Word tried not to listen to their screams, but in vain. A chill ran down its syllables. So this was how humans spoke. They tortured words. Dad was wrong, it thought. Humans are monsters!

The Word was next in line now, lying right in front of the opening. At that moment, it promised itself that it would never rely on being written or read by a human being. Suddenly it felt a blow to the back and, in agony, cried out the name it had carried within itself since its birth. Everything went dark. The world was swallowed up as if submerged in the blackest of ink.

When the Word awoke, the world was still enveloped in inky blackness. But the darkness wasn't as thick as it had been in the depths of the Word's unconsciousness. Now the obscurity was pierced by a flickering reddish-yellow light, and there was a crackling, rustling sound. The ground the Word

was lying on felt soft. It wanted to turn towards the sound, but it was too weak. Its whole body ached.

“No, lie still.” An old word’s face appeared, bending over the Word. A woman. “You rest now, don’t try to move,” she whispered.

“Look after it, but don’t exaggerate.” It was a man’s voice this time, but the Word couldn’t see his face for it had already closed its eyes again.

“I have everything we need here,” said the woman. “Cold compresses for the bruised letters, bandages for the cuts and some woundwort herb for the pain ...”

Then the Word fell fast asleep.

When it awoke the next morning, an old man was sitting in a chair opposite it. He was stroking his grey beard with his index finger and thumb, staring into space, apparently lost in thought.

“Good morning,” the Word said in a slightly husky voice.

The man’s eyes cleared as he snapped out of his reverie. “Good morning!” he exclaimed. “How are you?”

“Better,” the Word replied. “I feel weak, but better.”

The Word was lying on a bed of straw. Light filtered into the room through a narrow window, and the shelves on the walls were piled high with tools. The Word saw little pick-axes, caesuras and hammers of all sizes, as well as iambic pentameters and wire brushes. There were also a pair of compasses hanging on a nail, and a verse metre ruler propped against the wall below it. The fire had burned down to ashes.

“My wife has been tending to you all night.”

“What happened?” asked the Word.

“You can’t remember, eh?” said the old man, turning to-

wards the doorway. “*Rhyme!*” he called out. “My sonnet!”

The door opened and the woman from the night before came in carrying a large tray. “I heard you whispering. Has our guest woken up at last?” She squeezed past her husband and put the tray on the bed beside the Word. “Buttered toast, syllable salve and verbal tea. Just what the doctor ordered. I’ve yet to meet a word I haven’t managed to cure with these. How are you feeling today, my dear?”

“Much better. Thank you.”

“It can’t remember anything,” her husband chimed in.

Rhyme poured the tea into a large cup and handed it to the Word. “Nothing at all, hm?” She set to work, rubbing the salve into its syllables.

“Nothing at all,” the Word replied. It paused for a moment, then said, “I don’t know my own name.”

“Listen,” the man said, “you were spoken out loud. By a human.”

The Word gulped. “A human?”

“Yes. We heard the shouts yesterday. I don’t know where the other words ended up. You were the only one we found.”

His wife screwed the cap back onto the tube of syllable salve. “It must have been a human,” she said. “We haven’t heard shouts like that in a very long time.”

The next morning the Word felt strong enough to get out of bed. Its body still ached in places, but it felt a lot better. The old woman and her husband were nowhere to be seen. The Word ventured out of the room, which seemed to double up as a bedchamber and tool shed. In the next room was the kitchen, where two folded-up camp beds stood propped against the wall. Had the old couple let him sleep in their

own bedroom? The Word heard a soft knocking sound. Then snatches of song:

*“We too are chipped away by time,
The hours must pass, the clock must chime,
I seize the moments, hold them fast,
And yet I know: this too shall pass.”*

Slowly, the Word opened the door and stepped outside. The knocking grew louder. The garden was full of sculptures, about the same size as the Word itself. It followed the sound of the knocking, weaving its way through the rows of statues. Each one was a pair of sculptures carved from a single block of stone. On a brass plate at the foot of one of the pedestals, it saw two wordlets engraved: *Heart & Soul*. The Word looked at the pair of statues and realised that they depicted exactly that – one statue was carved into the shape of a heart, and the other was a flame burning straight and still, like a candle. Another sculpture consisted of a paper-thin sheet of stone with delicate lettering on it, and a seal with a tapering handle that looked rather like a bishop on a chess board. The brass plate beneath them read: *Signed & Sealed*. Word-pairs, thought the Word, and walked on through the garden of stone-art.

The knocking sounded much closer now, and the Word heard Rhyme’s voice:

*“In the end the book is shut
And we are left with nothing but
Empty silence, blank and still
No here, no now, no we, no will.”*

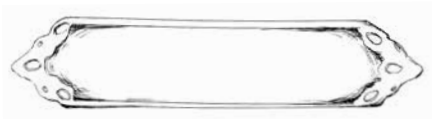
She must be standing right behind the two large statues the Word was now looking at. The sculpture was of a young couple. The man was down on one knee, clearly asking his sweetheart to marry him. The Word read the engraving on the plaque:

Rhyme & Reason.

Rhyme was sitting on a bench close by. She looked up from the sheet of paper she was holding and watched her husband work. Reason was standing in front of two hefty blocks of stone, chipping away at one of them with a hammer and chisel. When Rhyme caught sight of the Word, she beckoned it to come and sit beside her. The statue Reason was working on was nearly finished – it was a table with three words sitting around it, one of them reading the newspaper. A family having breakfast, thought the Word, and was overcome by melancholy without knowing why. The other block of stone was untouched. Reason had now put down his chisel and was in the process of attaching the brass plaque to the pedestal. The Word read ...

... nothing.

The plaque was blank.



Reason lowered his hammer. “Finished,” he said, although that was clearly not the case. Then he stepped closer to his wife and gave her a kiss. “That was a very moving poem, my love. What’s it called?”

Rhyme thought for a moment and said, “I don’t know. I don’t think it has a name yet. Perhaps I’ve simply forgotten it, just as our guest here has forgotten its name. Things don’t always need to have a name in order to be meaningful.”

“What is this place?” enquired the Word.

Reason lowered himself slowly onto the bench beside his wife. “In all the years we’ve lived here, you’re not the first word we’ve found lying in our fields. We’ve heard the shouts many times. I’ve been spoken out loud myself, you know. I was just a young man at the time.”

“Did you lose your memory too?” asked the Word.

“No. I was quite badly hurt, but my memory wasn’t affected. For me, the misfortune of being spoken out loud was actually the beginning of a wonderful story.”

Rhyme gently placed her hand on Reason’s thigh and started to speak. “I was just a young woman living here with my parents when I found him. He was gravely injured, and my mother and I nursed him back to health. As he gradually recovered, he started to tell me about all his ideas – about art, word sculpture and logic. His eyes shone as he spoke.”

“And I loved your wonderful poems, my sonnet,” said Reason, laughing. It made him look ten years younger. “A few weeks later, the first sculpture was complete.”

“That was how he proposed to me,” said Rhyme, pointing to the statue of the kneeling man which the Word had just been looking at.

“That’s a lovely story,” said the Word. Then, after a pause, it added, “And the other statues?”

Reason replied: “Whenever we found a word in the fields, a new sculpture was born. Sometimes it took years for them to be finished.”

“Why do the statues all show pairs of words?” the Word asked.

“*Signed & sealed, safe & sound, live & learn, heart & soul, now & then,*” said Rhyme. “Every word, at a certain point in its life, may meet a companion – someone who completes it, who enables it to become something it never would have thought possible before. *Signed & sealed* became a *promise*. *Live & learn* became *wisdom*. *Heart & soul* became *devotion*. Not every word in the world has the good fortune to find such a partner, of course – but our word pairs, at least, are among the lucky ones.”

The Word looked at the statue in front of them, the one it interpreted as a family sitting around the breakfast table, and again it was overcome by that feeling of melancholy which it couldn't quite explain. The other stone was still unworked and the brass plate blank. “You made this sculpture for me, didn't you?” it said. “Why a family?”

Reason stood up and went back over to his sculpture. He ran a hand over the rough surface of the uncarved stone. “The statues emerge all by themselves. I simply release what has always lain hidden within the stone. As a craftsman, you just know when something feels right. That's true not just of word sculptures, but of poetry too.”

The Word wasn't sure it understood. “Why is one of the stones not sculpted yet?” it asked.

Rhyme put her arm around the Word. “Because, my dear, the stone hasn't yet told Reason what's hidden inside it. The first stone symbolises the beginning of your story, which is where you are now. The second stone symbolises the end. But nobody knows yet *how* your story will end. It didn't feel right to work on the sculpture yet.”

Her husband continued: “Every word embodies its own name. My name is Reason, and that is who I am. You’ve forgotten your name and you’ve forgotten what you are. Just as I have found the rhyme to my reason, so you must find the end to your story. It might be an end you would never have thought possible before. Find out which word family you belong to. Because without family and without meaning, you are nothing.”

The Word stayed with the old couple for a few more days. Rhyme insisted on applying the syllable salve every day, even though the pain had long since abated. But the Word’s memory did not return. In the evenings, they sat around the fire while Reason told stories of the words he had already made into statues, and Rhyme recited poems in a soft whisper. The Word mostly stayed silent. It gazed into the fire and thought about what Reason had said. *Because without family and without meaning, you are nothing.* The thought went round and round in its head, keeping it awake for a long time that night before it finally drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, the Word took its leave of the old couple. “I will come back to see the finished sculpture, I promise,” it told them. But it didn’t know if it would be able to keep its promise. Rhyme insisted on giving the Word a parcel of provisions for the road, containing a hunk of bread and cheese and a flask of verbal tea. The Word accepted the parcel gratefully and set off, as Rhyme and Reason waved farewell. Reason had been right; it had to find out what it had forgotten, what its meaning was ...

... But where should it begin the search?

The Word was not the only one who hardly slept that night. In a completely different part of the world of language, two creatures had caught the scent of their next victim. That victim was a word without any meaning.