Nell abhorred the gesture of speaking. As a result, she spoke as little as the world would allow her to. As a little girl, her teachers thought her dim, and possibly even mute; though she was neither. Perhaps unexpectedly, she was popular with the other girls, by virtue of her aversion to self-expression. Thus she found herself—much against her will or wishes—befriended by strident, skirted creatures who could not shut up for even a moment. It was all Nell could do to resist covering her ears in silent complaint.

Nell’s parents despaired of their daughter’s quiet introversion, never knowing what she really felt about anything. She never voiced a preference for toast or cereal, horses or bassoons, adventurers or poets. On one occasion, these concerned and good-natured souls sent Nell to a psychiatrist. The talking cure, however, was not the right route for a girl who seemingly gave her tongue to a cat, for the price of a pair of rather feline eyes. And so, after the poor professional had run out of his bag of solicitous tricks, his patient fell asleep on the couch. An expensive nap, to be sure.

At night, as the barn owl hooted in a tree outside her bedroom window, Nell would smile to herself, tingling with the
pleasant sensation of all those pre-articulations swimming around in her bloodstream. Indeed, these unuttered things would give her the energy to hop, skip, and jump through the following day. (For it is a little known fact that unspoken words are rich in iron and potassium.)

As already mentioned, however, Nell was not technically mute. She would thus sometimes startle and alarm her family, friends, or teachers by allowing a word or two to escape from somewhere deep within the shrouded belfry of her silence. But these disappeared again so quickly that those within hearing range were inclined to suspect — once the fugitive syllables dropped back below the surface of her body, like so many heavy carp, plopping down deep once more into a lake — that they were suffering aural hallucinations. What’s more, there seemed to be no special pattern to those rare moments when she let her vocal cords strum themselves into a linguistic vibration. They had no special significance or import. Perhaps, on such occasions the words themselves were curious to see what the world was like, outside the tranquil chamber of her rather aesthetic silences. Perhaps a batch of phonemes banded together in order to feel themselves glow, on the other side of the velvet curtain of her throat; tip-toing sometimes shyly, other times boldly, off the scarlet carpet of her tongue. The paparazzi of her social circle could never catch the gesture of Nell’s speech in the act, given its invisibility.

Sometimes Nell would hum along with the popular songs on the radio, but never sing the lyrics. When particularly tired or stressed from too much homework, she responded to the chatter that her mother listened to on the publicly funded talk shows by covering her ears, as if the sound coming from the speakers were not reasoned discussion, but the inhuman hiss of static snakes, coiling on to the kitchen countertops. Nell dreamed of growing up to be a librarian, in the world’s most strict library, and looked forward to shooshing patrons of all ages, races, shapes, and sizes. (For shooshing was certainly not a figure of speech, since it did not originate in the breast or the larynx, but thrust itself forward
from in front of the voice box, like the quick and shallow pneumatic rush from domestic bellows.)

Even when no longer a child, Nell suspected that the animals were just like her: perfectly capable of speech, but almost never deigning to resort to such a vulgar mode of interaction. (Those people who, throughout Occidental history, overheard the cautious animals in hushed conversation were uniformly dismissed or committed, as drunks, liars, witches, or madmen.) As a young woman Nell started studying at university. She soon opted to do this via correspondence course, since during the few lectures she endured, she could not concentrate. Indeed, she blushed in sympathetic humiliation, listening to professors being obliged to resort to their mouths to transmit the great ideas of our kind. During this time Nell learned of a philosopher who famously insisted that if a lion could speak, we should not understand what the creature said. She secretly suspected that we would in fact understand such a prolix beast only too well, which is why the great cats so wisely employed their heavy tongues to lick the antelope blood off their paws. (Though at night, on the savannah, when the moon is full, and the hunt successful, one might possibly hear the great lioness tell the tale of her most recent kill as a grisly lullaby for the three curious cubs at her feet.)

To break up the monotony of her studies, Nell would go to an old flea-bitten cinema near the abandoned synagogue in the outskirts of her town. She chose this rather mournful and forsaken venue because it specialized in silent movies; the only sound being the toothless growl of an old organ on Friday nights, or the hacking cough of an old spectator. Here, she met a melancholic, and rather ageless, usher who appealed to her in his refusal to speak to customers, many of whom never failed to ask inane questions. (All questions, of course, appearing to Nell as inane.) Through body language alone, and the coy tactical syntax of hem, hair comb, necklace and neckline, she eventually seduced him near the coat check, while the attendant was smoking a cigarette in the alley. Nell was quickly appalled, however, to find that in the full throes of lust, the previously enigmatic usher tried to whisper specific, sordid words into her ears. (The
same ears she soaped with vigor for the next seven days straight, in her evening bath.) The argument they shared, after emerging from the impromptu mattress assembled with the inexpensive coats of strangers, could have well used emphatic intertitles, as they gesticulated wildly, in the same style as the old movie, currently flickering on the screen to a room of scattered, watery, cataract-compromised eyes.

Indeed, to see Nell’s anger and disappointment at this moment — to see her being so silently verbose — was to see the true secret of speech. To wit, this gesture has precious little to do with the larynx in fact. Nor the tongue or the teeth. For the cavern of the mouth — and the fleshy voice box, in which words are held captive (all the better to send into the world, needy and grasping) — are not the true organs of speech.

As the animals know, this true organ is the eyes.

A truth that Nell would spend many lonely years understanding in solitude. That is before finding another (yes — this tale has a happy ending), who similarly understood that the lips, the tongue, and the teeth, should be reserved for eating or loving. Two ways, to be sure, of naming the same gesture.