Guinea Pig

*Sally Bliumis-Dunn*

When the small hill
of the mother’s body stayed still,
I knew she’d died.

Fanny sat in the woodchips beside her.
When I returned with a Ziploc bag,
she lay right on top of her, making
a soft, almost inaudible sound—

her mourning strangely the same

as any other I’ve known—
the same perfect limpness
of one body thrown over another
like a hopeless cloth,

and the sound of deepest sorrow,
muffled as though it came
from the center of a gigantic stone.

I couldn't bring myself to move her.
All afternoon she lay
on the sudden silence of
her mother’s heart

and on the slower news
of the body, which still
offered a fading warmth.

Hal-9000, Bach, and the Personal Physics of Going Deaf

*Laura Hope-Gill*

There is no sound in space. Beyond our noisy atmosphere stretches an infinite quiet. There are waves in space, but they are not sound waves. They are simply waves of silence moving through. All that vibrates keeps to itself, does not shout, scrape, or otherwise draw sonic attention. Black holes erupt in their introverted manner. The sun splashes itself again and again with its magnificent tidal flames. And not a sound comes from any of this. Solar systems are born, stars collide. Deafness prevails.

Earth, in comparison to its surroundings, is a noisy planet. We talk almost all the time. DVD players and iPods keep sound flowing directly into our heads. We use electronic devices to broadcast TV and radio around the globe and beyond. We send signals out in search of someone else to talk to. We rely on the molecular vibrations we call sound to feel “at home” in what we perceive to be a lonely and too quiet universe.

In Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the computer, Hal-9000, cuts off Frank Poole’s air and sends him drifting into space. We see this scene through the computer’s unchanging red eye; we hear the sounds of machinery and Poole’s breathing. The breaths are loud in the way that my own breathing was loud when I once snorkeled with a faulty mask in Bermuda. As I entered the preliminary stages of drowning it was the only sound in my world. At first Poole’s breath is even—it is our breath, normal and safe. As Poole enters the preliminary stages of his own death, the amplified breath becomes irregular. Hal is killing him. Watching the scene, I find my own breath matching Poole’s. I stop breathing when he does. We only hear breathing when we are watching from Hal’s perspective; watching Poole die floating in space, we hear nothing. We see only the convulsion of a suffocating man. Perhaps it is this that makes this scene so terrifying. The air we breathe, like the sound we hear, does not exist in space. It is the absence of air that causes the absence of sound. And I wonder if we don’t equate silence with suffocation. We feel, at some level, that if we stop talking the world will stop moving, as though the vibrational nature of speech is what keeps everything in motion. What would happen if we were to *fall quiet*? Are we uncomfortable with silence because it makes us feel “deaf,” a near homophone of “death?”