

The inner ear is a flower bed inside a blacksmith's shop.

Down below the auditory canal—past the hammer, the anvil and the stirrup—sprout the hair cells of the cochlea, planted in tidy rows along the basilar membrane like geraniums in a window box. As the hammer and anvil pound sound waves into shape, the stirrup taps out the beat on the basilar membrane, which sets the hair cells swaying like a breeze through a cornfield. Each of the hair cells' undulations fires electrical signals to the brain, where we discern the cause of the commotion—a cymbal crash, for instance, or the soft exhalations of a child's breath. Other senses may rest, but the ear never sleeps. It is insomniac, always alert to the slightest pulses, awake to the faintest tremors. If, as English novelist George Meredith wrote, "**Speech is the small change of silence,**" then let's hear it for the ear! A moment of silence, please, followed by three resoundingly soundless cheers.