

STEVE GEHRKE

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*Galena*

Half-an-hour climb and I'm breathing  
the way the shipwrecked breathe  
between the waves: gasps, heaves.  
The grade ahead is steep, so I sit  
down to read: *Leibniz: A Biography*,  
the master trying to devise a scheme  
to drain the silver mines. The stones  
below me could hold their breath  
for centuries; each time we tramp  
them down, they reappear, as if  
even the hardest elements retain  
a touch of buoyancy. Buoyant, it  
means being lighter than whatever's  
trying to swallow you: water, flesh.  
I'm thirty-nine today. No reason  
to face it yet, I say, the latest blood-  
work still sealed in the envelope  
in which it came, though the swelling  
in my ankles is a little worse each  
day, the chills deepening at night  
like another ice-cube dropped into  
a cup. They're buoyant, too, aren't  
they, rising up through the elements

from which they're made before melting  
back. At death, I suppose, the self's  
like that. Leibniz, bless him, would  
disagree. The self and the brain, he  
writes, are manufactured separately,  
and are housed apart, though they  
achieve a kind of synchronicity.  
Like skaters, I imagine, in different  
rinks performing the same routine.  
Like nothing, the stones below me  
say. The glint in one of them might be  
some of the last galena in these hills.  
Galena, the word like some mythic  
ship. *Bright death*, I decide it means.  
The Egyptians wore it to combat  
the sun, and enemies: at night a tribe  
became a charging galaxy. How long  
before this kidney's gone? Three  
years? Four? Scattered is the word  
I use when people ask me how  
I'm managing. The two apartments,  
they mean, the way I fly each  
few weeks to visit my daughter  
in another state. Scattered. It means  
that when I'm here I'm in another  
place. Oh well. If Leibniz is right,

we're already all that way. Music is the soul's arithmetic, he also liked to say, though at night he lay awake listening to the silver singing from the distant mines. He was as of-this-world as anyone. Distant *minds*, I almost wrote. My breath is slow in coming back. I'd like to walk into the woods and read but there are breakthroughs just off this path, where sequined belts once dragged the galena up, so much of it, the story goes, that drivers would mistake the glare for ghosts or UFOs, and those miners would go home so covered with that bright death, that unearthly snow, that some nights, exhausted, half-asleep, they must have pulled back the sheets to find that their bodies glowed.