

thrice great hermes

#39

by stanley lieber

all of this gray tracking across his forest like smoke.

vidya sat atop the water tower and watched the spread of the disease. human language, from which he was, for now, thankfully removed.

he opened his bag and took out his sandwich. he fumbled with his thermos and his elbow struck his phone, which had been sitting on the cold metal beside him. it tumbled over the side. he watched as it slipped, spiraling to the ground, impacting with a practically inaudible thump.

vidya climbed down.

he was reduced again to real books. at school, the library admitted to some few volumes he had previously ignored. mostly, lurid fantasy texts, too similar (judging from the titles, covers, and dust jacket descriptions) to other examples of the genre he had already read. he liked this kind of stuff, just not this particular stuff. still, it was here.

mr. anderson noticed him reading a book that, judging from its cover, would seem to concern the adventures of a flight of spacefaring dragons. the pained expression that displaced his usual happy demeanor belied internal contradictions in a man who professed to prefer usa today to the new york times because the former contained more colorful charts and its articles contained fewer words.

sensing opportunity, the english teacher had suggested a program of alternatives: orwell, bradbury, heinlein, dick, pynchon, kafka.

vidya had rolled his eyes and explained his predicament: it wasn't that he hadn't explored the recommended authors, it was precisely that this gaudier book was unfamiliar. he hadn't read it before. the shapes it presented were new.

the shapes?

vidya went into the whole spiel: he couldn't think of it in words. there weren't any words about it to think. what he saw were shapes, lines, volumes, twisting into and out of each other in connecting patterns, stretched over time. a schematic view of myriad, though not particularly discreet elements. a maze that in sharp focus represented a pathway, but in the long view comprised the entire map. the map could be folded, bent, rolled up, distorted, stretched, and fitted to arbitrary configurations, but never altered from its essential substance, containing all possible interpretations, and defying any attempt to artificially constrict the infinite catalogue of juxtapositions it advertised, that it seemed to offer.

mr. anderson had not known what to say. for his part, neither had vidya. and that was the point.

mr. anderson had changed tacks. "let me tell you a story," he said.

during the war he had been in the army, serving on a ship.

"okay, let me start again."

during the war he had been in the army, but he had not really been in the army. he had sat in a chair, looking at pictures all day long. the pictures were photographs that had been taken by a satellite. the chair had been in the back room of a small office, which was an architectural firm that did not design buildings. the secretary of the firm did not know that mr. anderson spent his days looking at pictures, and in fact did not know that the firm did not design buildings. a second man, mr. anderson's colleague, consumed his days forging busywork: various papers, contracts, receipts, memos, correspondence, flyers, bills, and invoices for the secretary to file, retrieve, proofread, type, mail, receive, dispose of, or misplace somewhere in the general disarray of the front office. mr. anderson would enter the building early each morning, flash his badge, ride the elevator to the floor occupied by the firm, nod to the secretary, produce from a hidden compartment in his sports jacket a special key that he used to unlock the safe in his office, and proceed to activate the covert mechanism by which the top of his desk rolled back to reveal his personal digital workspace. hold all my calls, and no interruptions, please.

"photographs of what," vidya intoned blandly.

"suspected military installations. airfields, mostly," mr. anderson said. he leaned forward conspiratorially. "and what do you think of that?"

vidya's eyes moved back to his book, the trashy fantasy fiction.

"any interest in maybe doing something like that when you grow up?"

vidya's eyes remained pointedly on the book.

"no thanks," he said, and continued with his reading.