

thrice great hermes

#45

by stanley lieber

étienne stood by the window and watched as the workers far below him cleared snow from the street. well, four stories below. they looked small enough. even in the privacy of his own mind étienne tended to fudge the details.

he liked to stand there during his morning break. sunlight would touch the streets, the cars, the sidewalks, just so. he would stand in the window and he would not hear the sounds of the office, nor of its inhabitants, whom he loathed with a clarity wholly absent from even the best of his written work.

no sooner than this clarity had obtained it would be time for him to get back to work. the elevator would open, he would step inside, and through the negotiation of some dark transaction, precise details to be determined, he would find himself back on the proper floor, back at his desk, back on his phone, back to not standing by the window. his two breaks and his lunch bounded the ritual, defining along its edges the canonical parameters by which the company's proprietary algorithm operated him.

he was being dramatic. a favored self-criticism during corporate sponsored struggle sessions. but they paid him too well to complain about work. he sipped his coffee and waited to hear from his manager.

he did not have to wait for long. her voice resolved, inaudible to audible, transitioning roughly from his imagination to his ear.

"have you made plans to see a doctor?"

he found that he preferred the manager as portrayed by his imagination. momentarily jarred from the procession of self-generated mental imagery, he fell out of step with the interaction, stumbling over the non sequitur.

"what?" he said.

"your break lasts ten minutes. we started to worry when your timer expired and you hadn't returned from the men's room. what were you doing in there?"

his immediate impulse was to state the obvious. that he hadn't been in the men's room, that he had been standing by the window on the fourth floor. but he stopped himself when he realized that it was beside the point. what she really wanted to know was where the extra two minutes had gone, the two minutes by which he had exceeded the ten minutes allotted for his break. he searched through his mind for a substantive excuse and came up blank.

"any orders, today?" he asked, diverting the conversation back to the ostensible reason why they were all there in the first place.

"none, as you are well aware from monitoring the dashboard. stay busy at your desk. some of your coworkers are cleaning up their stations, or reading quietly. remember to tally your time accurately."

it had been the same for two months. virtually no work to do, but the constant imperative to stay busy doing it. étienne marveled inwardly at the infallibility of certain guarantees established for him by his union contract. soap residue of an earlier era, when monopoly drew nourishment from its own largess. and now étienne, like the former monopoly, swirled around the drain. for how long could this go on? he pulled out his copy of neuromancer (he'd finally tracked one down) and picked up reading where he'd left off. earlier, before his break.

side-glance at the woman seated next to him. she eyed his paperback with open suspicion. "are you reading that for school?" she finally asked, more incredulous that a book could exist, here, in the current year, than passing any judgement on its title, author, or the presumable content of its character.

"it ain't dan brown," he agreed.

at the end of the day he closed the paperback and switched off his terminal. walked to his car and drove to his apartment, where he showered, read for an hour, and then erased the day from his mind.

he would try again in the morning.