

## thrice great hermes

#58

by stanley lieber

the gods had pursued étienne from childhood. over and around obstacles, their pursuit had been relentless, ever-present in his awareness. and now he was here, in this place where at least one of them had first been born.

most of them were dead. all of his fathers had moved on. bowie had followed the last remaining shade from beneath the hollow tree. and now étienne was here, in this space that invoiced itself as the *berlin of the ohio river valley*, where the bars boasted animatronic bowies.

so, the faces of the gods were gone. sl came around from time to time, willing to relate their stories, but you had to turn him off and on, the spigot would not contain itself of its own accord.

étienne didn't want to know how it worked. he figured the town had not been like this, back in grandpa's day. the casino had not even existed. the hotels had sat decrepit, or otherwise mostly empty—let's say neglected. the town's connection to germany was also likely a fiction, but it was true there had been some crossover between labor protests, in the early- to mid-twenties. in october there was strassenfest.

grandpa had only smiled when anyone brought up the subject of bowie. "we've got one of those down at the bar," he would say, and laugh. he didn't laugh very often, so the effect was unnerving.

when étienne had decided to abandon the gods, he had required a seal, to close off any temptation towards regression. he chose the unlikely figure of the spiral, or, to put it bluntly, the rune u+1f300. spotting it frequently in advertising and literature, the mark assured his safety. this was what he had decided. he was surprised to discover it as a motif in the town's architecture, and wondered if perhaps he hadn't simply remembered it subconsciously, from his childhood.

for the most part the seal had proven effective. the usual seeping through of malicious messaging, whether through malevolent incompetence or honest misconfiguration, had left him mostly unscathed. the glaring exception had been his inability to set down in words exactly what it all meant.

when he wasn't reading, étienne would open his notebook and attempt to communicate with himself. the clatter of notes as he assembled them would fall on deaf ears. though sometimes, looking back in a notebook filled years before, he would convince himself that he was finally getting the message. the future—his present—having bled through to his past. he realized he was setting himself up for some manner of disappointment.

tonight was no exception, as presently he had no earthly conception of what any of the words he had just written down were intended to mean. he decided against destroying the pages just drafted, but marked them each anyway with the seal.

How to keep sane in spiral types of space. Precautions to be  
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He expected nothing, and that's precisely what he got.

As designed, the seal was a seal upon itself, cutting off the tape even as it continued to spiral off the reel.