



The Street

By Georges Perec




The buildings stand one beside the other.





They form a straight line.



They are expected to form a line, and it's a serious defect in them when they don't do so. They are then said to be 'subject to alignment', meaning that they can by rights be demolished, so as to be rebuilt in a straight line with the others.



**The parallel alignment of two series of buildings
defines what is known as a street.**

The street is a space bordered, generally on its two longest sides, by houses; the street is what separates houses from each other, and also what enables us to get from one house to another, by going either along or across the street.

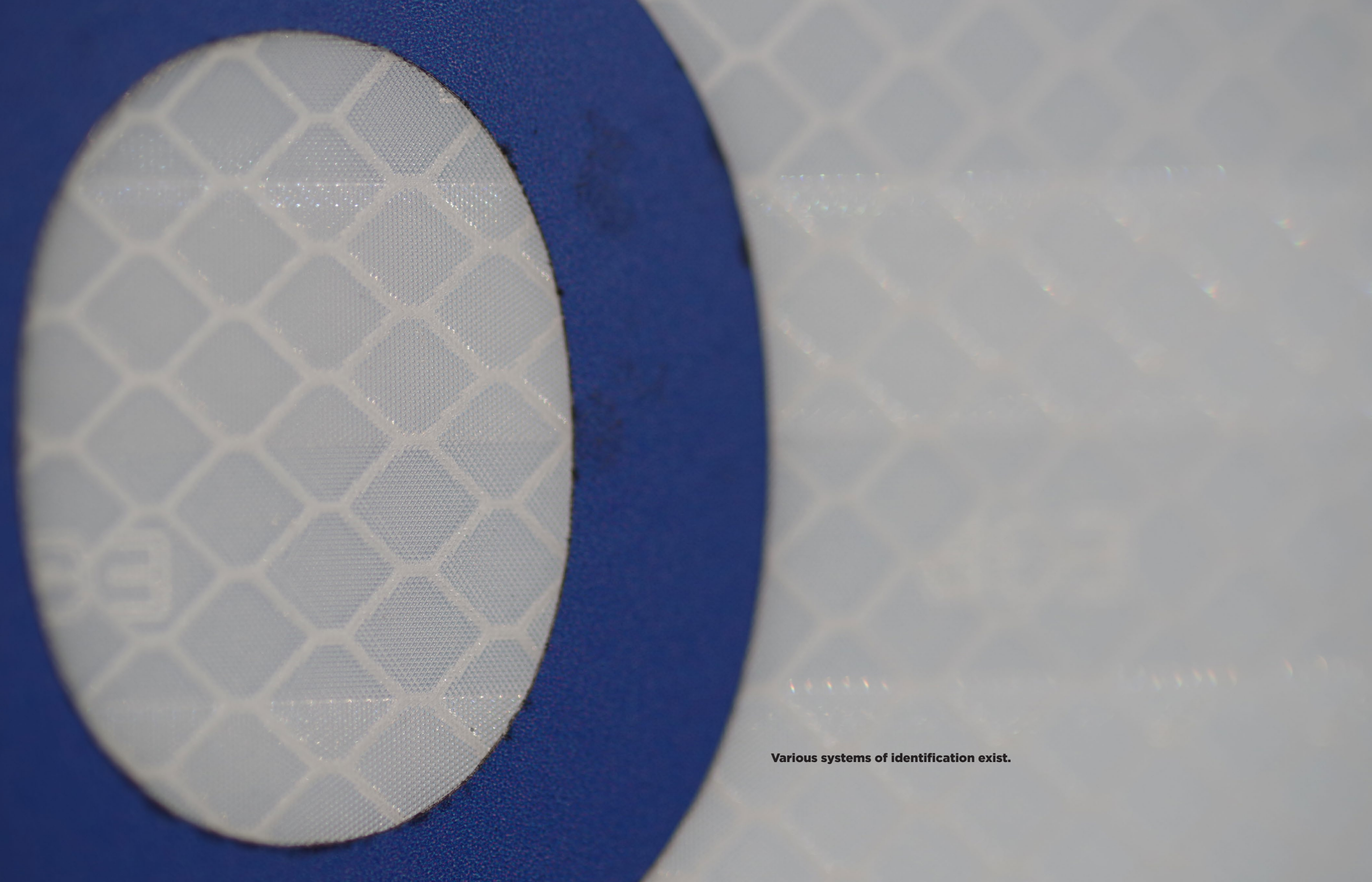


The street is a space bordered, generally on its two longest sides, by houses; the street is what separates houses from each other, and also what enables us to get from one house to another, by going either along or across the street.



In addition, the street is what enables us to identify the houses.





Various systems of identification exist.

***Conway
Cooling &
Heating, Co.
248-4007***

The most widespread, in our own
day and our part of the world,
consists in giving a name to the
street and numbers to the houses.



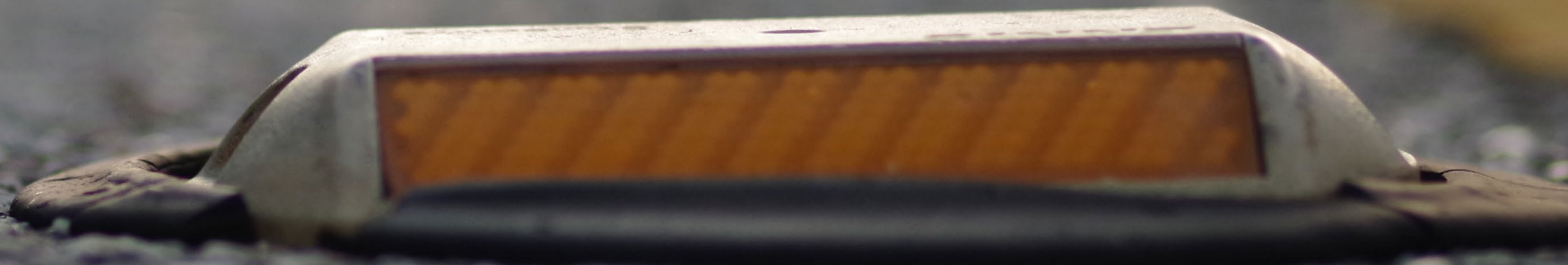
The naming of streets is an extremely complex, often even thorny, topic, about which several books might be written.

And numbering isn't that much simpler.

It was decided, first, that even numbers would be put on one side and odd numbers on the other (but, as a character in Raymond Queneau's *The Flight of Icarus* very rightly asks himself, 'Is 13A an even or an odd number?');

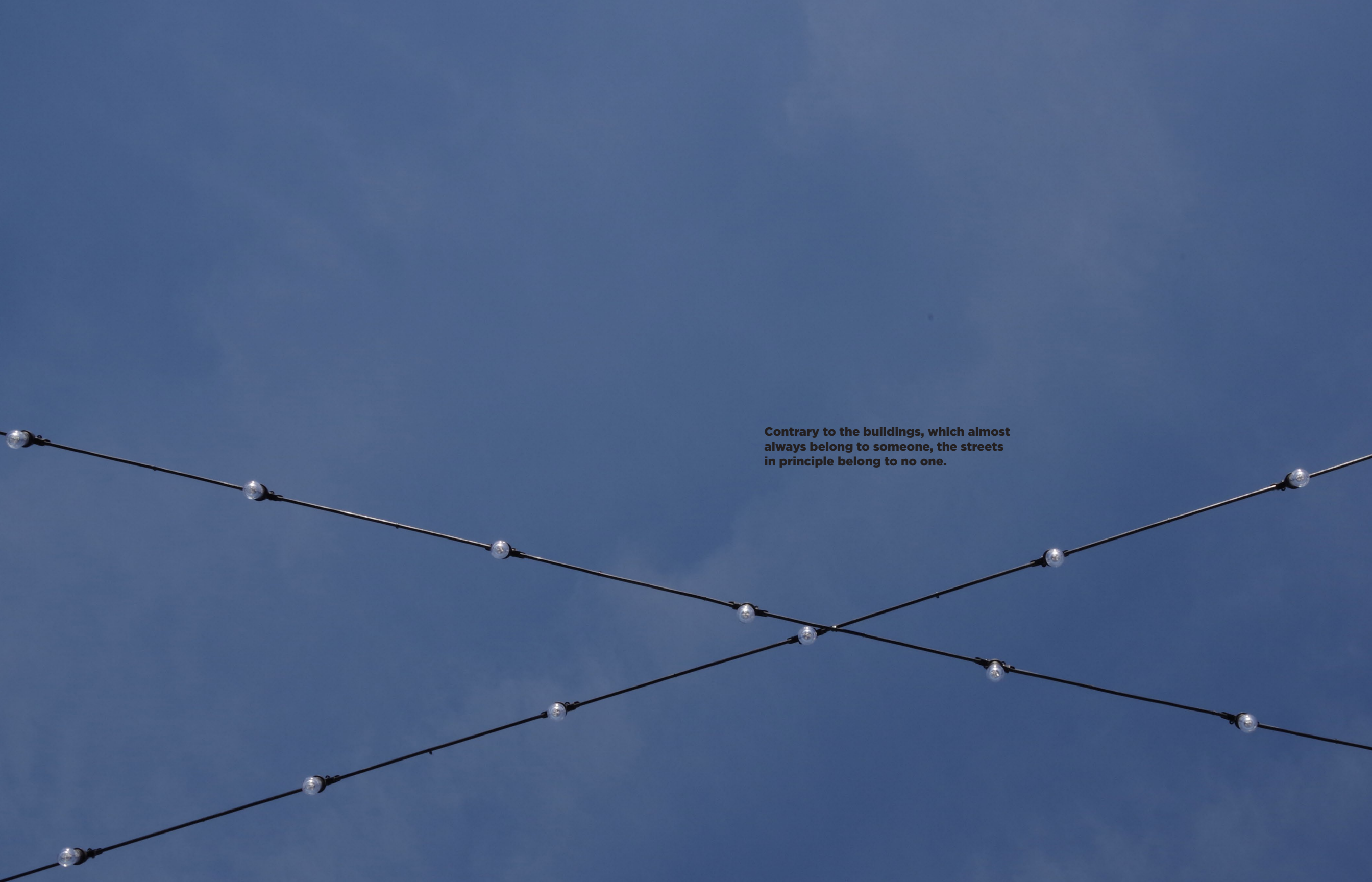


Secondly, that the even numbers would be on the right (and odd numbers on the left) relative to the direction of the street; and thirdly, that the said direction of the street would be determined generally (but we know of many exceptions) by the position of the said street in relation to a fixed axis, in the event the River Seine.



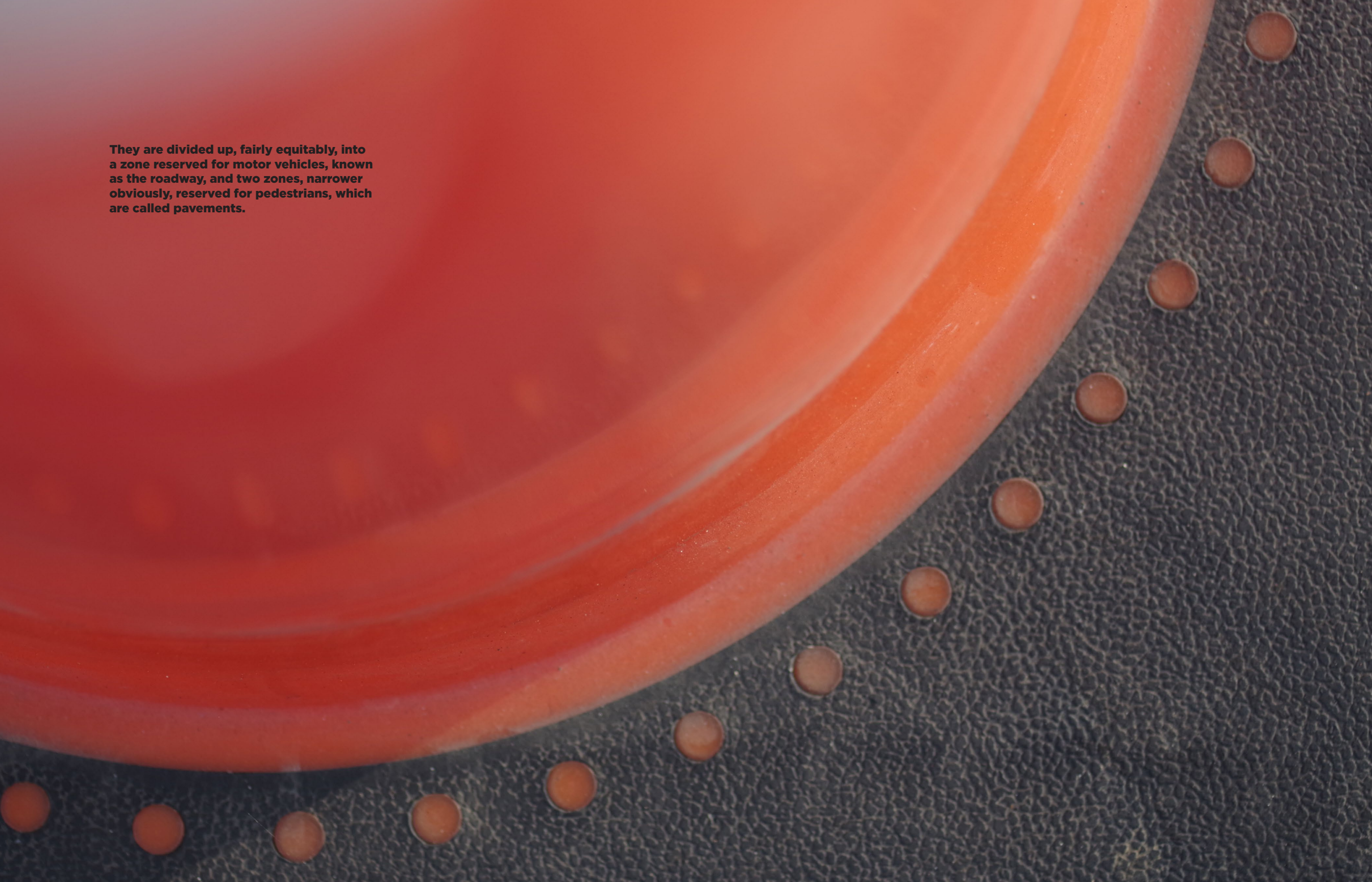


Streets parallel with the Seine are numbered starting upstream, perpendicular streets starting from the Seine and going away from it (these explanations apply to Paris obviously; one might reasonably suppose that analogous solutions have been thought up for other towns).

The image features a vast, clear blue sky as the background. Two strings of outdoor lighting are stretched across the frame, intersecting in the center. Each string consists of a thin black cable with several small, clear, spherical light bulbs attached at regular intervals. The lines of the strings create a simple 'X' shape, dividing the sky into four quadrants. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

**Contrary to the buildings, which almost
always belong to someone, the streets
in principle belong to no one.**

They are divided up, fairly equitably, into a zone reserved for motor vehicles, known as the roadway, and two zones, narrower obviously, reserved for pedestrians, which are called pavements.



A certain number of streets are reserved exclusively for pedestrians, either permanently, or else on particular occasions.






The zones of contact between the roadway and the pavements enable motorists who don't wish to go on driving to park.

The number of motor vehicles not wishing to go on driving being much greater than the number of spaces available, the possibilities of parking have been restricted, either, within certain perimeters known as 'blue zones', by limiting the amount of parking time, or else, more generally, by installing paid parking.






**Only infrequently are there trees in the streets.
When there are, they have railings round them.
On the other hand, most streets are equipped
with specific amenities corresponding to
various services.**

Thus, there are street lights which go on automatically as soon as the daylight begins to decline to any significant degree; stopping places at which passengers can wait for buses or taxis; telephone kiosks, public benches; boxes into which citizens may put letters which the postal services will come to collect at set times; clockwork mechanisms intended to receive the money necessary for a limited amount of parking time; baskets reserved for waste paper and other detritus, into which numbers of people compulsively cast a furtive glance as they pass; traffic lights.



There are likewise traffic signs indicating, for example, that it is appropriate to park on this side of the street or that according to whether we are in the first or second fortnight of the month (what is known as 'alternate side parking'), or that silence is to be observed in the


vicinity of a hospital, or, finally and especially, that the street is one-way.



Such is the density of motor traffic indeed that movement would be almost impossible if it had not become customary, in last. few years, in a majority of built-up areas, to force motorists to circulate in one direction only, which, obviously, sometimes obliges them to make long detours.



At certain road junctions deemed especially dangerous, communication between the pavements and the roadway, normally free, has been prevented by means of metal posts linked by chains. Identical posts, set into the pavements themselves, serve sometimes to stop motor vehicles from coming and parking on the pavements, which they would frequently tend to do if they weren't prevented. In certain circumstances, finally - military parades, Heads of State driving past, etc. - entire sections of the roadway may be put out of bounds by means of light metal barriers that fit one inside the other.



At certain points in the pavement, curved indentations, familiarly known as 'bateaux',* indicate that there may be motor vehicles parked inside the buildings themselves which should always be able to get out. At


other points, small earthenware tiles set into the edge of the pavement indicate that this section of the pavement is reserved for the parking of hire vehicles.




The junction of the roadway and the pavements is known as the gutter. This area has a very slight incline, thanks to which rainwater can flow off into the drainage system underneath the street, instead of spreading right across the roadway, which would be a considerable impediment to the traffic. For several centuries, there was only one gutter, to be found in the middle of the roadway, but the current system is thought to be better suited.

Should there be a shortage of rainwater, the upkeep of the roadway and pavements can be effected thanks to hydrants installed at almost every intersection; these can be opened with the help of the T-shaped keys with which the council employees responsible for cleaning the streets are provided.




A close-up photograph of a metallic, textured surface, possibly a metal plate or a piece of machinery. In the center, there is a faint, circular stamp or marking. The background is a solid, dark red color. The lighting is somewhat uneven, with a brighter area on the left and a darker area on the right.

In principle, it is always possible to pass from one side of the street to the other by using the pedestrian crossings that motor vehicles *Called 'boats' because of their shape.

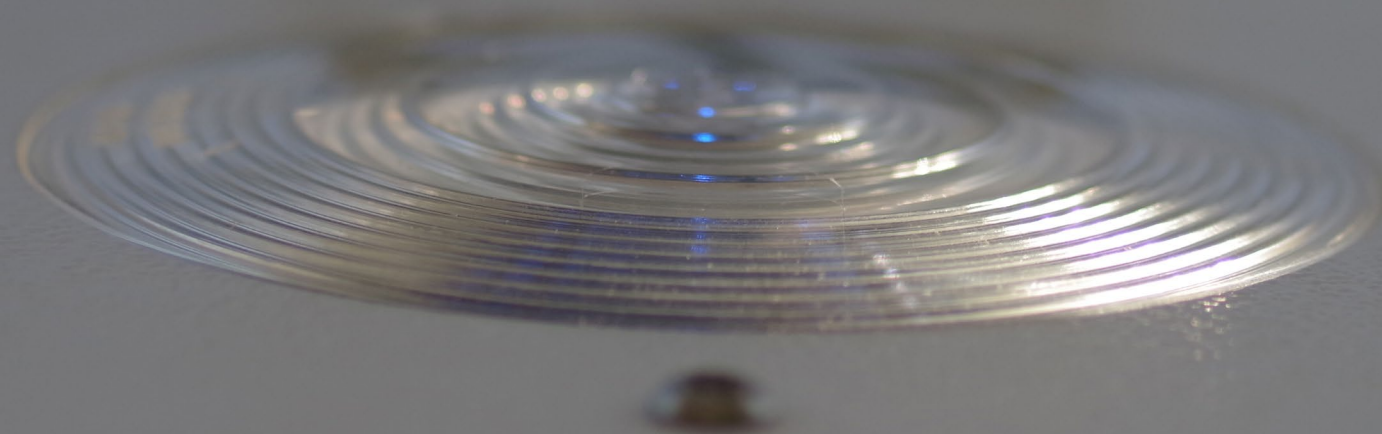


One must only drive over with extreme caution. These crossings are signalled, either by two parallel rows of metal studs, perpendicular to the axis of the street, whose heads have a diameter of about twelve centimetres, or else by broad bands of white paint running at an angle across the whole width of the street.



This system of studded or painted crossings no longer seems as effective as it no doubt was in the old days, and it is often necessary to duplicate it by a system of traffic lights of three colours (red, amber and green) which, as they have multiplied, have ended up causing extraordinarily complex problems of synchronization that certain of the world's largest computers and certain of what are held to be the age's most brilliant mathematical brains are working tirelessly to resolve.

At various points, remote-controlled cameras keep an eye on what is going on. There is one on top of the Chambre des Deputes, just underneath the big tricolour; another in the Place EdmondRostand, in continuation of the Boulevard Saint-Michel; others still atAlesia, the Place Clichy, the Chatelet, the Place de la Bastille, etc.



2



I saw two blind people in the Rue Linne. They were walking holding one another by the arm. They both had long, exceedingly flexible sticks. One of the two was a woman of about fifty, the other quite a young man. The woman was feeling all the vertical obstacles that stood along the pavement with the tip of her stick, and guiding the young man's stick so that he, too, touched them, indicating to him, very quickly and without ever being mistaken, what the obstacles consisted of: a street light, a bus stop, a telephone kiosk, a waste-paper bin, a post box, a road sign (she wasn't able to specify what the sign said obviously), a red light.



Practical exercises

Observe the street, from time to time, with some concern for system perhaps. Apply yourself.

Take your time. Note down the place: the terrace of a cafe near the junction of the Rue de Bac and the Boulevard Saint-Germain

The time: seven o' clock in the evening

The date: 15 May 1973

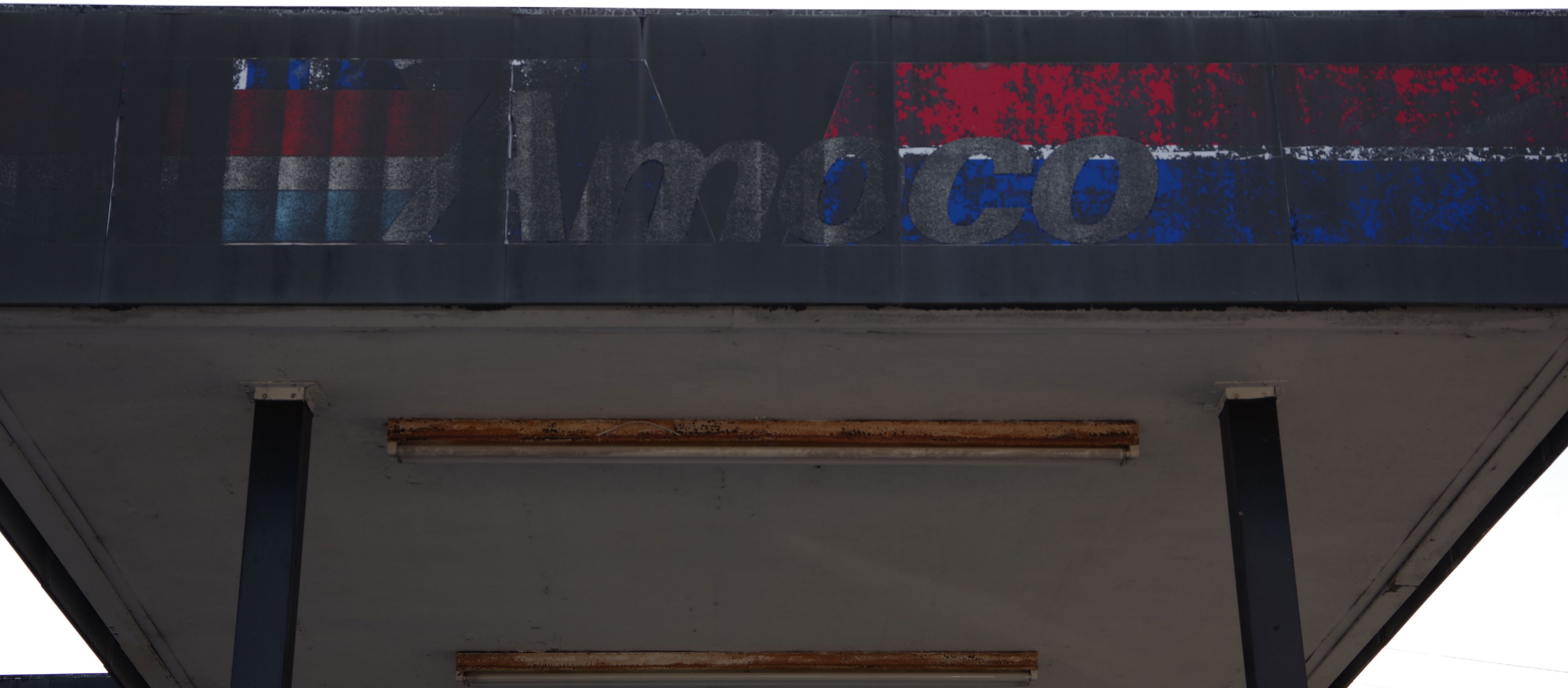
The weather: set fair

Note down what you can see. Anything worthy of note going on. Do you know how to see what's worthy of note? Is there anything that strikes you?

Nothing strikes you. You don't know how to see.

You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless.

The street: try to describe the street, what it's made of, what it's used for. The people in the street. The cars. What sort of cars? The buildings: note that they're on the comfortable, well-heeled side. Distinguish residential from official buildings.




The shops. What do they sell in the shops? There are no food shops. Oh yes, there's a baker's. Ask yourself where the locals do their shopping.





Force yourself to see more flatly.

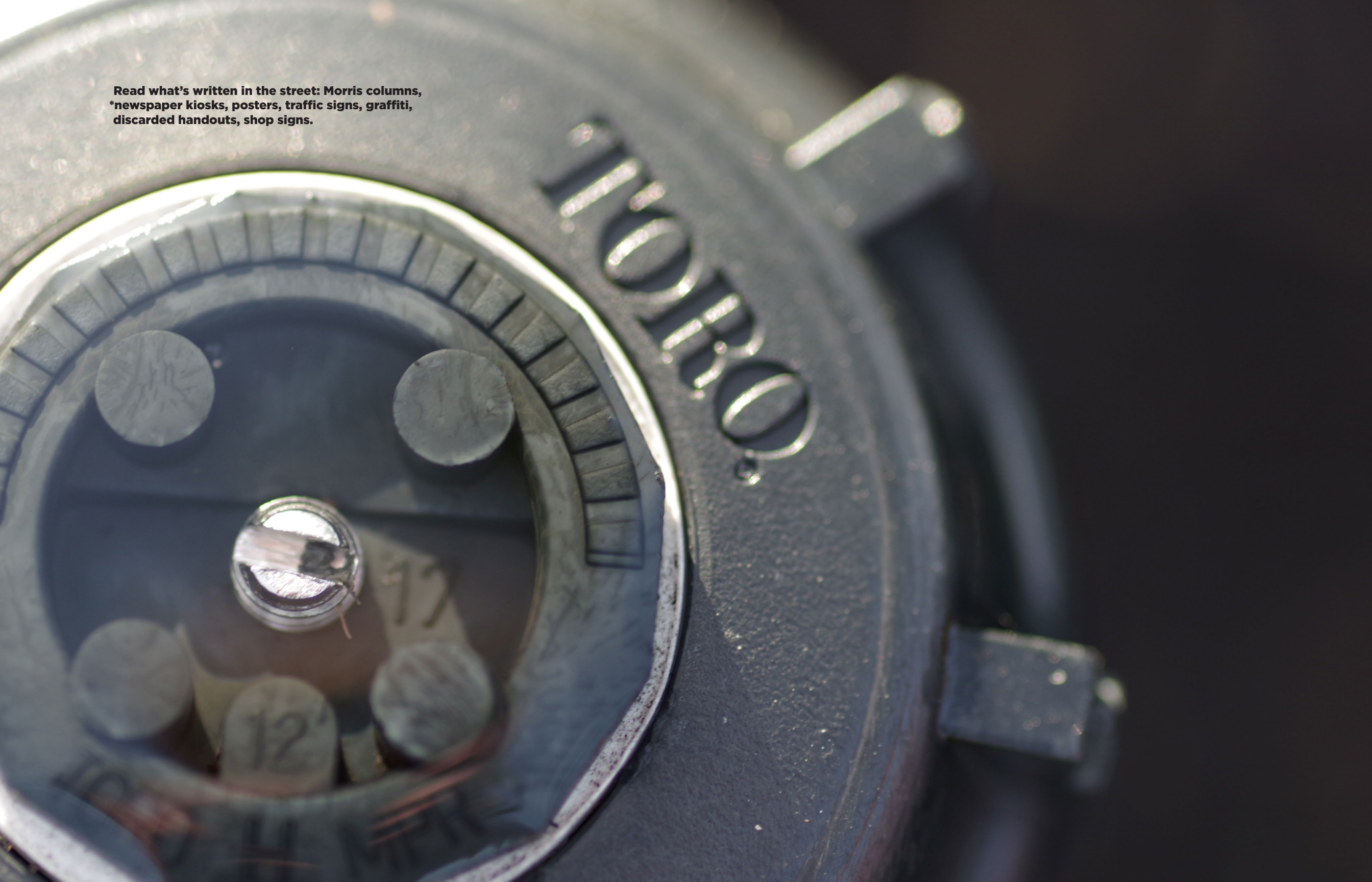


Detect a rhythm: the passing of cars. The cars arrive in clumps because they've been stopped by a red light further up or down the street.

Count the cars.

Look at the number plates. Distinguish between the cars registered in Paris and the rest. Note the absence of taxis precisely when there seem to be a lot of people waiting for them.

**Read what's written in the street: Morris columns,
*newspaper kiosks, posters, traffic signs, graffiti,
discarded handouts, shop signs.**





Beauty of the women.

The fashion is for heels that are too high.

Decipher a bit of the town, deduce the obvious facts: the obsession with ownership, for example. Describe the number of operations the driver of a vehicle is subjected to when he parks merely in order to go and buy a hundred grams of fruit jelly:


- **parks by means of a certain amount of toing and froing**
- **switches off the engine**
- **withdraws the key, setting off a first anti-theft device — extricates himself from the vehicle**
- **winds up the left-hand front window**
- **locks it**
- **checks that the left-hand rear door is locked; if not: opens it raises the handle inside slams the door checks it's locked securely.**

***The sturdy columns that carry posters advertising theatrical and other entertainments.**

- **circles the car; if need be, checks that the boot is locked properly**
- **checks that the right-hand rear door is locked; if not, recommences the sequence of operations already carried out on the left-hand rear door**
- **winds up the right-hand front window**
- **shuts the right-hand front door**
- **locks it**
- **before walking away, looks all around him as if to make sure the car is still there and that no one will come and take it away.**

Decipher a bit of the town. Its circuits: why do the buses go from this place to that? Who chooses the routes, and by what criteria? Remember that the trajectory of a Paris bus intra muros is defined by a two-figure number the first figure of which describes the central and the second the peripheral terminus. Find examples, find exceptions: all the buses whose number begins with a 2 start from the Gare St-Lazare, with a 3 from the Gare de l'Est. All the buses whose number ends in a 2 terminate roughly speaking in the 16th arrondissement or in Boulogne.






(Before, they used letters: the S, which was Queneau's favourite, has become the 84.

Wax sentimental over the memory of buses that had a platform at the back, the shape of the tickets, the ticket collector with his little machine hooked on to his belt.)

**The people in the streets:
where are they coming
from? Where are they
going to? Who are they?**

1948/19



People in a hurry. People going slowly. Parcels.
Prudent people who've taken their macs. Dogs:
they're the only animals to be seen. You can't see
any birds - yet you know there are birds -and
can't hear them either. You might see a cat slip
underneath a car, but it doesn't happen.

Nothing is happening, in fact.



Try to classify the people: those who live locally and those who don't live locally. There don't seem to be any tourists. The season doesn't lend itself to it, and anyway the area isn't especially touristy. What are the local attractions? Salomon Bernard's house? The church of St Thomas Aquinas? No 5, Rue Sebastien-Bottin?*



**Time passes. Drink
your beer. Wait.**





Note that the trees are a long way off (on the Boulevard Saint-Germain and the Boulevard Raspail), that there are no cinemas or theatres, that there are no building sites to be seen, that most of the houses seem to have obeyed the regulations so far as renovation is concerned.

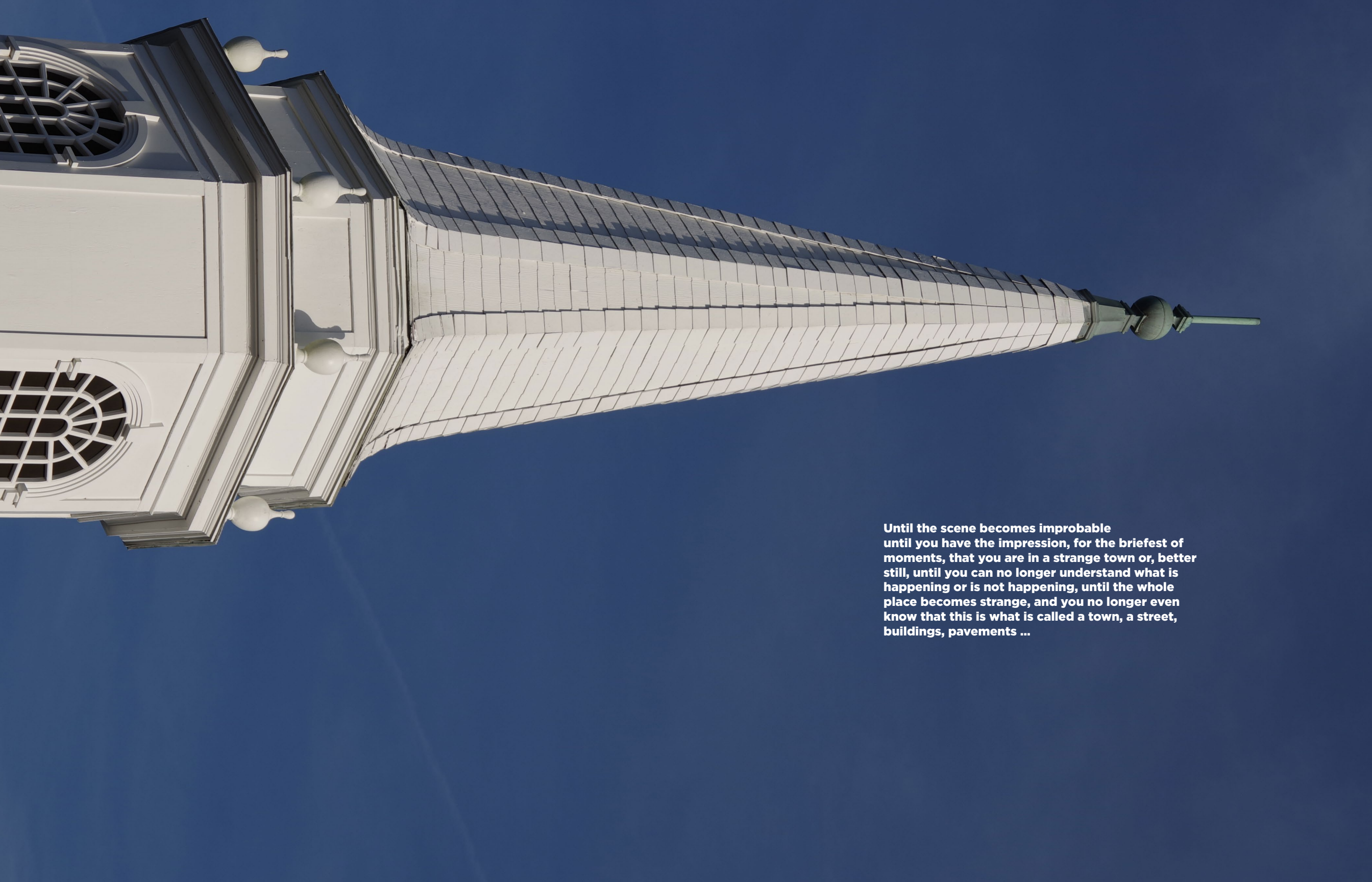
A dog, of an uncommon breed (Afghan hound? saluki?).

A Land Rover that seems to be equipped for crossing the Sahara (in spite of yourself, you're only noting the untoward, the peculiar, the wretched exceptions; the opposite is what you should be doing).







Carry on.



**Until the scene becomes improbable
until you have the impression, for the briefest of
moments, that you are in a strange town or, better
still, until you can no longer understand what is
happening or is not happening, until the whole
place becomes strange, and you no longer even
know that this is what is called a town, a street,
buildings, pavements ...**



**Make torrential rain fall, smash
everything, make grass grow,
replace the people by cows and,
where the Rue de Bac meets
the Boulevard Saint-Germain,
make King Kong appear, or
Tex Avery's herculean mouse,
towering a hundred metres
above the roofs of the buildings!**



Or against: strive to picture yourself, with the greatest possible.

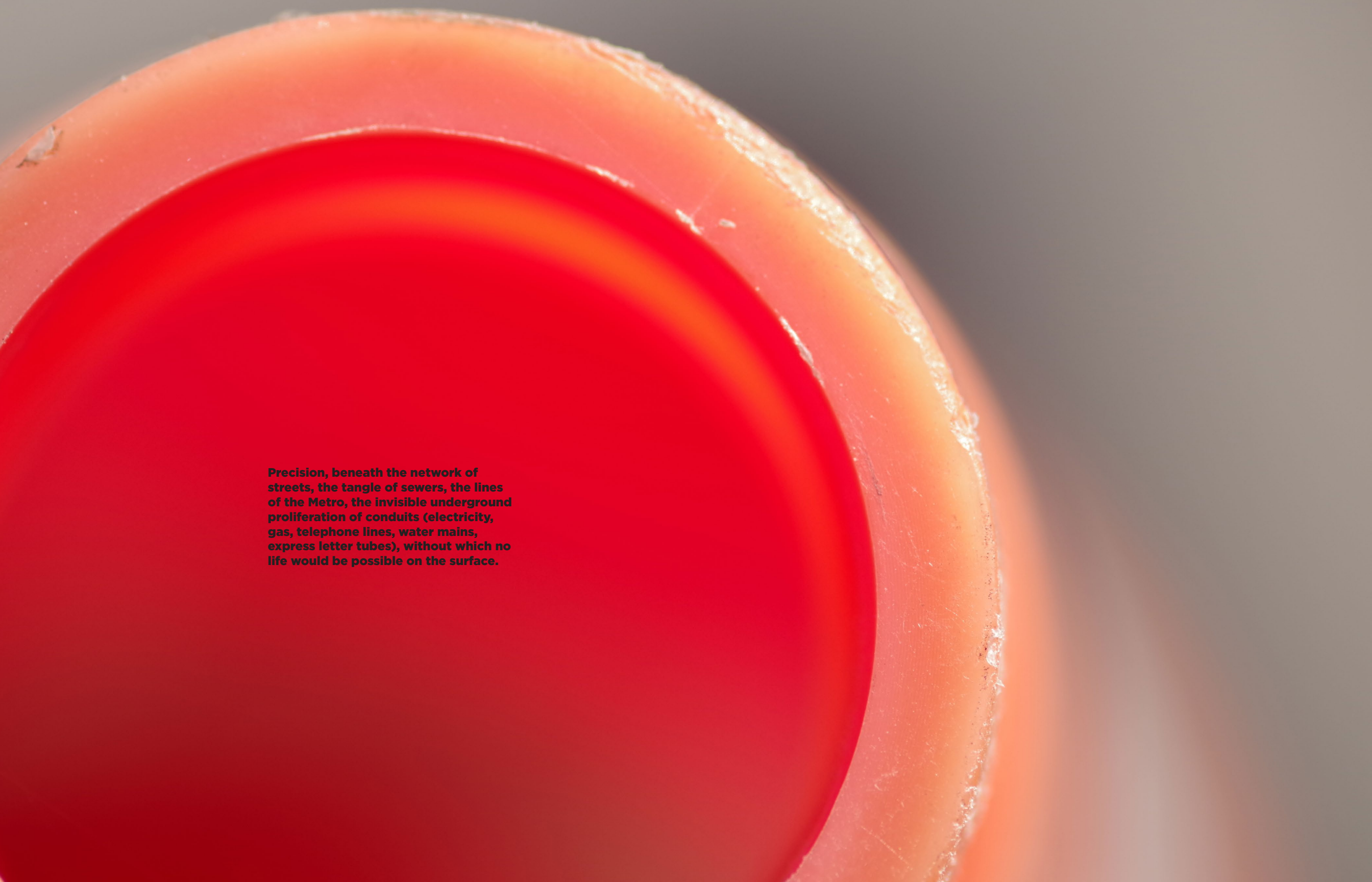
*The address of the largest
and most glamorous of
French publishing houses,
Editions Gallimard, by
whom Perec would like
to have been published,
though he never was.

PECALIZING

IN COLOR

& CUT

U.S. International Beauty Salon II



Precision, beneath the network of streets, the tangle of sewers, the lines of the Metro, the invisible underground proliferation of conduits (electricity, gas, telephone lines, water mains, express letter tubes), without which no life would be possible on the surface.

Underneath, just underneath, resuscitate the eocene: the limestone, the marl and the soft chalk, the gypsum, the lacustrine Saint-Ouen limestone, the Beauchamp sands, the rough limestone, the Soissons sands and lignites, the plastic clay, the hard chalk.



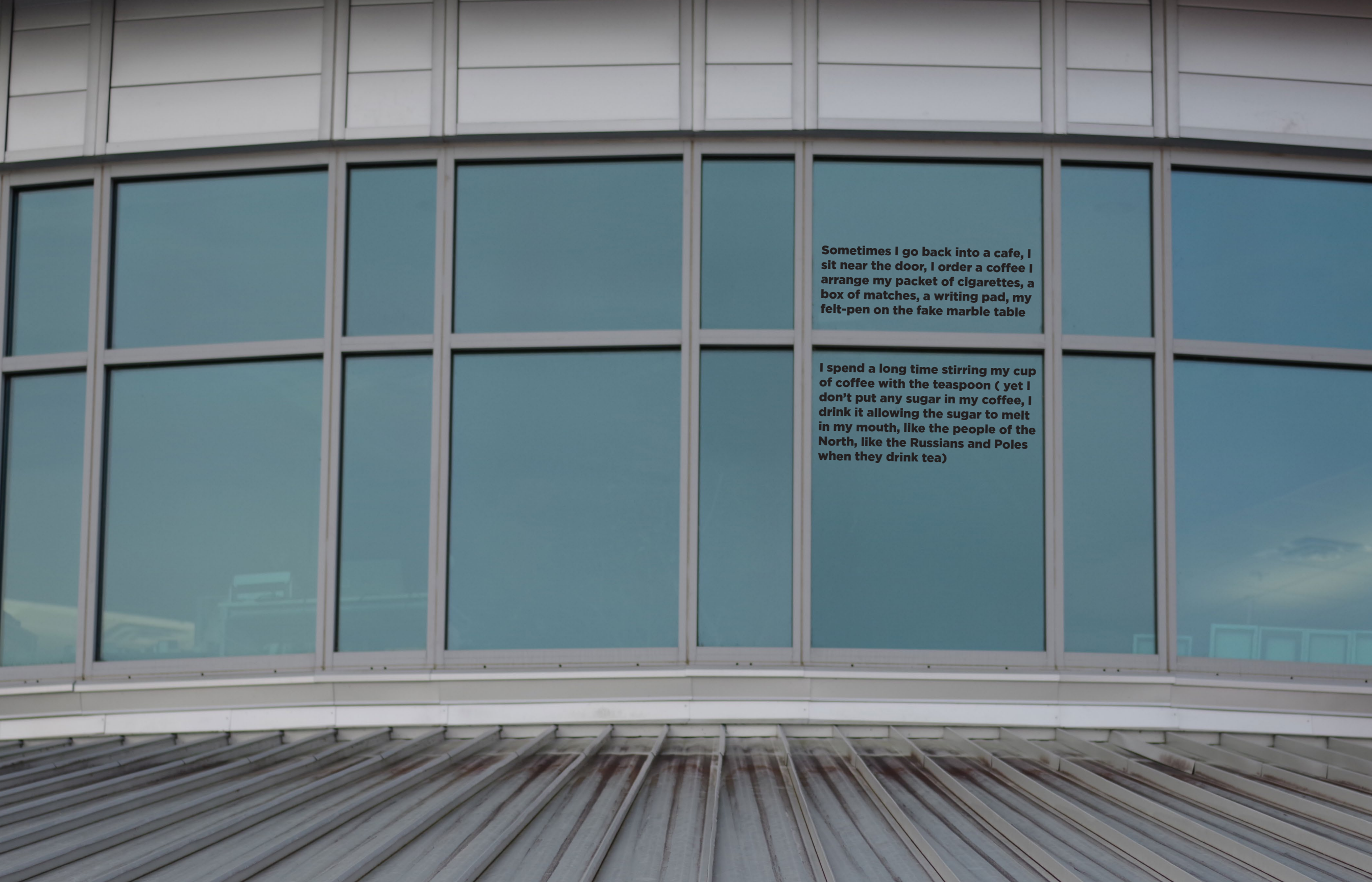




Or else:

**Rough draft
of a letter.**

**I think of
you, often.**




**Sometimes I go back into a cafe, I
sit near the door, I order a coffee I
arrange my packet of cigarettes, a
box of matches, a writing pad, my
felt-pen on the fake marble table**

**I spend a long time stirring my cup
of coffee with the teaspoon (yet I
don't put any sugar in my coffee, I
drink it allowing the sugar to melt
in my mouth, like the people of the
North, like the Russians and Poles
when they drink tea)**

**I pretend to be preoccupied, to be
reflecting, as if I had a decision to make
At the top and to the right of the sheet of
paper, I inscribe the date, sometimes the
place, sometimes the time, I pretend to
be writing a letter**

**I write slowly, very slowly, as slowly as
I can, I trace, I draw each letter, each
accent, I check the punctuation marks.**



The image shows a close-up of a red-painted wall. A black metal grid, consisting of vertical and horizontal bars, is mounted on the wall. Several green, five-lobed leaves are climbing up the right side of the grid. In the center-left area, there is a block of text.

I stare attentively at a small notice, the price-list for ice-creams, at a piece of ironwork, a blind, the hexagonal yellow ashtray (in actual fact, it's an equilateral triangle, in the cutoff corners of which semi-circular dents have been made where cigarettes can be rested).

**Outside there's a bit
of sunlight the cafe
is nearly empty two
renovators' men are
having a rum at the bar,
the owner is dozing
behind his till, the
waitress is cleaning the
coffee machine**

**I am thinking of you
you are walking in your
street, it's wintertime,
you've turned up your
foxfur collar, you're
smiling, and remote.**






Places


(Notes on a work in progress)

In 1969, I chose, in Paris, twelve places (streets, squares, circuses, an arcade), where I had either lived or else was attached to by particular memories.





I have undertaken to write a description of two of these places each month. One of these descriptions is written on the spot and is meant to be as neutral as possible. Sitting in a cafe or walking in the street, notebook and pen in hand, I do my best to describe the houses, the shops and the people that I come across, the posters, and in a general way, all the details that attract my eye.



The other description is written somewhere other than the place itself. I then do my best to describe it from memory, to evoke all the memories that come to me concerning it, whether events that have taken place there, or people I have met there. Once these descriptions are finished, I slip them into an envelope that I seal with wax. On several occasions, I have got a man or woman photographer friend to go with me to the places I was describing who, either freely, or as indicated by me, took photographs that I then slipped, without looking at them (with a single exception), into the corresponding envelopes. I have also had occasion to slip into these envelopes various items capable later on of serving as evidence: Metro tickets, for example, or bar slips, or cinema tickets, or handouts, etc.

**I begin these descriptions
over again each year, taking
care, thanks to an algorithm
I have already referred to
(orthogonal Latin bi-square,
this time of order 124), first,
to describe each of these
places in a different month
of the year, second, never
to describe the same pair of
places in the same month.**



This undertaking, not so dissimilar in principle from a ‘time capsule’, will thus last for twelve years, until all the places have been described twice twelve times. I was too taken up last year by the filming of ‘tin Homme qui dort’ (in which, as it happens, most of these places appear), so I in fact skipped 1973, and only in 1981 shall I be in possession (if, that is, T don’t fall behind again) of the 288 texts issuing from this experiment. I shall then know whether it was worth the effort. What I hope for from it, in effect, is nothing other than the record of a threefold experience of ageing: of the places themselves, of my memories, and of my writing.

***The same schema as Perec used for Life: A User’s Manual — see the note on p.40; ‘of order 12’ means simply a 12 X 12 square as opposed to one 10 x 10.**



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