DENNIS LETBETTER

1.5 miles of Fenton Road

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Reading *Fenton Road*

Some time back, photographer Dennis Letbetter asked me to write something about his ambitious photo series entitled *1.5 miles of Fenton Road* to accompany its publication. Photographed in 2002, the work consists of 146 color views arranged in apparent sequential order, providing what appears to be a documentary record of a suburban strip typical of many American towns across the country. On the face of it, this is the work's identity: a straightforward historical record of a progression of buildings that could be almost anywhere. The humble buildings are entirely lacking in architectural distinction, but in their anonymity and bland familiarity they somehow command the viewer's attention. As I spent time looking more closely at them, the series became increasingly interesting as a compelling work of art.

But that took a while, and my initial difficulty in finding something meaningful to say about my friend's work spoke more to its hidden evocative qualities than to any artistic lack. So my delay may be explained as a kind of journey to a degree of understanding of the conceptual complexity before me. I came to see my process of looking and thinking as an enlightening stroll down what I now think of as a landscape scroll. *Fenton Road* turns out to be loaded with information well beyond the appearance of buildings and intersections. The levels of artistic meaning range from formal considerations and personal associations—those of the photographer and the viewer—to the context of recent American urban history.

In fact, a recent stroll in my San Francisco neighborhood provided the urban experience that opened my mind to a point of entry into the work that had so far been resisting my efforts to engage it. As I ascended the stone steps to Duboce Park, I surveyed the view before me and was struck by the complete lack of human presence, including moving automobiles. When I turned around and looked back down one–block long Carmelita Street, the landscape was identical. No evidence of human occupation was visible. The time was early, about 7:15 a.m., an hour that generally would see considerable activity: dog walkers, wet–haired commuters, bicyclists. The foot traffic is considerable along our narrow street leading to the N-Judah's stop near the east portal of the Buena Vista tunnel. No crowded trains with standing commuters pressed together like sardines; nobody even at rush hour standing or sitting

waiting for the next train. Nobody visible at all within my personal range of vision. For some reason this reminded me of a line from Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*: "To be is to be perceived." Not just to see, but to be seen. That was my crucial link to Letbetter's lonesome landscape.

When I glanced again at the playground usually populated by nannies and parents with small children, I saw one brown-skinned young adult with her towheaded charge. I paused to absorb the feeling of unaccustomed absence and emptiness. I was surprised by the almost surreal effect this had on me as I surveyed the familiar but momentarily abandoned urban landscape of my Lower Haight neighborhood. The impact of this "nothingness" actually took me out of myself and initiated an entirely unexpected few minutes of reflection on the nature of reality and its dependence for most of us upon human presence. Sure, the built environment and landscaped park were indeed evidence of human activity and thereby reassuring. Later I imagined a man appearing out of the emptiness and saying to me, "Can't you see. There is *nobody* here. *Nobody* to hear you say 'good morning'." Or even nod by way of acknowledging my presence. So, the temporary lack of human (or off–leash canine) life and movement contributed to a spooky silence that was discomfiting.

I recovered and continued on my way to my early morning pool appointment. But this encounter with emptiness, and the momentary sadness that I experienced due to it, turned my thoughts to Dennis's photos and their possible meanings. At that moment I felt I had been serendipitously shown a point of entry to *Fenton Road*. I did not yet know the circumstances of the series or the photographer's relationship to his subject, if there was one—or his motivation or intent. And the larger "meaning" of the work, something all genuine art carries within it, was entirely inaccessible. But this is the process of looking hard enough to guess what an image or object is about. The experience I had in Duboce Park and its impact was akin to the first step in decoding images, responding on the basis of personal experience and associations. So, I tentatively decided that *Fenton Road* was about human connection, absence, and loss. And therefore the subject was somehow related to these phenomena for the artist as well. I felt this, so he must have also done so and set out to communicate the feelings to others. This is speculative to be sure, but a reasonable point of departure.

Having discovered what satisfied me in terms of the meaning, the content, of *Fenton Road*, I proceeded along several lines of inquiry to uncover what I could about the work on the basis of formal elements—shapes, colors, composition—and the subject matter depicted, and to what ends. However, when approaching an entirely unfamiliar work of art the first natural step is to compare it to other works that in some way seem familiar. Call it a family resemblance, membership in an aesthetic community. What does it look like? What other art or artists does it immediately conjure? For me, and most likely many other viewers, those questions are easily answered. More than any other well-known photographic series, *Fenton Road* brings to mind Ed Ruscha's famous 1966 book panorama *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. On the face of it, the two collections are identical in format, approach, and basic conception. If the main idea of photographing both sides of a street building by building as seen driving by is to be viewed as conceptual art, Ruscha's work clearly staked out the territory. Herein lies a problem in thinking in conceptual art terms when comparing works. If there is little or no difference between the examples, then the first has creative precedence and whatever follows is imitation—copying, maybe even plagiarizing. However, there are all sorts of modern strategies to get around that. Parody is one, tribute is another, and appropriation is a favored post-modern virtue. But if first idea is tantamount to ownership, then how do we explain Cubism and its many excellent practitioners or, even more consequential, the introduction of linear perspective and deep pictorial space in the Renaissance? What about the debt of German Expressionism to Vincent Van Gogh? These invaluable discoveries belong to every artist who follows. And the same is true of our considering the similarly formatted Ruscha and Letbetter photographic works.

In fact, when one compares them side by side, as I have done by unfolding them on the dining room table, the differences stand out at least as much as the similarities. First of all, Ruscha's accordion–fold *Sunset Strip* was photographed in subdued, quite somber, black and white while Letbetter's *Fenton Road* buildings were shot in comparatively almost exuberant color. Also, as later pointed out to me by Dennis, the scenes are framed in different ways—Ruscha's camera view focused head on and Dennis's with a flexible panning approach opening up views down side streets from different perspectives. As if they are being actively explored by someone looking for something. This, of course, is much more like the actual experience of walking along and glancing

here and there. Ruscha's monochromatism leads to the detachment of the photographs or rather the artist from his subject, this despite his famous attraction to Los Angeles and unashamed fondness for Hollywood glitter.

Sunset Strip presents both sides of the boulevard facing one another at the top and bottom of the pages, the latter inverted. Letbetter follows that format. But the trickster Ruscha takes liberties that belie the title of the series. Familiar landmarks have gone missing, notably the animation studio of J. Ward Productions at Sunset and Havenhurst just west of Lytton Savings and Loan, site of the former Garden of Allah where F. Scott Fitzgerald stayed with his lover and biographer, Sheila Graham. It would be difficult to miss J. Ward, in front of which stood a large statue of Bullwinckle J. Moose holding Rocky the Flying Squirrel in his hand. The popular television program premiered in 1959, and the statue was in place before 1965 (when I first saw it as a graduate student at UCLA driving my wife to work at Lytton each weekday morning) directly across the street from Chateau Marmont. To this day the most famous art-literary-celebrity-bohemian retreat in L.A., Marmont is inexplicably missing from Ruscha's rendition. Careful examination of the many *Sunset Strip* panels would presumably uncover other seemingly arbitrary absences and relocations, discrepancies that suggest collage or even assemblage rather than reliable visual record. There is a cool faux documentary aspect to this approach entirely lacking in Letbetter's more literal depiction of his subject.

Both series are devoid of human inhabitation, either by accident or the design of waiting for the right moment. Tiny figures do indeed appear on Ruscha's *Sunset Strip*, but they are almost invisible, absorbed in the built landscape or mounted on motorcycles on the wide boulevard. In each work the street provides the foreground baseline. However, Letbetter's version suggests buildings as seen by walking rather than the drive-by view of Ruscha. We all know that a city is better experienced personally by walking than driving. To the extent there is commentary in the Ruscha, it may be that lack of real physical connection between people and buildings. Ruscha's scroll–like street scenes betray little or no emotional link between him and his subject. It is just there. In fact it may be devoid of meaning beyond its existence. If one further insists upon commentary in these static depictions, it would appear to be the obvious contrast between the reality of the Strip and an imposed reputation for glamour shared with the nearby Beverly Hills homes of the stars. The irony is clear and apparent.

However, these differences, although useful in separating the works, are not the measure of their individual meanings. I soon decided that *Fenton Road* and *Sunset Strip* were dramatically different in a fundamental way. Ruscha's work is famous for its deadpan quality and unengaged neutrality (rearrangements notwithstanding). He has removed self–expression to ponder art issues arising from subtle but, when contemplated, striking juxtapositions and highly unconventional combinations of media and words. In his quiet way he has produced one of the great bodies of stealth conceptual art, all the more remarkable for the intuitive quality of his vision.

Letbetter's art should not be described in these terms. And the reason is in the divergent meanings based on approach: engaged emotionalism versus cerebral neutrality. I started this essay by sharing a personal story about the importance of human presence to the vivifying of a scene. That essential ingredient was recognized by 17th–century Golden Age Dutch landscape painters such as Meindert Hobbema (1638–1709) who introduced small figures as *staffage* to engage the eye within large compositions. In their absence, even nature—not to mention populated cities and villages—are deprived of meaningful life. Under such circumstances, the results represent a stage setting devoid of human activity. It seemed to me from the beginning that the meaning of Letbetter's work, unlike Ruscha's, was contained within a personal relationship to Fenton Road that may even have come to him as an unexpected surprise.

In the beginning of my effort to understand the specific meaning and significance of this work of art, I had very little of the all–important personal context for the photographer. Nonetheless, I subjectively felt qualities which would lead there. Two years ago I posted a short piece on Facebook about *American Beauty*, an exhibition of striking large-scale prints by Canadian photographer Phillip Jarmain. Simultaneously beautiful and horrible, these images of abandoned, vandalized, and decaying public buildings in Detroit were stunning in the impact. I wrote of the exhibition at Meridian Gallery: "As you look you are forced to move beyond the aesthetic triumph to the sad civic, social, and cultural truth—the monumental local and national custodial failures they silently proclaim." Particularly moving were the formerly spectacular vast

theater interiors such as *East Town Theater*, now in shambles, from a period of optimism, elegance, and prosperity accompanying the American auto industry flexing its considerable muscle. To view these urban palaces as witnesses to the decline of a formerly great and vibrant city is heartbreaking.

Dennis's humbler subjects perform a similar function for Flint, Michigan, the city where he spent his childhood years. Admittedly, Flint's decay and depopulation lacks the impact of Detroit's grandeur turned to ruin. However, the process with roots in the changing economic circumstances of America is the same. So, these photographs are about change and loss, national and individual. Beyond that, it is a story of one person, our photographer, returning to his hometown to record how it has changed. The assumption is that almost everything familiar from the time Dennis first rode down Fenton Road on his bicycle has altered. But most of all, the scene is marked by a desolation evidenced by the absence of human activity. Once again, nobody is there. Dennis encountered only one other human being, other than his sister, on his photographic journey. A lone man seated in a car parked across the street stared suspiciously, as if to intimidate them: "What are ya doin'. Ya takin' pictures of me?" Dennis described the experience to me as frightening. I later learn that Flint's high crime rate paradoxically occupies this seemingly empty void. That single ominous detail is located at the opposite emotional pole from that of Ruscha's treatment.

Having finally had the chance to talk with Dennis about the series and the circumstances in which the photographs were taken, I learned just how much he—to his surprise—felt the loss of his own past. Thomas Wolfe wrote about his subject in *You Can't Go Home Again*, "He never had the sense of home so much as when he felt that he was going there. It was only when he got there that his homelessness began." Elsewhere he writes: "In other times, when painters tried to paint a scene of awful desolation, they chose the desert or a heath of barren rocks, and there would try to picture man in his great loneliness. … But for a modern painter, the most desolate scene would have to be a street in almost any one of our great cities on a Sunday afternoon."

It would be far too convenient to put Dennis Letbetter in the shoes of Wolfe's young George Webber. But the universal truths of change, loss, loneliness—and the slippery nature of memory—are embedded in the views of Fenton Road. The big question is how do we know ourselves in relation to that reality? What and where is *our* past? Where do we come from and where can we find that place? Where is home? This sense of being—of belonging—presupposes other people, much more than buildings, by whom we are perceived. Somehow I think that insight lies at the heart of *1.5 miles of Fenton Road*. This work by Dennis Letbetter is not only rich in poignant philosophical speculation about life but beautiful in its mundane, homely, small town features. There is sadness, but more than that a sense of growing and maturing understanding of the human condition—the nature of our world and our place in it. Who would have thought philosophical reflection could be found in such a simple and bereft setting?

Paul J. Karlstrom, 2015

San Francisco from Rincon Hill *unknown 1851*

Everything faded into mist, the past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth. George Orwell

Photographs carry death in them. Whether exposed this morning or decades ago, they are instantly of the past and every image is of something lost. All is in flux and change and photographs are unflinching talismans. While I would choose to view photographs mostly as cherished memories, a lingering sadness remains. In them we can see no longer extant buildings, meadows, and people. Photographers are chroniclers of our past, the resulting images vestiges of what once was.

Since all photographs document, what can possibly distinguish images gathered under the umbrella of documentary photography? Every photograph was chosen, seen and exploited in a particular individualistic way. Every photograph is the object of an expression.

Fenton Road is located in Michigan running from the city of Flint south into the town of Fenton. It is residential. I grew up on a street that intersects with it. At that time Fenton Road was a lively and vital street with all one could need within walking distance: grocer, milliner, hardware, barber, butcher, dentist, doctor, schools, bars, auto repair, gas stations, soda fountain, plumber, electrician, lumberyard, furniture and dime stores, sporting goods, homes, apartments, books and magazines, restaurants, a printer, notary public, boat sales, bait shops, beauty shops, churches, ice cream parlors, lawyers, a library, candy store, realtors, clothing stores. It was a neighborhood where both presidential candidates and Santa would arrive by helicopter.

Most all of these concerns and businesses have long gone, and most buildings have been replaced by seemingly temporary prefab structures and a couple of dominating franchise businesses. With typical disregard for the best legacies of the past, the beautiful brick school, my family's elementary school named after Buffalo Bill Cody and dating from early last century, was leveled rather than repurposed.

A recent visit to Flint revealed that the city and Fenton Road have continued to decline considerably. The vitality has gone; the population has plummeted. Streets once crowded with families and playing children seem empty and menacing. The sidewalks are uneven, overgrown, bro-

ken and unpeopled. Flint is a city suffering the ravages of a real but officially unacknowledged economic depression. It is populated now with the underemployed, the underinsured, the overweight and the barely educated. Furniture is too often seen on lawns.

A city that blossomed under the benefits of philanthropy from the titans of the auto industry and the New Deal has devolved, as much due to corporate design as to neglect. In any given year Flint's per capita murder rate is the highest in the country. Empty homes are recreationally set on fire and there is little governmental will or monies to remove them. Formerly well kept neighborhoods are left to become overgrown gap toothed shambles.

* * *

The term panorama was coined by the English painter Robert Barker, who combined the Greek words pan (all) and horama (view) in 1792 to describe his large-scale painting of Edinburgh. When hung inside a circular space it enveloped the spectators within a 360-degree view. The following year Barker built the first dedicated panorama building in Leicester Square, London to exhibit his panoramas. In short order, the panorama became a hugely popular form of mass entertainment.

One of the first photographic panoramas was made in 1851, daguerreotypes later linked by Martin Behrman. Perhaps the best known early work, however, is Eadweard Muybridge's panorama of San Francisco in 1878. The very fact of using a panoramic format inspires the photographer to ever wider possible formats, with banquet cameras, the Cirkut cameras used by E.O. Goldbeck, and 360 degree cameras. Now we have Google Street View and the ability to travel virtually down a street looking in any direction. The photographic panorama has intrigued photographers and viewers, yet panoramic photography has been marginalized by curators and gallerists, with very few exceptions.

In 1966, Edward Ruscha made his Sunset Strip leporello using several photographs of single buildings shot straight on, sharing a constant perspective, lifted out of context and positioned adjacent to one another complete with their addresses. The result is a collage of what seem to be real estate photographs. His images are as lifeless and passionless as possible, begging a postmodern allegiance.

My photographs in this issue constitute linked images made in 2002 with a 6 x 17 cm Linhof camera on color film. They were exposed over two days, exploiting the morning or afternoon sun. Stitching together such images creates a series of vistas, lending a sense of space and dimensionality allowing oblique views of the sides of buildings as well as partial views down intersecting perpendicular streets. The images on the top are of the west side of Fenton Road, with images of the east side running inverted along the bottom.

This is still a street where people live.

Dennis Letbetter

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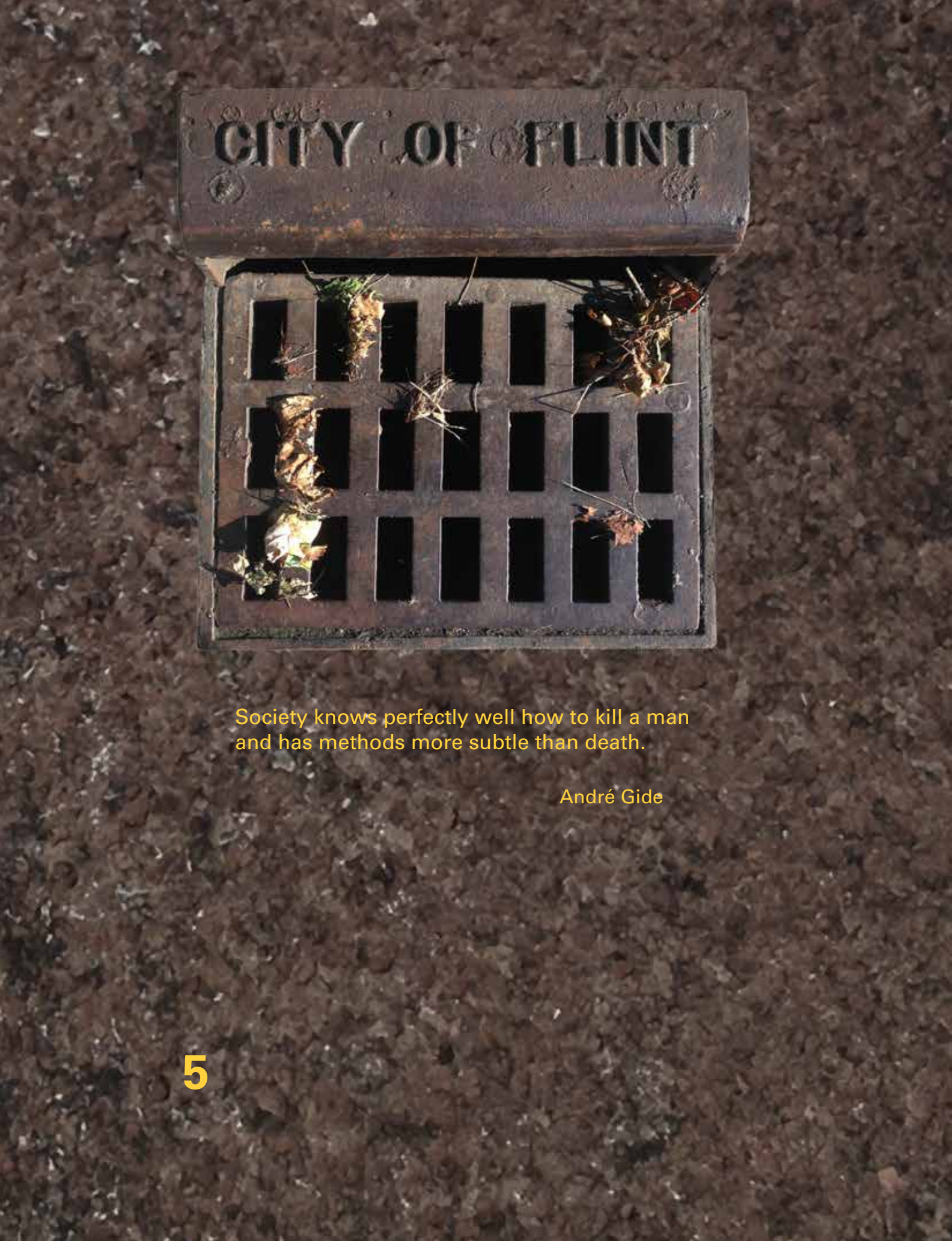

Society knows perfectly well how to kill a man
and has methods more subtle than death.

André Gide