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Municipal Ruins and Sacred Waterholes in Brooklyn, New York

by Regan Good

I love New York City and the Borough of Brooklyn and all cities across the globe, cities being great metaphors for poems and art—all the disparate parts working together to make an ecstatic whole. Walking the streets of a historical city is a metaphysical and ontological exercise; on city streets we are often alone together in time as we walk forward on (or down under) the pavement, enacting and furthering history. No one can stop Time and no one can own a City. The carved corbels, iron fencing, kiln-baked bricks, shop fronts, restaurants, domiciles, alleyways, water towers—all this tonnage of concrete and glass and steel belongs to no one though the city serves as the constantly changing, growing and eroding background for millions of shared lives. New York can present as shiny as a new skyscraper or as *wabi-sabi* as a Japanese tea bowl from the 7th century.

I'm interested in wabi-sabi; the old, the neglected, the dinged, the battered—such texture rivals erosion in a Western canyon; it takes time and it can't be faked. One such artifact of city streets has kept me awake for years and sharpened into a mild obsession; these are the historical

manholes and handhole covers through which men, hands, fuel, gas, water, and electricity descend. These lids cover the portals into the damp, industrial Hades beneath our streets.

Brooklyn sidewalks are, despite my childhood in Connecticut by the beach, my natural landscape; I was born to them in 1967 in Brooklyn Hospital, I left them twice, and then I returned to them. I chose these streets; it has not been easy, though it has been rich. As a poet, I take these lids for what Wallace Stevens might have called "the parts of the world," and by rearranging them in my mind (I can't say much more) they might be sea-changed into a new poetic reality. I also think of Eliot's idea of the poetic Objective Correlative—how the emotion of a poem is to be reflected or grounded in the concrete world, in the backdrop, so to speak, in the poem's physical or figurative place. In this way these lids are my Waste Land; they are also my gravestones and my chapels. I have also come to think of these markers as my "sacred groves," my "sacred water wells," my "mystical landscape markers," where broken sacrifices of swords and amulets might be deposited if humans still did that kind of thing. The lids provide what Harvard professor John Stilgoe calls one's "objective internal landscape." It is New York as the Bronze Age fens of England, an America city-dweller's vast memento mori, a layered and ritualistic landscape. While the city can be niggardly with its secrets, once you start looking for them they are everywhere.

How It Started

While vacationing in Rome one now distant March, my mind was in the gutter. The Spanish Steps, the Forum, the Basilica of San Clemente—all the plentiful and fascinating attractions vied for my attention, but my eyes were cast downward. The simplicity of Rome's ancient water drains seemed equally if not more interesting than the eternal ruins of pomp and ceremony. The drains —circular or square— often with small, elegant leaf-shapes cut out for the actual drainage, resembled, to my American mind, tiny apple pies. These drains are logically designed municipal art, an ideal marriage of form and function, with reasonable aesthetic care taken despite their quotidian purpose. Like Roman slaves, these humble drains performed Herculean

tasks. Master water manipulators, Roman engineers famously invented modern plumbing, as well as powerful gravitational pumps to propel their fabulously ludicrous fountain projects. With rain and drainage from the baths adding to this already heavy flow, the Romans required rivers of waste water to be shunted away daily. My boyfriend and I returned from Rome with many pictures of these drains and few pictures of each other.

"Looks like a great trip," people said, looking at our photos. "Did you guys ever look up?"

Once back in Brooklyn, my eyes remained trained on the ground. The little Roman apple pies were now replaced by local street hardware in our neighborhood, the now vomitously over-egged Carroll Gardens, named so because its gardens are placed in front of the brownstones, instead of behind, as is customary. A few blocks from our apartment, in a little cul-de-sac down by the putrid and poisonous Gowanus canal where the bulwarks kink and zigzag, I spotted a 1950s honeycomb manhole cover with a bright, thick yellow stripe painted directly across it, from pick hole to pick hole. I heard the plinking and rushing of underground waters. That evening, a man was playing a jazzy saxophone on a loading dock as the summer sun was setting and plastic bags lufted up in the little alley's tornadoes; I looked up at the unused forlorn brick warehouse (perhaps home to financiers now) where so much work had been performed by nameless men, and I fell in love with that cover. Deeply. It was not rational. It wasn't a particularly old lid or one that was even beautifully designed; it was more that I felt a kingdom opening up under my feet that day in my own country, my own city, a parallel world I knew nothing about but with which I knew I would be henceforth engaged. That day I started to record the storm drains, manholes, and eventually handhole covers of Carroll Gardens, Gowanus, and Red Hook—as well as anywhere else that has manhole covers, which means everywhere. Along the way these lids began to fall into several categories of my own devising. To be sure, the symptoms of this obsession are with me to this day.


I am not the first to be spellbound by this constellation of lids under our feet. Mimi and Robert Melnik founded the discipline in 1970s Los Angeles, pioneering the study of municipal ephemera with their research on manhole covers and similar hardware. They famously hung a manhole cover above their living room couch, ready to squash any sitter, large or small. Their relatives thought they had gone insane. The Melniks' lonely work is now the work of many. Diana Stuart, God bless her, has written the definitive book, *Designs Underfoot: The Art of Manhole Covers in New York City*, where she documents 400 of the city's most special manhole covers out of a staggering 600,000. On Tumblr and Instagram, one can view manhole covers

from all over the world. Photographers, historians, and amateur urban explorers are out there admiring, deciphering, recording, and uploading their discoveries, recording pilgrimages to noteworthy lids. (Manhattan's oldest lid, an 1866 Croton Aqueduct lid in Central Park, is especially popular.)

On Flickr, a group called the Manhole Whores shares its finds in an international scroll of molded and forged manhole covers: Copenhagen, Alberta, London, Budapest, Hong Kong, Dublin. Every municipality across the globe has manholes and a subterranean world of tubes, holes and lines (what some have called a city's "subconscious") which, like a body's parasympathetic nervous systems, no one thinks much about—until something goes wrong like one stops breathing or a small child slips down one and pops out in China.

One's sentimental and practical education in this realm is rapid; it's like learning a new language in its source country. Each week a new piece of information emerges that needs to be assessed against what one thinks one knows. Wonderful moments ensue as one has a clarifying breakthrough, as when an English speaker studying Italian can suddenly incorporate reflexive verbs into her conversation. Things get bigger and make more sense. One day, for example, I saw what looked to be an iron age axe-head embedded in a concrete sidewalk; upon inspection I could make out letters K-O-S-M, but it was impossible. The letters had worn off from billions of scuffing feet. Half of the plaque seemed burned. (Does brass burn?) I went home and returned with paper and pencil to make a blurry, childlike rubbing of the thing which was also completely indecipherable. Weeks later, I came across a dark round plaque the size of a Frisbee with a weird and familiar axe-head head shape on it: I saw the K-O-S and, *Eureka*! I saw that plaque spelled out the name of the long defunct KOSMORETTE Cement Company. (These plaques served as advertisements for the cement companies who laid the sidewalks.) The large disc functioned as my sidewalk Rosetta Stone.



I have gotten many strange looks in the field, especially from children being pulled along by their parents. "Mommy?" they ask as they look back at me crouched on the sidewalk feeling the raised bits on a lid, "What is that lady doing?" One man recently doubled-back half a block in disbelief: "You just took a picture of *that*?" Yes, yes. I loiter without shame.

As I took in the sidewalks, I began to make distinctions, though at first I indiscriminately took pictures of anything embedded in the street. If you walk by a potentially interesting cover and don't give it a good look, you will regret it, as a boyfriend once told me men regret (sometimes blocks later) not turning around to look at a pretty woman. Another boyfriend once explained to me that he'd developed a "fast eye" during his marriage, which allowed him to scan and take in the female form in a split second. I too have developed such a fast eye, used when walking with people who are not keen on stopping every ten steps to squat on the sidewalk. Now that I have inspected many of these covers, I know what I am after; usually the covers I love the most show signs of decay, neglect, ruin, and rebirth. (For example, the familiar, big flat silvery-buttoned intact "gutter mandalas" of Con Ed manhole covers are nice, but are ubiquitous—one doesn't need hundreds of pictures of them.) Rather, more fascinating examples of dilapidation, loss, and retrofitting exist.

Out of respect for the Melniks' territory (as well as the homesteading urban explorers that came before me), I shifted most of my attention from manhole covers and drains in the street to what are called handhole covers imbedded in the sidewalks. (For our purposes, I include coal chute or coal hole covers as handhole covers.) The Melniks also photographed handhole covers, but they are known primarily for manholes. If a man passes through a manhole, then it follows that a hand fits through a handhole. Usually the lines they capped were for water, gas, coal, or oil monitoring, or for their delivery into private homes. Many lines are now defunct. (If you remove a lid and look down, you will see simply a circular shaft to Nowhere, a creepy tube side by side with other creepy tubes.) These lids, still *in situ* but without utility, will be found in different states of wear. Like great earthworks, the lids and their holes have undergone changes over the decades, and what remains is often moving. These lids are not Nature, of course; they are evidence of human industry and metallurgy— human ruins in miniature; they mingle with Nature and Time, catch it, arrange it, and are ultimately worn down by it. Still, like a tea cup or a horseshoe, these lids outlive the men who forged and placed them; the workmen are now dust while the lids still perform their intended function.

Intact Lids

For sentimental reasons, the most magical handhold lids are certain water line covers from the early 1900s. They appear as little frowning faces or penny-brown, open-mouthed Mr. Bill dolls:

They spell out WATER in a curvilinear eyebrow. Their mouths become stuffed with pine needles, sand, bits of pulverized leaves. Some handhole lids are still removable, and it takes great moral fortitude not to slip them in my pocket. This summer in Stonington, Connecticut, I found an old loose water cover of this preferred variety.

I picked it up on the way to the boat. I showed it to some kids. I put it back down. I thought about it on the beach. I thought about it on the dock when we returned from the beach. I picked it up on the way home from the dock. I replaced it and thought about it some more at dinner. This went on all weekend. Ultimately, I left it there because that is where it belongs. It would be like moving an old man to a new nursing home for one's own selfish reasons, I thought. It would be ruining other people's pleasure at seeing such an old cover still in place. Not that anyone in the whole of Stonington has noticed this lid, or that it is removable, or cares one fig what happens to this little atavistic piece of the town's municipal history.

I once rescued an abused and totally uprooted 1970s GAS cap from a tree-bed in Columbia Heights; it was no longer capping its scary tube, it was completely separate and laying in a ditch like a decapitated head. My friend Linda and I saw it struggling and popped it in a plastic bag before it was lost under the grass and any more dogs peed on it. Other than that I have never disturbed the ground I study.

Spidey Face and Other Soft and Worn Covers

 There are old manhole covers in NYC made of a soft, silvery, glowing alloy that grow more gorgeous and dreamy each day as they are buffed by the rubber tires of hundreds of thousands of cars. These lids have become burnished with rubbing and they softly glow like Danish silver in the moonlight. I have a favorite cover in Red Hook that I call “Spidey Face” for the weird caul-like-webbing effect its soft

disintegration results in; its raised letters DWS (Department of Water Supply) and its background hatching design have become swollen and watery. My favorite silver cover (see conclusion) is such a softy:

Lidless Holes

When water, gas, or oil lines are missing their lids, they leave perfectly round holes in the sidewalk, which, when nominally stopped up, become receptacles for impromptu still lifes.

Feathers, trash, plastic, cigarette butts, newspapers, and leaves drift into these holes and settle so beautifully that there seems to be a sentient hand at work. Their seasonal stuffings (pine needles at Christmas time and petals and pollen in the spring), plus all sorts of ambient detritus are all arranged by the wind, reminding me of what Mussolini once said: "Once the bombs fall everything will fall into place naturally." Dada also comes to mind, the art of randomness and chance and the "found object."


Sometimes these dead, lidless handholes become receptacles for dirt into which drift seeds, causing little green plants or tufts of grass to sprout up. The mean city is dotted with thousands of such micro-gardens.


Occasionally I have seen where some common citizen has cut a lid out of plywood to replace one that has been lost; once I found a paint can lid jammed into a water line hole. (While not as dangerous as an open manhole, open handholes could prove tricky for small dogs and cats.)


Plugged or Sealed Handhole Covers

Sometimes the lines have been sealed with concrete. Some are sealed sloppily, with great globs of cement or tar fixing them in place; others seem to have been tended to by a worker who respected the lid. Instead of a messy mound, these workers have created a kind of troweled cement penumbra around the lid. Like an old man, these lids are not what they once were, but they remain themselves. Certain older lids have been swallowed by the sidewalk as it shifted tectonically around them. I know of one very old water cover (a favored variety) that seems to be in the middle of being eaten by the conflicting slabs of the sidewalk. No matter how I tug, it won't move.

The Found Art Gifts

On lucky days, one might look down and see where the street hardware has tuned into something else entirely. A drifting bobble-headed sperm? A moon with a crater? A sun and its moon?

Painted Lids

The Department of Works uses gorgeous colors to mark cracks in the sidewalk and handhole covers. I passed by a lovely tomato soup-with-a-can-of-milk-colored handhole cover recently, and I have multiple photos of lids painted in Mannerist bright oranges, acid greens, bright magentas, cherry reds, and searing yellows. Often there are linear and circular markings painted in these fluorescent colors as well as squiggles, arrows, criss-cross lines, dots, words, and numbers.

I understand that each paint color represents a different agency; for example, the gas company uses yellow paint, the electric company uses blue paint, the fuel companies, red, but, truly, only the municipal men with their spray cans know what these marks mean.

The Heartbreak

While coal chute covers are not exactly handholes, they are closer to handholes than manholes. Coal chutes are probably the most beautiful covers out there; they acted as both functional lids to keep the rain out of the coal chutes and as advertisements for the many iron works companies in operation in the city. There are still a handful of coal chute covers here and there, but more often than not you will find large circular cement scars where these lids once were.



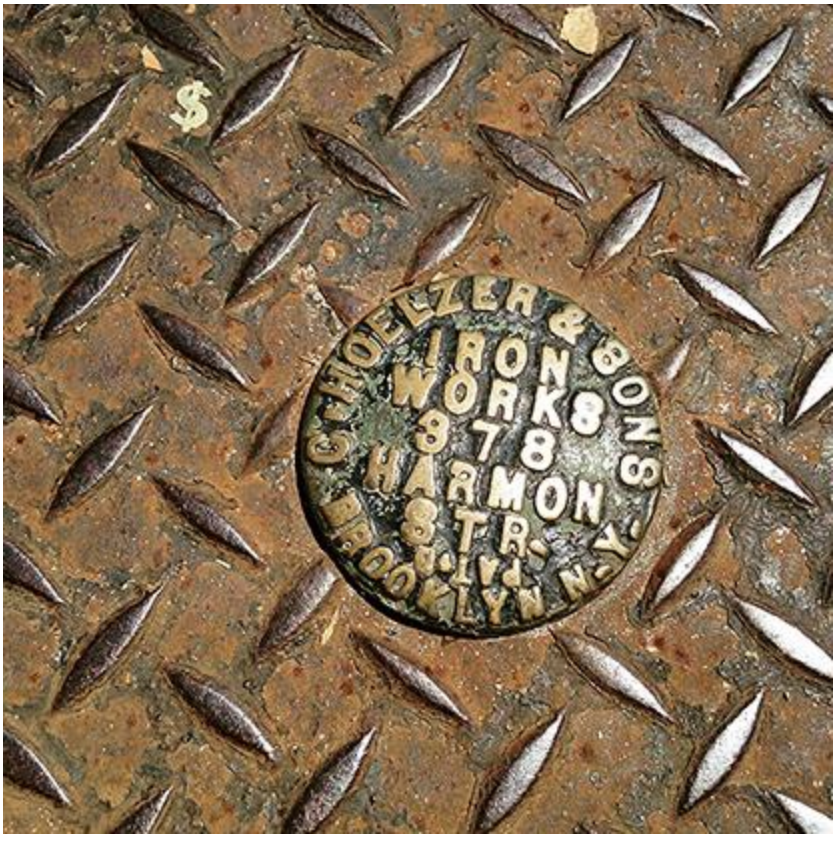

Most were torn out of the blue slate when coal was replaced by gas. Horrid cheap grey concrete was slathered over each gaping hole. When I see these scabs, my heart sinks and I am tormented by the same series of questions: Who made the decision to remove the lids? Where did the lids go? Were they melted down? Did the removers see their beauty and understand their value and

stash them in their attics? Did their grandchildren then toss the lids or sell them at stoop sales? Coming across an intact, *in situ* coal chute cover is a true pleasure; I love these heavily decorated reminders of our energy history.

Behold the variety of coal cover designs incorporating stars, vines, scrolls, addresses, chevrons, herringbone hatchings, honeycombs, radials, numbers, studs, holes, and family company names complete with progenical "& Sons." The foundries that made these lids were located in Manhattan and Brooklyn: The Healey Iron Works, A. Johnston; 193-195 Varick St NYC; W. J. C. C. Alexander, 11 Thompson ST, NYC; Kasper & Koetzle 565 Bushwick Ave. BKLN, NY, etc. I imagine that businesses at those addresses now produce cups of artisanal coffee or more likely, renovated spaces for real estate developers. No judgments, it's just more evidence that as a nation, we don't really make much anymore.

Besides manhole and handhole covers, there are many other atavistic street remnants to seek out: boot scrapers (look carefully at the front of a brownstone stoop's balustrade; the horizontal blade is the scraper); sections of old blue slate sidewalk (ten thousand times more beautiful in the rain than poured concrete); the presence of the odd laundry pole; bucolic iron fencing in the form of trident grapes; purple and pink vault lights; heavily decorated streetlamps; foundry stamps; sidewalk maker markers (with company names like Kosmorette, Kaidamant, Granolithic and Cementine); flip lid metal mailboxes; stamped bricks; foundry-stamped latch buttons on metal cellar doors.

These buttons are a true delight to encounter, so packed as they are with information. For example, on a button three inches round, one finds the following in buffed and glowing raised brass letters: C. Hoelzer & Sons Brooklyn, New York Iron Works, 378 Harmon STR; Lash Iron Works, 474 -478 Water STR New York; Chas Streble & Sons 610 Myrtle Ave BKLY N.Y.:



This game collapses time, and it has, at times, actually been a solace to me, connecting me to the streets of my Brooklyn ancestors, as a trip to Stonehenge may have been a solace for whoever it was they were, doing whatever it was they were doing.

Speaking of laundry poles, the laundry poles of Sackett Street are a study in each owner's individuality and relationship to unauthorized vegetation. Sunk so expertly in the 1920s, no man can unearth these poles without a backhoe, so this atavistic drying technology remains fixed in the present. Weedy vines love these poles and climb and climb their tiny internal ladders, weaving themselves around the slats and sometimes wildly branching out (if allowed). All of our old Carroll Gardens neighbors have them in their backyards and each deals with them differently, so that they become vehicles of self-expression, much like the hipster penchant for styling one's pubic hair. My ex-landlord, for example, lets it all hang out. His pole looks like Crusty the Clown's hair or (as my boyfriend said) a "huge bud." No poisons, no clippers; Misha's pole is as irresponsible and wayward as Misha himself. The crazy branches bounce and loll; when a wind comes the pole looks like a dancer in a disco. Next door lives what used to be called a yuppie couple; he brings home big adman paychecks to his Stepford wife and their

uncommunicative blonde child. Their awful 1990s brownstone renovation steam-cleaned all of the charm out of the building so it's not surprising that their pole looks like it is tended to by Martha Stewart's landscapers. It is immaculately manicured, bearing a nearly topiary-quality rounded top in the shape of a Beefeaters hat. I imagine the new mom gets satisfaction as she gazes on her tidy pole of controlled greenery. The third pole in our row of twenty or so is managed by Nicky, a Vietnam Vet. Nicky has lived on Sackett Street for fifty years in a multi-family affair. He likes to think he's a wiseguy and somedays I think he is. Perhaps because he and his wife have cultivated such a lovely rose garden, their pole has been stripped and scoured of all vines so not to detract from their manicured beds. Their pole stands bare, unnaturally unmolested by vines, as if it had been sprayed with Agent Orange.

Both sides of my family go back several generations in Brooklyn, and as I looked into family research recently and found actual addresses where this or that relative lived or worked, I also scouted (and documented) the street hardware in those areas, wondering if perhaps their feet touched, for instance, that gas line handhole cover right outside that old door. It was a way to commune with the long-gone Finleys and Thompsons and Goods and Boyds, those lunatic strangers so integral to my own existence. My maternal grandfather was a letter carrier in Brooklyn for three decades, and I am now sure we've walked over some of the same street hardware. One illustrious arm of my Brooklyn family operated a butcher shop in Red Hook, and I believe my great-grandmother Fanny Finley and I have touched the same blue slate. On rainy days, after her shift at the Vaseline Factory, did she watch from the butcher shop windows as the slate dreamily turned into watery shadows? As she did this did she wonder if beef bones and soup greens were to be her future? Did her seaman husband, John West, one day spy her weighing out marrow bones through the butcher shop window as he paused on this same blue slate? This patch of stone is connected to my own existence; after all, without Fanny and John I would not be here.

Recently, we've moved to the grand old historical neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, leaving Carroll Gardens behind to eat itself alive. I was in Bed-Stuy newcomer heaven for weeks and skipped around taking snaps of all the street hardware and sidewalk plaques in my view, gasping at the variety and startling sane people with weird exclamations. There are golden burnished brass gate handles here, too, as well as "urban gravestones," murals of young dead black men (RIP Jamel, Larry, Pop), killed in the '90s when Bed-Stuy was deeply troubled and woefully underserved. Unlike our old neighborhood, this neighborhood is still raw, and comprised of fascinating historical buildings, empty lots, farmland, storefront churches of all denominations—and, of course, thrilling municipal street hardware. One day last summer, I found what I believe to be the most beautiful manhole cover, possibly in the entire world, though few will agree. It is as large as the Iron Age Battersea Shield now in the British Museum, found in the Thames in 1857 where it may have been deposited as an offering or sacrifice. (O, to have been the one to pull that from the mud!) This cover is a silvery Dali-like melting-clock-of-a-lid, made of a soft, silvery, glowing alloy, oblong in shape, i.e., not round as most manhole covers are. This shield-lid, as I call it, is pocked with "breathing holes" and sloppily sealed at its edges with black tar. It bears the marks "BPB," which indicate Borough President Brooklyn. The first day I found it, I initially heard the sound of rushing water as I waited at a crosswalk. To my left lay this silvery reflecting pool, an oblong portal to the underworld. For a moment I felt that I was in the subterranean reaches of San Clemente in Rome, hearing water rushing through the ancient drains still in use, and my mind started churning and dreaming and then I was gone, ravished and reified, thinking of the waters of the world, the rivers of the cross, and all the waters of the many liminal sacred water pools of my life.

Read online at: http://www.hinchasdepoesia.com/municipal-ruins-and-sacred-waterholes-in-brooklyn-new-york/