

Daniel Khalastchi's
MANOLERIA

(Tupelo Press, 2011)

A READER'S COMPANION

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An Introduction to Manoleria

by author Daniel Khalastchi

Manoleria was written during my time as a fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown from 2006–2007. During the winter of my fellowship, I spent most evenings listening to public radio’s *Marketplace* (a daily briefing of stock reports and business news) on a small kitchen radio. The more I listened, the more I began to think about the economic/political/social uncertainties our country was facing, and soon began writing poems that addressed these issues via a recurrent character who is physically/mentally manipulated while the world around him takes little notice. While the poems in *Manoleria* are sonically driven, they are also bound together with locatable narratives that ask the reader to question just how much the recent “developments” of our nation (specifically in regards to the crumbling financial, housing, and job markets, and the healthcare system) have actually benefited its citizens.

As a whole, the disruptive, heavily rhythmic poems of *Manoleria* are concerned with the state of citizenship, politics, and culture in contemporary nations. In these pieces, our nameless narrator discovers himself over and over again — against his will — imprisoned within a sequence of absurd, grotesque, and dramatic events, tests, or accidents, that push his psyche to the brink of bewilderment. While these dangerous predicaments echo such complex current events, they also aim to bring to light the travesties of extraordinary rendition and official willingness to torture for information.

In these poems, bodies grow sick with abuse, neglect, and worry, and the intense percussion of the caesuras are meant to act as gasps of breath, a beating heart, or the structure of a spinal cord, holding the bodies of these poems together. While the collection shifts back and forth between narrative and fragmented structures, the strange and at times inane circumstances brought upon the narrator may serve as a catalyst for questions concerning democracy, locality, and the representative voice of a single citizen.

The poems in *Manoleria* don’t claim to have answers to all of these questions — rather, they depict one character’s attempt to survive a series of bizarre and troubling difficulties, an effort that, in the end, might signal hope for a better future for us all.

Advance commentary on *Manoleria*

“Daniel Khalastchi’s debut collection *Manoleria* restores to lyric writing a visceral poetics — ‘Body was music’ — which informs this vulnerable yet virtuosic writer’s utterance all the way down to the microtexture of punctuation. Here a colon is a typographical mark, a frailty within the embodied subject, and a resurrected form of prosodic measure. Part nightmare journal, part survivor’s narrative, this haunting volume recounts one soul’s journey through the *selva oscura* within: ‘It is hard to navigate the forest at night, but this, I am told, is how it must be.’ Amid the darkness of interiority, however, a music emerges that bears ultimate promise, for ‘somewhere inside I hear calling a shepherd.’”

— Srikanth Reddy, author of *Voyager* and *Facts for Visitors*

“With composure so unflinching as to be unnerving, the speaker of this mysterious, deft collection explicates what would be, in other hands, unimaginable and unspeakable atrocity. Instead of trembling evasion, we are privy to a remarkably compelling account of torture, mutilation, humiliation, and horrific transformation. At the heart of such a project is the question of eyewitness, of I-witness. Who is the victim? Who is the perpetrator of this seemingly ritualistic violence? Who is this account addressed to? What will be done to avenge it? One complicit by-stander trying to maintain his clerical cool sits ‘dabbing his forehead/ with an envelope’ and meanwhile, Khalastchi uses a steady, steady hand to reach into the quiver.”

— Robyn Schiff, author of *Revolver* and *Worth*

“In *Manoleria*, the body, broken apart ‘in elegant stress,’ recongregates. Daniel Khalastchi writes through a trauma that is both personal and communal, a weather system of the corpus where pressure gathers and dissipates in drips and in utter storms. Formally, the poet is literally taking us through the emotional work of picking up pieces. Despite the splintering, despite the hemorrhage, somehow ‘all is accounted for.’ A cardinal debut: important for poets and vivifying for poetry.”

— D. A. Powell, author of *Chronic* and *Cocktails*

“Uncertain as to whether they are buried or planted, growing or dead, the poems in *Manoleria* know when they are pushed up out of the dirt by some unholy hand what they can claim is a world punctuated by gasps, loneliness, and shadows that may be nothing more than wreckage. These poems remind me of Beckett’s Lucky (slave, clown, stranger, preacher); they are as terrifying and beautiful. Like Lucky they bring with them an indecipherable hope. Like Lucky they know to be fully alive means to embrace the soft panic only language can bring.”

— Sabrina Oran Mark, author of *Tsim Tsum* and *The Babies*

An Interview with Daniel Khalastchi

by Andy Stallings

AS: *I'd like to begin with a discussion of disruption — of the body (by unnamable, alien force), of rhythm (by in-line caesura), of dinner (by men with axes), all the forms it takes in this collection. Each form of disruption is a creative or propulsive force, the first and most present radicalism in Manoleria's poetics. I'm invested from the very beginning in your distinctive use of spatial caesura, and am particularly interested in understanding its technical importance to you. In fact, to start there, how does disruption — whether technical, narrative, metaphorical, or otherwise — operate for you as a compositional force?*

DK: Disruption, indeed, is something I think about often when writing. The poems in *Manoleria* came from a time (in my life, in the world) when I felt very disrupted. When these poems were written, I was living in Provincetown, finishing my fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center — I was far away from the people I loved, the fear of securing a job and health insurance overwhelming me on a daily basis, and I was listening to news pour in from my small kitchen radio about a collapsing housing market and a seemingly endless parade of recently uncovered secrets about war, torture, and extraordinary rendition. As a person living in the world, I didn't know how to react, and as a writer I wasn't sure I could react.

When I did begin to write, the poems took the form of a recurring narrator who was (quite literally) physically destroyed while the world, the people around him, took little notice. Not such a subtle metaphor I realize, but to me this felt like the best way to examine the utter catastrophe I (like everyone?) was witnessing at the time.

As the poems became more and more sonically driven, it became important to me to bridge the gap between what I heard in my head (a stutter, an uncertainty) and what the reader would encounter on the page. I began experimenting with space, with caesuras, and with punctuation that arrived when the audience didn't expect or want punctuation, or wasn't sure how to handle it. Big inspirations to me during this time were writers/artists like D. A. Powell, Caryl Pagel, Nas, Claudia Rankine, Gertrude Stein, Matthea Harvey, Bruce Springsteen, John Berryman, and Mobb Deep.

Music has always been an important part of my life, and to be honest I'm not sure where I'd be without music. That said, I heard Springsteen say in an interview once that he gets away with certain things lyrically that an author/poet would not because he has, "the music raging underneath." On the page, however, we only have our words and the way we present them — since I didn't have instruments/a rumbling beat surrounding my poems, I felt it was my responsibility when writing *Manoleria* to create that "rage" through hiccups/gaps/gasps/delay/disruption. My goal, then, is for you (as a reader) to

hear/read the poems the same way I do — so that we (and pardon the terrible cliché here) hear the same song, even if we hear different singers, from different speakers, in different cars, driving down different highways.

AS: *I want to pick up later on these comments about music.*

However, let's follow this for a moment: "Not such a subtle metaphor," you say, and certainly one of the most striking aspects of this book is its unapologetic use of physically grotesque description — of violent forces working their way through the narrator's body, and of violences imposed on the narrator from without. Whether metaphorically, psychologically, or purely in terms of imagery, there is nothing subtle in the presentation of Manoleria's main current. It is pure voltage. And, in the wake of the visceral experience of reading these poems, I'm inclined to think that subtlety is overrated.

Psychological terror is something I'm accustomed to in my reading of contemporary poetry — it's the physical element foregrounded here that I have encountered much less frequently.

What's interesting to me about it, and to bridge this back to disruption somewhat, is that for all that the world is unflinching around the disruptive force that the narrator might logically become, so too is the narrator entirely calm in the face of all that afflicts or disrupts him. It's as though there is a mutually derived accord between the disruptive force and the would-be disrupted audience that above all else remaining calm is necessary in these circumstances. As a reader, I find this sort of in-narrative agreed-upon equivocality to be rather calming. I wonder if you could speak some to the impact of an equivocal (or dogged, or numbed) tone on these poems, and your experience writing them?

DK: These are wonderful questions, Andy. While I'd love to give you an impressively original/mind-blowing answer, the truth is that the poems in *Manoleria* were written with a kind of disturbed apathy because that's what I saw going on around me at the time.

What I mean to say is that when these poems were shaking loose from my typewriter, we (as a country, as Americans, as humans, etc.) were involved in a war, in torture, in an election cycle that was just beginning to dominate every aspect of the news, in an unemployment crisis, in a healthcare crisis, in an educational crisis, and no one seemed to notice or care.

Now, obviously, that's a gross generalization — people noticed, but it didn't seem to me that anyone (including myself) was doing anything about what was happening. When I began to think about writing during such a politically charged/definitive time in our history, I was hyper aware of my limitations (or, perceived limitations): I came from a supportive, middleclass family; I graduated college, went to graduate school, was being paid (at the time) to do nothing else but write in a cottage on the shores of Cape Cod. Since I was in such fear of coming across as (gasp!) pompous/naïve/presumptuous, I wanted to present these poems (this narrator, these terrors) in as much horrific-nonchalance as possible. Maybe it was silly of me, but the thought was that if I could make readers *feel* the grotesque, if I could bother them by how

little the world around the narrator (and the narrator himself) appeared to care about what was happening, maybe the meta-connection to the present state of our crumbling existence (not to sound hyperbolic) would somehow suddenly become more viscerally apparent.

In the absence of all this politically charged rhetoric, I think maybe the poems in *Manoleria* remained “calm” or quiet because in the face of such glaring and obvious wrongdoing, shouting doesn’t always seem to help. Sometimes, I drive down the street and watch as kids push each other on sidewalks or listen to students on campus use potentially hurtful language as they attempt to make their friends laugh. As an outsider, I am reassured when someone stands up for himself or herself. When a person can vocalize a defense (“Hey, stop pushing me,” “That word is offensive, you shouldn’t use it”), this seems to signal a strength that suggests a recognition of borders/boundaries/respect/power. What bothers me, however, is when no one says anything — when we watch the kids bully each other for sport and then seem surprised to hear of a school shooting; when I walk past a homeless vet being ushered from underneath the awning of a sandwich shop and don’t ask the students taking pictures with their smartphones why none of us have enlisted.

I fear, here, that I’m not fully making sense, so I’ll leave you with this thought: It’s uncomfortable to watch people not be able to defend themselves, but it’s potentially more disturbing to realize they don’t want to. That discomfort, that personal/social disruption (to come full circle) is something I’m very interested in, and I hope the poems in *Manoleria* bring that to light in some way.

AS: *It’s safe to say that Manoleria does bring some of that personal discomfort to light, and in such a way as, for instance, a pedagogical theorist would find sound (if you’ll pardon the comparison): that is, this book forces me to begin an interrogation of my own response. Confronted with violence, I remain calm — feel, even, calmed. That’s a situation few readers would claim comfort in recognizing.*

But let’s return to the thoughts about music (as an underpinning, as an aspiration) that you brought up a while back. There are multiple tracks I’d like to head down on that subject. Leaving aside the obvious — artists are constantly inspired by and in conversation with other artists, living and dead, in and out of their own discipline, in the same way that they are engaged with, say, landscape or memory — what impact has music had on your writing, in this book and in other writing?

I think, for instance, of the titles taken from Mobb Deep songs in your extended sequence, “Send Weight” (a series not included in Manoleria but published in Thermos) — and you mentioned both Mobb Deep and Nas as presences in your daily life as you wrote Manoleria. Prodigy (of Mobb Deep) is legendary for the coldness in his line from “Shook Ones, Pt. 2,” when he says, “rock you in your face, stab your brain with your nose bone.” And while the coldness is coming from the opposite end in your figuration of violence and non-response, it seems like one place where you might easily have found an example.

Does much of your inspiration stemming from music come from content, as here,

and as in your interest in the social situations handled in Springsteen's music? Do you find hip-hop beats or flow in the current of your own poetic rhythms? Where does music enter technique for you?

DK: I'll say, first, that I'm overjoyed we are able to discuss Mobb Deep and Springsteen in an "academic" interview. Second, these questions are incredibly interesting to me, and I'll do my best to rein in my response.

Music, to me, is the most important aspect of poetry. The rhythms, the cadence, the sonic bravado (or lack thereof) of any given poem are what allow a reader (this reader?) a clear shot at the heart. While some poets rely on music to push/pull their pieces in new and engaging directions (Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dora Malech, Michelle Taransky), others use it more sparingly to signal shifts I find utterly breathtaking in their subtlety (Denis Johnson, Zach Savich, Marc Rahe . . . the list could go on). I guess what I'm saying is that sometimes the music of poetry is a knocking 808 drum machine, and sometimes it's silence. For me, word choice and rhythm happen so intrinsically that I do my best to avoid attempting to disguise or analyze it. Like a rapper (say, Prodigy in "Shook Ones, Pt. 2"), when I write there is something in my head that is driving me towards certain words and their combinations. While I don't have a slick beat thundering in my headphones, I do have a feeling (in the case of *Manoleria*, a feeling of destruction/political upheaval/uncertainty, etc.) that I want to say something about. If you think of that feeling as a beat, the full "music" of the piece comes together when lyrics/poetic lines are laced on top. What I mean to say is that Prodigy, with that grimy beat from "Shook Ones. . .", wasn't likely to say "kiss you on the cheek, hug you tight cause I love you." The beat, the feeling it created, allowed him to lyrically represent the violence he felt and saw growing up in Queens. The sound let him let go, and I think I try to allow that same thing to happen to me when writing.

To say this more succinctly, and to go back to the Springsteen quote I mentioned earlier, while I don't have a beat/"music raging" underneath my poems, I still want my poems to sing. The rise and fall of each syllable, each gerund, each moment of punctuation, is there hopefully to help the reader feel/hear/connect to whatever it is I'm trying to get across — I've never stabbed anyone in the brain with their own nose bone, but I understand the anger Prodigy was surrounded by in his youth; my dad never worked in a factory, but I understand the backbreaking labor Springsteen's characters go through on albums like *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. Those songs, those musicians, move me — I guess I use music in my poems to try and move the reader in a similar way.

In an attempt to answer this question specifically, I should state more exactly that music plays a direct role in my writing. Every morning, I get up and spend an hour or so reading hip-hop blogs, listening to new rappers, new songs, and new flows. Although it sometimes feels that the rap genre (like all art forms) is "played out," or that there can no longer be a fresh way to present the same formula (beat, 16 bars, chorus, more bars, more chorus, etc.), I'm always inspired by what I hear. The drive, the determination of some of these artists reminds me to "stay hungry," as they say. They get me excited about word

play, about language, and about what it's like to have a voice with something to say and a world around you that doesn't necessarily want to hear you. (Sounds a lot like contemporary poetry, huh?) I go back and forth with musical genres and styles — some days I'll only listen to Tommy Dorsey, others Springsteen, still others Jimmy Witherspoon. But most days, I stick with hip-hop, and I take walks or drives around town when all I do is listen to one song over and over, focusing intently on how the artist was able to pull me as a listener in and out of the track. How they maintained control. How they kept me from “switching the channel” — how they kept me in it. (As a side note, this week that artist/song was Freddie Gibbs' “National Anthem.” If you haven't listened to this, you should. Right now.)

I once heard a rapper (I forget who) say that rapping was like boxing — that every time an artist picks up a notepad or gets in the recording booth, they have to believe they're the strongest/most well trained/hardest person in the world. If not, and they get in the ring with someone else who's more hungry, more tough, they'll just get eaten alive. I don't mean for this to sound like I believe, in any way, that poetry is a competition, or that I want to be better than my peers — what I mean is that through music I've learned that a certain amount of confidence is necessary, and that taking risks and chances with my word play/presentation/disruption (we've come full circle again!) keeps me from falling in to the “only twelve notes a man can play” thought process that (at times) seems to inundate all art forms, poetry not excluded.

My final point is a small one: Springsteen is the greatest poet who has ever lived. But maybe that's something we can talk about later.

AS: *There are many avenues to take out of that response — including: Springsteen as the greatest poet, how and why? But I'm most interested in the issue of confidence.*

I think we would agree that artists must move with confidence — even something beyond confidence, a non-acknowledgment of confidence — through whatever ground they deem necessary in order to achieve the rhythm/music/form/content that constitutes meaning for them in writing poetry. That there is no terrifying realm of consciousness that should be held outside the materials of a poem. But for the reader — even the serious and seasoned reader of literature — that is not necessarily true. There are territories that a reader might justifiably not wish to engage, for whatever reason. Leaving aside the question of how much a writer owes to an audience, I'm interested in hearing from you about some of the territories you found, as a poet, difficult to traverse — and where you might expect readers to encounter restraints and limits in themselves. I ask because there is evidence in the music of the Manolera poems of deeper disruptions than the sort we discussed earlier on — things you must have had to reconcile with yourself in order, as your narrator does, to press forward.

DK: I may have said this before, but as a writer I find great comfort in discomfort. For me, there is so much in the world that is upsetting and utterly frustrating (poor education, wars, political issues, etc.) that while I may choose to avoid these to an extent in my daily

life (I'm not one to picket, to proselytize my beliefs in any particularly public forum), my poems are a chance to get in the face or the head of another person (of myself?) and say, "Hey — isn't this fucked up?"

I don't mean to be crass, but hopefully you see my point. Certainly there are many territories I wish not to (and don't) write about — I avoid (for the most part) writing about my family's history (escaping Iraq) because it's difficult and I don't feel I have the right to write about this. I also avoid writing direct "confessional" pieces because if I wanted someone to know about my failed attempts at living my own life, I'd leave my journal on a public bus or start a blog.

Maybe the bigger question here is how I expect my readers to deal with the issues/images/violent dismemberment that occurs throughout *Manoleria*, and the truth is I simply hope they trust me. I worked hard at avoiding "shock value" in this book. I'm not writing to show how weird my brain is, or (honestly I'm shaking my head here) to be funny. Poetry — and I stress that this is a personal opinion — is not meant to be stand-up comedy. Too often contemporary poetry feels like the poets are out to try and amuse their friends at a bar where everyone is wearing skinny jeans; like poetry has become easy, in the sense that (strangely?) it is suddenly a hip thing to do, and if a person makes a few jokes and breaks a few lines, they'll have a book done in no time. I don't want *Manoleria* to read that way. I want the discomfort, the moments where a reader would rather turn away or close their eyes, to be somehow balanced with a more engaged, purposeful stillness. Maybe that's why so many of the poems in the collection are "narrative" — it was very important to me when creating these pieces that the reader not feel like I was saying anything just to say it. I wanted there to be a feeling of deliberateness — perhaps that leads to the "calm" feeling we discussed earlier — and I'm thankful that the editors at Tupelo saw that in the book.

When I teach creative writing, I tell my students that they owe their audience everything and nothing — they just have to remember that the reader only has what the writer leaves on the page. After that, misinterpretation/alternate readings/etc. are fair game. Hopefully *Manoleria* doesn't ask too much of the reader, but also doesn't ask too little. Hopefully that impulse to want to cover one's eyes from the proverbial car-crash of images, but still peek through to see the wreck's aftermath comes from a quiet voice somewhere in the collection telling everyone: *there, there — yes, this is happening, but it's okay.*

AS: *All right, so you called Bruce Springsteen "the greatest poet who ever lived," and there's a part of me that's inclined to agree, largely for temperamental reasons. What I want to know is what you mean by that statement? How would you justify that claim?*

DK: Listen to *Darkness on the Edge of Town* front to back four times in a row. Listen to *The River* (all of it), and then put on *Nebraska*, turn off the lights, and spend three days only eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the floor of your apartment. Make note of the control. The ability for one man to assume the voice of a country (its politics, its

people, its economic diversity/frustration/limitation/need), and then try to give me another writer who is able to achieve anything close in a total run-time of roughly 159 minutes. Then we can talk about justification. Am I right? (I get all hot and bothered when I talk about Bruce — maybe my claim can't be justified, but Springsteen is the one who first showed me what was possible as a writer, if I just opened my eyes; if I just looked out the door, the window, down the stairwell. If I just *saw*. In fact, I get a very similar feeling every time I listen to Nas's *Illmatic*, but maybe that's a conversation for another time.)

AS: *I've encountered a question many times with the primary word "responsibilities," but I feel that an artist's primary responsibility is to the art, so I want to frame this slightly differently: What do you see as the possibilities of the poet in public conversation? I mean primarily political conversation, but interpret as you will. Who are some poets who have recently advanced these possibilities for you?*

DK: Every poet has different responsibilities, and maybe every poet also has different possibilities. That said, I think a poem has the chance to cause action — whether that's a fiery riot by a critical mass in objection to political tyranny, or a sudden understanding of what to say to a lover and how to say it. In other words, if we can get poems out there (which is easier now, in some ways, with online journals, etc.), they have the possibility of (gulp) changing the world. For me, as I've mentioned before, I feel this change, this call to action, often from musicians/hip-hop artists, but there are also many poets/writers who have greatly advanced what I understand to be "possible" on the page. I'm not one for lists, but I will say that the writers whose work I return to regularly for this reason are Roberto Bolaño, Leonard Michaels, Claudia Rankine, Dan Beachy-Quick, D. A. Powell, Jack Gilbert, Robyn Schiff, John Berryman, Vinnie Wilhelm, Inger Christensen, Mario Bellatin, Matthea Harvey, and James Wright. Obviously I am forgetting people (James Galvin, Suzanne Buffam, and others) but these writers/poets all show me, every time I pick up one of their books, that there's no limit to the power of language. I owe a lot to all of these writers. It's that simple.

AS: *Finally, since you finished writing Manoleria, what are some books you've read, films you've seen, experiences you've had (etc.) that have altered the context of the book for you in some way?*

DK: After finishing *Manoleria* I went on a pretty big TV series kick that I'm honestly still trying to work my way out of. I didn't have television for a good stretch of the last four years, so I've worked pretty hard to play catch up when I can. One show that has made me think about (albeit in different contexts) the themes raised in *Manoleria* is the beautiful and amazingly under-appreciated *Friday Night Lights*. Aside from the strange dip in season two (possibly because of the writers' strike) I think *FNL* does a terrific job of highlighting the struggles of everyday Americans, everyday people. Like Springsteen, the show touches on everything and everyone — it covers how economic class is driving

our country apart, investigates how bad political decisions are impacting our educational system, examines (daringly, by contemporary television standards) the role religion plays in social/personal decisions and actions, and shows people finding a way to survive in the face of obvious hardship and adversity.

While I hope *Manoleria* doesn't read as a "family drama," the themes I'm discussing in the collection are not unique to my poems. *Friday Night Lights* seems to have similar aims, just with pretty actors and a sexier drawl. If you haven't seen it, it's highly recommended.

I'm not sure if that's the answer you're looking for. Obviously the election of President Obama, the book *The Dark Side* by Jane Mayer, my move to Milwaukee, and other experiences/events/etc. have all altered the way I look at *Manoleria* — but isn't it more fun to talk about television?

Interviewer Andy Stallings teaches creative writing at Tulane University in New Orleans. He lives there with his wife, Melissa Dickey, their daughter Esme, and by the time anyone reads this, their second child. He is a co-editor of the journal Thermos and listens to baseball games in his spare time.