

Denver Syntax



our 10 year old publication.

stories.
poems.
art.
music.

Malissa Stark
Literary Magazine Report
Fall 2013

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Fact Sheet

Magazine: Denver Syntax

Web Address: www.denversyntax.com

E-mail Address: jonathan@denversyntax.com

Founded: 2003

Founding Editors: Jonathan Bitz

Current Editors: Jonathan Bitz, Luc Simonic, Charly Fasano

Frequency: Quarterly

What they Publish: Fiction, essays, poetry, music, and art

Submission Guidelines: They accept e-mail submissions. A brief cover letter and bio is required, and the subject of the e-mail should read "submission". Manuscript should be attached as an MS word format. Times and Arial fonts are appropriate.

Word Count Requirements: 2,500 maximum.

Submission Period: Open year round

Contributor Payment: None

Cost per issue: \$10

Why I Chose *Denver Syntax*

I was drawn to *Denver Syntax* initially because Denver is my hometown. However, that's just the reason I visited their Web site. Colorado does not have the literary community that Chicago or New York do, so I was curious. What I found was a literary journal that has it all.

The beautifully crafted fiction lends itself to my particular taste: "Provocative works dealing with madness, sex, death, general mishaps, strange infirmities, unique situations and the like; sociological criticism/assessment; philosophy, physics; interesting use of language (within reason)." Who the hell wants run-of-the-mill fiction?

Besides the excellent narratives, they publish captivating photography, music, and radio syntax (their very addictive podcast section). The very ambitious Syntax team is also opening up a restaurant in their attempt to attack all of the creative senses. To put it simply: Denver Syntax fascinates me. I am hooked.

Comparison of Issues

| Issue | Issue 26 | Issue 23 | Issue 14 |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Number of Prose | 6 | 6 | 7 |
| Female Authors: Male Authors | 2:4 | 1:5 | 1:6 |
| First Person: Second Person: Third Person | 1:3:2 | 4:0:2 | 6:0:1 |

Denver Syntax encourages pieces with unique styles; it was not surprising that they publish such a wide array of point of view. In the most recent issue, they published three stories in second person, which is not common to see in fiction. They consistently publish six to seven quality pieces of prose per issue, but seem to prefer mostly male voices. They did not offer bios for their contributors, so it's hard to tell whether or not there is a balance between established writers and newcomers.

Story Reviews

Issue 14

“Kentucky Snowstorm” by Matt Baker is a plainspoken domestic story told in first person. The narrator begins the story by giving some background on his Grandma Alabama, though it is a mystery how she got her name since she’d “never even been to the damn place.” Alabama is withering away with no particular illness, but every illness. She wants her grandson to help her end her life. He eventually gives her morphine pills that she chokes on after trying to swallow ten at once.

Baker uses well-crafted sentences and clever metaphors to draw the reader in. When discussing his grandma’s philosophy on mankind he says “Grandma Alabama thought we took a wrong turn in our evolutionary Sunday afternoon drive.” It’s sentences like this that add charm to the story. The structure of the story is unique and took many different turns. It starts with Grandma Alabama’s philosophy, moving to her background, then into the scene of her death, ending in a heavy load of dialogue between the narrator and the nurse. This kind of ever-changing structure builds momentum in the story.

“Recovery” by T.K. Dalton is a surreal, plainspoken story told in third person. Conor, who is transgendered, has broken down on the highway, though we never learn where he is off to. The twist is that he is carrying a hitchhiker who refuses to help change the tire. They begin to argue about the matter and as the conversation goes on the reader begins questioning if the hitchhiker is even real. At moments the hitchhiker can be seen as his deceased father, or the female version of Conor, Caitlin. In the end, the stranger takes a jack out of the trunk of Conor’s car and tells him to meet him for lunch when he finishes changing the tire.

Dalton uses dialogue in a way that makes the reader is just as confused as the protagonist. It moves by so fast that it’s hard to tell who is speaking, unless you pay close attention. “‘I am a product of the mind.’ ‘Some mind.’ ‘Yours.’ ‘Whatever. You’re getting off at the junction of I-91.’” This makes the piece the kind of story you have to read three times to get. That’s something I admire. Dalton also uses verbal interaction in a clever way to reveal the characters and the setting, which is crucial since there is virtually no narration outside of the dialogue, which keeps the vague allure that is needed for the piece.

Issue 23

“The Far Wall of the World,” by Robert Kaye is a plainspoken, first person story, told in a domestic setting. It captures the narrator’s journey to work in the middle of a snowstorm. The scene opens with the narrator laying in bed and noticing the sheer comfort of it. He then realizes that if he doesn’t head to work a layoff may be in his future. Whilst driving, he watches an SUV swerve through three lanes and eighteen-wheeler nearly hits him. After swerving off the road he chooses to walk home and “join the resistance.”

Though I thought the content of this piece was a bit dry—a short attempt to drive in a snowstorm with nothing else happening—the perspective of the narrator was inviting. The closeness of this third person allowed everything to be told and seen fully. The first line is, “Lying in bed, the quality of light bleeding under the curtains indicates the arrival of fresh snow.” This kind of specificity is drawn out throughout the piece: “The defroster kicks in at last, revealing an enormous white SUV wandering across three lanes, the driver hiked out his open window to the thigh.” The effect of such precise details as the color of the car and position of the driver give a strong visual. That is the real asset of this piece.

“New York City Bowery Blues,” by Catfish McDaris is a plainspoken domestic story told in first person. The narrator takes his girlfriend shopping in Little Italy, but waits outside of the store for her. While he is waiting he watches an Italian walking his dog approach a Chinese man walking his dog. In no time the two dogs are fighting and killing each other. He reacts only by laughing and shaking his head. When the narrator finally talks to his girlfriend she believes this was something of his doing.

McDaris is able to create a very interesting internal dialogue of the narrator. “The chink dog grabbed the wop dog by the nuts and did some dog Kung Fu,” is how he describes the total of the fight. The use of “chink” and “wop” characterizes the narrator as someone crude, not concerned with being politically correct, so it’s easy to see why the girlfriend assumes he had something to do with the fight. Though I found the word choice and internal monologue to be effective, the piece didn’t seem flushed out enough to actually be a full story, as I felt with “The Far Wall of the World.”

Issue 26

“Tether” by Phillips Spotswood is a surreal, plainspoken story told in second person. It relays your story starting with your relationship to the umbilical cord in the womb all the way to death when you are again searching for some sort of tether. In between you spend your life sleeping and searching for nourishment and for a short amount of time you thrive before you eventually shrivel.

This was my favorite story I’ve read in this magazine. The second person point of view could not be any more perfect. This story just wouldn’t work any other way. It fits because the cycle of life is the same for everyone, when detailed in abstractions like, “Notice wrinkles. Feel your mind drifting away from its establishment.” The other interesting thing Spotswood does is that he separates each paragraph with a very telling verb that establishes the next portion of life. For example, “Inhale,” “Sleep,” “See,” and “Thrive.” All of the verbs add to the strength of the story by keeping it active.

“A Note About My Lovers on the Telephone,” by Mandee Wright is a plainspoken second person story, told in a domestic setting. This story is told in six sections. Each one is a different moment that the narrator shared with a lover over the phone. With one lover she simply could not remember the sound of their voice. With another, they would read to each other on the phone. Another one she would gossip with like a fourteen-year-old girl.

Wright does an incredible job at creating six totally separate relationships and making each one distinct. She does this with the use of concrete significant details. She begins one of the memories, “the first word you said that made me want to love you was when you said Horses.” Such a bizarre detail makes the relationship feel very real, rather than a work of fiction. However, the separate accounts didn’t seem to have much of an arc. They didn’t flow and create a story. In the end, I don’t even really know much about the narrator, though I know a lot about her lovers.

Interview with Editor, Jonathan Bitz

Malissa Stark: Can you tell me how *Denver Syntax* came about?

Jonathan Bitz: It was ten years ago. There are probably many reasons. One was trying to publish for about ten years previous to that, actually. Seeing the publications I was submitting to, coupled with my complications with trying to get published. I think that my poetry editor and I had always wanted to do our own thing. And so *Syntax* was born out of that. We kind of made a couple of attempts before and then I just really picked up on the visual art element and thought that was a point of entry.

We had to figure out how to do that without spending a bunch of money and that came down to the idea that we could just make this thing called a website. I was lucky enough to have good technical help around me with my brother. We decided we were going to do it so we got this really great artist named Jeff Soto from California. I sent him this e-mail and I said, "Hey, we're starting this thing, I don't know if you'd be interested in it." The next day he wrote back and said, "Yes." That to me was like, okay, I guess we have to do this now.

I think that looking at the online literary publications, I couldn't find the kind of writing that I was, overall, totally interested in, so we wanted to provide a little bit of that. I've always had this sort of editorial sense about myself and really just wanted to employ that. That's eventually where it began and it turned into a bunch of different things that I really couldn't have imagined at this point. It may be one of the more profound things I've actually ever done.

MS: I think that's interesting that you said you couldn't really find the type of writing out there that you enjoyed reading. I've noticed that *Denver Syntax* does have a different style than other literary magazines. I was immediately drawn to the point-of-view in *Tether* by Phillips Spotwoods, from Issue 26. What drew you to that piece specifically?

JB: I couldn't tell you 100% right now because I can't remember it. I get so many submissions; it's really overwhelming to a positive—and sometimes negative—degree. There are some days that I'll go back and spend time going through the archives and re-falling in love with pieces and going, "Man, that really was a good selection. This guy's great, I've got to send him an e-mail and ask him for more work."

I think curating the way that we do, over the long term, you do forget. There's part of me that feels bad that I can't tell you, but I think it also goes to show what we've been able to accomplish, which is, receiving submissions all day long, every day to the point where we don't have the staff to respond to people. There's no way I could respond to every e-mail.

MS: Let's talk about those e-mails. What turns you off of a submission?

JB: It can be a variety of things, but I really think it's somebody's approach. I think that's a very important thing. All of the publications are very strict about their guidelines. There is that guideline page and you sort of have to play by the rules. In the beginning I used to be very concerned with somebody's publishing credentials, not necessarily because they had them, but it showed they were serious about this. But being a business owner now, for me, I want to see that somebody is trying, somebody who is taking this serious and not wasting my time.

So it starts with that. To be honest with you, it's a weird thing. I think that most editors are probably the same way. They want to feel a little bit of that before they get to open something. You can see it in somebody's formatting, the fonts that they chose. Computers are very interesting like that. You can tell a lot about somebody just physically and visually what you get.

Apart from that, I either love things, or I don't. It just hits me pretty quickly. It's within the first paragraph I can tell if it's going where I need it to go.

MS: I read in an interview with *Westword* that you're writing a book. How do you find time to do that?

JB: Yeah, this is my sixth or seventh. This goes in with the publishing thing, it's just been something since I was nineteen—I'm thirty eight now—that I just decided was important to me for some reason. It's something that I encourage everyone to do. Write a book, just to write. I think that I learned the most about myself through that writing process. It's kind of therapeutic for me. Chuck Palahniuk said something like, "I find something in my life that puzzles me that I can't quite solve and I decide to write a book around it. I work through that problem by writing that book." For me, it's sort of about that. There's something magical about that process that you can't put your finger on, but I'm compelled to do.

This last book that I finished is the most marketable piece that I have, and I'll get it out there for sure. It's historical fiction, something that I've wanted to do for the last fifteen years and never really had the guts to do because it was such a huge, huge story that I was terrified of screwing it up. I had a little bit of a break, and it had been sitting in my head forever and it just felt right to do it here. I think we set those goals. It was like when *Syntax* hit our ten-year anniversary it was like, if the whole thing flops at this point, we made it ten-years. It's good to be goal and project oriented. That's what all of this revolves around.

MS: Do you think being rooted in Denver gives you a regional edge that other magazines might not have?

JB: Not really. In the first five years I would be really concerned with tracking and seeing how many people were reading, getting onto our web site and seeing our readership. I never felt like we were getting enough for a long time. Then I came to the realization that we're a niche market, especially because I'm really pushing the Denver art, Denver music thing. There are only so many people that actually care about that. In Denver, there's not that many. Abroad, there are less. I feel like it's virtuous to pick your battles. I'm very passionate about this. That sense of regionalism was and still is, very important to me. I know that people read our stuff. Some people tell me that some of our essays are particularly offensive, but it feels good because it means somebody is reading it. I think that's what's helped in this kind of integrity to launch into the art gallery restaurant stuff.

There definitely is a market enough in Denver that this is a reasonable, feasible thing to do to spend \$100,000 to get going.

MS: Can you tell me a little bit more about that restaurant music venue?

JB: Yeah, it all certainly stems from the publication. You know, being around my writer buddies, we all sort of had this adolescent fantasy of creating a little community of us where all we would do is write and create and make things and we would have a space to do that. I think everybody else grew up and moved on. I held on to that idea. Twenty years down the road, it seemed like a reasonable thing to do: creating a multi-sensory experience for people. All senses: food, drink, art on the walls, entertainment, community conversation. Really playing off of the core of Syntax: story, words, and other forms. That stuff excites me. I want to share that with people in a little bit of a literary way, but really in a very Denver-centric way is what we're aiming after.

I wanted to make these literary things palatable for people; things like words, vocabulary, quote. I want people to be exposed to these things, I want them to be conversation pieces at the dinner table.

MS: Going back to the magazine, what exactly does that turn around for a story look like?

JB: We try to be quarterly. We've gotten a little off that in the last couple of years. I think the publication has turned out to be content driven. When we have the rights bands, when we have the right artist, when we have enough fiction pieces that are good, poetry pieces, then we'll do it. Unfortunately, sometimes it takes a lot longer.

MS: What advice do you have to give to emerging artists?

JB: Keep your head down and work hard. That's the main thing. Seeing other artists succeeding in a big way should inspire people to work hard and be open. Work hard and

be an expert of your craft, whatever that is and be open to the possibility of collaboration.
That's really all that you can do.