

Issue 2

# The Aesthete

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## Introduction from Wine and Whiskey

It's that time of year again: October. Things are spooky and scary. People, in some sense, should be having fun, getting into the Halloween spirit, watching movies, dressing up, going to parties, taking a few risks, within safe measure, of course. But we know things are also scary in another sense: as we approach the end of 2024 things might feel odd, weird, tumultuous, and uncertain. We at the *Aesthete* are not just editors, we are also human-beings. We know how scary and uncertain life can be. In part, I think that is why we started this magazine in the first place. We wanted to create something with the help of others. We wanted to consistently showcase beauty, quality, and literary form. Perhaps, in

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some ways, we wanted to say that, despite the times, whether good or bad, the *Aesthete* will exist to provide. That is, to provide a source of entertainment, of art, of the unique, of quality, and of the beautiful. Perhaps, I dare say, we wish to produce some form of comfort in this day and age.

Signed,

Wine and Whiskey.

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## Featured Short Story

### Boomerang by Nick Young

As she passed the city limits sign she stepped hard on the gas. No more town speed limit. *No more fucking town*, she said to herself, reaching for the cigarette lighter. Joy Tallmadge was two months shy of thirty and two hours past her vow of never blowing out the candles on another birthday cake in Creek Bend, a dirt-bag dot on the road map. Yes, it was the place. Mostly it was him.

She lit her cigarette and nudged the side vent window open so that the smoke was sucked out into the cool April night.

*No moon.*

Joy did not much like driving after the sun went down, not on that two-lane blacktop, not in her state of mind.

*Fifteen more miles and I'll hit Route Three.*

Then? It wouldn't be Sikeston. She was done with Missouri. Now, she was done with Illinois, too.

*Three hours I can make Memphis.*

If her nerves could take driving in the dark that long. She feared a creature, maybe a racoon, scuttling across the pavement, freezing in her headlight beams, causing her to swerve. Worse, it

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might be a deer leaping without warning from the trees that crowded each side of the road. Or, what if her car broke down with her all by herself? There was so much that could go bad.

*And if it can go bad, it'll damn sure go bad for me.*

Nervously she took a deep drag off her cigarette and pulled it away. A flake of tobacco stuck to her chapped lower lip, and she began working at it with the tip of her tongue.

*Goddamn him.*

Running. Again. She had been in Creek Bend for a year-and-a-half, and she had made her peace with the town, drab as it was. At least there had been no melodrama in her life. Not like Sikeston or Cape Girardeau before that. Not until she had hooked up with Travis Freeman. That started it all over again.

Now, with the pavement spooling out in front of her, Joy was desperate for some distraction from the thrum of the car's motor and the anxiety and anger squeezing her chest like a vise. She clicked on the radio and began spinning the dial up through the frequencies.

*That station in Little Rock -- where was it? Nine hundred?*

Through the crackle and fuzz, she finally caught the signal and the tail end of "Higher and Higher."

"Jackie Wilson on the Mighty Ten-Ninety, K-A-A-Y, where the hits never stop, night people!" And while disc jockey rocked, he rolled into "Born to be Wild." Travis liked to crow that it was his theme song.

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*Oh, fuck me! I can't even get away from him on the goddamn radio!*

She snapped it off, took a last drag from her cigarette and flipped the butt out the window. It was pushing one and the thick clouds that had been rolling in steadily for the better part of an hour began to open up, fat drops that drummed heavily on the windshield.

*Just what I needed.*

She turned on the wipers, started them whipping across the glass, throwing off thick ropes of water. At the same time, she eased up on the accelerator as the rain began washing down in sheets. This stretch of road was especially treacherous—asphalt, unmarked, snaking through hilly terrain. There were no good places to pull off. Joy didn't trust the shoulder, which was narrow, falling away sharply into a deep ditch. So, with the beams of her headlights cutting a murky wedge through the downpour, she white-knuckled the steering wheel. Her eyes flicked to the rear view mirror, worried that the heavy rain would find a way into the trunk of her shitbox Corvair, where she had hurriedly thrown her clothes and what few possessions she called her own.

*Goddamn him!*

"I can't take it no more, Mace," she had said to the other girl working the lunch counter that night at the truck stop on the north end of town.

"He getting' rough with you again?" Macy asked, knowing the answer was always the same with Joy.

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“Sometimes I just want to kill him.”

“I’da done it already. I don’t let no fucking man raise a hand to me.”

“This is it. The last time. I’m outta here—this crummy-ass job and this dead-end town and my shitty life with *him*.”

She finished her shift, took her paycheck from the back room slot labeled with strip of masking tape that had her name written on it in ballpoint and went straight to Travis’ trailer, gathered up her things and climbed behind the wheel. As she drove away, she cast a look back at the rundown single-wide that occupied the lot nearest the road at the mobile home park.

*‘Scenic Vistas.’ What a joke!*

A dozen or so trailers—old, poorly kept up, with more cracked red clay than grass for any kind of yards to speak of. It was dismal, a place that blighted the outskirts of the town like a fly speck.

Joy had known such places before, really had never shaken them since moving in with her boyfriend a month after she quit high school. He was twenty-one; she was seventeen. Her father had no use for him, but she couldn’t have cared less. The old man never paid her one day’s worth of respect or affection. The same way he treated her mother. He was, plain and simple, a lousy bastard who drank himself into dark rages, until the night five years before, when he put both barrels of an over-under in his mouth and ended everyone’s misery. Joy hadn’t bothered with the funeral.

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But her corrosive relationship with the man she'd taken up with—Jim Tatum was his name—set a tone for her life that kept repeating, a bad dream that had unfolded yet again, forcing her to cut and run.

*Jesus, I can't see a thing!*

She had slowed the car to a crawl and turned on the high beams. But with the windshield starting to fog up, it made the visibility worse, so she quickly switched the headlights back and swiped her hand across the glass, clearing it enough so that she caught the outline of an overpass up ahead. She tapped the brakes and eased to the side of the road beneath its shelter. Abruptly, the pounding of the rain stopped, leaving the frantic wheeze and creak of the wipers. Joy shut them off, slipped the car into park and lit a fresh cigarette. She let herself slide down until her head rested on the back of the seat and drew in a deep lungful of smoke. She didn't think it was possible to feel so bone-tired.

*My life is nothin' but a broken record.*

Sometimes she wished she could cry—and this was one of them—but there were no tears. Not any more. She was all cried out. What remained was anger at herself. And frustration.

*Why?*

Each guy had turned out to be like the one before, and all of them carbons of the old man in their skill at inflicting heartache.

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Travis? Well, it had seemed different with him in the beginning. He was back from two tours in 'Nam, poor like her, struggling to make some kind of life as a mechanic at the truck stop. The war had left deep scars. He was edgy, suspicious, withdrawn. But she knew he was hurt and vulnerable, and while he pushed others away, he let her in; and she salved his wounds, calming him, making him feel whole, at least fleetingly. And giving to him allowed her to renew the sense of herself that the other men had tried so hard to crush, the belief in her worthiness beyond the sad trappings of her existence.

For a few months, the hard angles of life became softer, with a glimmer of hope that she just might have a future with this one. But then the old pattern began again. The more she offered of herself, the angrier he became. When it happened, especially when he was drinking, he took it out on her verbally, bitterly.

“You needy little bitch! You want to suck the life out of me!”

Then it turned physical. Not every time, but lately more often than not, sometimes when she least expected it. The bruises she could cover with makeup or long sleeves and high collars. Inside, her soul curdled.

It never failed that the remorse followed. He would break down, baring his shame, begging her forgiveness, and she would relent because he held her in a way that pulled her from the lip of the abyss of extinction. And in those moments, filled with soothing words and passionate caresses, she absolved him, fearing abandonment more than his cutting her heart yet again.

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Joy sat up, threw her cigarette away and laid her forehead on the steering wheel. Outside, the storm seemed to be losing some of its fury. She sighed and reflected on her slender prospects. There wasn't much money to make a new start. She had managed to squirrel away a few dollars, tips mostly, which she had wadded up in her haste to leave. She picked her purse up from the seat and snapped it open, pulling out the bills and folded pay envelope. By the dim dashboard lights, she counted out the bills: ninety-eight dollars.

*God—that's it?*

All the rest of the money she had in the world was in her last check.

*No way that's going to make another hundred.*

She saw that the flap on the pay envelope had already been opened, so she folded it back and reached inside. Along with her check, out came a small piece of paper. It was smudged and smelled of motor oil, lined, with a frayed edge, torn from a spiral-bound notepad. With her thin fingers she angled the paper to catch what light there was inside the car. The writing was nervous, a pencil scrawl:

**I'm sorry little buttercup. I truly am. I love you like sunshine in the morning.**

**T.**

She closed her eyes, her lips drawn tight.

*Not this time.*

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The downpour had subsided into fitful showers, bursts of lightning and intermittent thunder. Joy tossed Travis' note onto the seat beside her, shifted into drive and pulled slowly back onto the pavement and out from under the overpass.

She thought about the radio again but decided she preferred the slow rhythm of the windshield wipers.

*He must take me for a real fool.*

She drove on for several more miles; but there was no exhilaration, no feeling of triumph or liberation that welled up within her.

*We started out so good together.*

There grew a sadness more profound than any she had ever known, and a yearning for human touch so strong she thought her insides would burst.

*He wrote. He never done that before.*

She resisted her first impulse but finally relented and reached out until her fingers found the scrap of notepad paper. She lifted it up and read it again, then put it close to her nose, inhaling its smell.

*Maybe it was me after all.*

Another mile, maybe two and in the Chevy's headlights, Joy spotted a mailbox on her left at the entrance to a gravel driveway that cut into a thick stand of trees. She slowed, pulled in and sat,

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feeling the ragged, low rumble of the car as it idled. A dull half-moon slid from behind the last scraps of storm clouds. The rain had moved northeast and the wind had fallen away. After a long moment, she took a deep breath, then turned the car around. The dashboard clock glowed green—1:25.

*He'll be waiting.*

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## Flash Fiction

### Fox and The Wolf by Joyce Frohn

Dan looked around the truck stop. If only Sheila hadn't been so obsessed. Who keeps the amount in their bank account memorized? And no women in this pit, just hairy truckers.

Then he saw a petite redheaded woman at the door. "Foxy Lady" her shirt said in glittering purple letters. He hadn't seen those crazy shirts since he was in high school.

She went through the crowd like a fox slipping through a herd of cows. A fox like her was no match for a wolf like him.

She slipped into a booth right across from him. Before the waitress even came her way, the biggest, hairiest trucker Dan had ever seen headed their way. He had trouble covering his smile. Playing the rescuer was his favorite role. And cute, too.

The trucker walked up to her booth. He tapped the table, and she glanced up. "Hey, Amy. Mind if I join you?"

Dan turned standing up into a minor stretch.

Amy smiled. "Mike, good to see you. Have a seat."

Mike glanced over his shoulder. "Is Bobby coming?"

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Damn. Married and to someone that truckers were afraid of.

Amy laughed. “What are you worried about?”

Mike’s laugh was nervous; he settled into the booth across from her. “I don’t want to start rumors.”

“His detailing business is taking off and I can’t fit two kids in the cab. I’m solo to California.”

California would be nice. Far away and full of beautiful women, stranded traveler, yes, that would be good.

Dan listened to them joking about places and people they knew, as the waitress came up. It sounded like she was looking for a fling.

“One of your half pound burgers, large fries, chocolate milkshake, large coffee cream and sugar. I’ll stop by the counter for a large thermos fill later. What do you want?”

“I’ll have another coffee.” Mike said.

“Put that on my tab.” Amy said.

Mike shook his head.

“You don’t want to have a fight.”

Mike nodded.

Dan counted out the coins for the coffee and a tip. He didn’t want to watch her eat. He headed out of the restaurant and toward the truck lot.

If only he could find out which truck was hers. He started giggling. There it was, a red sleeper cab with “Foxy Lady” written in glittery gold letters on the bug shield. He heard a rattle.

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A quick glance showed a big Doberman walking out from under the truck, wagging its stump of a tail.

He gulped and stepped back. One more seduction. He circled to the back of the restaurant. Stupid fence. Why would people lock up garbage? He looked at the lock on the gate. Just a stupid little padlock. He had it off and pawed through the garbage. His stomach began to growl again. He grabbed a plastic bag and got a steak with only a few bites missing and two burgers.

“Nice doggie. Good doggie.” He threw the burgers toward the dog. It began to bark and snarl. He walked backward away from it and into the line of trees. He didn’t take his eyes off the damn dog in case the chain snapped. He pulled himself into the bushes. He heard voices come from the restaurant.

“Want me to walk you to your truck, Amy?”

“Why? Afraid of the dark?”

“No. Just-“

Amy put her hand up. “Hear that?”

“Some dog.”

“That’s not some dog; that’s Duchess.” Amy ran toward her truck with Mike right behind her. He stopped outside of the reach of the chain.

“Look at that meat. Someone tried to distract her or poison her.” Amy threw the meat as far as she could and gathered the eighty-pound dog into her arms.

“Maybe someone thought she was hungry.”

Amy kept petting the dog. “I was going for a jog but she’s hysterical. She’ll be barking at every chipmunk.”

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Mike sighed. "It's too bad you don't have someone who could stay with her."

"Come here." Amy patted the ground beside her. "Sit down."

He sat. The dog raised her head from Amy's lap and looked at him.

"Now hold out your hand." The dog licked his hand. Amy shifted the dog into his lap.

"Stay, Duchess. Now you pet her."

Mike began to run his hand along the dog's back.

Amy stood up and headed into her cab. She had running shoes on when she came out. She gave the dog one last pat.

She turned toward the woods.

"Amy." Mike called. "You're going the wrong way. You need to stay near the lights." He pointed toward the highway.

She shook her head. "I'm going away from diesel fumes."

Dan shrugged. A ride to California would be good but he'd settle for cash and fun. Truck drivers always carried cash.

"We can come with you." Mike said. He tried to get up but eighty pounds of Duchess in his lap slowed him.

"You stay with her. If I run into any ferocious chipmunks; I'll yell."

Dan waited until she was in the shadows and a little past him. He jumped toward her with his switchblade out. "Give me all your money and there won't be any trouble."

She froze and stared at him. "There won't be any trouble." She was reaching into her pocket.

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Bob smiled a little. Then he saw a flash of metal. He lunged with his switchblade and stared, as the hilt of her knife seemed to sprout in his stomach as her left hand knocked the switchblade out of his. As he fell, he heard her running steps going away from him.

The next thing Dan heard was the paramedics telling him that they were taking him to the hospital. The hospital, he thought, that would be good. Lots of old ladies and no foxes to bite back.

### **Tale of a Thermos by Arvee Fantilagan**

It was sleek and immaculate, with golden and ebony lines checkering its bright red body; a steel deity of immortal warmth and undying resolve draped in a noble Irish kilt.

Every staffer in the residential care village marveled at the brand new vacuum flask on the conference table, the most coveted in an otherwise sad ensemble of mugs, pens, and picture frames. It was a Thermos too, one that used to cost Filipinos hundreds of precious pesos in the late '60s, but on Christmas Day, the Employee of the Year received one for free.

That turned out to be Mula, the nurse who was an intern two years ago, and who since then had been irritating everyone with her enthusiasm despite already being employed full-time.

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Now with the thermos by her side and the accolade to her name, she also started getting the stink-eyes and snide-comments that officially welcomed her to workplace politics.

She was perfectly happy with it, though. The coffee she prepared at four in the morning remained scorching hot and bitter inside it throughout the day, just like her coworkers' piercing stares. She weathered all that passive hostility until the next Christmas party, when the newest hire won a shinier, fancier thermos. Mula then at last earned everyone's acceptance — by squeezing with them in the pantry and gossiping about the newcomer and his undeserved prize.

When Mula left for a job overseas in the mid-70s, her younger brother Tito took the thermos to his dorm so he could stay awake reading his physical therapy textbooks. He also used it to sneak alcohol into his classes, and to sneak alcohol out of bars on weekends, which he denied having anything to do with his girlfriend's unexpected pregnancy in their last year of college.

The thermos survived that scandal, and over the next decade, helped power Tito through fatherhood, his internship, his marriage, and the countless chatty patients at work.

One midnight during those times, Tito had to force himself out of bed to clean up the lunchbox and the thermos he forgot to take out of his bag. His wife vehemently refused to wash anything anymore past her telenovelas. As he was rinsing them, he noticed smoke flowing out of the windows next door.

He dropped the thermos and started shouting. This woke up their dog, who woke up their neighbor's dogs, who woke up their neighbors, who finally woke up the rest of the neighborhood.

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The thermos got kicked around the floor like a pinball by Tito, his wife, and their 10-year-old daughter Gabriela as they rushed to join the impromptu bucket-wielding brigade outside. The blaze took half an hour to be extinguished, consuming half of their neighbor's house. Fortunately, the only damages to Tito's property were suffered by the thermos, still half-soaked in soap.

Gabriela grew up to become a public school teacher, a career of high prestige but not of much wealth. So, moving out of her parents' house at the turn of the century, she brought with her as much of their stuff as they let her take — their old rice cooker, their rustier fridge, their spare kitchenware, the thermos.

Its classic, fanciful royal pattern had faded over the years; its once majestic surface was now pockmarked with dents, owing to decades of fierce scrubblings in various sinks and its many washers' careless grips.

One exception was the time it intentionally flew from Gabriela's hand toward her live-in boyfriend's forehead. The lid, barely a quarter of the way screwed through, popped out upon impact. Its boiling contents splashed out with malice, scalding his face and leaving painful marks much like the ones he gave Gabriela throughout their relationship.

By the time he finished shrieking, Gabriela was already gone. He picked up the thermos and hurled it at the floor in rage, only for it to bounce back and smack his head even harder.

The thermos remained on those unscrubbed tiles for about a week, until Insan, a friend of Gabriela's, came by the house with her brawny husband and his even brawnier brother, ready to beat up the boyfriend if he was still holed up in there. He was not, so they just packed up all of the stuff Gabriela left behind in her haste to get out.

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The night before Insan could drive them to her friend, however, her little daughter Bunso sneaked into the backseat and scavenged them for curiosities of any kind. It was the thermos that stood out.

She saw how hurt and tired it looked, so she brought it to her room where — following a thorough checkup with her plastic stethoscope — she diagnosed the thermos with Ouchie Disease. The treatment: a blanket of baby goat stickers taped all over its decades' worth of welts.

Sadly, it never fully recovered, so Doctor Bunso just let it rest comatose under her bed.

It was discharged almost 20 years later.

Insan, who in recent days had lost her husband to cancer, and her daughter to a loving man, had been finding tiny bits of solace in minimalism. She would come back to her desolate home after long shifts at the hospital and sit in random corners sifting through all the junk and the mess, decluttering and reminiscing, often fighting back tears.

This past week, it was her daughter's bedroom, where she found the high-heels she bought Bunso for her prom, now worn down to medium-heels. The outdated, crack-riddled phone they gifted her for college. Her books about a family of talking bears, crinkly with orange juice stains and cookie crumbs.

And a battered, childishly stickered thermos that... she borrowed from one of her volleyball teammates perhaps?

Insan tucked them all inside a box and, as she had learned to love these last few quiet weekends, closed her eyes and thanked them for everything.

Then she carried them outside, and on Monday morning, a truck came by and took them all to the city landfill.

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## Poetry

### Orange by Anastasia Jill

JUICE -- alone and empty;  
she knows I don't like pulp  
but takes a grinder to my back,  
squeezes me into a flask,  
the citrus monster mash.

Carotenosis:

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my loss is her regale.

What does JUICE do to my body?

Makes me pliable, liqueous,

a film that lays

like beach towels on her teeth,

her sandy lip sucking me back,

telling people, "My wife just died."

But I am not dead;

I am gossip on her tongue,

tangy and acidic.

She killed me for a story

to tell her friends

and wear their sympathies like

a titan veil.

The Florida widow hates morning tea,

so she hides me in JUICE

drinking down the evidence --

a sunny film

in her cellophane glass.

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### **Neighbors by Alec Solomita**

I know they think but I don't know what.

They know I drink but they don't know why  
(neither do I).

A rat lurks under their basement sink.

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### **Dear Vincent Gray by CS Crowe**

Childhood is a kind of ghost,  
Well-behaved and courteous,  
It haunts us until its business is finished,

But you sit on the top step, hands around your knees,  
And listen to your parents fight at the bottom.

They don't know what to do to fix you,

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They don't know what to do to help you,

In their minds, these are the same thing.

All you needed was someone to sit with you

Patiently on a park bench and tell you

It's okay, I see dead people too,

Or,

It's okay, I'm also a dead person,

You spend your entire life, always listening, never heard.

Ghosts demanding you be the one to fix what is broken,

Imagine that burden placed upon a child's shoulders.

We don't have to imagine it. We do this every day

In the demand for eye contact and physical touch,

In the buzz of fluorescent lights and heavy machinery

In all the small things we do to push the burden

Onto the ghosts and the children who only need

A little patience, a gentler touch from a safe distance,

Imagine seeing the psychiatrist from your childhood

Who promised to help you and then abandoned you

Receiving an award for his work in child psychology.

Imagine how many ghosts beg you not to do this:

Put down the gun. Put on some damn clothes. Walk away.

They try to tell you that you have your whole life ahead of you.

How can you not break when you have spent a lifetime

Being told, over and over, that you are broken?

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To be anything less than "normal"

To be haunted by the voices of the dead,

In the world we have built, these are the same thing.

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## About The Authors

### Nick Young

Nick Young is a retired, award-winning CBS News Correspondent. His writing has appeared in dozens of reviews, journals and anthologies. His first novel, *Deadline*, was published in the Fall of 2023. He lives outside Chicago.

### Joyce Frohn

Joyce Frohn has been published in "ClarkesWorld", "Dirty Magic" and the anthology, "Leadership Gone Right", among other places. She is married with an adult daughter. She also shares a house with two cats, a guinea pig, and too many dirty dishes.

### Arvee Fantilagan

Arvee Fantilagan grew up in the Philippines, lives in Japan, and has more of his works at [sites.google.com/view/arveef](https://sites.google.com/view/arveef). He hopes to write a better bio someday.

### Anastasia Jill

Anastasia Jill (they/them) is a queer writer living in Central Florida. They have been nominated for Best American Short Stories, The Pushcart Prize, and several other honors. Their work has been featured or is upcoming with Poets.org, Sundog Lit, Flash Fiction Online, Contemporary Verse 2, Broken Pencil, and more.

### Alec Solomita

Alec Solomita's prose, poetry, and art have appeared in scores of journals. He has published (not self-published) two books of poetry and his work has appeared in many anthologies.

### CS Crowe

CS Crowe is a storyteller from the Southeastern United States with a love of nature and a passion for writing. He believes stories and poems are about getting there, not being there, and he enjoys those tales that take their time getting to the point.