Afternoon Discoveries: October 23, 2026

Nonfiction, Memoir, Essays, & Narrative Journalism

AMONG THE LETTERS
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Nonfiction, Memoir, Essays, & Narrative Journalism

A playwright with a failing heart returns to a Czech chapel built of human bones. A Canadian author learns too late how her family history shaped her risk of breast cancer, and a Harlem boy measures his childhood in morning radio. Today's essays come from small magazines, two Substack publications, The Walrus, and Brick. The back shelf brings a solitary walker, a bachelor's

dream of children who never were, and a storm in the Upper Canadian bush. Each piece asks how we carry the people and places that made us.

All links in today's edition were checked against the linked publication, magazine, or publisher page on October 22, 2026.

Featured Discovery

Charnel Heart - Kristin Idaszak

Playwright Kristin Idaszak first visited the Sedlec Ossuary near Prague in her early twenties, when a chandelier made of human bones thrilled her far more than it frightened her. Years later a dangerous heart arrhythmia confined her to a cornflower-blue living room, and mortality stopped being an idea. She planned a sabbatical anyway and led a group of students back to the bone church, now crowded with tour buses and restoration videos. Along the way she weighs the ethics of dark tourism and the silence of Euripides' Alcestis. It is a vivid, searching essay about learning to live again.

Read "Charnel Heart" at Longreads

The Discovery Desk

No One Told Me I Was at High Risk for Breast Cancer - Kelly S. Thompson

Kelly S. Thompson's mother had breast cancer at forty-one, yet no doctor ever explained what that meant for her own odds. Only after a move to the United States did a nurse practitioner's assessment reveal her dense breast tissue and place her in the high-risk category. In this personal essay, the bestselling Canadian author pairs her story with interviews about uneven screening across the provinces. She explains breast density, competing risk models, and why only Ontario and Nova Scotia run high-risk programs. She closes with her own difficult decision about surgery, made with open eyes.

Read "No One Told Me I Was at High Risk for Breast Cancer" at The Walrus

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Radio Days - Michael A. Gonzales

Michael A. Gonzales grew up in a Harlem apartment where music drifted through open windows and his mother sang "The Party's Over" while bathing him. In 1970 his stepfather gave her a handsome wooden radio, and family breakfasts soon ran on WNEW and, later, WABC. Gonzales traces his education as a listener from Dionne Warwick to Jim Croce's "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown" and the classroom bully it made him dream of toppling. A move to Baltimore brings one last, heartbreaking scene with that radio. It is a warm, funny memoir of the soundtrack that shaped a writer.

Read "Radio Days" at Oldster Magazine

A Spider's Portion of Joy - Eric Aldrich

On an October evening in Tucson, Eric Aldrich found a large western black widow beneath his gazebo and, instead of squashing her, carried her inside to live in a two-gallon jar. He named her Chalcedony and kept her for a year, watching her slowly grow used to his shadow. His essay blends close observation with research on how widows listen through their webs, sensing vibrations with tiny organs on their legs. One night a cockroach lands on his chest and becomes her dinner. Aldrich's question about whether a spider can feel joy lingers well after the last line.

Read "A Spider's Portion of Joy" at Orion Magazine

Snapshot - Jocelyn Lovelle

Jocelyn Lovelle's brief, luminous essay opens with an embrace, as she holds her mother's hummingbird bones a moment longer than usual. Her mother is losing words now, offering broccoli when she means brussels sprouts. Then an unexpected snow begins to fall, and Lovelle rushes outside in boots and a fur-trimmed hood to catch a flake on her tongue. When she turns around, her mother is standing on the porch, taking a picture of her joy. In a few hundred words, Lovelle captures the ache of loving a parent near the end of her life.

Read "Snapshot" at Hippocampus Magazine

Thank you for spending some time with this afternoon's edition. Below this point are six more essays and reports on home, memory, and history, three pieces of craft and conversation, and three special recommendations from the back shelf.

Special Recommendations can be found near the bottom of the article.

More From the Discovery Desk

The Ontario Town Where (Almost) No One Wants to Be Mayor - Kunal Chaudhary

Pierre Lamontagne, a retired construction worker in the Northern Ontario township of Fauquier-Strickland, hoped to spend his days fishing, trapping, and tending his wild mushrooms. When nobody else filed for mayor, even after the deadline was extended, he stepped forward. Kunal Chaudhary's report explains how a town of fewer than 500 people ran up a deficit of more than $2.6 million, from water plant upgrades to a new medical centre. Rural leaders describe a provincial funding system that leaves small places stretched thin. It is a sharp, humane portrait of local democracy under strain.

Read "The Ontario Town Where (Almost) No One Wants to Be Mayor" at The Walrus

Fixing Up Our Home Means Making Memories My Husband Might Lose - Josepha Natzke

Josepha Natzke and her husband bought an 1895 house in northwest Chicago, painted in loud colours by the couple who owned it for thirty years. Her essay moves room by room like a floor plan, from a scrubbed bathroom to a living room the shade of drugstore lipstick. Her husband cannot recall his childhood, even when his father sends old photos of him covered in Alabama mud. Natzke finds herself keeping their shared history for both of them. A final crawl beneath the house turns a moment of fear into a quiet declaration of love.

Read “Fixing Up Our Home Means Making Memories My Husband Might Lose” at Electric Literature

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Five Questions I Wish I’d Asked My Father - Peter Moore

Peter Moore last saw his father beside a Connecticut hospital elevator in 1995, sharing a manly handshake while his mother fought cancer. His father, a vigorous seventy-three, died while jogging that December, and his son never asked what he most wanted to know. Moore, a cartoonist and former editor of Men’s Health, poses those questions now, about heaven, loneliness, a creative life beside an accounting career, and a surprising stand for gay members of the Methodist church in 1969. Each answer becomes a lesson. He closes with simple advice for anyone whose parents are still living.

Read “Five Questions I Wish I’d Asked My Father” at Oldster Magazine

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Alive on the Page - Lynn Henry

Lynn Henry, editor-in-chief at Knopf Canada, was invited by Helen Humphreys to give a lecture at Queen’s University on the humble page. Her answer begins around 1990 in a tiny radical-feminist press, where she laid out m. nourbeSe philip’s She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks with wax, a light table, and a blade. From there she moves through scrolls, Socrates, and a Latin word for a small rectangle of vines. She argues that the page is where writer, editor, and reader come alive together in time. Book lovers will treasure this generous essay.

Read “Alive on the Page” at Brick

All in the Pumpkins - Anca L. Szilágyi

Anca L. Szilágyi wrote this playful essay one October while she and her husband waited in Chicago for a call from their adoption agency. A discarded decorative pumpkin sets her wandering through nursery rhymes, a Persian fairy tale, Roman satire, and Yayoi Kusama's devotion to the gourd. She considers the pumpkin's quiet role in saving people from hunger, from the Pilgrims' first winter to wartime Japan. Pumpkin ravioli and her parents' Brooklyn garden join the feast. The essay ends in a pumpkin patch, with a long-awaited son held aloft.

Read "All in the Pumpkins" at Orion Magazine

The Small, Sad Freud Museum in Vienna - Charity Hume

Charity Hume studied Freud's case histories in college and arrived at Berggasse 19 in 2023 hoping to sense his presence in the famous study. Instead she found bare white walls, glass cases, and no couch at all. Her essay explains that emptiness, from the Gestapo's arrest of Anna Freud in 1938 to the family's flight and the murder of four of Freud's sisters. It also honours Edmund Engelman, who secretly photographed the rooms before they were stripped. Hume shows how absence itself can become a powerful memorial.

Read "The Small, Sad Freud Museum in Vienna" at The Rumpus

Beyond the First Shelf

What Is a Mother Allowed to Write? - Katie Bennett

Katie Bennett finished editing her first book, the memoir She Was Wild Grass, at a tiny desk curtained off in a corner of her bedroom while her baby slept nearby. Her craft essay asks what her daughter will think when she one day reads about the hardest chapters of her mother's life. Bennett also weighs a promise she once made, and quietly broke, never to write about her own mother. She draws on Iman Mersal's thoughts about mothers and photographs. Her honest answer will help any memoirist who fears exposing the people they love.

Read "What Is a Mother Allowed to Write?" at Electric Literature

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Reflection, Reaction, Narrative: How to SHOW emotional development in your writing - Allison K Williams

Allison K Williams, managing editor of The Brevity Blog, tackles a note every memoirist hears, the request for more interiority without drowning in "I thought" and "I felt." She separates three voices, the reflecting narrator of now, the narrative voice inside a scene, and the reacting self of then. Using a son who announces he wants to join the Navy, she shows how moving reflection out of a scene makes it hit harder. She applies the same fix to journal entries. It is clear, practical advice for anyone revising a personal essay.

Read "Reflection, Reaction, Narrative" at The Brevity Blog

Interview: Amy Goldmacher, Author of Terms & Conditions: A Memoir - Melissa Fraterrigo with Amy Goldmacher

Amy Goldmacher's hybrid memoir grew from a genetic test she took on reaching the age her father was when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In this interview with Melissa Fraterrigo, she explains how a dull chronological draft found new life once she sorted its pieces alphabetically by keyword. The result became a glossary of anxiety, inheritance, and love. Goldmacher also discusses a section written as one long, tumbling sentence and the craft lessons it taught her. Writers drawn to experimental forms will find plenty to borrow here.

Read "Interview: Amy Goldmacher" at Hippocampus Magazine

Special Recommendations

On Going a Journey - William Hazlitt

William Hazlitt's essay from Table-Talk opens with a famous confession, that he loves going a journey but likes to go by himself. The soul of a journey, he insists, is liberty, a winding road, and a three hours' march to dinner with no one to explain a wild rose to. He makes one exception for his old friend Coleridge, who could turn a landscape into a poem as they walked. He also recalls an April day in 1798 at an inn at Llangollen, with sherry, a cold chicken, and Rousseau. It remains the great essay on travelling alone.

Read "On Going a Journey" at Project Gutenberg

Dream-Children: A Reverie - Charles Lamb

Charles Lamb's most tender essay finds him telling two little listeners, Alice and John, about their great-grandmother Field and the great house in Norfolk she kept. He describes her goodness, her dancing, and the ghostly infants she believed glided on the stairs at midnight. He speaks of their uncle John, who once carried him on his back when he was a lame-footed boy, and of seven years spent courting a woman named Alice. As he talks, the children begin to fade. Few essays turn on so quiet and devastating a final line.

Read "Dream-Children" at Project Gutenberg

The Whirlwind - Susanna Moodie

This chapter from Roughing It in the Bush, Susanna Moodie's 1852 memoir of pioneer life in Upper Canada, records the most awful storm she ever witnessed. Alone with her children one August day, she watches the dawn sky glow saffron and crimson before the heat turns suffocating. By late afternoon the clouds are whirling, trees are crashing, and old Jenny bursts in soaked and terrified. Moodie then shares her brother's account of a tornado near Guelph in 1829 before the chapter turns to a hard winter of scarlet fever. It is vivid Canadian memoir from the backwoods.

Read "The Whirlwind" at Wikisource

Thank you for spending part of your day among the letters with us.

Many of today's pieces return to rooms that hold more than furniture. A chapel of bones, an emptied study in Vienna, a pink living room, and a log house in a storm all keep some record of the people who passed through them. Others

ask what we owe the living, from a mother on a porch to a father who never answered. Good nonfiction keeps those questions open long enough for us to look. We hope a few of these pages keep you company this weekend.

I hope one of today's pieces gives you somewhere worth staying for a while.

Take care!