Afternoon Discoveries: October 25, 2026

Emerging Writers, Debuts, & Reading Worth Revisiting

AMONG THE LETTERS
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Emerging Writers, Debuts, & Reading Worth Revisiting

An old man in a Colorado canyon smells smoke and decides to stay. A young woman learns how little her doctors believe her, and a first-grader falls from a banyan tree into a lifelong friendship. Today's edition gathers contest winners, new voices, and writers early in their careers, many from small magazines. The

back shelf offers a debut thriller interview and a fresh look at a modern classic. The specials return to three stories worth reading again.

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

Featured Discovery

Wind and Embers - Carol Keeley

Val Barbeau is frying catfish when he smells smoke, switches on the scanner, and knows at once that this fire is a bad one. Decades ago he and a neighbour blasted their homes out of a Colorado canyon with dynamite bought by the case. Now his wife is long gone, his hands tremble, and the only road out is closing. Carol Keeley's story won first place in the Masters Review Winter Short Story Award, chosen by Jim Shepard. It is a gripping and tender portrait of pride, love, and stubbornness under pressure.

Read "Wind and Embers" at The Masters Review

The Discovery Desk

Cut Off - Ioana Barbulescu

The narrator's mother greets her with the same question every time she comes home, asking when she last checked her blood. A routine test before a year in Moscow reveals two strains of HPV, and the story follows years of dismissive doctors in three countries. Ioana Barbulescu, a Romanian writer and recent MFA graduate, writes with clinical precision and fierce feeling. Her chapters open like medical charts. This New Voices story asks what we lose when no one believes our pain.

Read "Cut Off" at The Masters Review

Heroes - Kelly Murashige

The first time the narrator speaks to her future best friend, she is bleeding badly at the foot of a banyan tree. She had climbed it during a game of tag, slipped, and hit the ground hard. A boy who had been hiding in the branches the whole time jumped down screaming for a medic. Kelly Murashige follows these two children through the years that follow. Her story is funny, warm, and full of the strange loyalties of childhood friendship.

Read "Heroes" at JMWW

Awakening - Julie Mehta

Mama tells her family she must sleep for a long time, and then she does. Her children play tag around the sharp corners she once cushioned, argue over her last snickerdoodle, and search for the knitted fox she made. Julie Mehta, a Bay Area writer and PEN America Emerging Voices finalist, writes this flash fiction with gentle precision. The story moves from exhaustion toward a surprising tenderness. Any parent who has felt worn thin will recognize its quiet longing.

Read “Awakening” at Fractured Lit

Trespasses - Matt Hawkins

Four young men share a draughty student house in Durham, and Frederick is easily the most responsible. He keeps the weekly shop to exactly £12.50 a head and pours bolognese fat into an empty pesto jar so it never clogs the pipes. His housemates find him maddening, and something about those jars begins to grow strange. Matt Hawkins’s story was runner-up for PRISM international’s Jacob Zilber Prize for Short Fiction. It is a funny and unsettling tale about the housemates we never quite understand.

Read “Trespasses” at PRISM international

Thank you for spending some time with this afternoon’s edition. Below this point are six more stories, essays, and poems from new and emerging voices, three conversations and close readings, and three special recommendations worth revisiting.

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

More From the Discovery Desk

Little Crimes - Bridget Adams

Hugh's dad hands two seventeen-year-olds some money on a Tuesday in October and tells them to get into trouble. They start at a gold-brocaded dim sum restaurant, saying yes to every passing cart. Bridget Adams captures the borderless closeness of teenage love, all fingerprints and teeth marks and a shared twin bed. The afternoon's small rebellions carry a sense of something about to end. This vivid flash fiction comes from a writer now seeking a home for her debut novel.

Read "Little Crimes" at The Forge Literary Magazine

The Sky Over Ford Land - Ivan Suljic

In southern Ontario, a three-billion-dollar retooling has brought an old Ford assembly plant back to life. Ivan Suljic rides with the construction crew across the bumpy site at sunrise, under clouds set alight in a peach haze. Travellers grumble about overtime while local workers wait to see whether the floor will fall out. Suljic writes about the men beside him, especially Gus, with care and humour. This creative nonfiction finds music and tenderness in a hard place to work.

Read "The Sky Over Ford Land" at The Forge Literary Magazine

Naked with My Scars - Jenn Hall

Morning light creeps around the blackout curtains as Jenn Hall studies a pinkish purple line running up her torso. The scar is six inches long and marks a surgeon's late-night path. In this brief, lyrical essay, she traces her body from the scar to the stoma to the port that delivers healing poison. Each mark becomes a word and a memory of the time before cancer. It is a brave and beautiful meditation on looking at ourselves honestly.

Read “Naked with My Scars” at JMWW

Alto-rilievo - Alexandra M. Matthews

A week after her roommate Charlie dies, the narrator skips Charlie’s sculpture retrospective and hides in their dorm room. Then an enormous hand appears behind her, as tall as a baby giraffe and smoothly manicured. Charlie believed in the occult, and the hand seems to prove her right. Alexandra M. Matthews blends grief, art school detail, and dark comedy in this surprising story. It is a sharp, strange tribute to a friend who would never forgive a missed show.

Read “Alto-rilievo” at JMWW

Nothing Says Quality Time Like Being Kidnapped by Dad - Forrest Rapier

Forrest Rapier’s two poems return to a father who hid his money inside his jacket and came home smelling of the cheapest weed he could find. The first poem opens with an epigraph from The Iliad and wonders how strong a father was when his child was young. The second turns toward a quieter presence that passes like wind off a river. Rapier writes with music and restraint about love that is complicated by absence. These poems linger well after the last line.

Read “Nothing Says Quality Time Like Being Kidnapped by Dad” at Electric Literature

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The Whales - Christopher Woods

While working as a cook on a training ship crossing the North Sea, Christopher Woods is cutting lettuce for two hundred people when an announcement comes over the intercom. A whale has been sighted. He puts down his knife, climbs to the deck, and sees three whales off the starboard side. This short piece of micro nonfiction is about the ocean and about fear. It shows how one cold afternoon at sea can stay with a person for a lifetime.

Read “The Whales” at The Forge Literary Magazine

Beyond the First Shelf

Interview with the Winner: Carol Keeley - Cole Meyer

After reading today’s Featured story, this conversation shows how “Wind and Embers” came to be. Carol Keeley tells Cole Meyer that she revises endlessly and that the story was drawn from a novel in progress. She talks about what she calls imaginal empathy, the way place shapes the people who live there, and the importance of small, exact details. She also shares how Wendell Berry keeps her company at her desk. It is a generous look inside a writer’s process.

Read “Interview with the Winner: Carol Keeley” at The Masters Review

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Stories that Teach: “Paper Menagerie” by Ken Liu - Brandon Williams

Ken Liu’s “The Paper Menagerie” follows a boy whose Chinese mother folds old wrapping paper into origami animals that come to life. In this column, Brandon Williams revisits the story as a modern classic that writers can learn from. He explains how its clear, devastating conflict carries more weight than its magic. The wonder lies in a mother’s love rather than in the folding itself. It is a perfect invitation to reread a story that still moves readers.

Read “Stories that Teach” at The Masters Review

Not Your Average Murder in a Small Town: An Interview with Janasha Prabhu - Devi Bhaduri

Janasha Prabhu’s debut novel, Monster in the Mirror, follows Jiah Rai, the niece of a notorious killer, after her girlfriend dies in a fall. When a new victim appears posed exactly as her uncle’s victims were, suspicion turns toward her. In this interview, Devi Bhaduri talks with Prabhu about writing thrillers and about the representation of queer women of colour in fiction. Prabhu speaks openly about family and small-town scrutiny. Readers who love a first novel with nerve will enjoy it.

Read “An Interview with Janasha Prabhu” at Chicago Review of Books

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Special Recommendations

Kew Gardens - Virginia Woolf

On a hot July afternoon, a stream of visitors drifts past an oval flower bed at Kew. A married couple, two women, an old man and his companion, and a young pair in love each pass by, their talk caught in fragments. Down among the petals, a snail makes its slow and determined way across the soil. Woolf published this short piece in 1919, and it still feels startlingly fresh. It is a perfect story to revisit on a quiet Sunday.

Read “Kew Gardens” at Wikisource

The Last Leaf - O. Henry

Two young artists share a studio in Greenwich Village when pneumonia sweeps through the neighbourhood. One of them, Johnsy, falls ill and decides she will die when the last ivy leaf falls from the vine outside her window. Her friend Sue and their downstairs neighbour Behrman, an old painter who has never produced his masterpiece, refuse to let her give up. O. Henry’s famous story is brief and full of feeling. Its final turn still lands beautifully.

Read “The Last Leaf” at Wikisource

The Lagoon - Joseph Conrad

A white traveller stops for the night at the house of his old friend Arsat, which stands alone on a still lagoon in the Malayan forest. Inside, the woman Arsat loves is dying. Through the dark hours, Arsat tells the story of how they fled together and what that escape cost his brother. Conrad wrote this early tale in 1896, and its heavy atmosphere is unforgettable. It remains a haunting story about love, loyalty, and guilt.

Read “The Lagoon” at Wikisource

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

Many of today’s writers are near the start of their careers, and their work already carries real weight. A canyon fire, a doctor’s office, a dorm room, and a factory floor all become places where people choose who to be. The classics remind us how good stories keep changing as we change. We hope you find a new name to follow today and an old story worth reading again.

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

Take care!