Afternoon Discoveries: October 26, 2026

Literary Fiction & Poetry

AMONG THE LETTERS
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Literary Fiction & Poetry

A modern Calypso scrolls through dating profiles on her island and mistakes the dishwasher for conversation. A fairy-wren chairs a shrinking meeting of birds, and a props maker has one day to cast a vole burrow in concrete. Today's poems come largely from Canadian and small magazines, beside stories about ambition, family, and the strange work of making art. The back shelf brings two conversations and a review. The classics end on a beach, a Nova Scotia shore, and a shepherd's cottage on a stormy night.

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

Featured Discovery

Calypso, Still Typing - Jennifer Manuel

Jennifer Manuel's Calypso has been alone so long that she mistakes the dishwasher for conversation. Now she answers messages on a dating app from her island, where every match lists hiking and asks what she does for fun. Her last love stayed seven years and left on a raft made of compliments. Manuel, who lives on Vancouver Island, turns Homer's nymph into someone funny, lonely, and painfully modern. This poem was shortlisted for Arc Poetry Magazine's Poem of the Year, and it deserves every reader it finds.

Read "Calypso, Still Typing" at Arc Poetry Magazine

The Discovery Desk

Kitchen Barbarians - Jason Kwon

Jack Kwon has climbed from an East Oakland childhood to the glass towers of Midtown Manhattan, where he engineers billion-dollar mergers. His achievements have stopped making him feel anything. At night he cooks difficult classic French dishes with the same obsessive precision he brings to the boardroom. Jason Kwon's rich, unsparing story moves between that polished life and the violence and kimchi stew of the past. It is a powerful portrait of how far ambition can carry someone, and what it cannot leave behind.

Read "Kitchen Barbarians" at Electric Literature

The New Birds - Chimedum Ohaegbu

A splendid fairy-wren calls to order the two-millionth annual general meeting of birds, held in an elevator. The roll call is long, and many members are missing, from the moa and the dodo to the passenger pigeon. Chimedum Ohaegbu's poem is witty, dark, and wildly inventive as it moves from jokes to grief over extinction. The agenda has only one item, the need for new birds. This poem was shortlisted for Arc Poetry Magazine's Poem of the Year.

Read "The New Birds" at Arc Poetry Magazine

The Propmaster - Sean Julia Civale

A film director tells the narrator, a props maker, that she must produce a concrete cast of a vole burrow by six o'clock. The movie is about a young woman who keeps buying things to improve her life, including a burrow cast made by a rich man in a meadow. A zoologist will judge the prop overnight. Sean Julia Civale turns this absurd assignment into a sharp meditation on art, desire, and subtle cruelty. The story's final image is unforgettable.

Read “The Propmaster” at Joyland

Chimes at Midnight - W. D. Ehrhart

Lying awake beside his wife late at night, the speaker of W. D. Ehrhart’s poem looks back across the decades of a long marriage. He remembers when the world stretched out before them like an endless highway. Now he counts the unkind moments and selfish choices he cannot undo. Ehrhart, a poet and essayist with many books behind him, writes with plain, open feeling about gratitude and mortality. The poem’s last lines about eternity are quietly heartbreaking.

Read “Chimes at Midnight” at ONE ART

Thank you for spending some time with this afternoon’s edition. Below this point are six more stories and poems, three conversations and reviews, and three special recommendations from the back shelf.

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

More From the Discovery Desk

Phillip Whitney - Anna Reeser

Jeremy once wrote uncompromising poems in college, and now he manages engineers from a comfortable home office, brewing elaborate

teas and watching birds. His calm life wobbles when his daughter Charlotte announces she wants to apply for a poetry MFA. The very mention of poetry gives him a full-body cringe. Anna Reeser follows him into an odd and funny midlife reinvention. This delicate story asks where unfulfilled artistic ambition goes when we set it aside.

Read “Phillip Whitney” at Electric Literature

Self-Portrait as Elena Greco - Lauren Peat

Each morning, the speaker of Lauren Peat’s poem watches a neighbour step onto her balcony in a dark silk robe and light a cigarette. The neighbour disappears into her phone, while the speaker cannot seem to vanish. A car door slams and six crows burst from a power line. Peat borrows the narrator of Elena Ferrante’s Naples novels to explore wanting and fearing to become important. This poem was shortlisted for Arc Poetry Magazine’s Poem of the Year.

Read “Self-Portrait as Elena Greco” at Arc Poetry Magazine

Serpentine Barrens - Ernest Hilbert

Ernest Hilbert walks through a rare serpentine barren, a strange patch of land where acidic soil kills most plants. Only hardy species survive there, from pitch pine and prairie bluestem to whorled milkweed and fame-flower. His long, single-sentence poem catalogues the place with care. Then it turns to people who also thrive apart because others cannot cultivate them. It is a beautiful, quietly defiant poem about belonging to an unlikely place and about the people who flourish there.

Read “Serpentine Barrens” at ONE ART

Tough Love - Lylanne Musselman

Lylanne Musselman's poem looks back on a long relationship with someone she loved, built on shared friends, children, laughter, and trips each February. Alcoholism and stolen prescriptions eventually broke it apart. The speaker made the hardest choice of her life and turned her partner in, afraid they might otherwise die. Years later, the two rarely speak, though the speaker still trades birthday texts with her former partner's daughter. Musselman writes with honesty and grace about love that could not outrun addiction.

Read "Tough Love" at ONE ART

Two Poems - Dalia Taha

Translated from the Arabic by Sara Elkamel, these two poems come from Ramallah. The first sits on the balcony of the late poet Zakaria Mohammed, where friends talk while nearby lights swell in the dark. The second turns to a fig tree that every poet has tried to describe. Dalia Taha moves between fear and ordinary tenderness, insisting that life is too complex for simple words. They are vivid, intimate poems of daily life.

Read "Two Poems" at The Common

Daughter of a Dead Addict Learns to Brine Olives - Patricia Caspers

Patricia Caspers begins with the history of curing olives, from bitter oil to fruit softened by the sea. Then the poem turns to a father who once sent his fourteen-year-old daughter home with a glowing jar of golden olives. He lived in orchard country, hiding, he said, from the mafia, and the truth came out only after he was gone. Caspers sets slow brining

against the quick burn of lye. The result is a tender poem about grief, inheritance, and patience.

Read “Daughter of a Dead Addict Learns to Brine Olives” at Arc Poetry Magazine

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Beyond the First Shelf

Interview with Renee Gladman - Leila Chatti

Poet Leila Chatti asks Renee Gladman about creativity, legibility, and joy ahead of a reading in Cincinnati. Many students, Chatti notes, fear not being understood and explain too much. Gladman answers that she has never felt legible, to others or even to herself, and explains why that can be freeing. She speaks about sentences, drawings, and the shapes thought can take. Writers who worry about their readers will find real encouragement here.

Read “Interview with Renee Gladman” at The Cincinnati Review

Interview with Uche Okonkwo - Blessing Christopher

Uche Okonkwo’s debut collection, A Kind of Madness, gathers stories about characters with irrepressible and often unreachable desires. In this conversation with Blessing Christopher, Okonkwo explains how

stories written over about ten years became a book. She describes seeing her pieces differently once she had enough for a collection. They talk about arrangement, recurring threads, and the patience that short fiction demands. It is a thoughtful look at how a first collection takes shape.

Read “Interview with Uche Okonkwo” at The Cincinnati Review

The Ecstatic Workshop: Jessi MacEachern’s Cut Side Down - Miles Forrester

Miles Forrester reviews Jessi MacEachern’s second collection, published by Invisible Publishing. He describes a funny, formally adventurous book bound together by the colour yellow and by conversations with other writers, living and dead. Its sections move from a retelling of Woolf’s Orlando through a literary seance to an extended memory piece. Forrester shows how MacEachern wrestles with influence and literary history. It is a lively and generous introduction to a Canadian poet worth knowing.

Read “The Ecstatic Workshop” at Arc Poetry Magazine

Special Recommendations

Dover Beach - Matthew Arnold

On a calm night, a speaker stands at a window above the English Channel and calls his beloved to look at the moonlit sea. He listens to the grating roar of pebbles as the waves draw back. The sound reminds him of Sophocles and of a Sea of Faith now in retreat. Arnold's poem ends with a famous plea for love in a world of confusion. It remains one of the most moving poems in English.

Read "Dover Beach" at Wikisource

Low Tide on Grand Pré - Bliss Carman

Bliss Carman, born in Fredericton, wrote this poem about the great tidal flats of Nova Scotia's Minas Basin. At low tide, the speaker returns to a place where he once spent a perfect summer evening with someone he loved. The river and the long red sands carry memories of what has since been lost. Carman's musical lines and gentle sadness made it one of his best-known poems. It is a lovely Canadian classic to read slowly.

Read "Low Tide on Grand Pré" at Representative Poetry Online

The Three Strangers - Thomas Hardy

On a stormy March night, Shepherd Fennel and his wife host a christening party in their lonely cottage on the downs. A stranger knocks and asks for shelter from the rain. A second stranger soon follows, then a third who takes one look inside and runs. Hardy builds the evening into a tale of suspense, mercy, and quiet rural justice. This story is a perfect introduction to his Wessex fiction.

Read "The Three Strangers" at Wikisource

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

Many of today's pieces look at the work people do to be seen. A nymph types to strangers, a father reinvents himself, and a props maker pours concrete for a film about desire. Poems carry grief for birds and lovers alike, while the classics remind us how a tide or a knock at the door can change everything. We hope a few of these pages start your week well.

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

Take care!