Afternoon Discoveries: October 9, 2026

Nonfiction, Memoir, Essays, & Narrative Journalism

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

A bomb sits on the deck of a dredger in Exmouth Marina while a town empties block by block, and a professor counts cinderblocks in a Texas holding cell to work out how much floor each woman has. A seventeen-year-old pulls tomcod through a hole in the Bering Sea ice, a granddaughter in Budaun watches a procession of men carry away a body wrapped in white, and a refugee boy in

Minnesota learns how gratitude is expected to flow in only one direction. Today's shelf holds nonfiction, memoir, essays, and narrative journalism, though most of these pieces are less interested in verdicts than in the moments when attention sharpens and a life comes into focus. Some unfold over months of reporting; others compress a single afternoon, a winter walk, or a conference weekend into a few pages. They take place in jail cells, barn bedrooms, sickroom living rooms, and London streets at dusk, and they keep asking what it costs to look closely and what looking gives back.

All links in today's edition were checked against the linked publication, magazine, or publisher page on October 9, 2026.

Featured Discovery

It Could Knock a Whole Street Down: The Art of Defusing a Second World War Bomb - Samira Shackle

Samira Shackle begins at Exmouth Marina on January 14, 2026, when a dredging crew hauled a 250-kilogram German bomb onto a deck that also carried 20,000 litres of diesel. A few hours earlier and fifty miles away, a contractor had found a second, smaller bomb more than four metres down on a Plymouth building site, and army and navy teams suddenly faced two unexploded wartime devices in the same county on the same day. Shackle follows Petty Officer Scott Dooley and Captain Liam Kidman through mud, rust, failed X-rays, and the long wait to learn whether a mechanical fuze might be ticking inside a casing no one can read. She widens the frame to the Luftwaffe's 60,000 tonnes of bombs, the roughly one in ten that failed to explode, a training exercise at RAF

Northolt where a child's baseball bat sits among the red herrings, and an Exeter detonation whose insurance fight still shapes the regiment's caution. Residents such as Fiona Bolt carry the human cost of the cordon, packing a rucksack and walking across town to a son's house while specialists weigh cranes, tides, and who can own the risk. It is patient, lucid narrative journalism about a war that keeps surfacing eighty years later, and about the people whose ordinary job is to make it go quiet.

Read "It Could Knock a Whole Street Down" at The Guardian

The Discovery Desk

Against the Current of the Moment, We Arrived - Minh Nguyễn

Minh Nguyễn was eleven when his family of nine crossed the South China Sea on a wooden fishing boat and was resettled in a small Minnesota town that had never seen people like them. He remembers knowing how to hold his own bag, how to listen without understanding, and how the grocery clerk's smile tightened when his mother counted coins too slowly. His mother scrubbed grease traps before dawn, and his father, once a government officer in Việt Nam, lifted garbage cans as tall as himself while a coworker stayed warm inside the truck. Years later Nguyễn reads the 1975 Gallup poll showing that most Americans opposed his family's coming, and what surprises him is not the opposition but that the country let them in anyway. The essay is brief

and carefully measured, setting fifty years of children and grandchildren against the language of crisis that has returned to debates about immigration. It locates its hope in a narrow space, the distance between what a country feels in a given moment and what it decides to do.

Read “Against the Current of the Moment, We Arrived” at Brevity

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Eat Around the Worms - David Shepard

David Shepard was seventeen and in his second winter in Unalakleet, Alaska, where at forty below zero metal turns stubborn and anything that runs does so because someone planned a day ahead. He had first come at sixteen to help a missionary family, then found himself largely alone when they were called away, and the loneliness returned with the dark months. One morning Luther, an Alaska Native neighbor who once showed him how to find firewood, is sitting in the kitchen without having knocked, and the two walk out to the sea ice where the Unalakleet River meets the Bering Sea. Shepard renders the fishing with exact physical detail: a hatchet breaking a fresh skin of ice, pre-tied lines that spare bare fingers, and small fish freezing mid-twist the instant they hit the air. What happens later in the kitchen sink and the frying pan unsettles nearly everything he thought he knew about survival. The essay is a quiet coming-of-age piece about competence, humility, and being fed by someone who expects no thanks.

Read “Eat Around the Worms” at Hippocampus Magazine

Thirty-Seven Theses on Time and Memory - Sven Birkerts

Sven Birkerts arranges his essay as a sequence of short meditations on how memory forms, fades, and returns without permission. He starts

with the near-blank years of early childhood, then lingers on one vivid fifth-grade afternoon when a veterinarian dissected a white rat and he slid down a cool hallway wall to escape the smell of formaldehyde. From there he moves through nostalgia, the flâneur's attention to traces of time, and his father's near silence about a childhood in Riga and the war years in Germany. Latvian, the language of his first home, becomes one of the essay's quiet centers, the place where his parents still live for him now that they are gone. Birkerts reads alongside Nabokov, Proust, Benjamin, Bishop, and Miłosz, though the borrowed lines never crowd out his own photographs falling from old paperbacks and hot summers on his grandparents' driveway. It is a patient, companionable essay for anyone who has noticed the past rearranging itself with age.

Read "Thirty-Seven Theses on Time and Memory" at The Common

8.4 Square Feet - Noreen Graf

Noreen Graf writes from Puget Sound, four days' drive from the twenty-three years she spent teaching on the Texas border, where mountains vanish into cloud and no one is likely to recognize her mugshot. The arrest itself, she insists, matters least: a near miss in traffic, a question of whether one car can graze another without the driver feeling it, and a charge she disputes. What matters is the processing, the iris scan, the pat-down, and the shackles she wears with the posture of a professor walking at graduation. The title comes from her statistics-teacher arithmetic in a fifteen-by-ten-foot cinderblock cell: sixteen women, one open toilet, and roughly 8.4 square feet each. Graf gives each cellmate a line or two, from a seventy-seven-year-old with a gun story to a woman in a wheelchair dropped onto concrete by guards untrained to move her. The essay shifts between first and second person as a self is stripped down, and it finds in shared confinement not justice but a thread of camaraderie.

Read “8.4 Square Feet” at Hippocampus Magazine

Thank you for spending some time with this afternoon’s edition. Below this point are six more works of nonfiction, memoir, essays, and narrative journalism, three pieces about reading, reporting, and writing nonfiction, and three special recommendations from the back shelf.

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

More From the Discovery Desk

White Is the Color of Death - Shraya Singh

Shraya Singh builds her essay around a single color, returning again and again to the words “White is” to gather grief, guilt, and memory into one shape. Her grandfather’s body lies in a courtyard in Budaun wrapped in clean white cloth, cotton in his nostrils and mango leaves chalked with limestone around his neck. She remembers her last visit, six hours from her life in Delhi, when he begged her not to go, and earlier summers riding on his shoulders with her hands in his thick white hair. Around the body the mourners surge, while she sits apart and watches her little brother, still a child, move toward the procession of men that will carry their grandfather to the cremation grounds. Singh writes with incantatory precision about a ritual that has a place for her brother and none for her. The piece is short and devastating, a lyric essay in which absence becomes the clearest image of all.

Read “White Is the Color of Death” at Brevity

Ladies of the ‘80s - Lisa Whittington-Hill

Lisa Whittington-Hill opens at the first MTV Video Music Awards in September 1984, with Madonna descending a seventeen-foot wedding cake in a lace bustier and a BOY TOY belt while industry insiders predicted the end of her career. Whittington-Hill was thirteen in suburban Edmonton, a self-described nerdy kid who spent her allowance on the album and rewound a VHS tape of the broadcast with friends in a wood-paneled basement. From there she builds a cultural history of the women who reshaped pop in that decade: Grace Jones and her flat-top, Joan Jett after twenty-three label rejections, Pat Benatar facing DJs who wanted her on their laps, and Whitney Houston breaking through MTV’s resistance to Black artists. The essay balances reporting and memoir, drawing on interviews, memoirs, and documentaries while keeping track of what each artist taught one girl about taking up space. Its humor is quick and generous, full of asides about Sean Penn, shag carpet, and Maybelline. It is lively music writing about how representation reaches a teenager through a Walkman and a television set.

Read “Ladies of the ‘80s” at Longreads

God of My Father - Lizz Huerta

Lizz Huerta writes in the second person from inside the years she spent caring for her father as ALS took his body by degrees. She lifts him from bed to wheelchair to recliner, learns the machines that keep him alive, and holds her mother in the laundry room in the small hours while soiled sheets spin. His diagnosis came a month before her own book was published, so success and loss became tangled, along with her

place as the unmarried, childless daughter in a Mexican family. Days before his death she prays for the first time in thirty-three years to the Jehovah of her childhood, a god she names as tyranny and punishment, asking only that her father be held tenderly. Huerta is frank about the bodily facts of dying and fierce about the rituals her family and village improvise around them. The essay finds its way into her father's garden, among mangoes and banana trees, as she searches for a kind of love that his faith could never teach.

Read "God of My Father" at The Rumpus

Small Eulogies - Liz Abeling

Liz Abeling begins with the word late, which she describes not as an alarm but as a whisper, a tickle, a background drip. Halfway to a writing conference in Baltimore she realizes she has already stopped three times to pee, and at the book fair she watches mothers with infants strapped to their chests while other parents carry wailing children out of earshot. She skips the pregnancy test at CVS, buys bandages instead, and begins trying out names: Avery, then Ella, then Abra from East of Eden, a girl whom everyone around her keeps reimagining. Abeling's question is not only whether there is a pregnancy but whether she can become the woman who wants one, as voices from her mother, her doctor, and television insist she eventually will. The essay moves through convention center bathrooms and rest-stop stalls in spare, exact sentences. It is a brief, aching piece about ambivalence, grief for an uncertain possibility, and the calm GPS voice that keeps rerouting her home.

Read "Small Eulogies" at Hippocampus Magazine

Play the Cards as They Lay - Jack Ciontos

Jack Ciontos grew up in a rural landscape of wheat fields and church spires, where he learned early that God was everywhere and that certain desires could not be spoken. The spring he turned twelve, a heat-wave afternoon at the lake brought a surge of feeling he would later name curiosity, pleasure, and, most of all, shame. In the schoolyard, after one fight left blood on the concrete, a scrawny honey-blond boy helped him up, and their friendship grew in a remodeled barn bedroom where they talked about Bukowski and Hemingway beneath an image of Christ. Ciontos read his friend's short story drafts for hidden messages, especially one about a farmer's son who flees to college and retreats home, and years later he heard how closely life had followed that draft. The essay holds tenderness and violence together, along with Baldwin and a poem written on a receipt aboard a midnight train. It is a reflective piece about unrequited love, inherited faith, and inventing a new hand of cards when the old ones cannot be played.

Read "Play the Cards as They Lay" at The Rumpus

Faster! Louder! Brighter! How the Attention Economy Overwhelmed Children's TV - Natalia Kucirkova

Natalia Kucirkova starts at an airport gate, watching a small boy clutch an iPad while cartoon characters snatch a toy, cry, apologize, and smile again before she has blinked. Her argument is that pace, not only content or screen time, deserves attention as a design feature of children's media. Drawing on her research group's Kids' Slow Media Project, she contrasts the problem-to-rescue efficiency of Paw Patrol and the boost-and-unlock loops of game apps with Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, Bluey, Paddington, and Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood. Two children may watch the same twenty minutes, she notes, and live entirely different encounters with time. The essay is careful not to romanticize slowness, conceding that some lively media is excellent and

some slow media is dull. Its real subject is attention as part of a child's inner life, and the room a story leaves for that life to form.

Read "Faster! Louder! Brighter!" at The Guardian

Beyond the First Shelf

The Longreads Questionnaire, Featuring Jon Ronson - Jon Ronson

The Longreads Questionnaire gives Jon Ronson a set of brisk, personal prompts, and his answers add up to a compact portrait of a narrative journalist at work. He credits Nick Broomfield documentaries, Hunter S. Thompson, P. J. O'Rourke, and the writers gathered in Tom Wolfe's The New Journalism, along with the editors who gave him his first breaks. He writes best in the early morning, prizes the silence of his Hudson Valley lane, and has recently fallen for a text-based audio editor that lets him cut his own tape. On craft, he says he cannot imagine scenes the way fiction writers do, yet in the field he instinctively knows what will work. The introduction sets him beside Joan Didion's famous self-assessment and frames his conviction that nonfiction should move like a page-turner. It is a light, quick read with real insight into how reporting becomes narrative.

Read "The Longreads Questionnaire, Featuring Jon Ronson" at Longreads

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The “Mutually Confounding” Relationship Between Librarian and Researcher - Matthew J. Prigge

Matthew J. Prigge compares becoming a librarian to a barfly deciding to tend bar, after years spent admiring the person on the other side of the counter. As a history graduate student in Milwaukee, he thought his thesis on the city’s old movie censor board was nearly done until a librarian he had never met rolled out a cart of unprocessed boxes she had rescued from the basement a decade earlier. That cart turned a modest thesis into a book, and it gave Prigge his model of the ideal researcher-librarian relationship, one that is mutually confounding. Years later, as a faculty librarian at Marquette University, he typed the name of the real bank robber behind Dog Day Afternoon into a digitized archive of LGBTQ periodicals and watched one search branch into reporters’ papers and archive visits. He is honest about the projects that die in the archives, and he argues that dead ends are not wasted time. For nonfiction writers, the essay is a warm reminder that sources have keepers, and that those keepers often want to be asked.

Read “The ‘Mutually Confounding’ Relationship Between Librarian and Researcher” at Literary Hub

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Interview: Jennifer Case, Author of The Carework Project - Erin Wood with Jennifer Case

Erin Wood, who lives half an hour from Jennifer Case and sometimes shares lunch with her between caregiving routines, interviews her about The Carework Project, a hybrid book of memoir, collage, interview, and research. Case explains how Thich Nhat Hanh’s idea of the koan, and Rilke’s instruction to live the questions, shaped a book that asks a single thing: what it means to care. She traces the form to Eula Biss’s Having and Being Had, whose short sections helped her build a book-length inquiry from brief scenes and full-color collage postcards about climate anxiety. The conversation turns practical on burnout, on unpaid family

caregivers sent home with medical equipment, and on the costs women carry when they tend others first. Wood brings her own experience of a daughter born at twenty-three weeks, which gives the exchange unusual warmth and urgency. It is a thoughtful craft interview for writers drawn to hybrid nonfiction and to the ways structure can carry a large question.

Read “Interview: Jennifer Case” at Hippocampus Magazine

Special Recommendations

Street Haunting: A London Adventure - Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf begins with a pretext, the need to buy a lead pencil, as an excuse for walking half across London on a winter evening between tea and dinner. Once the door shuts behind her, she sheds the self her friends know and becomes, in her phrase, an enormous eye drifting through islands of lamplight. Along the way she watches a small woman display a perfectly shaped foot in a shoe shop, passes two blind brothers guided by a boy, and finds anchorage among the second-hand bookshops. In a stationer’s shop she senses that an elderly couple has just been quarreling, and she lets the anger still hanging in the air become its own small story. Woolf turns the walk into an essay about the pleasure of briefly inhabiting other lives and the comfort of returning to one’s own. It remains one of the great urban essays, light on its feet and quietly profound about the self.

Read “Street Haunting” free through Project Gutenberg Australia

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How It Feels to Be Colored Me - Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston opens with a joke about Indian chiefs and then remembers the very day she became colored. Until she was thirteen she lived in Eatonville, Florida, an all-Black town where she perched on the gate-post as if in a proscenium box, greeting passing Northern tourists and performing pieces for their small silver. Sent to school in Jacksonville, she stepped off the riverboat no longer Zora of Orange County but a little colored girl, a change she records with wit rather than lament. The essay refuses the posture of tragedy, insisting she is too busy sharpening her oyster knife, while still noting how sharply she feels her race against a white background at Barnard or beside an unmoved companion in a jazz cabaret. First published in 1928, it is brisk, funny, defiant, and at times deliberately provocative, written in a voice entirely her own. It rewards rereading as a declaration of selfhood that will not be filed under anyone else’s category.

Read “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” free through Project Gutenberg

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Ten Days in a Mad-House - Nellie Bly

In September 1887, a young reporter for the New York World accepted an assignment to feign insanity, get herself committed to the asylum on Blackwell’s Island, and report on what she found. Nellie Bly checked into the Temporary Home for Females on Second Avenue under the name Nellie Brown, practiced a wide unblinking stare in the mirror, and unsettled the other boarders so thoroughly that police, a judge, and Bellevue doctors passed her along with little scrutiny. Her account of the asylum itself is plain and unsparing: ice-cold baths, inedible food, freezing wards, abusive attendants, and women who seemed perfectly

sane yet had no way to be heard. Bly keeps her own fear in view, especially once she sees how easily a woman could be sent there and never leave. Her reporting led to a grand jury investigation and a large increase in city funding for the care of patients. It is a foundational work of undercover journalism, and still a startling read about who gets believed.

Read “Ten Days in a Mad-House” free through Project Gutenberg

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

Many of today’s pieces are about looking closely when looking is hard. A bomb technician listens for ticking, a daughter learns the machines that keep her father breathing, a reporter feigns madness to see what an asylum hides, and a woman out to buy a pencil borrows a few minutes of strangers’ lives. Nonfiction is often described as the genre of facts, yet its force usually comes from the arrangement of those facts, from what a writer holds in the frame and what she lets fall away. Memoir and the personal essay add another kind of pressure, asking the writer to serve as both witness and evidence. Some of these works end in relief, and others leave the reckoning open on purpose.

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

Take care!