

Afternoon Discoveries: October 16, 2026

Nonfiction, Memoir, Essays, & Narrative Journalism



AMONG THE LETTERS

OCT 16, 2026  PAID



Nonfiction, Memoir, Essays, & Narrative Journalism

A former hostage opens a pop-up paper flower mailed to him by one of the men who guarded him in Somalia, and a surveyor's crew in 1788 drags a chain through a forest that would one day become quarter-acre lots. A young man in a navy wool coat walks the Moscow metro unnoticed, and a grieving son in Munich is led from his flat by armed police. Today's shelf holds nonfiction,

memoir, essays, and narrative journalism. Most of these pieces care less about verdicts than about the stories people tell to survive what has happened to them.

All links in today's edition were checked against the linked publication, magazine, or publisher page on October 16, 2026.

Featured Discovery

I Was Kidnapped and Held Hostage for 977 Days. Could I Forgive My Captors? - Michael Scott Moore

Michael Scott Moore went to Somalia in 2012 to report on modern piracy and was kidnapped on his tenth day, beginning two and a half years in captivity. After his release, a Facebook message arrived from Mohamed Tahlil, the mild guard leader who had insisted he belonged to the "good group" of pirates. Moore agreed to help the FBI lure Tahlil to New York, and he examines that decision with unusual candour as the trial overturns his picture of the man. It is a searching, morally serious piece of memoir and narrative journalism about the gap between justice and forgiveness.

Read "I Was Kidnapped and Held Hostage for 977 Days" at The Guardian

The Discovery Desk

Winter Coat - Isaac Amend

Isaac Amend bought his coat at a market near Belorusskaya Station, navy and calf-length and heavy enough to feel like armour, paid for before the vendor could decide what he was. In that Moscow winter his voice still hovered and his passport still described someone else. He learns to dress for ambiguity, padding his hips and copying the unhurried stride of the men on Tverskaya Street, while the 2013 law against so-called gay propaganda hangs over the city. It is a brief, beautifully controlled essay about passing, postponement, and a body he calls mid-sentence.

[Read "Winter Coat" at Brevity](#)

Better Embarrassed Than Dead - Philip T Starks

Philip T Starks teaches evolutionary medicine, which does not prepare him for the Saturday morning he tells his reflection, "Better embarrassed than dead," and asks his wife to drive him to the emergency room. Elevated troponin lands him in cardiac intensive care, where a specialist cites the father who died of his fourth heart attack. Starks traces the grammar of illness he inherited from his mother, who treated sickness as something a person chose, and the diagnosis keeps shifting. The essay is candid, wry, and quietly suspenseful about medicine, masculinity, and the stories families tell about why people get sick.

[Read "Better Embarrassed Than Dead" at Hippocampus Magazine](#)

Where the Forest Went - James Whorton Jr.

While researching the racially restrictive covenants that once kept his town of Brighton, New York, white, James Whorton Jr. followed an old deed back to a surveyor named Hugh Maxwell. In July 1788, Maxwell set out to walk about 1,100 miles of ruler-straight lines through 2.6 million acres of forest, carving Roman numerals into trees so the land could be sold. The forest was never empty, since its openings held the towns, orchards, and fields of the Seneca Nation. It is a patient, lyrical piece of reported nonfiction about property, nationhood, and the strange persistence of straight lines.

Read "Where the Forest Went" at Longreads

Dinner Party at the End of the World - Matthew Hawkins-Santana

At a dinner party hosted by Matthew Hawkins-Santana and their partner, guests trade retirement plans built on index funds, inherited property, and radical acceptance. Their best friend jokes that her plan is to kill herself before forty, and the room goes silent but for Bad Bunny on the speaker. The essay then drifts back to the Chicago apartment the two friends shared after art school, where they read their pages aloud and cut what did not feel real. It is funny and unsettling about generational futurelessness, and it ends with a vacuum the writer calls a loud form of silence.

Read "Dinner Party at the End of the World" at The Rumpus

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 reporting, fact-checking, 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

Derby Day - Mikayla R. Schutte

Mikayla R. Schutte admits from the first sentence that she knows it is cruel to whip a horse, and that she watches the Kentucky Derby every year anyway. In a crowded bar near her birthday, she bets on Pavlovian for the way the v and the l rub against each other. When a horse falls before the race, she is suddenly back at a gun range, learning to brace one palm beneath the other. It is a tight, rhythmic essay about complicity, home, and the beautiful things we can only bear to watch with one eye open.

[Read "Derby Day" at Brevity](#)

Your Brother Tim - Wendy Hammond

Wendy Hammond writes in the second person from inside the phone call in which her older brother tells her that their youngest brother, Tim, has taken his own life. She cannot hold the scene steady, unsure whether it was still light or whether she was marking a student screenplay with her favourite blue gel pen. Her mind insists it must have been a car accident, until a memory arrives of little Tim crossing one

eye at the dinner table to make everyone laugh. It is a short, disoriented, tender account of grief arriving faster than language can.

Read "Your Brother Tim" at Hippocampus Magazine

A Death, a Plagiarism Scandal and a Quest for Revenge: The Bizarre Tale of Otto Z - Alessio Perrone

Alessio Perrone begins in a Munich flat where Otto, a doctor who cared for his stroke-stricken mother for years, watches her smile and stop breathing. Instead of a quiet aftermath, armed police arrive, and within days he understands that investigators suspect him of murder. A far stranger second act follows, involving a forensic professor's old thesis on colchicine, a red hardcover from 1982 on eBay, and a plagiarism hunter in Salzburg. It is gripping narrative journalism about grief curdled into obsession, and about how easily a forged story travels when it tells people what they expect.

Read "The Bizarre Tale of Otto Z" at The Guardian

Nursing - Catherine R. Squires

Catherine R. Squires opens in Mississippi in the years when her great-grandfather was born, when white families still hired Black women from sharecropper cabins as wet nurses. She follows those women up three flights of stairs to a nursery larger than three cabins, insisting on what the arrangement took and that it never ran the other way. It then turns to a Missouri porch where her great-grandfather listens to a rocking chair squeak while her white mother nurses her brown, curly-haired daughter. In under five hundred words it compresses centuries of history into a single sound and a single blessing.

Read “Nursing” at Brevity

A Postcard From Dolly - Lauren Hough

Lauren Hough begins in the back seat of her grandmother's Subaru in the 1980s, four children sharing a single can of Coke on the way to a horse race in Albuquerque. Her grandmother buys them a Dolly Parton tape, and only later do the children understand it was their last road trip before the family split them in half. As a teenager Hough writes to Dolly Parton, Nashville, Tennessee, and a postcard comes back. The essay is profane, funny, and tender about sisters, fandom, and the songs that hold a family together after it has been separated.

Read “A Postcard From Dolly” at The Rumpus

Almost Vibrant - Edie Williams

Edie Williams starts in a strip-mall parking lot in winter, gripping the wheel while her knees and resolve negotiate whether she will go into Frazier's Exercise Emporium at all. Memory keeps interrupting, from the harness tracks of Northville Downs in the 1950s to a profane trainer who asked why anyone would pay to exercise when there were stalls to muck out. When the instructor tells the class they are young and vibrant, Williams answers with a gesture the whole room enjoys. It is a short, warm, very funny essay about aging bodies and the strength that comes from showing up.

Read “Almost Vibrant” at Hippocampus Magazine

Beyond the First Shelf

In Praise of Fact-Checkers - Erika Hayasaki with Alex Carp

In this free post from her newsletter *The Reported Essay*, Erika Hayasaki, who teaches literary journalism at UC Irvine, turns to Alex Carp, the New York Times Magazine research editor who checked her profile of a young woman who befriended an AI chatbot. Carp even caught that the bee and mushroom in the subject's bedroom were Squishmallows. In the Q&A he explains why fact-checking, writing, and editing are different ways of reading, and Hayasaki adds practical advice for writers preparing a draft for a check. It is a generous look at the invisible labour that lets readers trust nonfiction.

[Read "In Praise of Fact-Checkers" at The Reported Essay](#)

Interview: Robert Kolker, Author of *The Vanishing Family* - Leslie Lindsay with Robert Kolker

Leslie Lindsay, a former psychiatric nurse, talks with Robert Kolker about *The Vanishing Family*, his account of a Pennsylvania family of nine children who carry a genetic mutation that can bring on dementia in their forties. Kolker explains how the family found him and why their choices about testing, children, and disclosure seemed breathtaking from the start. He offers a clear account of frontotemporal dementia, which attacks impulse control and social behaviour rather than memory. It is a thoughtful interview for readers interested in how narrative journalists build book-length stories from science, family, and grief.

[Read "Interview: Robert Kolker" at Hippocampus Magazine](#)

The Longreads Questionnaire, Featuring Roberto José Andrade Franco - Roberto José Andrade Franco

The Longreads Questionnaire introduces Roberto José Andrade Franco through his ESPN story about Tess Mata, a student killed in the Uvalde school shooting, and his writing from the El Paso and Juárez border where he grew up. Franco recalls a decade in construction before enrolling at community college at twenty-eight, a degree he calls more meaningful than his PhD. He writes early in the morning in silence and records interviews with his young daughter to hear how she changes. It is a short, humane portrait of a reporter whose work keeps returning to place, family, and sport.

Read “The Longreads Questionnaire, Featuring Roberto José Andrade Franco” at Longreads

Special Recommendations

A Modest Proposal - Jonathan Swift

Jonathan Swift published his pamphlet in 1729 in the voice of a reasonable, public-spirited projector who has studied the misery of Ireland's poor and found a solution. With ledger-like calm, he proposes that the children of the poor be sold at a year old as food for the wealthy. The horror works because the tone never breaks, and because

the reforms he dismisses near the end were exactly the ones Swift believed in. Nearly three centuries on, it is still uncomfortably sharp about how the powerful talk about people they regard as surplus.

Read "A Modest Proposal" free through [Project Gutenberg](#)

An Apology for Idlers - Robert Louis Stevenson

Robert Louis Stevenson mounts a cheerful defence of idleness, which he insists does not mean doing nothing but doing a great deal that the ruling class does not count. He argues that the open street teaches what no lecture hall can, and that extreme busyness is a symptom of deficient vitality. His warmest passage is saved for happiness, a duty we badly underrate, and for the person whose entrance into a room is like the lighting of another candle. It is a short, companionable classic of the personal essay, made for a slow Friday afternoon.

Read "An Apology for Idlers" free through [Wikisource](#)

Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases - Ida B. Wells

In May 1892, Ida B. Wells questioned the story white Southerners told to justify lynching in her Memphis newspaper, and a mob destroyed the paper's office while threats drove her into exile. That October she expanded her case into this pamphlet, introduced with a letter of support from Frederick Douglass. Wells assembles names, dates, and newspaper clippings to show that the charge of rape was often a pretext, and she is unsparing about the officials who excused mob murder. The writing is cool, evidentiary, and furious underneath, a founding work of American investigative journalism.

Read "Southern Horrors" free through Project Gutenberg

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

Many of today's pieces are about the distance between what happened and the story that gets told about it. A former hostage weighs a trial's facts against the forgiveness he needed to survive, and a fact-checker walks a young woman through every sentence written about her. Memoir asks the writer to be both witness and evidence, while reported work asks for patience with records and sources. Some of these pieces close their cases, and others leave the file open on purpose.

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

Take care!