

The First Two Pages: “Woodpeckers” by Jessica Slee

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An Essay by Jessica Slee

I was most looking forward to hearing Michele Slung speak at ShortCon 2026, the conference for short mystery fiction. As the first reader for Otto Penzler’s *The Best Mystery Stories of the Year* series, her process for choosing which stories to send on, we would learn, was some nearly unquantifiable combination of vibes, an instant connection not unlike the spark found when first meeting a romantic partner, and the benefits of a lifetime of reading experience. My story “Woodpeckers” was among those chosen for inclusion in the Honor Roll in 2024’s BMSoTY, and I wanted to revisit it with her talk in mind. What had she seen in it? Let’s try and find out.

She doesn’t pay it much attention when the kid comes in that morning, asking to speak to her, to report something he’d seen. Dermody had caught him once drawing graffiti on the side of a vacant mini-mart but let him go with a warning, and now she guesses that gives her an air of sympathy and consideration that she really wishes she didn’t have to humor.

Her partner intercedes before the kid can make it to Dermody’s desk and guides him forward instead. Bless him, Dermody thinks. Even as her attention is drawn to the conversation just beginning to take shape at the head of the room, her jaw twinges with the phantom pain of a mostly-healed bruise.

The eavesdropping is a habit she wishes she could break. She has enough work to deal with without adding conjecture and gossip on top of it.

We’ve got a setup with an immediate crime, even if we don’t know what it is yet.

Having a direct, confident style of narration and using present tense gives the story a sense of immediacy, and bringing in a third party (the kid) to deliver information about

the crime feels natural, without being too forced or too convenient. The character of Dermody (named after actress Maeve Dermody, most known for playing Vera Claythorne in a television miniseries adaptation of *And Then There Were None*) investigates crimes but is shown right up front with a whole host of faults. She's a little lax in her application of the law, even if it's to help a child. She can't break bad habits. And she's got a suspicious injury she's concealing.

"I told you, I know what I saw," the kid is telling her partner, Detective Morrigan. He has a notepad open, and takes down every word, nodding with a professional, detached interest.

"I saw somebody throwing a rifle into the river, down by the docks."

"A rifle," Morrigan repeats. "You didn't see them use it?"

The kid shrugs. "I wasn't about to go closer! But I stayed to watch."

"Why?" Morrigan asks.

"There was something off about it."

Morrigan continues the interrogation, asking what the person looked like and what time of day it was. Together, they learn that the kid didn't get a good enough look at their face to tell their gender, but they were broad-shouldered and wore a big hat that covered their hair, and a long brown overcoat and a patterned scarf on top of that. All new-looking. It had been late the night before, after dusk, but not so late the cicadas started chirping. Morrigan writes down 7:30pm.

"Something off about it," Dermody echoes, wandering over. "What do you mean by that?"

The kid fidgets, twisting his fingers together. The tips of his shoes are pointed in towards one another, his posture unsteady.

"They stayed too," he says at last. "They watched it sink."

Something occurs to her, then. "Hey, what were *you* doing down there?"

The kid freezes, looks guilty. After so many years, she's developed a good sense of when someone is lying and when they aren't. Some people are better at it than others. It's a learned skill.

"If I go for a visit, I won't find some new murals on the side of a warehouse or something, will I?"

The kid shakes his head, his eyes too wide. Dermody shoos him away with one hand. The kid stumbles out the door, pauses just outside the

threshold. He stops to glance back, watching. It makes Dermody feel a little perturbed.

“Suppose we go take a look, then,” Morrigan says.

Dermody nods. “I suppose we should.”

The opening section is mostly dialogue. It’s way more effective than just having the character think all of this information. Tension is building, but we don’t even know yet what we’re going to find at our theoretical crime scene. I wanted the two detectives to be opposites in a lot of ways—Morrigan is described later in the story as “virtuous” and is overly preoccupied with his hobby of birdwatching. I don’t think Dermody has a terribly high opinion of her partner, and we’ll see a pattern of self-absorbed behavior from her in that she continuously looks at what other people are doing and makes it about herself—for example, she finds guilt in the kid because she doesn’t want to have to reflect on her own guilt. Guilt for what? Maybe this:

Dermody throws the first punch. There’s a cheer from the crowd, gathered around the ring painted into the cracked concrete floor. It makes her blood sing, makes it a little easier to find a rhythm. The other woman is off to a sluggish start, but she’s got a smile on her face. She’ll get there, soon enough.

They circle one another, and her opponent throws a wild haymaker, like she doesn’t know how to punch right. She’s got enthusiasm but no technique.

Dermody ducks and responds with a punch of her own, to show her how it’s done. There are more than a few people in the crowd tonight she knows have never been here before. All women, here to take out some unspoken grievances or outrage, to indulge in some fantastical new form of self-expression.

Once, that was her, and although she couldn’t say who had been the first to meet her in the ring she is grateful for the gift that they have given her.

It feels good when the back of her knuckles crack across a stranger’s eyebrow. The light from a streetlight washes over the ground, and when she blinks the sweat from her eyes it makes the world look like an oil painting.

The crowd cheers. She strikes again, emboldened, aiming for the ribs. She thinks she can draw out her opponent's ire. It is where she most wants to be hit, herself.

Her opponent wears what looks like a bandana tied around the upper half of her face, with jagged holes cut into the fabric for her eyes. It looks hastily made. Even now Dermody cannot help herself from making these tiny observations, even as she dodges the next punch. The other woman has injuries, too, cuts and scrapes from before Dermody had ever gotten her hands on her. Maybe from falling on the ground, or a particularly overzealous challenger in an earlier fight. She's taking most of the hits, too, not even bothering to dodge. Sometimes it's like that. She understands.

I'll admit, I'm the last person to say I like a good flashback. But hopefully this one is earned. We've got the origin of the bruise on Dermody's jaw and context for some of her strange behavior. The story continues to go back and forth between the main narrative and flashbacks of the same fight. The details are very blink-and-you'll-miss-them but will turn out to be very important. Why might this person have injuries already? Why might she not mind being hit? Why is Dermody's opponent concealing her identity, beyond the obvious? Have we seen that "bandana" before?

And we still haven't even gotten to the main crime, sorry!

So, what is working here? According to Michele Slung, she will read more than two thousand stories, and she said in a recent year she forwarded maybe seventy or so to Otto and the year's guest editor for final review. Twenty are chosen for inclusion in the anthology, with another ten in the Honor Roll. The story's doing something right. Was it the writing style, or was everyone in the mood for an unsympathetic, closeted main character? The opening of the story breaks a lot of unspoken rules in that there are almost no physical descriptions of its characters or setting—this is done both because it

does not matter to the story, and so that when we do get to them, the descriptions of the crime scene and the natural world carry an even greater impact. I always notice in a story when descriptions of women focus on their physical features but men are characterized by their personality, values, or actions. Dermody's bruise being the only detail we get about her for the entire story is rare to see, and it serves a function in that it helps us place the story's timeline with regards to the flashbacks as the story progresses. Descriptions about the weather or unnecessary sensory details don't matter yet, so the opening scene isn't weighed down with them. This lets me focus on what *does* matter. "Woodpeckers" is a story about violence—from whom is violence acceptable, and in what form? This is a subject that I feel I still have a lot to say about, and I think that when deciding "The Best" stories, that's one of those attributes you *can* quantify. Do you have something to say with your story?

You get just a taste of this from the opening pages, but hopefully, the rest hits just like the follow-through of a punch.

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Jessica Slee studied English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is a Claymore Award Winner, and in 2022 she was longlisted for the CWA Debut Dagger and the First Pages Prize. She was recognized in the Honor Roll of *The Best Mystery Stories of the Year 2024* and her work appears in *Punk Noir*, *Shotgun Honey*, *Cold Caller Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and others. For more, visit sleesquared.com.