How to Write Fiction When the Planet Is Falling Apart

Jenny Offill is the master of novels told in sly, burnished fragments. In her latest, 'Weather,' she uses this small form to address the climate collapse.

By Parul Sehgal

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Scurvy, the great scourge of maritime exploration, the killer of some two million people between the late 1400s and 1800, was once understood as a disease of longing. With their brains parched for vitamin C, sailors would find their perceptions muddled and emotions heightened. They would dream of food and weep upon waking. Their senses became so scrambled, their yearning so pitched, that when they disembarked, flowers smelled almost oppressive. "They felt like they would die from the bite of a piece of fruit," the novelist Jenny Offill told me, "the voluptuous luxury of it was so overwhelming."

Offill is a rangy, obsessional reader, a rover of archives and libraries. When she became interested in historical accounts of scurvy, she felt a flash of strange recognition. "This is that uncanniness that's starting to happen now, with the seasons changing," she told me — our longing for a world we once knew. It reminded her of a word coined by the environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht, *solastalgia,* which combines *solace, desolation* and *nostalgia* to convey the distress of seeing a familiar environment bitterly transformed by drought, fire and flood. It is the disorienting homesickness we experience without leaving home, when home has altered beyond recognition.

Offill made her name with her second book, "Dept. of Speculation," a viciously funny philosophical novel of ideas smuggled into a story of new motherhood and marital infidelity. In her new novel, "Weather," Offill applies her instruments — the fragment, the odd fact, her deep banks of knowledge on mysticism and natural history — to a broader canvas. The stakes are the survival not of a marriage but of the planet itself. "The question I was thinking about in this book," she told me, "was, Can you still just tend your own garden once you know about the fire outside its walls?"

We were standing in her home office. She pulled books from a shelf as if appending footnotes to our conversation, piling them high on the small bed between us. *Look at this, and this:* a novel by the German writer Christa Wolf; a "Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Survival Manual"; a moss-green hardback, "Cold Meat and How to Disguise It: A History of Advice on How to Survive Hard Times."

Her desk faced a hill covered with exposed roots and brambles. If the symbolism isn't obvious enough for a writer of her precision and exacting slowness, consider also the small painting on the sill, of a man walking a snail on a leash. On the desk lay neatly

stacked academic studies about the psychology of denial and accounts of polar exploration. A small sign hung on the door bearing a Kafka quote: “In the fight between you and the world, back the world.”

She jokes that she used to be content to let her best friend — the novelist Lydia Millet, who works at the Center for Biological Diversity, an organization dedicated to protecting endangered species — worry about the climate crisis. She was stirred by climate scientists’ accounts of the profession’s private despair. In public, scientists would sound a hopeful note; alone, they would confess to their feelings of failure and discuss the imminence of mass starvation.

“For two sort of interesting but slightly embarrassing years,” she told me, “I became the person who ruined your dinner party.” She delved into disaster preparedness and paranoid “prepper” blogs (“Don’t do it,” she said) and began to notice which stories attracted attention — the plight of “charismatic megafauna” like polar bears or koalas — and all the extinctions that went unmourned. She told me about visiting the American Museum of Natural History. A sign on a door read, “Save the invertebrates (this won’t be easy).”

“You want to know how to get the comfortable white Americans to do stuff?” she said, looking mischievous. “The only thing that matters to them is their children’s welfare.” Look at how they worry about bad plastics and good colleges. “That’s what I’m going to do on my book tour. I’m just going to try to freak out the parents,” she said. “I *am* those people. They’re not going to worry about me. I don’t look very radical.” She laughed. “I’m the Trojan horse.”

Offill was 30 when she published her first novel, “Last Things,” in 1999. The story of a precocious child raised by a charismatic, unhinged mother, it was received warmly, the auspicious debut of a young writer keenly attentive to language and the natural world. She would not complete another novel for 15 years, stalled by a failed book and chronic illness. When “Dept. of Speculation” was finally published, in 2014, it received a level of critical acclaim from which I think she has yet to recover. Not since the British writer Rachel Cusk’s memoirs, “A Life’s Work,” has a book catalyzed such extensive debates about motherhood, ambition and ambivalence — let alone a novel so slender, scarcely thicker than a pack of cards.

The story couldn’t be simpler. A woman wants to write and can’t. She has a baby. Her Brooklyn apartment is besieged by bedbugs. Her husband becomes involved with someone else. The woman grieves and begins her halting return to writing. The book is a raw record of early motherhood and sexual humiliation, studded with odd facts about Arctic exploration. (“If someone had described this novel to me, I would never have read it,” Offill has said.)

“Weather” can be read as a companion to “Dept. of Speculation.” Lizzie, the narrator, is one in a line of Offill’s charming, depressive heroines. A failed Ph.D. turned part-time librarian, she works at the help desk and finds herself helplessly porous to the people

around her. Is that pale-looking adjunct selling his plasma again? Is her brother in recovery using? “I wish you were a real shrink,” her husband says. “Then we’d be rich.”

These might be familiar stories of family life, but now imagine them told in shards, the plot edging forward in jokes, quotes, Zen koans. The fragment is an old form, perhaps even our native form — don’t we speak to ourselves in curt directives, experience memory as clusters of language? In Offill’s hands, however, the form becomes something new, not a way of communicating estrangement or the scroll of a social media feed but a method of distilling experience into its brightest, most blazing forms — atoms of intense feeling.

I read somewhere that clouds could be called floating lakes. That is what these fragments feel like: teeming worlds suspended in white space, entire novels condensed into paragraphs. Offill is much influenced by the Swiss writer Robert Walser and his notion of artwork as a temple that can welcome all aspects of life, big and small. The domestic and intellectual meet on the same plain in her work; the swirl of hair on the back of a baby’s head is as worthy a subject of contemplation as one of Wittgenstein’s aphorisms.

“Weather” begins in the year before the election of President Trump, although he is never named. The characters vibrate with nervous energy. Lizzie starts working for a former mentor who hosts a podcast called “Hell and High Water”; she responds to letters from listeners panicked about climate collapse (“How will the last generation know that it is the last generation?”) Her preoccupations turn from the philosophical to matters of stark survival: “If you are not getting enough iron, put a few iron nails into a bowl of lemon juice and leave it overnight. In the morning, make lemonade out of it.”

The plot does not build so much as flurry. Lizzie is as well intentioned and balky as the rest of us; she keeps wondering how to “channel all of this dread into action.” She rouses herself to attend an activist meeting at a church (“too much eye contact,” she finds); she goes to a dentist to be fitted for a mouth guard she never wears. The story lies in the accumulation of the details, in being buffeted by Lizzie’s thoughts, their sudden swerves. In two pages, she can go from contemplating the Tibetan Buddhist version of *dukkha* (life is tolerable, but only barely so) to wordplay to grumbling about taking in her brother after his girlfriend has chucked him out.

Offill doesn’t write about the climate crisis but from deep within it. She does not paint pictures of apocalyptic scenarios; she charts internal cartographies. We observe her characters’ lurching shame, despair, boredom and fatigue — solastalgia experienced in ordinary life, vying with the demands of aging parents, small children, the churn of the mind. What she is doing, her friend the novelist Adam Ross told me, is coming as close as anyone ever has to writing the very nature of being itself.

When Offill was a college student, she woke one night to find a man kneeling by the edge of her bed. The man was wearing work clothes, and in the first, hazy moments of waking, she assumed he must have been part of the construction crew working next

door. *He must need me,* she thought. *He must have a question.* Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the clock in the room. It was 3:04 a.m. The man put a finger to his lips.

She cried out. Her roommate heard her and called through the wall, sleepily. "There's someone in the house," Offill said. "He's in my room." She heard the thump of her roommate jumping out of bed. The man turned and walked out, leaving through the front door.

Offill told me this story over lunch in Koreatown in Manhattan in December, breaking off midsentence to look up at me, suddenly amused. She asked, as she often does in the course of her anecdotes that detour into digressions, comic impressions, trivia: "How did I get here?" You were talking about denial, I prompted her. Offill spent years researching disaster psychology for "Weather." In emergencies, she told me, we rarely take immediate action. "We all just have this normalcy bias," she said. "Your brain is like: *I have not experienced this. I do not think I am experiencing this now.* People spend a lot of time at their desks straightening things." That's why that night nags at her — it wasn't just the horror of finding a strange man kneeling by her bed, but also that mysterious instinct to construct a story in which his presence made perfect sense.

What mechanisms — what sorts of evidence, what kinds of narratives — can jolt the brain out of its set patterns of denial, accommodation and adjustment? New forms must be forged; new traps set; new words invented, like "solastalgia," that sidestep numbing jargon. Artists thinking seriously about depicting the climate crisis join a contentious conversation among scientists and activists who have long been struggling with the "narrative problem" of the climate emergency. How do we write a story with an antagonist when *we* are the antagonist? Do we have a responsibility to avoid narratives of blame and despair, lest they stoke our sense of hopelessness and passivity? Or is there a value, even a moral imperative, in presenting the threats, as frightening as they are?

In 2005, the naturalist Robert Macfarlane asked, in an influential essay in The Guardian: "Where is the literature of climate change? Where are the novels, the plays, the poems, the songs, the libretti, of this massive contemporary anxiety?" How should we understand the paucity of the cultural response to climate change, he asked, compared with the body of work catalyzed by the threat of nuclear war? In recent years, however, planetary collapse has emerged as a dominant concern in contemporary fiction; there have been major novels by Louise Erdrich, Barbara Kingsolver, David Mitchell, Ian McEwan, Jeff VanderMeer, Kim Stanley Robinson and Jeanette Winterson. Margaret Atwood's "The Testaments," which examines the connections between totalitarianism and despoliation, shared the Booker Prize last year. Richard Powers's "The Overstory," which follows a group of environmental activists, took the Pulitzer Prize in fiction.

The climate crisis, Offill shows, is reshaping not just our world but also our minds. "Weather" joins other new fiction in transforming the novel of consciousness into a record of climate grief. "Sometimes I think that people today must be the saddest people ever, because we know we ruined *everything*," the heroine of Lucy Ellmann's "Ducks, Newburyport" thinks. One of Deborah Eisenberg's insomniac narrators frets: "I was

exhausted, though still wide awake, as I was so often — wide awake, and thinking about things I couldn't do anything about. Couldn't do anything about. Couldn't do anything about."

It is the "incredulity response" Offill described to me: How do we keep passivity at bay? Perhaps with a narrative that never permits passivity. It's not merely the fragments themselves that feel so powerful in her work but also the silences between them, the way they require the reader to pay attention, step in, supply the connections between the snippets. We are invited to take possession of the book in its white spaces in a way that feels like preparation to live more fully in the world.

[Jeff VanderMeer's novels of planetary devastation will make you want to survive.]

Privately, I began thinking of Offill as a variety of charismatic megafauna herself. In person, she is tall, twinkling and almost unnervingly disarming. At various points during our meetings, she burst into a bellowing recitation of Dylan Thomas at a bar ("Time held me green and dying/Though I SANG IN MY CHAINS LIKE THE SEA"!) and impressively committed to mimicking a squirrel. "We must look so slow to them," she said thoughtfully one day over lunch, and enacted first a human lumbering in agonizing slow motion and then the squirrel's disdain.

She is endlessly curious; her probing leaves you feeling pleasantly browsed. "Tell me," went a characteristic, offhand question. "In the religion you were raised in, how was the truth revealed — through grace or other acts?" Her conversation is so absorbing that we invariably took the wrong turns while walking together, wildly botched attempts at parallel parking and, on one occasion, boarded a train to New York from her house upstate without noticing that she didn't have a ticket and that I had one for a different train entirely.

A pitted, slightly perilous dirt road leads to Offill's house in the Hudson Valley, past a winding creek, well-tended fields, yards full of tractor parts. A faded sign warns: Caution, Children at Play. On the bright winter morning I traveled to see her, I passed grazing horses in handsome maroon coats and, incongruously, a tree stump wearing a peach-colored bra.

Her home, a former five-car garage, has the look of an old-fashioned schoolroom. The long living space, flanked by bedrooms on either side, is filled with overstuffed bookshelves and a collection of globes. There is an old card catalog Offill lugged home one day as a present for her husband, and a chalkboard marking planting dates for his sugar snap peas and baby bok choy. I submitted to a thorough inspection by the family dog, Jetta, a Labrador-corgi mix with a muzzle gone gray and an aura of beleaguered responsibility. She followed us as Offill gave me the tour through the home offices and a bathroom that had a small laundry line strung up in a window bearing the sign "Sock Refuge" and dangling mismatched socks. A tally sheet marked each family member's score in reuniting socks with their mates.

Offill works in a small room that was once the chauffeur's living quarters. An artist friend told her that she stretched canvases when stuck; Offill borrowed the idea and took to printing out fragments from "Weather" and pasting them onto large poster boards. She laid them out on the bed for me, weighing down the curling corners with stones, one of them decorated with a line drawing of a man holding his head as if in pain. She pointed out which fragments made it into the book, which ones didn't. The key to her process, she told me, is time — hence the agonizing slowness of the writing. Only by waiting and continuing to stare at and sift these fragments does it become clear which ought to remain. So many, she said, lose their "radiance"; they reveal themselves to be merely clever.

Jetta was restless, and we took her for a walk, bracing against the whipping wind. Offill moved upstate nine years ago. She does a fine impression of herself as a recent Brooklyn transplant worrying about ticks and consulting her new landlord: What precautions should she take? "Life," he told her — she made her voice low and contemptuous — "is full of perils." It became the family motto. She took conspicuous pride in showing me around the property, pointing out her daughter's favorite tree. They had moved because Offill wanted her to know something of her own happy memories of childhood, wandering in the woods.

Offill was born in 1968, in Greenfield, Mass. Her parents were English teachers at boarding schools and moved frequently — Massachusetts; North Carolina; California, for a few idyllic years; and then to Indiana. She was an only child and devised devious entertainments for herself that would be familiar to readers of "Last Things"; she dug holes for people to trip in, dusted the school with fingerprint powder in hopeful anticipation of a crime, spied brazenly on neighbors. Her parents were increasingly drawn to the Episcopal Church, and Offill recalled long summers at Christian camps, grudgingly tolerating them, even grateful at points — the questions about virtue and service felt less superficial than the ones she encountered in high school.

Books, I was surprised to learn, were not an early love. Music was. She was a teenager in North Carolina when she first heard someone playing the Velvet Underground's "Candy Says" in a park. So intense was her response that the boy playing the tape gave it to her — "It will change your life," he said. "It kind of did," she told me. I asked what she heard in the music, and she thought for a minute. "New York," she said — a dark glamour, a sense of a larger life. She found those same strains reading Keats and Coleridge in college, the first texts she loved. After graduating, she wrote on the side while working as a maid, bartending, reading fortunes in coffee grounds at a Turkish restaurant in New Orleans. She was accepted to Stanford's prestigious Stegner writing fellowship, but the years that followed were lean. She moved to New York, that long-cherished dream, and worked more odd jobs. For years, she recalled, she and a friend would trade the same $200 back and forth.

She had imagined her life clearly at that stage — it would be very exciting and very solitary, full of work, travel and "unsuitable men." Instead, she married, and she published her first novel. She worked as an adjunct professor but was unable to land a

more permanent position, because her second novel was so delayed (she wrote a number of delightfully wayward children's books in the meantime). While teaching a class called Unhinged Narrators, she finally abandoned the book that had so stymied her — about a student who has an affair with a professor. She strode out of her office one day and announced to her husband that she was going to write something weirder, more interesting, told instead from the wife's point of view, never mind if it didn't sell; she'd keep writing children's books to make money. For years the draft that became "Dept. of Speculation" was saved in her computer as a file marked "Bad Novel."

Jetta was panting and mud-caked when we returned home. We bathed her together in the tub. As I lathered Jetta's chest and shoulders, Offill spoke of the strangeness of finding herself in the midst of this warm domestic commotion — she, who had been prepared to consecrate herself to literature. "Sometimes I come out of the tumble of family life, and I think it's amazing I have this tumble. I didn't think I would have mittens drying on the" — she gestured vaguely — "Or papers spread all over the car. Even as it feels overwhelming, it feels like life. I feel like I got more life than I thought I was going to get."

But the tenderness of family life, as Norman Rush has written, exposes you to the "hellmouth" — all the "thin places" suffering can break through. Offill has been interested in Buddhism since college and maintains an occasional zazen practice. One day she came home from meditation and broke down while taking a shower. How could she square nonattachment — the awareness of transitory life, the acceptance that everything can be taken from her — with her love for her daughter? "It was a knee-buckling kind of moment," she told me. "I just remember thinking: Not her. Not her. I just gave away everyone. I gave away everyone at that moment." She called Millet, crying. Her friend told her to remember that Buddhism is a religion made by men, but mother love is even more ancient and has always been the strongest force in the world. In the early days of writing "Weather," Offill imagined it as a survival manual for her daughter, cramming it with information about every possible catastrophe, with tear-out sheets on practical tips. Some of these remain: notes on starting a fire with only a gum wrapper and a battery, or making a candle with a can of tuna fish.

The leap in Offill's work is how she imagines expanding this circle of domestic care to include the world, harnessing this powerful, private force and releasing it into the collective. In "Weather," Lizzie comes across the Buddhist idea that in previous lives we have all been one another's mother, sister, child. "We should treat each person we encounter as if they are our beloved." "Enmeshed" is the word she starts to use to understand her relationship with her brother, her sharp, painful attentiveness to his vulnerability. The form of the book enacts that very enmeshment — the fragments that hook into each other, rhyme and repeat. "What do you mean interconnected?" a caller asks on an environmental podcast Lizzie listens to. "There is a pause and then the ecologist speaks. 'There is a species of moth in Madagascar that drinks the tears of sleeping birds.' "

Later that month, Offill and I did a bit of moongazing, at the Met Breuer museum. We stood together in a room full of drawings of the night sky, part of an exhibition of the

work of the Latvian painter VijaCelmins, known for her graphite-and-charcoal photorealist portraits of stones, sand and outer space. The moon hanging before us was depicted in such close detail — the nubby, scored surface, the creamy rise of the ridges — it actually felt handled, as if the artist had reached out, palmed it like an apple, felt her fingers into its crags. I said something to this effect, or perhaps something even more maudlin — why does the moon always seem to meet our gaze? Offill nodded, gathering my dropped threads, as she does, weaving it into a conversation. It was, I realized, how I would remember her — slouched in that puffy coat she wore all winter, shoes wet with slush, listening as avidly as she spoke.

Celmins is an artist Offill has admired since she was in college. Now in her 80s, Celmins began her career painting disasters: forest fires and plane crashes. In 1968, she began to take photographs of the Pacific Ocean, near her home in Venice, Calif., making minutely detailed drawings of waves in different weather, each taking months to produce. “There’s one big one. But mostly” — Offill indicated the smaller works. “It’s not her choice of how to address the infinite.”

Up close, the drawings of the waves could be anything — striated skin, the whorls of a shell. “That undeniable technical skill,” she marveled. “You can’t look at that and be like, ‘She can’t draw.’ It makes me think of the big span of books some women — like a Rachel Kushner — write. They’ll never be mistaken for writing a *little* book.” She laughed. She was referring to Kushner’s 2013 novel, “The Flamethrowers,” a gritty, ambitious book about motorcycle racing and the rise of Italy’s radical left in the 1970s. “It’s probably a really smart move. And then there are all these women who write — Aimee Bender, Kelly Link — who use another genre as a way in. They are writing absolutely about domestic life at times. But then there’s a layer of the surreal or something, so again it’s not like you’re too head-on with it.”

It was not defensiveness I detected, not superiority, but a kind of rueful, collegial recognition of the strategies of the female writer — and quiet pride. It was Jane Austen writing to her nephew, an aspiring writer: “What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety & Glow? — How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour?” Offill has made no concessions, no feints to be taken seriously on anyone’s terms but her own. She has taken up a disparaged form, the “domestic novel,” stuffed it with ideas, histories of geology and the cosmos, while somehow stripping it down to its most austere, efficient form. With it, she pursues those very subjects — motherhood and the climate emergency — that can seem too large, too sentimentalized, too guilt-inducing to be subjects of successful, let alone serious, realist fiction.

I continued to admire the moon. Offill wandered off and returned. “That’s the part of my personality that I don’t understand exactly where it comes from.”

“Your ambition?” I asked.

She nodded. We were moving on to the next room when she added: “I don’t think you’d stay at something for 15 years when no one’s interested unless you have something — like, ‘I’ll show them.’ *Something* is there.”

In the late 1970s, Celmins began a five-year project creating identical duplicate sculptures of 11 stones, down to every nick and shadow. The work — “To Fix the Image in Memory” — is presented in a glass case; the game is to figure out which stone is real. As we looked at them together, I realized Celmins captures what Offill has called “last things”: “My mother said that stones were last things and would be around long after people were gone,” the narrator in her first novel recalls. “Other last things were oceans, metal and crows.”

Ambition is a paltry word for such work; ambition alone cannot explain the kind of attention required to stare at 11 stones for five years, to sketch water for more than a decade. Ambition alone cannot explain Offill’s patient rescue of facts and fragments from old books, a forgotten town meeting, annals of lonely polar explorers; her pressing them onto the poster boards, moving them around, waiting for them to ripen. Ambition has nothing to do with the desire to tuck into a novel a survival guide for a beloved child. It is not ambition, I was moved to tell her, it is devotion, but she had walked on. “Oh, I love you, I love you,” she was saying, standing in front of a drawing. “That’s Mars. Supposedly, we’re all going to live there one day.”

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