

ALSO BY JENNY OFFILL

Fiction

Dept. of Speculation

Last Things

Anthologies

The Friend Who Got Away (coeditor)

Money Changes Everything (coeditor)

Children's Books

Sparky

17 Things I'm Not Allowed to Do Anymore

13 Experiments That Failed

While You Were Napping

WEATHER

JENNY OFFILL

GRANTA

NOTES FROM A TOWN MEETING IN
MILFORD, CONNECTICUT, 1640:

*Voted, that the earth is the Lord's
and the fullness thereof; voted,
that the earth is given to the Saints;
voted, that we are the Saints.*

ONE

In the morning, the one who is mostly enlightened comes in. There are stages and she is in the second to last, she thinks. This stage can be described only by a Japanese word. "Bucket of black paint," it means.

I spend some time pulling books for the doomed adjunct. He has been working on his dissertation for eleven years. I give him reams of copy paper. Binder clips and pens. He is writing about a philosopher I have never heard of. He is minor, but instrumental, he told me. Minor but instrumental!

But last night, his wife put a piece of paper on the fridge. *Is what you're doing right now making money?* it said.

The man in the shabby suit does not want his fines lowered. He is pleased to contribute to our institution. The blond girl whose nails are bitten to the quick stops by after lunch and leaves with a purse full of toilet paper.

I brave a theory about vaccinations and another about late capitalism. "Do you ever wish you were thirty again?" asks the lonely heart engineer. "No, never," I say. I tell him that old joke about going backward.

*We don't serve time travelers here.
A time traveler walks into the bar.*

On the way home, I pass the lady who sells whirling things. Sometimes when the students are really stoned, they'll buy them. "No takers today," she says. I pick out one for Eli. It's blue and white, but blurs to blue in the wind. Don't forget quarters, I remember.

At the bodega, Mohan gives me a roll of them. I admire his new cat, but he tells me it just wandered in. He will keep it though because his wife no longer loves him.

"I wish you were a real shrink," my husband says. "Then we'd be rich."

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Henry's late. And this after I took a car service so I wouldn't be. When I finally spot him, he's drenched. No coat, no umbrella. He stops at the corner, gives change to the woman in the trash-bag poncho.

My brother told me once that he missed drugs because they made the world stop calling to him. Fair enough, I said. We were at the supermarket. All around us things tried to announce their true nature. But their radiance was faint and fainter still beneath the terrible music.

I try to get him warmed up quickly: soup, coffee. He looks good, I think. Clear-eyed. The waitress makes a new pot, flirts with him. People used to stop my mother on the street. What a waste, they'd say. Eyelashes like that on a boy!

So now we have extra bread. I eat three pieces while my brother tells me a story about his NA meeting. A woman stood up and started ranting about antidepressants. What upset her most was that people were not disposing of them properly. They tested worms in the city sewers and found they contained high concentrations of Paxil and

Prozac.

When birds ate these worms, they stayed closer to home, made more elaborate nests, but appeared unmotivated to mate. "But were they happier?" I ask him. "Did they get more done in a given day?"

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The window in our bedroom is open. You can see the moon if you lean out and crane your neck. The Greeks thought it was the only heavenly object similar to Earth. Plants and animals fifteen times stronger than our own inhabited it.

My son comes in to show me something. It looks like a pack of gum, but it's really a trick. When you try to take a piece, a metal spring snaps down on your finger. "It hurts more than you think," he warns me.

Ow.

I tell him to look out the window. "That's a waxing crescent," Eli says. He knows as much now

about the moon as he ever will, I suspect. At his old school, they taught him a song to remember all its phases. Sometimes he'll sing it for us at dinner, but only if we do not request it.

The moon will be fine, I think. No one's worrying about the moon.

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The woman with the bullhorn is at the school door this morning. She's warning the parents not to go in, to leave the children there behind the red line. "Safety first!" she yells. "Safety first!"

But sometimes Eli cries if he's left in that loud scrum of people. He doesn't like having to walk alone from one side of that huge cafeteria to the other. Once he froze in the middle until some aide grabbed him by the elbow and pushed him toward his corner.

So today we make a run for it and dart past her to his assigned assembly point. His friend is at the table and has animal crackers, so I make it out of there without tears, but not before the bullhorn

woman screams at me. "No parents! No parents may accompany their children!"

God, she loves that bullhorn. Something shoots through my body at the sound of her voice, then I'm out on the street again, telling myself not to think.

I'm not allowed to think about how big this school is or how small he is. I've made that mistake after other drop-offs. I should be used to it by now, but sometimes I get spooked all over again.

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All day long cranky professors. I swear the ones with tenure are the crankiest. They will cut past other people in line to check out a book or set up their hold list. Studies have shown that 94% of college professors think that they do above average work.

They gave us a guide the other day. *Tips for Dealing with Problem Patrons*. The professors weren't mentioned. There were the following categories.

WEATHER

Malodorous
Humming
Laughing
Defacing
Laundering
Combative
Chattering
Lonely
Coughing

But how to categorize this elderly gentleman who keeps asking me to give him the password for his own email? I try to explain that it is not possible for me to know this, that only he knows this, but he just shakes his head in that indignant way that means, What kind of help desk is this?

...

There's a poster of Sylvia at the bus stop. It says she's coming to give a talk on campus. Years ago, I was her grad student, but then I gave up on it. She used to check in on me sometimes to see if I was still squandering my promise. The answer was always yes. Finally, she pulled some strings to get me this job even though I don't have a proper

degree for it.

On the way home, I listen to her new podcast. This episode is called "The Center Cannot Hold." They could all be called that. But Sylvia's voice is almost worth the uptick in dread. It's soothing to me even though she talks only of the invisible horsemen galloping toward us.

There are recognizable patterns of ascent and decline. But our industrial civilization is so vast, it has such reach . . .

I look out the window. Something in the distance, limping toward the trees.

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The door opens and Eli hurls himself at me. I help him peel some rubber cement off his hands, then he goes back to his game. This is the one that everyone likes. It is a 3-D procedurally generated world, according to my husband. Educational.

It's fun to watch them play. They put together buildings block by block, then fill the rooms with

minerals that they have mined with pickaxes they have made. They assemble green fields and raise chickens to eat. "I killed one!" Eli yells. "It's almost night," Ben tells him.

There are bills and supermarket flyers. Also a magazine addressed to a former tenant. The cover promises tips for helping depressive people.

What to say:

I'm sorry that you're in so much pain. I am not going to leave you. I am going to take care of myself, so you don't need to worry that your pain might hurt me.

What not to say:

Have you tried chamomile tea?

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I let my brother choose the movie for once, but then it's so stupid I can barely watch it. In the movies he likes there is always some great disaster about to happen and only one unlikely person who can stop it.

Afterward, we walk in the park. He's met someone maybe. But he doesn't think it's going to work out. She's too different from him. It takes me a while to figure out they haven't even been on a date yet. "You don't want to date someone like you, do you?" I ask him. Henry laughs. "God, no."

In the first class I ever took with Sylvia, she told us about assortative mating. Meaning like with like—depressive with depressive. The problem with assortative mating, she said, is that it feels perfectly correct when you do it. Like a key fitting into a lock and opening a door. The question being: Is this really the room you want to spend your life in?

So I tell my brother how Ben and I never notice the same things. Like that time I came home and he was all excited because they finally took it down. Took what down? I asked. And he had to explain that the scaffolding that had covered the front of our building for three years was finally gone. And then last week, when I was telling him a story about the guy from 5C, he said, Wait, what drug dealer?

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When I get home, the dog wants an ice cube. I give her one, but she keeps banging her bowl around the kitchen. "How was your day?" I ask Ben. He shrugs. "I coded mostly, did some laundry."

There is a heroic tower of folded things on the table. I spot my favorite shirt, my least depressing underwear. I go into the bedroom and change into them. Now I am a brand-new person.

On her third day of marriage, Queen Victoria wrote: *My dearest Albert put on my stockings for me. I went and saw him shave, a great delight . . .*

My mother calls and speaks to me of the light, the vine, the living bread.

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Seven a.m. and Eli is playing fetch. I take the slobber frog away, put it on top of the fridge. "We have to go! Get your backpack!" I tell him. The dog watches me warily, her head on her paws. I run a brush roughly through Eli's hair. He winces

and darts away from me. "We have to go! Put on your shoes!" I yell. Then finally, we're out the door.

Mrs. Kovinski tries to tell me something about the elevators, but we race right past her. Ten blocks. I'm walking too fast, pulling Eli along with me. Wrong living, I know, I know, but it's a long line at the office if he's late.

A last sprint across the playground and we make it just in time. I'm out of breath, sweaty, sad. I kiss Eli's head, trying to undo the rush. Why didn't I have more kids so I could have more chances?

These other mothers knew enough not to have only one. There is a cluster of them over by the fence. They are speaking Urdu, I think. One of them smiles at me and I give a little wave.

How do I look to her? I wonder, in my drab clothes and fancy glasses. Last week, she donated a bag of silk fabric for the school raffle; it is red, stitched through with golden thread. Eli wants to win it and use it for a cape. I know how to write her name, but not how to say it.

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This woman is a shrink. Also a Buddhist. She likes to practice one or the other on me, I've noticed. "You seem to identify down, not up. Why do you think that is?"

You tell me, lady.

On Tuesdays, she teaches a meditation class in the basement. It is open to the whole community, not just university people. I've noticed that she listens differently than I do. She pays attention, but leaves her own stories out of it.

It's slow today so I help her set up for class. Cushions for the strong, chairs for the weak. "You should stay," she always tells me, but I never do. Not sure where to sit.

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Here is the midnight question for my husband: What is wrong with my knee? "I hear this little click when I'm walking. And there's a twinge too sometimes if I take the stairs." He is eating a

spoonful of peanut butter. He puts it in the sink, then kneels down to examine me. "Does this hurt?" he asks, pressing lightly on the skin. "How about this? Or this?" I waggle my hand to indicate maybe it does, maybe a little bit. He stands up and gives me a kiss. "Knee cancer?" he says.

One good thing about being addicted to sleeping pills is that they don't call it "addicted"; they call it "habituated."

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Funny how people will lecture you about anything these days. This one on the library steps is going on and on about my ham sandwich. "Pigs are more trainable than dogs! Cows understand cause and effect!" Who asked you anyway? I think, but I leave and eat it at my desk.

But the man in the shabby suit tells me things I want to know. He works for hospice. He said that it is important when a loved one dies to try to stay alone in the house for three days. This is when the manifestations occur. His wife manifested as a small whirlwind that swept the papers off his desk.

Marvelous, marvelous, he said.

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There's a sign on our elevator saying it is out of order. I stand there looking at it as if it might change. Mrs. Kovinski comes into the lobby. They'll let anyone be super now, is her theory. Anyone.

I get the mail, put off making my slow way up the stairs. The fancy preschool still sends us the newsletter. This one features a list of the top ten fears reported by their students. Darkness doesn't make the cut. Blood, sharks, and loneliness are 8, 9, and 10.

When I come in, the dog is sleeping under the table. Eli is folding a piece of plain white paper. "Don't look," he says. "I'm inventing this. No one will ever know what I have done except me."

I don't look. I put out kibble and water, peer openheartedly into the fridge. The window is open. It's nice out. The pigeons aren't on the fire escape. There are some pots left over from the tomato

experiment. “Whoosh,” my son says.

My # 1 fear is the acceleration of days. No such thing supposedly, but I swear I can feel it.

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“Do you want a snack?” she asks me. I hesitate because Catherine works in advertising. She met my brother when he signed up to be in a focus group for her agency. A hundred dollars cash was the pay. The assignment was to brainstorm names for a new deodorant aimed at children under ten. The Stink of Angels was his contribution.

I still can't quite believe they're a couple, but on their first date, they both ordered club soda. Twelve Steppers call it the Thirteenth Step. She used to do a little coke. He was all about the pills.

I tell Catherine I'm just going to wait for dinner. Later, I cruise by her desk and, sure enough, there's a folder there.

Potato Chips: Ambitious, successful, high achiever
Nuts: Easygoing, empathetic, understanding

Popcorn: Takes charge, smart, self-confident

I head into the living room and there is Ben, blithely eating cashews.

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Sunday morning. The dog has found a baby bunny in the grass. She closed her mouth around it once, then released it. Now we are trying to save it. Someone at the community garden has given us a box lined with a soft cloth. But it is trembling violently. There is no blood anywhere, but there are small indents in the fur that show where her teeth have been. We try to put it back in the garden but it has already died. Of fright, I think.

That night, Eli calls to us hysterically from the kitchen. There's a mouse skull under the sink, he says. I give Ben a dark look. We are killing them secretly, I thought. Heavily, he rises to go in there. He gets down on his knees to look under the sink. But it is only a knob of ginger and we are saved.

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