

The Thrum

Fiction

Lying down on the ground feeling the cool dirt pressing into my back, I try to focus on the rush of bird song in the forest, I try to feel the breeze and the minimal rays of sun that reach this far down to the forest floor. Squeezing my eyes shut, trying to only let in the wind, the birds, and the quiet murmuring of the leaves high above me. Attempting to ignore the ache in my stomach and the noise in my mind that together make me feel like I'm in an elevator plummeting down fast. I can't shut out the thrum of life, and when I try, it only gets louder. I take a deep breath and try to concentrate. I ball my hands into fists, *focus Shea. You're lying in a jungle, listen to the birds, to the wind, listen to anything* —ding! A notification on my stupid phone, *why didn't you turn it off.*

My eyes fly open, I sit up. It's useless. I can't focus. All the thoughts in my head are too loud. I get up off of the floor and grab my phone. I look down at the message, it's Ben. We were close before the pandemic, but now we are very, very different. We met in the hospital, him waiting for his sister to be brought into the world and me waiting and fearing that my brother would leave it. I open the message and read.

Messages:

(Ben Russell): hey shea! wanna meet up this weekend + catch up? been a while!

I let out a big sigh. *Come on Ben you know I can't.* Then reread the text thinking of different ways I can respond.

(me): *seriously? we're locked down. 9,423 people died yesterday + u think it's cool to just hang out?*

Or

(me): *on-screen or nothing u know that! u remember why I was @ the hospital that day? Emmett almost died + still could + people like you are making it dangerous for him. so thanks but no thanks!*

I end up not responding, I don't care if he sees that it's read. As I'm thinking, my phone dings again.

Calendar:

2:30 pm Dr. Fernez (it'll make you feel better)

I have ten minutes, plenty of time. That's one weirdly good thing about COVID-time; a year ago, it would take me 35 minutes just to drive to my appointment, and now I can be ready for it in less than five *on a bad day*. I walk into the kitchen to get a glass of water. Looking at the shelf, I decide on the cup I got for Emmett covered with little dinosaurs (I think they're supposed to be Apatosauruses). I secretly love it, and no one knows that when I bought the cup for him, I just got it so I could look at it.

Before I go back to my room, I need to check on Emmett. He's watching an old musical, his favorite, he's got an umbrella in his hand and is dancing along. I smile. He's in his happy place.

"Hey, Emmett, can you pause for a sec?" He's mid-twirl when I ask, and as he goes for the remote, he's a little wobbly, making me flash to all the ways he could fall and get hurt. He pauses the movie, a bit frustrated that I interrupted. "What's up?"

"I'm going to be in therapy, and Mama's in her meeting for at least another hour. If you want a snack, there are carrots and chips in the kitchen. You think you'll be okay until she's done?" Seeing that Emmett's only half-listening, I crouch down, so that he has to look in my face. "You think you'll be good, bud?"

"Yep." He clasps his hands and looks at me, making his eyes real big. Then adds, "if it's over before Mama's done, can I start another one?" He knows there's usually a one movie per day policy in this house, but these days are anything but ordinary. I give a little laugh, "sure, you can go crazy! If Mama asks, tell her I said it was fine."

Emmett unclasps his hands and throws his arms around my neck. Standing up, I cradle his little body and squeeze him close, and I breathe him in. He drops his legs, and I let him go. I'm about to walk to my room, but then turn back, "and Bud—"

"I know, I know, no matter what, don't use the stove!" Emmett says, rolling his eyes. And I think that if he's old enough to roll his eyes at me, he's old enough to know not to use the stove.

Back in my room, I close the door and sit at the little desk and open my old laptop. As I click the link for the meeting, the fan in the computer starts to whirl loudly. I have two minutes until we start, I adjust the camera so that you can't see my unmade bed.

When it's one minute to 2:30, Angela pops up. "Hey Shea, early as always, I love it!" She always comes on smiling, and she always says something to make me smile too. But I can tell that she isn't trying, making me comfortable is just her.

"Hey, Dr. Fernez." And she begins by asking me how my week was and as I answer, I notice that her usual tidy braid, which sits on her left shoulder, has been replaced. This week her hair is up in a bun on the top of her head. When she talks, it moves almost gelatinously, swaying from side to side, reminding me of an octopus, with the long strands of her curly dark hair becoming the tentacles of the creature, sitting there.

Angela asks me how my meditations have been going and if they are getting any better. I try to answer honestly and tell her that the meditations are not so good. And that I can't stop imagining horrible things, that they're just there, in my mind, almost all the time. Then she asks me the usual questions. Am I safe? How was my week? Is Emmett improving? So I tell her everything. About how lately life feels too close. How usually bad things are far away and on the

news, on the screen. But this, this is different. This is close. People I know are getting sick and dying in the same city as me, in the same apartment building as Mama and Emmett and me. “All I want to know is that my family is gonna be safe, and that’s one of hundreds of things I can’t know. And that thought makes me feel as if everything inside me is falling, but somehow I stay still.” I stop talking to take a deep breath.

Angela leans back in her chair and looks at me. I think she’s trying to look me in the eyes by staring straight at the camera and not the screen, and it seems a little weird. “You know what one of the hardest things about this crazy time is for me? And yeah, I know that people are dying, and good, hard-working people are losing their jobs, and oh Shea, you know I could go on.” She pauses as if carefully searching for the perfect words, then continues, “the one big thing that bums me out the most is that bright, amazing, powerful young people, like you, are being forced to carry the weight of this world on your shoulders. But Shea, I hope I don’t sound pessimistic. There’s plenty of good and hope in this time too. And thankfully, lots of people, like you, are doing what’s right and staying safe.” When she stops, she takes a long, deep breath. And I can tell that there’s a ton of emotion in what she just said. And that’s the exact same feeling that keeps making my life thrum.

“I want you to do something, let’s switch this up a little, okay? I want you to start a notebook, and each time you meditate, before you begin, I want you to make two lists: three things that you are grateful for and that make you happy and three things you can only do because of the pandemic. They can be as big or as small as you want, but just three of each. I

know this may seem a little cheesy.” Angela leans forward and puts her forearms on the desk.

"But Shea, I know that mind of yours. It's capable of conjuring up the bad, but it's the same mind that can make Emmett lose his mind laughing. And I want you to focus on that, on the good." I agree and smile. We say goodbye, and I log off, closing my overheated computer.

The next morning I get out of bed and sit in the middle of my floor, a new notebook in my hands. I open to the first page and begin.

Three things I am grateful for and make me happy:

1. A room of my own.
2. Clean air to breathe.
3. I have such a good imagination that it's capable of taking me anywhere.

Three things that I can only do because of the pandemic:

1. Eating lunch with Emmett every day and noticing how each day he seems a little older.
2. Taking daily naps between online classes.
3. Staying up very late with Mama, watching movies and talking.

I close the notebook, and I lay back, letting my arms fall to the floor. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. I let my mind go, and a warm, green forest full of life takes shape. Feeling the small plants and flowers beneath me forming the ground, I start to hear the far-off calls of birds. I

feel a light, misty breeze kiss my face and run over my skin. The leaves in the trees above sound like waves on a distant shore. I breathe in and out with the rise and fall of my earth beneath me. Sitting up, I open my eyes and look around, smiling. This is my world, and here everything I need is waiting for me, and me alone. Turning my face up to the sky, breathing deeply, I see tiny beings of light dancing through the air around my head and all through the forest. Yep, like I said, whatever I can think of can be true in my world. I get up and walk into the woods, knowing no matter how far I wander, I can always find my way.