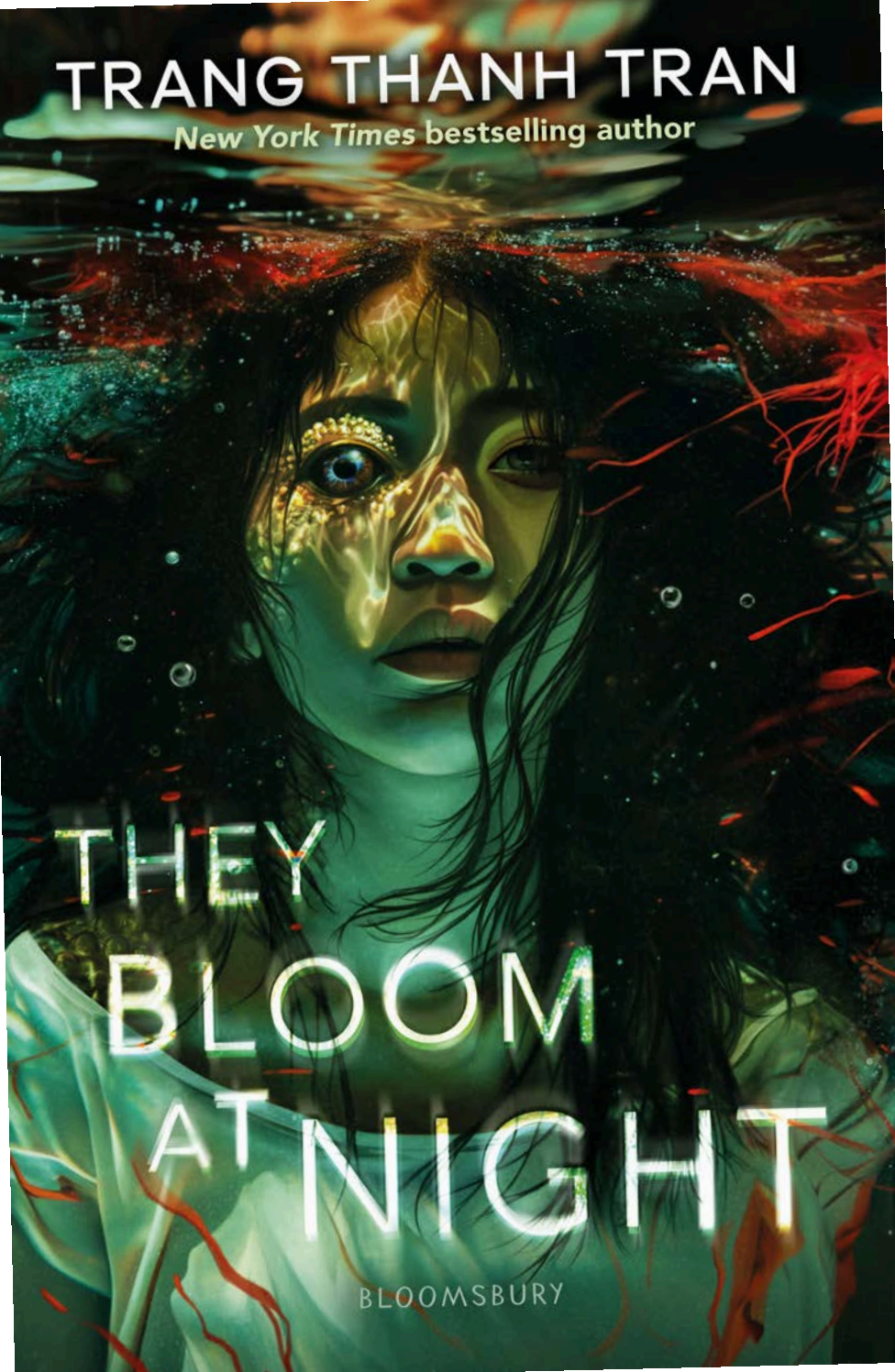
TRANG THANH TRAN
New York Times bestselling author
THEY BLOOM AT NIGHT
BLOOMSBURY

Praise for
They Bloom at Night

'A literary tour de force that should go down in history as a masterclass in atmospheric and terrifying writing'
Kosoko Jackson, bestselling author
of *The Forest Demands Its Due*

'Trang Thanh Tran has a story for everyone who wants to tear off their skin and craves the strange ache of becoming something new. This book moults and chews itself raw under your fingers. It's perfect'
Andrew Joseph White, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *Compound Fracture*

'A mesmerising novel with visceral descriptions that are both gorgeous and terrifying. With its exquisite prose, captivating mystery and a setting so vibrant that you can smell the salt and hear the waves crashing, *They Bloom at Night* is a must-read'
Liselle Sambury, author of *Delicious Monsters*

'A briny, rotting ode to the things we must become to survive and the things we yearn to become when the surviving is over. In elegant, atmospheric prose, Trang Thanh Tran peels back layers of salty skin and sea foam to expose the truth: even when we are wrong, even when we are monstrous, we are whole'
Courtney Gould, award-winning author
of *The Dead and the Dark*

‘Gorgeous, gruesome and fiercely cathartic, *They Bloom at Night* is body horror with a beating heart’
Rebecca Mahoney, author of *The Valley and the Flood* and *The Memory Eater*

‘Trang Thanh Tran has created a horrifying, mesmerising world that’s not too far from our own, challenging us to examine who the real monsters truly are’
Alex Brown, author of *Damned If You Do*

THEY BLOOM AT NIGHT

Books by Trang Thanh Tran

She Is a Haunting
They Bloom at Night

THEY BLOOM AT NIGHT

TRANG THANH TRAN

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For those who can't see themselves in mirrors

1

TODAY'S BODY IS SKEWERED through the old church spire, a gray-black whale peeling in fleshy wisps. Dead too long for food.

From between my fingers or with my glasses dangling aside, I am still sometimes too scared to see how life has changed. Trailers refurnished with fish and eels under sunken sofas, cardboard boxes soggy and broken into bite-size pieces, and bodies torn up by the crashing waves. I don't like to look, which means, of course, that I have to.

The bloom has claimed much of our town of Mercy, red algae spilling over the Mississippi and adjacent floods like entrails. Our boat cut through it easily, but the micro-plants are probably sticking to the hull right now. It should've been like any algae bloom—spill toxins into the water, kill a bunch of fish, ruin the local economy, and leave us to pick up bootstraps and get back to work—but no, since Hurricane Arlene twenty-one months ago,

these red tides have become the longest-lasting bloom known to humans.

Worse, not all the animals die. Wrecked on the levee, the whale gapes in anguish, as if to scream, *Why me?*

"Cẩn thận nhe con," Mom says. Her eyes are trained on the riverside, searching for the outsize tree that flanks the fortune teller's home. Without looking, she reaches over and rubs Vicks under my nose to ward off the rotten egg stench on the breeze. The glob burns my upper lip.

I turn the three-spoke wheel, cautiously guiding our forty-foot trawler on the bloodred river. "It's 'be careful,'" I say, because that's our implicit deal: I learn how to steer a boat and she talks in English. They are the skills we each need to survive without the other. Just in case.

Brows pinching together, she mutters, "Be careful."

I steer our boat over the tombs lurking below, hoping that none moved again in the last storm. This close to land, anything can rip through the hull. The most dangerous stuff is always unseen. Mom should know; she spends most days staring into watery depths, searching for dark silhouettes. *Monsters*, people like to whisper.

It happens a lot actually—people claiming they discovered a new species or the southern Loch Ness, when really, this dead whale just washed up and became postmortem kebab. Maybe some deep-sea creatures got curious about the sun and swam up. Ninety-five percent of the ocean remains unexplored, so it doesn't surprise me to see strange animals. A two-headed shark is still a shark. I should know. Before, I wanted to be a marine biologist, though I probably would've ended up pregnant and

stuck here. With most of Mercy abandoned due to off-and-on flooding, I never have to worry about being a late bloomer anymore. I am my best self in this apocalypse.

Mom is not.

"We only have twenty minutes," I say. "Mình chỉ có hai mươi phút thôi Má. Okay?"

The two moles on her left eyelid disappear in a scowl. Rushing at the fortune teller's is a sure way to annoy her, but right now is prime market hour. Our fuel gauge is way too close to *E* to risk missing the weekly trade, no matter the short distance to the harbor from here.

"It take how long it take," she says, pointing at the one tree that looms above all others. Beneath it is the tip of an old boardwalk, mostly covered by weeds. The smaller mole re-emerges at her left eye crease as she gets up, sweeping photos of our family from the counter into her bag. The plastic frames clank together. Anchoring as close and safely as possible, I remove the key from the ignition. It hangs from a silver necklace, a pendant to keep close. I turn the familiar weight in my fingers, counting một, hai, ba, as Mom taught me. Three times, a magic trick to forget all the bad things. It's more of a ridiculous comforting ritual than anything else. Mom pauses and, with a rare smile, helps put the necklace around my throat. "Đừng có lo." Both hands rest on my shoulders. *Don't worry.*

Mom never says "I am here for you," because she's still stuck in those family photos—in the memory of what was. She wants me to be a girl who sits down with her hair neat and smiles, though I have always been different. I *am* different. Under her hands, my sweater clings to my slick skin, itching me

everywhere. I keep still, yet miss her when she lets me go. With a bit more fuel, we'll have an escape, for whenever we need. We can rejoin the parts of the US that forgot us as soon as the news stations left, or just go far from Mercy. But we stay.

On the deck, I open our freezer, where at least eight thousand pounds of large brown shrimp are layered in crushed ice, ready to be processed. I grab an already portioned bag up top, then the smaller sandwich bag beside it, and join Mom on the dinghy. A gentle wave helps us toward the fortune teller's porch. The entire cabin is dipped in the strangler fig tree's shadow.

Mom knocks on the door. "Chị Oanh ơi?" No answer. "Chị Oanh!"

This late in summer, the figs are fat, purple pustules that'll burst at the slightest touch. These trees used to only populate southern Florida, but it's tropical enough now to grow in Louisiana too. Some bats might come eat Bà Oanh's figs yet, then shit seeds elsewhere. Another cypress or palm will die under the strangler fig's embrace. That's romance; I don't touch it.

"Em vô nhe chị," Mom announces. Her knuckles are pale on the doorknob, and quivering. She opens the door. The algae that's laced itself across the cabin rips as daintily as a doily as the door opens. Fine red dust spills into the muggy air. Between the bloom's stench and the overripe fruit, I hadn't noticed her smell. Bà Oanh's body is bloating in the armchair she always sat in during our visits. Gasping, Mom leaves me at the threshold. The algae had found its way inside as well, seeping into damp wood. It resembles dried blood that can't be scrubbed clean—only blood isn't this orderly when spilled. There is no shape to the algae; it is just everywhere.

Rather than sobbing at Bà Oanh's feet, Mom cries and rifles through the woman's side table and drawers. She grows more frantic when she doesn't find a hidden fortune, a direction to which we can drive our boat next to find what she really cares about.

My dad. My brother.

They are out there somewhere, reincarnated and waiting for us to rescue them, according to her. Every family has their myths, and Sông is ours. It's like the spirit of the water, but its name doesn't mean ocean. We call it Sông for the rivers we've lived by. In Vietnam, we had the Mekong. Here, we have the Mississippi. Sông kept my dad's family safe during the perilous journey to the United States. During good shrimping seasons, my family thanked it for providing. During bad ones, they wondered if they'd mistreated the water, spat one too many times over the railing. To me, it was just metaphor, simile, and superstition. Mom has twisted it with her faith when my dad's and brother's bodies weren't recovered. She truly believes Sông birthed them again as some sea animal. More impossible dreams to catch within our nets.

"Nhung," my mother says, her eyes as brittle as pistachio skin. There is a question there.

Wake up, I can respond. *They are gone.* A fly lands on Bà Oanh's glasses. *She's dead too.*

I cover my nose, brushing a stray tear off my cheek. What's wrong with being swept in this a little longer, if it makes Mom happy? If it makes her want to live?

"Okay," I answer. "I'll help look." Setting our goods aside, the clock dwindling away light, I go through the fortune teller's ten-year-old receipts, yellowing magazines, and notebooks. Bà

Oanh had been haunted by the memory of her drowned sister. She didn't believe in reincarnated people or monsters, but she stayed because she'd lived in Mercy since she first came to the US. She never encouraged my mom's delusions. Lunar calendars and palm reading were her forte.

Her last fortune for Mom had been this: "Not the year for rat signs, Tiên. Bad luck will come and come again for your daughter. It'll be better if you wait on shore until the shroud passes. She should not operate cars or any other machinery."

Mom didn't listen, of course, because we had to be on the boat. She always held onto the hope that, next time, Bà Oanh would divine our family's location.

Eventually I make it back to the armchair, which Mom hasn't searched at all. She isn't good with bodies. People worth saving don't do things like steal glasses from corpses. I've always liked Bà Oanh's frames since the attached chain makes them harder to misplace. Her glassy eyes don't need them anymore. The flies I'd disturbed resettle on her forehead. I can see every blemish, every putrefying pore, every small cut likely from seashells on her feet, but no wounds big enough to kill. Maybe a heart attack or aneurysm got her in the end. Better than drowning. Many people drown these days.

I follow her sloping arm, to where it lies between cushion and armrest, so heavily covered in beetles and other insects that I almost miss the mini notepad. I tug it free. Five words are scrawled out: KHI NƯỚC CỨ DÂNG CAO. *When the water keeps rising.* An omen I know well. It's easy to imagine the muck-ridden river or the temperamental ocean waves breaking through the windows and ripping us apart. It always sings in a

rush, but it is the day-to-day erosion that will end us. To me, *when the water keeps rising* means now. Like an outdated textbook, the phrase teaches me nothing new.

A laugh wells in my throat. I love the wild, open ocean where it's only us and the horizon, where no one can see me, but I don't want to trace the coastline looking for imaginary monsters again. Mom is overjoyed as she takes the notepad. For Mom, *when the water keeps rising* means every day is an opportunity.

I try to hold on. "We don't know if this is for us."

"Who?" Mom asks. "Who then?" I'm afraid she'll swallow all the carrion beetles with her lips open in argument. I let go. To the fortune teller, Mom utters "cảm ơn chị," as if the woman had written an epiphany destined for us as her final act before unceremoniously croaking. She leaves, slimy notebook hugged against her chest, the only weight keeping her from fluttering away. It won't be long before she takes us into the next storm. Even whales have been known to carry dead calves on their heads for weeks in mourning.

What's an ocean to a Vietnamese mother with a dream?

In those quiet moments between whatever's left of Bà Oanh and me, I open the plastic sandwich bag and put a dome of Vietnamese sponge cake on her lap. She had a sweet tooth, so I'd saved it just for her. The last of the freezer's frost has melted, making the crumps sloppy. It would've ruined the condensed milk she liked to dunk it in. I mumble a sorry, though I'm not sure for what. The way we barged in here, how I robbed her glasses? For my mom?

Here's the truth: my life went apocalyptic a whole two months before the hurricane swept through, when I lost my

virginity in the famed shallows of Mercy Cove. Now more than ever, I can't look in a mirror. I am all the wrong shapes, skin flaking away to shell under prying fingers. My hair's as white as bleached coral, though for a time Mom made me dye it black. Now we just say it's stress-induced. She tells me these changes are from my imagination, but she puts me in thick sweaters and stiff jeans in this awful heat.

The taste of brackish water plagues my tongue as I linger at the door. On the dinghy, Mom hums and waves for me to hurry. My insides boil, which is unproductive because only one of us can be reckless at a time. Crying seagulls dive and snap up small fish breaking through the algae. I go to catch up with Mom.

Time bleeds this time of year, sun late into the day with skies like watered-down raspberry tea. This season used to bring back crayon-scented memories full of composition books and leaking glue. It had the slickness of a paper cut: sharp and quick, then pressed with humidity under a cartoon-themed Band-Aid. Outside, everything is beautiful, all at the cusp of rotting. There are no cicadas, only buzzing wasps that squeeze into figs to lay their eggs. September is close, a month of new beginnings.

I glance back at Bà Oanh's cabin, a place I plan never to return to, at the sliver of inside still visible. Light glints off the dead woman's yellowed teeth, made sharper by the blood-tinged foam dribbling from her nose and mouth. As the door closes, she suddenly seems to be wearing a smile.

2

THE BLOOM'S SCATTERED NEAR the harbor, streaking through a constant stream of fishing boats, and touched with oil. On the docks, the locals stop haggling to gawk at us. Of all trawlers, Mom and I go the longest distances into the Gulf of Mexico, where there is still a chance of hauling in shrimp. But really, the locals are just waiting to see if we've brought back the terrifying creature-thing rumored to be hunting in these waters.

"Non Bien Tien and Loony Noon's here!" a tall dockworker shouts. He flips a baseball hat back on his hair. The logo of an alligator eating its own tail is about as inspired as the nicknames they give us. In the early days post-storm, Jimmy's Gator Swamp Tour and Emporium, with its airboat fleet and crew members unemployed due to dying tourism, won a government contract to transport limited goods to towns farther south. How marked up the prices are doesn't matter, as long as the politicians don't have to think about us. We are the ones who chose to stay, after all. We deserve what we get.

Above deck, Mom and I find our way to the pier. A special crew waits for us as usual, and today Knife Girl is back. Despite being closer to my age, she lays out on a hammock and "oversees" Jimmy's henchpeople. Mostly, she reads a book and holds the pointy end of a knife between her white teeth.

"Finally," the tall dockworker says. "Jimmy woulda been *pi-ssed*. You Asians are always late."

I would've very much liked to push him into an algae mass, but someone else speaks first. "Shut the hell up, you disgusting skid mark." Knife Girl sits up in the hammock, small blade glinting in the sun before she uses it as a bookmark. She slips the whole thing into a cargo pocket. Her brown hair is parted in the middle and cut shaggily at her strong jawline.

Next to me, Mom has stopped humming. She does not like this change and, for all my curiosity about Knife Girl, I don't like this either. "We are late a lot," I say in what must be a betrayal to multiple cultures. I'll apologize to the entire continent of Asia later. A whiff of Knife Girl's sunscreen—Banana Boat—catches on the breeze, and something stirs inside me, a hazy memory, maybe, of simpler days. After a pause, Knife Girl introduces herself. "I'm Covey."

"Covey," I repeat. "Like a flock of birds?"

She raises a brow, then counters, "Noon, like the time of day?"

"Like Nhung," I say. "Something you can't pronounce." Since forever, Noon has been a placeholder for neighbors, teachers, and other kids. It is a favor to myself, honestly, since it saves me from correcting everyone's pronunciation or having to slap on the verbal equivalent of a participation sticker. No anger or

embarrassment flits across her face, just a flash of teeth that I can't pin as a smirk or smile. We stare at each other.

"Why y'all call it *Wild Things* when it's one boat?" Skidmark asks as he ropes it to the docks.

Tilting my head, I consider the cursive Dad branded on the shrimp trawler years ago. He'd wanted to name it Little Jay after my brother, but Jaylen took one look at me and said no. *What about this instead*, *after the book?* he suggested, and of course our dad said yes. He always said yes to his son.

I ignore the worn paint again. *Wild Things*, his childhood favorite. Not mine.

Moving into my line of vision again, Covey answers with lazy confidence, "It's after the picture book. Yeah?" I nod, finally noticing that no one's unloading our boat. Usually they'd be on it, eager to get the hell out of Port Mercy. I look back at the girl. Her eyes are an agonizing blue, the kind of ocean water that's hard to find now. "Jimmy wants to talk to you both in person, over by the swamp."

Dread hooks my gut. The harbor has always been our meeting place. The swamp lies farther inland, not safe for our trawler. We'd have to take another boat.

"Nó nói cái gì vậy?" Mom whispers.

"Make him come here," I say loudly. "We aren't leaving our trawler."

Covey's expression is hard to read. Her words, however, are clear: "If you have no fuel, it gets left anyway." The next dock not under Jimmy's watch isn't for hundreds of miles, with rules and people we don't know. We would be stranded in algae-infested waters trying to reach the next harbor.

"Ông Jimmy muốn mình tới gặp ổng," I say to Mom. She moves to argue. I tell her that we don't have a choice when we're led to a different boat.

The aluminum skiff bounces under our weight. Mom has fallen silent after rearranging my clothes to cover as much skin as possible. Covey controls the engine using a hand tiller to lead us down a channel off the bayou.

Things do their best rotting in daytime or deep in water. And this close to Mercy itself, there is simply more to kill. Animals that returned in low flood cook at its surface, a resting place for flies. Others sit drowned at the bottom. We hit the formerly dainty swamp off Port Mercy, where in some months there isn't even enough water to call it that. Now, patches of red algae float like cloudy fat on a pot of bún riêu. We pass stilt houses and houseboats. Somewhere, a woman's soft sobbing harmonizes with swinging wind chimes.

The sun begins to bake me brown. My mouth dries out. I want to reach into the brackish muck and catch a fish, any fish, and break its spine for fluid. Suck the eyes. It is a trick Mom's aunt told her about—how they withstood the dehydration while at sea on their way here decades ago. It barely works really, but I don't care.

I am thirsty and trapped. I need the ocean. I need to see no one else for miles.

Unmoving, Mom watches the only part of America she has ever known. From her world, she clings to the bench, squeezing until her knuckles turn white. At the next juncture of trees, the boat takes a hard right toward a shallower end.

A white man stands on the shack's porch, hand wrapped around a gun. He has it pointed directly in front of him. When our skiff bumps against the porch, he lowers it and turns his head. His hair is a deep brown, sweat-drenched and dripping down to a mostly gray beard. "Excuse me," James Boudreaux says with a bright, jolly smile. "I was just thinking about taking care of any potential interruptions." Our eyes follow his gaze back out to the tree some fifteen feet away, where a bird hovers over its nest, feeding its young. He helps Covey up first. "I hope my daughter has been a hospitable host."

Daughter? It makes sense that Jimmy would have his kid watch over his business. Plenty follow their parents into whatever trade—myself included—but Covey was always nose-deep in a book when she ought to be nickel-and-diming us on every haul. Next to him, she sighs. "We didn't get into it."

The word *it* snags on my nerves. *He's finally come for the boat*, I think as I pull Mom onto the creaky wood. We call *Wild Things* ours, but Dad had taken a loan from this man following the bank's rejection to purchase it. We owe more than it's worth now. The first time I met Jimmy was last year, when we brought in blue crabs. They'd looked normal on the outside but completely different on the inside. He wouldn't take our word for it.

"Wait," I had said, but it was already too late.

Jimmy snapped a living crab's shell open and exposed its body. The legs twitched once, twice, but he only added, "Let's take his little face off. It's distracting, huh?" His thick thumb peeled back the crab's black eyes in a gut-wrenching crack, then

discarded the remains at our feet. The rotting sea had filled our nostrils.

The crab had no lungs. The feathery gills that should rise from either side, tasteless and icky, were absent; in its place, more orange roe and dark meat—what we break them for. Guts dripped from his fingers. It was unnatural. Wrong.

He made us bring in every fucked-up thing that wound up in our nets after that. He sold them to hobby collectors, rich people in dry places that mounted specimens to walls and kept the rest in thick tanks. Some he slipped to university scientists who happily ran tests on them. *No microplastics, PCP, MSG, the whole thing*, he'd report back gleefully. *Just more bang for your buck. Nature doing what food geneticists want to do.*

Now he has the same greedy look on his face. "It's very nice to see my best shrimpers again. Thank you for coming," he drawls as he lights a thick cigarette. Cherry smoke blankets us with his next words. "Tell me, what have you and your mom seen out there recently?"

He doesn't mean the sunrises and sunsets, a calm ocean rocking me to sleep, or the air so salty and cool I dreamed of floating in it. Anyone can tell him that. He wants stories and rumors: intestine-pink tentacles overcoming barges, impossible antlers riding a crest, and smudges swimming underwater, lost between one blink and the next. He wants to hear about the things that thrived while others died.

"Nothing," I say. "Just the same-old crap. The algae's getting wors—"

"Monsters," Jimmy cuts in.

"There are no monsters," I reply. Mom refuses to call them that. To her, they are gia đình. Family.

He blows out another sick, sweet breath. "Semantics, then. So what if it's actually a megashark or giant squid, or whatever messed up abomination's out there swallowing up people's lives and livelihoods. The problem is now it's here too. Right in Mercy, people are vanishing with no trace." He inclines his head toward Mom. "Tell her."

August has been full of bloated skies that refuse to rain. Of course, it would begin now. A soft drizzle catches on Mom's eyelashes as those moles vanish in wide wonder. A storm is always coming.

"You sure people aren't just getting drunk and falling in?"

He barks out a laugh. "One or two maybe, but there have been several cases and no bodies at all. Whatever it is, it's taking people whole."

"Or they could be leaving," I say. "This place sucks." They'd be far from the first residents to abandon Mercy.

Covey unfolds from her slouching. "Not everyone runs from a fight." I hate that she looks cool even for a second, and I hate it even more when Jimmy beams proudly at his daughter. "People have reported seeing or hearing things, then they disappear too."

Her dad picks up the spiel. "We can keep Port Mercy running for as long as we like, but that means Mercy has to stay on the map. Folks are terrified enough of storms, and this is the last damn straw. It certainly is for the government." He pauses for full effect. "A scientist has gone missing."

He explains how the lead botanist on their research team disappeared while collecting algae bloom samples, how annoying mishaps like these are costly to morale and bad PR for officials who want to keep the seafood industry thriving. "The government's gonna close the fishing season early. Some people will leave for less stingy places, and then they'll make everyone go. They're planning to designate this entire place a disaster zone."

"When?" I ask, mind reeling.

"September tenth." That's three weeks from now. "This is where you and your mom come in. You got all those other specimens. So you catch this one too. Dead or alive, I don't care."

I start to shake my head. Mom waits next to me, unaware (for the most part) of what we are being tasked with. It must be a shitty joke, but it's also my fault for letting my mom do whatever she wanted, for letting our reputation as monster hunters balloon out of proportion. The ocean's deepest part runs seven miles down. It is pitch-black, with pressure over a thousand times the surface level's. Of course, whatever can survive that depth can kill us. Of course, there is always something in the water.

There's a rush of excitement as I realize Mercy being a designated disaster zone would be the perfect excuse to convince Mom to leave. We don't have to listen to his demands.

As if he can read my mind, Jimmy adds, "If you don't take the deal, then my patronage ends here, and I'll collect on your loan. Someone will do what I ask them, for a boat like that. *Wild Things*." The name is obscene in his drawl.

The excitement plummets as I clench my fists so that I don't scream. Without our trawler, the only way out of Mercy is on

a school bus refashioned for mass evacuation. And Mom will never agree when she believes our family is in danger. Seething, I ask, "And what do *you* think this monster is?"

"Now that's y'all's job to figure out," Jimmy says. "Don't care how you do it, but I want it contained. I don't give a shit about the scientist, or Mother Nature menstruating, people need to know the situation is under control. Once it's eliminated, it'll be safe. No reason to close up shop. That's how we get back to normal. Now don't keep your mother waiting. Translate."

"*He wants us to catch the animal,*" I mutter to Mom. "*Dead or alive. He'll take the boat if we don't*." She inhales sharply.

Jimmy claps his hands together. "Do this and you'll get better rates on all your shrimping hauls. More fuel for your trips out there. Your debt will get knocked down by half."

This deal promises more freedom. We won't have to work so hard running nets across the entire Gulf and counting down the gallons of fuel. "*We can fake it*," I say in Vietnamese, though once we'd brought back a faceless cusk—a deepwater eel with a bulbous head, hardly any eyes, and a tucked-under mouth—to Jimmy's annoyance. He'd known what it was immediately. I touch Mom's elbow. "*We'll find something weird and dead. We can stuff one of my fingers in its gut. After, we can stay out two weeks at a time. Or just leave. It'll be easy. It'll be better that way.*" Under their watch, I keep my voice low, urgent, but Mom recoils from me. Disgusted. The two moles on her monolids have disappeared in a bewildering stare, as though we don't know each other at all, and maybe she's right.

She would do anything to protect family, reincarnated or otherwise. I underestimated her.

Mom lunges for Jimmy's throat.

Like a moth to flame, I follow, desperate to grasp at her black hair. Covey catches me around the middle and shoves me against a wall, while the man easily gathers Mom up and slams her on the porch. I scream.

Sitting on her back, Jimmy holds her jaw closed. "I wrestle gators bigger than you," he says, his knees bruising her arms.

At my ear, Covey says, "It'll be worse if you get involved."

Anger surges at my pulse points. "Go fuck a screwdriver. I'm already involved." I fight against her strong grip as a low whine peels from Mom's throat.

"What did I do to deserve that, huh?" Jimmy *tsks* and shakes my mom against the porch. "See what you did to yourself?" His smile is cold as he regards me. "Tell your momma to stay put."

"*Don't fight*," I say instead.

Mom wails in response. "Trời đất ơi." When he lets her go, her arms flop to the side, oddly bent. She groans as he rolls her over with a dirty boot. Her thigh eases from a large nail jutting from the porch. The rust and blood meld together in one big mess.

"Get off." I shove Covey from me. Blood oozes from the hole in Mom's loose trousers. I apply pressure with my hands but she swats me away.

Jimmy plops down in a rocking chair. He points to the matching seat, then at Mom. "Sit." He wags a single finger at us. "Sit." I half-expect him to throw a treat.

Seething, breathing lungfuls of mossy air, I help Mom to her feet and onto the chair. I grip its back, digging my dull fingers in to stop the chair's squeaking.

"As I was proposing, ladies," Jimmy says, slopping government-issued Purell over his palms. "You have three weeks. This is a generous deal. And well, you Vietnamese know how to rebuild from nothing. You're resilient. You'll figure it out."

Less than a month to accomplish what we haven't over a year, or we lose everything.

Mom's crying cuts into my translation. Makes me repeat words. She's anguished. "We can't hurt them!"

"Con biết rồi," I say. A dangerous feeling thrums in my skin. My heavy clothes are too small to contain the shape of my rage, my desperation. I wish for claws and sharp teeth, a stinger to stab this man through. I imagine what it must be like to have a colossal squid's serrated grip to wrap around his smirking face and squeeze. "*We'll find another body,*" I try Mom again. "*We won't have to kill anything, I promise.*"

"Oh, by the way," Jimmy says, as if well-versed in all the ways to betray others. "My daughter will go with you. She's a great shot."

My eyes meet Covey's again.

I knew from the moment she spoke today, she was fated to ruin my life. She will report everything back to her crime lord of a dad. And she doesn't belong on *Wild Things*, the last space that's ours.

"Our nets will work fine," I say through gritted teeth.

The patience vanishes from his voice. “She’s the best hunter around my place. You need a demonstration?” His hand hovers over the holster.

In English, Mom says, “No gun.” With her bleeding leg steady, she snaps her fingers at Jimmy directly. “Okay?”

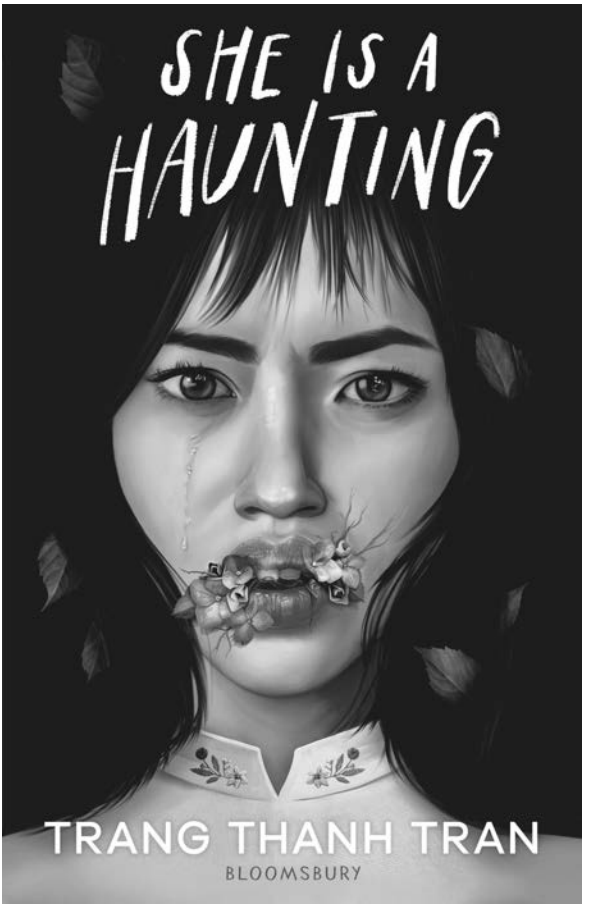
He raises his hands. “Okay then.”

“That’s fine,” Covey says. Back at the shack door, she squats down to pick up another menacing contraption. “I’ll take my crossbow.”

Daniel, thank you for being by my side. You've saved me in so many ways. One day I'll let you teach me how to swim too.

To Laurie Halse Anderson, thank you for writing *Speak*. It found me at the right time and has stayed with me since.

This house eats and is eaten.
Dare you enter?



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TRANG THANH TRAN writes speculative stories with big emotions about food, belonging and the Vietnamese diaspora. They grew up in a big family in Philadelphia, then abandoned degrees in sociology and public health to tell stories in Georgia. When not writing, they can be found over-caffeinating on iced coffee and watching zombie movies.

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