



TLC SHOWCASE

LOUISE WATTS

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Introduction to *The Words for Go Away* by Louise Watts

The Words for Go Away is about grief, childhood, marital breakdown, and the forces of loss that shape us. It is set in the 1970s Arabia, in a place of astonishing emptiness and wild beauty, where children have the freedom to roam and where adults work tax-free, drink and party. But even so far from home, the past cannot be escaped. There is an unprocessed grief beneath the surface, just out of view, that feels wrong but is impossible to name. As the narrator grows older, and a better life for the family proves elusive, the past repeats and childhood is betrayed.

The Words for Go Away is made up of short chapters and segments that together have an *ombre* effect, moving from stark bright light to winter darkness, from immense heat to penetrating coldness, as loss passes through generations.

The work started with persistent memories, sensations, odd life lessons, and dissonant experiences that had their own stubborn logic. They came in the voice of a child, but with a kind of older knowing embedded within them. I combined these fragments in a way that was not piecemeal, but was not fully coherent, and as I did so, a larger narrative began to emerge. I entered The 2023-24 Bridport Memoir competition and was astonished to win, deeply gratified that the judge, Kit de Waal, had recognised something in my experience, referring to my writing as '*a new and unique voice*' and describing '*the fragmentary structure of this memoir [as] a perfect vehicle for a story of dislocation, loss and trauma.*'

As part of the Bridport prize, I received a year's mentoring from TLC. I am now working with my mentor Anna-Jean Hughes on revising and completing my work: I have a feeling it may not stay squarely in the 'memoir' category, but might mutate into something that is closer to fiction. The lines for me are blurred. I was so delighted that one of the first things my mentor did was to give me 'permission' to do whatever I really want to do with my work.

It has been wonderful to have access, within a private, safe space, to someone who wants to help me do the best that I can. My mentor is encouraging and challenging, collaborative but also independent in thought and point of view. The result is so helpful: an external perspective that helps address some of the structural and plot-based elements I find most challenging, and at the same time, a supportive, permissive presence with first-hand understanding of the delicate, subtle workings of creative processes, and how important confidence is.

Extract from *The Words for Go Away*

Soon after we got here we learnt the words for *go away*. There are two words for go away and one of them is stronger than the other. Also, we learnt the words for *yes* and *no*, and how to count to four. I do not remember the word for *please* but I do remember the word for *thank you*.

The Pink and White House

Our house is at the edge of the desert. It is pink and white. Opposite and next to us, there are other pink and white houses in rows.

No-one lives in them yet.

At the end of the sandy road there is the tarmac road.

Few cars go by.

Now and again, lorries pass, back and forth, carrying boulders. The boulders and the lorries are so large the ground vibrates. They travel in a cloud of dust.

They are taking stones to the place at the end of the tarmac road where the road ends and the sea begins. There, they are making a new port.

When we can't think of anything else to do, we go to look. Machines are working along the edge - sucking and spewing, dredging and excreting, turning the sea into land.

The house smells of cement dust and tile grout.

There are no pictures on the walls and there are no carpets. When you turn on a tap, water clatters.

We must not drink the water from the tap.

We can only drink the water from the water filter.

There is nothing soft about our house, apart from us. We are soft.

I try to get my feet hard.

I stand on the burning sand and count. My brother watches. I pull a face of agony and move my arms up and down like a bird. But I do not move my legs until the heat has gone through the soles and into the flesh, has moved into the deep inside of them, and there is no choice but to stop.

We run over the burning sand, towards the melting tarmac.

Beyond, the air is shimmering like water.

The Idea of Home

At the edge of the desert, Mum hangs out washing.

We have pulled ourselves up onto the high wall and walk along it as if on a tightrope. At first we are slow. The height pulls at us, making us doubt, the muscles in our legs and sides moving under our skin like buried fingers, holding us in place.

I practice getting faster and faster until I can execute a switching sequence of jumps, flashing into new being - I am a witch - you are my boy - I am a queen –

Mum doesn't notice the shapes I make, but I leap as though she might.

I know that if I were to jump up and down, as high as I can, she will see me seconds later, not as I do it. However much I try, I can't get her into the same moment that I am in.

She is thinking about spring: a broad-brush stroke of bright green and fast watery yellow light and the smell of damp earth and a bird singing.

When she speaks it is as though there is a piece of moss stuck in her throat.

Never-built Palaces

Dad works at his drawing board in the spare room.

'All the sheiks want palaces,' he says. 'Of course, they'll never build them. They just want the designs to show off to each other. Everyone has to have a palace bigger than the others.'

It is cold. He has the air-conditioning on high. He prints out blueprints elevation by elevation.

The fluid he uses is made of ammonia; a smell of damp alkaline, of cat piss, frying kidney, hairdressers. He hangs the prints to dry with miniature pegs on wires across the room. He keeps the door open to let out the smell. When we walk past, we hold our breath. We can see his back leaning over the drawing board, his pink wealed heels rising out of his slip-ons, his hand reaching out for his cigarette, placing it back in the ashtray, and reaching out again for his cigarette.

He feels us there and says without looking up, *I'm not telling you again.*

The client

A tall, regal man in a fluttering white thobe visits, and we all stand in the hall-way. Shy, I examine his toes. They are chubby and clean and covered in black, definite hairs. He is approving, sceptical, amused. He laughs and nods at us, *the children*, with raised eye-brows. When he talks about the Emir his slaps a hand onto his chest: 'like a father', he says. 'Our father' the *a* is rich, rolled, guttural, deep, the end of the word clipped, as though father is a path with a ditch in it, a sudden falling down a hole, and a righting of yourself again. As he passes, he releases an intense and woody smell, like the inside of a treasure-box.

Rich

We look for cardboard on the mounds of rubbish at the edge of the desert. Large pieces, unstained, which do not smell and are not too bent. Whole boxes and single inner layers. In the still heat, we make a palace against the back wall. There is an inner chamber and a bedroom, and a long corridor through which we enter and leave. It smells of warm box and dust. We sit in our cardboard palace and smooth the sand of its floors and scoop it up in handfuls. We pour it over our arms and legs and feet, letting it run down and over us, laughing as it leaves slipping, fragmentary crescents and curves and catches in the hairs of our legs. *Pretend that it is gold, we say.*

Things that can kill you

There are small, almost invisible things that can kill you. The water from the tap could kill you. Oleander flowers can kill you, and scorpions. Rabid dogs and snakes in the sea can kill you. Mosquitoes, sucking your blood, can give you a fever so high it kills you. The sun can kill you. Your own sweat can kill you. If you sweat and sweat you will start to shake, and soon you will die.

Each morning on the counter there are the salt pills and the malaria pills. The salt pills are big and yellow and smooth, the malaria pills are small and bitter and white. We throw them to the backs of our throats, and drink water like grown-ups drink whisky, knocking it back in one go. And then we go out, into the world of sun and scorpions and snakes, the fly screen banging behind us, and we do not give death more thought.

Smashed

On Fridays, the grown-ups like to get smashed and stoned and to talk to each other about getting *smashed* and *stoned*.

They drink at the club and sitting around each other's pools on plastic chairs in each other's compounds.

Everyone drinks beer. All the men. Fosters or Heineken. That is the choice. Fosters, or Heineken? Except for the women. The women drink gin.

My mother likes to surprise people.

'Whisky,' she says, when asked, 'with just a little bit of water.' And she laughs.

She gets in the pool wearing all her clothes.

'I'm so hot!' she says. 'I need to cool down!'

She stands in the middle of the pool. Her T-shirt clings to her chest and she holds her arms up, just above the water, as though she is about to begin a dance. Then she gets out.

She sits at the bar.

Getting smashed takes time.

'Just one more,' says Dad.

And he has one more, and then after that, he says, 'just one more.'

We sit on the edge of the car park.

We watch a man reverse his car into all the cars parked behind him. He gets out and looks at what he has done and gets back into his car again. Then he tries to correct what he has done by driving forward very fast. He crashes into the cars parked in front of him. The cars that are parked in front of him move forward and crash into the cars in front of them.

Eventually, after several goes, he gets his car to leave, accelerating loudly, spinning up clouds of sand and dust.

About the Writer

Louise Watts studied English at Cambridge University. She also has a Diploma in Creative Writing from Oxford University.

In 2024, she won the Bridport Memoir prize: her 30,000 word memoir was selected by Kit de Waal, who referred to her writing as ‘a new and unique voice’ and described ‘the fragmentary structure of this memoir [as] a perfect vehicle for a story of dislocation, loss and trauma.’ In the same year, Louise’s novel, *The Blue Journal*, was short-listed in the Mslexia Novel Competition.



Louise’s writing often blurs the distinction between fiction, poetry and memoir. She has published short stories, flash fiction and poetry in a range of journals, anthologies and magazines including *Ambit*, *The Rialto*, *Aesthetica Creative Writing Anthology*, *Flash: the International Short-Short Story Magazine*, and The Reflex Press anthology. Her novella, *Something Lost*, was highly recommended in the Bath novella-in-flash award and published by Ad Hoc Fiction in 2020.

Louise has been highly commended in the 2022 Seán Ó Faoláin Short Story Prize, and placed and listed Mslexia Novel Competition, Mslexia Poetry Pamphlet competition, The Plough, Poetry Society National Competition, and in competitions run by Fractured Lit, Reflex Fiction, Fish, and Retreat West. She was winner of best overall Flash fiction in the Retreat West annual awards 2021 and has been nominated for ‘Best of the Net’ and for Best Small Fictions.

She lives in Oxfordshire, UK with her family and her dog, Dougal.