

Praise for
It's Gone Dark Over Bill's Mother's

'The title says it all. Close up and personal yet universal stories of childhood yearning, misunderstandings, loss and triumph. Beautifully written from inside – real people, ordinary homes. Set pieces, hilarious and tragic – the caravan site, the spring cleaning, the drinking game. Each is crafted to perfection. These are short stories to die for.'

– Kit de Waal

'If you enjoy funny, tough, sharp, surprising and unsentimental writing about family life, buy this book.'

– Chris Power, author of *Mothers*

'Lisa Blower's short-story collection *It's Gone Dark Over Bill's Mother's*, in which her hometown Stoke-on-Trent is the setting that binds together different narrative forms and a fearsome array of matriarchs. Her writing is firmly rooted in her lived experience, but transcends all the limitations and preconceptions surrounding work from communities seldom represented on the page.'

– Kerry Hudson for *The Guardian*

'*It's Gone Dark Over Bill's Mother's* is worth buying for the first story alone, which is totally fantastic. Heartbreaking is too mundane a way of describing it.'

– Robin Ince

'Reading Lisa's stories is like being given the privilege of scouring over the UK's lesser known towns and picking the roofs off people's houses, then the tops off their minds and delving in to the innermost thoughts and feelings.'

– Hollie McNish

'Emotionally draining, hard-hitting and brilliantly written. I came away from this collection with the sense that here is a writer who could take her talent in any direction she wishes.'

– *The Quietus*

'These stories are in equal parts comedic and achingly sad. Dripping with nostalgia and a real sense of place, told through the down to earth northern voice, this is a collection about real folk and real struggles that will always have my heart, not least for the stunningly engaging writing, but also for the memories it stirred for me.'

– *Bookish Chat*

'This is top-notch short fiction, showing remarkable depth of voice, character and human bonds. The first story 'Barmouth' is magnificent and made more of an impact on me than many novels. I re-read it this morning and was no less moved and awed than the first time by everything it manages to convey. It's Brokeback Mountain good.'

– *Literary Sofa*

'It knew exactly how to play with and exploit the potential of its naive narrative voice – what to say but, far more importantly, what not to say – quite apart from its wit, and the undercurrent of sadness it explored without ever being sentimental.'

– William Boyd on 'Broken Crockery'

'*It's Gone Dark* is a quietly brilliant collection united by its roots in the North, and often by the working-class matriarchs that populate it. With a laser-focus on ordinary lives "written from the inside", often overlooked, but no less compelling for it, *It's Gone Dark* is well worth a read if you're looking for a fresh voice in fiction.'

– Turnaround 2019 Fiction Staff Picks

'It's in the details that Lisa Blower triumphs... They benefit from a strong thematic core. Like all good short story collections, we are gifted the shoulder of assorted narrators, over which we enjoy a diversity of entry points, a variety of styles and a clarity and strength of voice that leaps from the prose. Add a confidence with tone and a mischievous way with an ending and *It's Gone Dark* feels new every time you return to it. And you will return to it... You care about these people in the space of a paragraph... These stories are about the little earthquakes people get caught up in, the fault-lines beneath their feet that open up without warning and threaten to close around them, and how they reach for the light and an escape, or just the promise of one.'

– Paul Woodgate, *The Short Story*

'There are so many contemporary novelists to watch out for. Right now, we should certainly be reading... Lisa Blowers' story collection *It's Gone Dark Over Bill's Mother's*... Solid proof that these are good times indeed to be reading writing about working-class life.'

– Professor Simon Kövesi, Oxford Brookes University

'This is THE most wonderful book: Lisa Blower confronts social class as a hugely neglected aspect of identity politics and visibility in contemporary literature.'

– Professor Katy Shaw, Northumbria University

'Blower's stories are grittily realistic but she relishes ambiguity and enjoys injecting humour into the darkest of situations. Her readers are treated with as much respect as her characters. This is a fine collection of 20 tough but tender tales by a writer who celebrates the lives of uncelebrated people with compassion and caustic wit.'

– *Morning Star*

'With a sharp eye and tough warmth, Lisa Blower brings to life the silent histories and harsh realities of those living on the margins.'

– *Shropshire Star*

'A really lovely collection of stories...like Alan Bennet's monologues, they're wonderfully funny and wise...Lisa Blower writes with precision and humour; she is a master of the short story form and really stands out for me. This is an excellent example of small press publishing.'

– John Mitchinson, Backlisted Podcast

POND WEED

LISA
BLOWER

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This is a work of fiction.

Names, characters, places, businesses, locales, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or have been used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

For Dave
My big adventure

PARKED OUTSIDE THE HOUSE is the Toogood Aquatics Swift Conqueror caravan with its saucy mermaid curtains, fully stocked bar, and the words *For your pondlife and beyond* stuck on the side, in the sort of red slanted font favoured by pound shops.

A man stands aside of this caravan as if he's just birthed it. This man is tall, but not imposing. His hair is a nest of fag-ash grey. His face like an ornate clock. He is wearing a suit jacket with patched black slacks and an XL red-and-white-check shirt with a button missing across the chest. This is a man I do not know, yet he is instructing me to pack what I need and to get in our car, which he's attached to the caravan. Behind me, a couple put in an offer on *A Place in the Sun* on the telly.

He says, 'The sooner you get in the car, the sooner we can get going.' He scans our road as if expecting something to happen.

Nothing is happening. Nothing ever is happening. He raises his voice as if this is something happening.

I ask him, 'What is happening?'

He says, 'I'll tell you everything in the car, but please. Pack what you need. We have to go. We're running out of time.'

By now, I've forgotten everything about us and all reasons for us being together. I try to remember when he was so irritatingly handsome he would admire his own reflection in a cheese grater.

'Are you leaving me, or am I leaving you?' I ask.

He grunts as if he's just passed a kidney stone. 'Ginny,' he says, giving me the same look as he does when he's seen our winter heating bill. 'We're finished. The bastard's gone and blown the lot.'



We all whimper at the faint whiff of romance, yet it is such a grub. I met Selwyn Robby in the garden centre. Almost fifty years had lumbered by since we'd parted ways and then he was right there, in the aquatics franchise selling garden ponds. I heard him before I saw him. He was talking intently to a couple about pond liners as if they might repair a doomed marriage. 'The most durable in the world with a lifetime guarantee,' he was saying. And there it still was: that Welsh borders accent with its fat and thick vowels that used to soothe my mother like a dose of laudanum, and no doubt doing that thing he used to do where he pinches his nostrils together and sniffs. 'This is top-quality Swedish Butyl rubber. One hundred per cent watertight, even in swell.'

For the size they wanted – 'Because you must consider the edging excess for the expansion during the water fill' – this particular liner was going to set them back £85.99 a square metre, and this was apparently without underlay, which was going to cost them another fifty quid per square metre if they went with the tight-mesh he was recommending with hand sewn trims. The couple looked as if they were having to share their lottery win with a family they despised. This was a little out of budget for them, they said. They were only in a retirement new-build with a lawn the size of a postage stamp. Not that this mattered to Selwyn. He pattered on: told them that the Swedish Butyl rubber comes with its own ecosystem, assuring an ecological balance that would filter rainwater and siphon off the right nutrients, as it would with any uneaten fish food. 'It's the effect of a million tiny teeth chewing on algae,' he said solemnly. 'On my mother's grave, you will never find a suffocated fish if you line with this beautiful tarp.'

Impatience had got the better of me – I'm the same with sweets: I'm a cruncher not a sucker – and I'd inched myself forward enough to see who he'd become.

Yes, I'd thought. It could only be you. You: from next door who'd count my hiccups through the wall. And me. Just sixteen then, and ripe as a bowl of apples. Now – happening upon one another again, and it was just as we were, as if time hadn't passed and he still took three sugars in his tea. Though I could tell straightaway that the world had pushed him to one side, as it had with me, as it does with those of us born on our bones. And his left hand then, smoothing down his hair at the back before placing it on the man's shoulder. 'I'm wondering,' he'd said, 'if you've been considering a submersible or external surface model?'

The man looked at Selwyn as if his affair with a submersible model had just been exposed, and his wife clamped her hand over her mouth and gasped that she'd not given it a thought either. 'There is so much to think about,' she'd exclaimed. 'It's like a whole new world.'

Selwyn led the distressed couple to the pond pumps where he got them to cradle each one as if choosing a new born. This one was more economical and practical and likely to sleep through the night. This came with an external pressurised filter – a squawker, if you like – and this one came with a removable leaf trap, which clogs less often: they generally last longer and they're easier to repair and replace parts.

And he doesn't know about her, I kept thinking to myself. I'm going to have to explain, show him a photograph and hope he won't mind. *Understand*, I shall have to ask. *Please. You must understand.* I watch the couple spend over five hundred quid at the till without buying a single fish: Selwyn's knack for selling you his promised version of how your world could be still terrifying.

He *won't* understand.

He will *never* understand.

Except that's when he caught sight of me, and not a bit of me but all five foot nine of me: just another one of those women who's standing behind you in the supermarket queue and dressed as if applying for a job in a department store that will let me down gently. I felt magnified.

You couldn't have counted a blink between us as he swam up to me. A musty aftershave, boots laced with military precision, and *that* smile. God. I remember that smile: I'd thought only freshwater habitats could bring that sort of smile to the Hoover parts of Selwyn Robby's leathery face; flagellating moss on the manhole; a soft-boiled egg.

'You remember me,' I'd said, which wasn't the thing I'd wanted to say having had so much to say over the years and thinking about this moment, should it ever happen, and practising what I would say, which would not have been, 'It's been so long I thought you'd have forgotten me.'

He dropped down on one knee and said, 'Marry me.'



Ten months later and here we are. Not married. Not sweethearts. Not quite a couple, or partners in crime, but next-door neighbours, once, who became something else because of the something we did, which I did without thinking when all I felt was rage. A monstrous rage that changed everything. I think about it a lot now – our small story that was over before it was started. I ask Selwyn a lot about it. He says he understands it, so I ask him to explain what he understands. He says, *There's nothing to understand. Just swimmer's itch, that's all.* But it is not all and it is not enough and whenever I tell him that it's not enough, he gives me his choking fish look and says, *How is that*

perspective working for you? because salesmen don't just turn the tables, they set them up with such clean cutlery, you can't help but keep looking at yourself.

So, I say to him again, 'I don't understand what's happening, Selwyn. What have you done?'

He says, 'It's not what I've done but what I haven't done. Now, pack what you need. We need to go. Do *you* understand?'

And he's galloping up the stairs, despite the grinding cartilage in his knees, and two at a time, me chasing after him with every fuse blowing in my head.

'No, I don't understand,' I shout at his back and pelt him with questions as hard as I can. 'What's happened? Why are you behaving like this? Are you drunk?'

He flings open the wardrobe door. I watch him shrink back from my hanging clothes as if they're about to sting him. Then he thinks of something else, more important, and reaches up for the suitcase on top of the wardrobe.

It's heavy – he hadn't expected it to be heavy – and he buckles and it lands on the bed with a *thunk*. He stares down on it, frowning. Selwyn's frowns are a foot long and bleed into his neck.

I hold my breath and something sticky lodges in my throat as I watch him look for the zip.

That's when I launch myself on top of the suitcase shouting, 'No. Nothing is going to happen until you tell me what's happening. You need to tell me what is going on.'

I am lying on the suitcase.

He says, 'What's in the suitcase, Ginny?'

I say, 'No. You tell me what is going on.'

He says, 'Why's it so heavy?'

I have both of my hands atop of the suitcase and my breasts pressed into the canvas with my full bodyweight behind them. I say, 'It doesn't matter what's in the suitcase. What matters is you telling me what is happening right now. Why that caravan is outside our house.'

He blows out his cheeks and puts his hands on his hips. He does this when I've burnt the toast.

'You've been leaving me, haven't you?' He points at the suitcase. 'It's why it's so heavy. You've already packed to leave.'

I lift myself off the suitcase and stand up. This is the same suitcase I arrived with when I first moved in with him – ten months ago now – and what's still packed in there I have never worn. I have moved in and not moved in. Lived here and not been living – like a bee that butts our bedroom window, until I've dug the sting into myself and given up. I have wished floods on this house, mini earthquakes and other natural disasters that might bring it down brick by brick. Left the front door wide open, and not a single burglar or even them dregs from the cuckoo's nest chancing their luck.

My eyes settle on my suitcase on the bed. In another life, I could've been a mountaineer with that case. Instead, I have only unpacked it and repacked it and then ironed what had creased.

I say, 'What's in the suitcase is only what I've not taken out.'

Selwyn starts to cough. I ask him if his throat's still sore. Did he gargle with TCP like I told him to? He takes out a handkerchief – man-size, white – the sort my mother always said you should bury with the dead. 'You're not well, Selwyn,' I say. 'What have you taken?'

I mean pills, tablets, he's allergic to everything and probably me, but he tells me, 'The caravan. And we need to leave.'

He looks down at the suitcase again, which is bottle green with a black leather trim, and frayed, ever-so frayed around the edges. He asks me if I have already packed a toothbrush. I tell him, 'I don't know,' so he heads for the bathroom. I follow him in and say it again – 'Selwyn, you really need to tell me what the bloody hell is going on' – and by now I am nuclear with rage. *That* rage. 'You can't just turn up towing that fucking caravan in the middle of the day and start ordering me about without telling where, or why, or– For God's sake, Selwyn!'

He pushes past me, a warrior with our toothbrushes in one hand and his razor in the other, and heads back out on to the landing.

‘We really have to go,’ he says again. ‘Please, Ginny. I will tell you everything, but we need to go. Please.’

What a word it is – *please* – it comes at the beginning and end of everything, and he says it so morbidly that I wonder if he’s going to leave flowers like they do on roadsides when someone’s life’s been snatched by a hairpin bend. I grab his shirtsleeve and tell him that I am going nowhere until he tells me what is going on because this is bloody ridiculous and he’s behaving like a madman and making no sense. He hangs his head and scrunches his face and shouts, ‘Goddamn you, Ginny! We’re going to Wales!’

‘Wales? What do you mean, Wales? Why?’

He’s made it sound like a punishment when this is positively exotic for the likes of us.

‘Snowdonia,’ he sighs. He’s good at sighing. He sighs so much they form their own opinion. ‘It’s our nearest New Zealand. I want to see how she handles the roads.’

‘New Zealand?’

He suddenly looks very pleased with himself.

‘In that caravan?’

He’s practically at bursting point.

‘Are you fucking serious?’

He tells me again to get in the car. He will tell me everything, but I need to get in the car.

‘Is this to do with Mia?’ I start to panic. ‘Has something happened? Is it Anthony? What’s he done?’

My daughter will be fifty next month. Half a century and half a world away. Her being over there, in New Zealand, with one of my old flames, is the stuff of theatre.

‘It’s nothing to do with Mia.’ Selwyn pushes past me to go back into the bedroom. ‘I’ll explain everything in the car, but we really have to go. You need to get in the car.’

If Mia was here now, she'd just tell me to go with him. *You don't deserve him anyway*, she'd say, and don't I remember how I gave her a map of the world and a box of drawing pins at eighteen and told her to go and adventure? This should suit me down to the very ground I refused to be rooted in. *Like mother like daughter like daughter again*, she would say. To know that you do not know everything about each other should be enough. And that none of us make our mistakes with such purpose.

'Please, Ginny,' he says it so sadly I wonder if he's been given a diagnosis and three months. He coughs again.

'It's lung cancer, isn't it?' I imagine the next few weeks spent carting about breathing apparatus and being hoodwinked by reincarnation.

He covers his mouth with his handkerchief. 'I'm not ill, Ginny,' and he even laughs it off. 'But for me, for us, *please*. Just get into the car.'

'Because we're going on holiday,' I say. 'To Wales.'

He nods his head, and lifts my suitcase off the bed with a stiff grunt.

'You're just taking me on a holiday. To Wales.'

He says, 'Is this everything? What's in here, it's all you need?'

'Just a holiday to Wales,' I say again.

'Yes,' he says wearily. 'Just a holiday to Wales. Now, please. For the love of God, and whatever it is you think of me. Please. Get into the car.'

I move towards him and take what he'll let me of his hand. 'Is it really such a terrible thing that's happened that we have to leave right now?' I try and make it sound like I'm asking if my lipstick goes with my blouse.

His fingers curl around mine and for a moment I think I have him, and all to myself. No Louis. No bladderwort. No Val from next door. But he pulls his hand away and tells me to stop asking questions. 'You can ask as many of them as you want as soon as we get into the car.'

'Then what about your water butts,' I snap. 'You never leave your water butts.'

He lifts up the suitcase, and at the same time lifts his head slightly so that our eyes should meet – there's little more than an inch in height between us – but we both do what we always do which is remember who we were and not who we are now.

'Okay,' I tell his shoelaces. 'I will get in the car.'

He gives me the same sigh of relief as I make when I've finished the ironing. 'Good. Thank you.'

He leaves the bedroom with my suitcase and I suddenly want to ask him if he's packed enough plasters. Selwyn's blisters can be biblical.

Then I remember my box, at the bottom of the wardrobe. A cardboard box and not at all heavy, but I will go nowhere without it when it is everything and nothing. I tuck the box under my arm and look out of the bedroom window and down on to our street. I watch Selwyn go into the caravan with my suitcase. I wait for him to come back out like he is always waiting for me. He waits and he waits and I still don't truly arrive.

A learner driver pulls up to practice a three-point turn. I watch Selwyn watch the car stall, the car start, the car be thrust into reverse. The car stalls again. The car will not start. The learner driver gets out flinging her arms – *She can't do it! She won't do it!* – and the instructor takes over. Like Selwyn does with me. Holds umbrellas. Opens doors. Licks my stamps. Tells me to put my purse away, he has enough. And, when I'd first arrived, he'd bought me a dress I wouldn't wear, rusty chiffon with bouffant sleeves, to attend some wedding of a friend of a friend where he introduced me to everyone as his like-wife – like it was a thing we'd agreed to do, along with shopping on a Thursday and a run out on a Sunday that always ends with me following him around a pond. Where are you really going, old man? I think, as I straighten the net. This is not like you. This is not what you do. Perhaps I really don't know you at all.

I know you like an under-sheet with hospital corners on your bed; an eiderdown, four pillows, a valance that I refuse to iron. That you talc between your toes and sleep with your eyes open, like a fish; that you and Louis have been the sort of chums that might share kidneys. So what has he done to you, Selwyn? What has happened between you for you to behave like you've disturbed a snake pit?

I close the bedroom door and head back downstairs with my box. I see that Selwyn has left the front door on the latch for me. A slight wind catches it. It opens. *Out*. It closes. *In*. It opens again. *Out*. Enough of a gap to squeeze through. Another breath and *out* again, wider. I have left other places with that suitcase and less thought. I have left and left again, from one rut to the next, and not looked back. When Selwyn sleeps with his eyes open, he is beautiful.

I close the front door behind me and look down at my feet. I do not know the name of this particular species that wraps itself around my ankles, ties itself into a tight bow and pulls, but it's pondweed all the same. I close my eyes and let it take me towards the car.