

Longsight

Hafsah Aneela Bashir



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Longsight

1.

Longsight takes a toke on her cigarette,
sits on the concrete bench outside the library.
and asks, *Is that you on the poster?*
Yes, I laugh, *but it doesn't look like me right?*

I'm here to study me, got a 14 year old son.
I tell her I have four and she looks to the floor,
tells me how she really wants to learn how to sign
so she can communicate with her boy better.

She rummages around in her bag,
proudly pulls out a level one English certificate in her hand.
We laugh, our hands high-five,
the whole morning sun caught as a glint in her eyes.

*As a young mum, the only certificate I ever achieved
was as a Homestart Volunteer, no one employed me!*
What do you do now? I point to the poster, tell her I write.
She grins at me, her heart swelling with pride.

And we connect in that quiet way mothers do,
as struggling women do, as strong survivors do,
working out how to approach a stranger
sat on a concrete bench, one dragging hard on her cigarette,
the other staring at her own face on a poster.

I cock my head – *well done Longsight, you did good!*
Maybe I'll see u signing for Stormzy at Glastonbury someday.
She pulls her head back, lets out a roar of laughter and says,
Don't be daft, I can't dance!

2.

Longsight specializes in the presence of absence,
not wanting questions but conversations.
Willing to share what's learnt if I put my notebook away,
letting me know I'm entitled to the knowledge
his mother paid for back in the day.

Longsight is monasteries and Franciscan missions.
It's community spirit and secret right-wingers,
It's questionable councils and rich landlords,
It's changing demographics with a history of turf-wars,
It's tough love and complex equations,

Longsight sits at the table in a crisp pinstripe shirt on this occasion.
A pristine cuff hides a watch from the military.
You won't see one of these so easily.
Slight of hand once deft with a fencer's sword,
gestures while quoting the bible – *I'm not religious anymore.*

Forgive them Father for they know not what they do,
sharing his experience as a sermon of truth.
The monastery made me, you know - it did not break me
An intelligent young man I was when I joined the army.

We talk children, travel; share our different hats
Longsight notes – *we're talking about me and I don't do that.*
He negotiates, questions, watches for vacant spaces,
reads you like a marksman, studies the movement of faces.

Longsight fires a quick-round of thoughts like
a black powder, mother of pearl revolver
so fast I miss some. He clocks me.
This is my life. Longsight demands attention.

3.

Longsight is a *no-men-allowed* sanctuary of safety
with red, green and orange silked, boss-women in saris.
Gold bangles clink as their chatter fills the air
and one by one they take up a chair,
till Longsight sits around the table with me,
finger-deep in spicy hot channeh, pickled mangos and puris.
*It really doesn't matter how far out you go,
everyone comes back to Longsight – it's home.*

Journeys from Dhaka to Italy to Longsight,
weddings, funerals – activists putting the world to rights!
It's laughter, pitha parties, best-dressed competitions,
Nimble-fingered dessert chefs baking breakfast traditions.
It's business women and matriarchs with jasmine flowered hair
taking selfies, dancing, playing strategic musical chairs!

Longsight is where the friends you make become your family,
it's close knit and it's nosy but we'll take that willingly.
Longsight, when it needs to, knocks against our door
but we know in our bones, there is always generous support.
*The streets feel safe for us and we prefer the local schools,
you just can't beat the market, the shops, the library, the food.*

Longsight is Kool Runnings, Kanafa, Northmoor café & Anmol
It's Crowcroft Park, Stockport Rd, the 192, and Plymouth Grove.
A place to hide, a rest from war, it's the M12 and M13
with a library– an active island, for some the only place for peace.

Near the entrance of the library, Longsight sit together,
debating world politics, heads deep in newspaper.
Huddled around the wisest, silent elder of the group,
If he sits, we sit, if he leaves we all do.

Longsight doesn't hear their voices, but Kaufman gave them time,
Remembering the respect he showed them long before he died.
These men are philosophers, teachers, retired pharmacists, activists
Mohammed Rafi ghazal singers and Allama Iqbal poets.

With fathers that taught them to eat less and study more.
Help others, teach them to get to where they want to go!
They will draw out directions for you,
get you precise instruction from their phones
hidden cartographers making sure people reach their homes.

*Longsight's waiting lists are long streets are full of rubbish,
roads are all broken and the drugs a huge problem,
but the people are the people, the people are A – Z!*
The library, for these men, is peace, tolerance, respect.
*We read in our own language, build community with our bare hands.
We even made that Pakistani Centre from derelict wasteland,
we did that, yes we did that.*

4.

Longsight sits at the computer in mismatched shoes,
big blue eyes and tousled blonde hair,
small cards attached to her arm with string.
Happiness is having your bare necessities so you feel complete,
asking me to help her write her CV.

Longsight is an oracle I want to learn from,
prophetic wisdom each time she speaks.
Autonomous, proud, she writes me a poem in my book,
then asks if I can help her with housing, bus tickets and food.
Will you come swimming with me to Levenshulme pool?

She says she bought a steaming hot curry yesterday,
fresh, smelt beautiful, dead good, from a local takeaway.
Suddenly thinking the meal might be a trick,
she throws it away without eating any of it.
I pull my chair closer – suggest we get food from across the road
I do get hungry, Longsight says, and if I don't eat, I'll smoke,
so I'd like that – yeah lets go.

Longsight works, is social, starts fresh in a new found home,
Longsight is thick skinned and resilient to the cold.
Longsight is a Prince from Verona Italy,
fluent in Italian, Spanish, Dutch but these mean
nothing if you can't speak English in the UK.

I rang somewhere for a job the other day
But the woman put the phone down on me before I could even say
I just need you to speak a little slower,
if you can just be a little patient – just wait!
Longsight's forced to fix his English while his mother-tongue assimilates.

5.

Longsight feeds its people, communal cooking in volunteer kitchens.
Longsight is Jamaican, Ghanaian, Cape Verdean, Venezuelan,
Longsight speaks Gujarati, Polish, Creole, Spanish, Arabic and Portuguese
It passes Maths & English juggling kids, and masters cookery.
*Pay what you can afford, they make their recipes with love,
a place for friends to gather, with respect that they deserve.*

Longsight is a phenomenal woman – a professor retiring in a year,
She's from the Caribbean, her fondest memories located there.
*At least there, I'm respected. Here? They just see skin.
For that reason I don't bother with British citizenship.
That's me, my land, where I'm valued and belong,
so before you tell me to go back to where I came from,
remember – you were there. That's why I am here.
I know who I am, I know my rights. I'm not illegal anywhere!
They kept my passport for 3 months but I just laughed in their face,
They can't mess with me, when they themselves are so disgraced.
Windrush scandal is all I have to say.*

Longsight is a community hall, the kids – an energy unbound,
playing bulldog, doing the hype, kicking a football around.
It's old-school, hiphop, rap, grime and RnB,
Its dominoes in the corner keeping the kids and elders busy.

Longsight puts on a front, chest puffed out, perched at the edge of the stage
sullen and quiet, watching the other kids play.
Kicked out of school he doesn't want to speak,
till the speakers blare a tune he likes, his fingers drumming to a beat.
Longsight's not so heavy now, he takes a breath and jumps off stage,
his four siblings watching as he runs off to join the game.

Longsight has a Persian name with one foot rooted in the ground.
*All I need is within a one mile reach, I don't have to look around.
I'm a compass always on the lookout for people who look like me!*
Quotes poets that she loves – Fez, Parveen Shakir, Bulleh Shah and Rumi
*We're all travellers here, just passing through our many homes,
Longsight's that place where we all try to get along.*

6.

Longsight grips a meter ruler to tear red silk from a fabric roll,
serves the aunty waiting to stitch her daughter's graduation clothes.

Going back 20 years, my dad worked this market stall,

I've seen so many people, through Longsight come and go.

First it was the Africans and the Irish here together,

I heard the Jamaican mothers carried sewing machines – securely tethered!

Mothers taught the daughters to stitch – a gift that they passed down,
bought yards of cotton to make their skirts, tops and head ties.

When they left for Hulme, I measured fabric lengths for saris,

patiala shalwars, kameezes, dubbatas, abayas and churidaariz.

This market is a thriving one, jewellery, velvet blankets, pots and pans

Fancy shoes, leather bags, fruit and veg and all things second hand.

If ever this market were to shut down or take flight,

Make no mistake about it, it would rip the heart out of Longsight.

Longsight is deceptively rich, breadline poor,

It's thriving business, wealthy landlords,

It's professional immigrants, a powerful collective,

Longsight is innovative, dynamic, creative,

Longsight is to cast a long sight towards its history,

It's the best you'll get for a diverse community.

Brimming with talented people, young and old,

It deserves an investment, it deserves love tenfold.

Longsight is Kimberly, Afsana, Paul and Waleed,

It's Luthfur, Pavia, Kofi and Mohsin,

Suzanne, Amira, Selam, Jan, Yonan,

It's Ali, Naveed, Barbara, Henan,

It's Prince, Suhaib, Vera, Fehmida,

Joe, Laila, Violet, Talisha,

It's Yasin, Shifta, Rosie, Tasnim, Safdar,

Its Afzal, Naseema, Ricky and Asghar,

Longsight casts a long sight towards its people

For what is Longsight if not its people?