Angel in Glasgow

An early lesson: the cold is a friend, stops the mind from reaching forward or back. Everything slows down into now. The cold is safe. Minoo lets go into not-feeling, stands outside Tesco’s in the late gray afternoon. The air is fragile, comes curling in the mist along the narrow streets of Glasgow.

The Brechin Bar has evening warmth and anonymity, but it isn’t open yet. She is trying to get the nerve up to go into Tesco where the automatic doors emit blasts of tepid air each time they roll apart.

There are electric lights everywhere. Wasteful light pouring like gold over the ice and the brown snow, running like jewels down sides of the tiled houses, the buildings, the bus stops.

A man gives her a couple of pound coins. Another man gets out of a car and also hands her a pound coin.

Things to know about men:
Men who give things will take things.
Sometimes men will kill you if they can’t think of anything else to do.
Sometimes men will kill you if you say the wrong thing.
Her mother: Not the children.

The coins are heavy. They, too, catch the electric light. She can go into Tesco’s and buy food. She stands, waiting for the next moment to somehow propel her into buying things, holding things in a plastic bag.

Here is a cold place with ice, many thousands of miles from here that used to be home. When she arrived, the church put her with
a family: scared-looking old people, who offered her pale biscuits, honey and thick cream. She left after two days. She hid from the church pastor and his wife. She is ungrateful. She imagines them all saying it in their round thick accents. *Ungrateful gurrl.* She keeps to the corners, the edges where the snow melts into melting leaves, and the ice forms over, buries the tracks. She is only one of the many who were brought from Northern Sudan. She sees them, the pastor and his wife, walking with the young girls. Several of the young Sudanese girls are expecting babies and a number have become pregnant since they arrived. The pastor and his wife are always busy. They don’t have time to look for the ones who slip away into Glasgow’s narrow streets. But she can take care of herself.

New skills:
Scavenging from the bus stop: A padded jacket with a hood under a concrete bench. She picked it up, slipped herself into its arms and walked away.
Stealing from the greengrocer: Two apples and an orange. The smell stayed for three days.
A place to sleep: A shed with a caved-in roof at the back of the parking lot near the train station. Moved rotting coils of rope and a broken swivel chair aside, used a sleeping bag she found thrown over the parking lot fence. It didn’t smell and there wasn’t anything nasty inside. The joyful surprise of waking warm: *I have been asleep.*

Two girls, baggy jackets, torn leggings, denim skirts, platform shoes, clatter across the road. The girl with a face-chain that runs from nose to ear flicks her cigarette butt into the gutter.
—Well, Tania’s not *here,* is she?
The other girl has green-streaked hair and a stomach that sticks out from under her short red shirt,
—We’re no doin’ it without her.
Face-chain sees Minoo.
—Her. She’ll do.
Fat Stomach,
—You speak English?
Face-chain,
—She’s one of them Sooda-kneeze. I seen ‘em at the church. Rescued all these fuckin’ Sooda-kneeze, didn’t they.
Fat Stomach eyes the girl,
—You speak Sooda-kneez, then?
Minoo,
—I speak English.
The girls go ooohhh and laugh.
Face-chain,
—I thought yeh wuz all took care of by the church, then.
—I don’t believe in their church. I don’t believe in their bible.
Fat Stomach,
—Yeh can no say things like that. Yeh’ll be struck down. Jesus is watchin’. Me mam says.
Face-chain,
—So what’s yer name? I’m Sheila and this is Kenzie.
Kenzie,
—Ah’m frae Glasgow. This old besom’s from Liverpool. Loada shite.
—I’m Minoo.
Kenzie squints at her,
—Och, that’s a daft name, then. Did yer mam no like yeh?
Sheila,
It’s no more stupid than Kenzie.
Turns back to Minoo.
—So you gonna rob the shop with us, then?
Minoo shakes her head.
—I have money to buy—
—Much yeh got?
Minoo opens her hand with the three pounds.
—Give us yeh money. I got an idea.
Minoo wants to close her hand around the coins. The coins mean crackers, maybe cheese. But Sheila takes the money.
—Stick with us, kid. We’ll take care of yeh.
Minoo hesitates.
Kenzie,
—Ach, come on, ye daft cow.

Minoo follows Sheila and Kenzie into the narrow shop, because they have her money, because there’s nothing else to do, because there’s a faint chance that Sheila will drop the coins. Kenzie moves to the back of the store where there are freezers of drinks. Sheila slowly walks between the shelves at the front of the shop. A metallic crash from the back.
Kenzie complaining,
—Whutja put them tins so close together for? I’m not payin’ for anythin’, mind.
Sheila waves a couple of packets of crisps.
—Can I get ma crisps, then?
The skinny cash register boy rings her up and hands her the change.

Another crash.
Kenzie,
—Clumsy me. Wouldja look at that, then?
The boy runs to the back, red hands knuckling.
—Could you step out of the way, please?
—Step out of the way, is it?
As the boy kneels to pick up the tins, Kenzie straddles his back and rubs herself against him. He falls.
—Geroff—
—Giddyap li’l pony—
—Kenzie, it’s no funny—
—Och, Kenzie is it?
Sheila tenderly folds a bottle of brandy inside her shirt.
They walk to the front, Kenzie strolls up from the back looking like she’s ready to smash up the whole shop.

The boy is back at the register, flushed, avoiding eye contact.
—I’ll call the manager, Kenzie. Think you can come in here and do what you like? You’ll see what happens.
—Oh aye? Wu’ll see, wull we?
Kenzie lifts her shirt a little.
—What d’you wanna see, Brad Pitt? Ma wee diddies?
Then drags her shirt up to show naked, fat breasts hanging over her stomach. The boy gapes, grabs the counter with both hands. Minoo’s hands are clenched.
Sheila and Kenzie hoot with laughter, swagger out. The boy swivels back to Minoo. She runs. The boy calls,
—Hey—you—the black girl—

Sheila and Kenzie running in their platform shoes. Minoo running in her flip-flops. At the far end of the street, they dodge down the side of a building. Bank of Scotland, faded black letters half-scraped off the old brick.
Sheila,
—Who’s he callin’ black? Fuckin’ racist.
Kenzie,
—Well, she is black, then.
—She’s not black. She’s—come under the light, would yeh?
Minoo stands under an orange light hanging over the rubbish tip.
Kenzie,
—She looks fuckin’ orange to me.
—Well, she’s not black. More like me aunty’s new car. Lovely deep brown.
Sheila stares,
—Are them flip-flops? Kenzie, she’s wearin’ flip-flops.
Kenzie,
—Yeh feet must be freezin’. Yeh can no run in flip-flops.
Minoo,
—But you are running in these platform shoes.
Sheila,
—She’s gorra point there, Kenz. Me feet are on fire. C’mon. Let’s go round the back-a yours.

Kenzie’s block of flats is a dark, fetid building with urine-washed stairs. Outside, someone is dragging an enormous bag of rubbish. It scrapes along the ground.
Minoo,
—It is only rubbish.
Kenzie turns around,
—Hawfwit. Whatdja think it was? Dead body?

You learn that the best way to drag a body is by the heels. You don’t look back. You just pull until you reach the dropping place. Then you step aside and they kick the body in. And then you go back for the next one.
You don’t look at anything past the ankles. You don’t want to recognize the scars on the shins, the shape of the knees. You don’t want to look further up and see the lacerated palms or the fingers curled up.
You do this in the morning when the bodies are still covered in dark, when it is cold enough that you don’t smell them. Especially when they might be someone you know.
The grass at the back is a dry balding patch but it’s clear enough to sit on. A couple of burnt-black bushes provide a little shelter. Minoo shivering. From inside her shirt, Sheila pulls out the brandy.
—Score! This’ll warm us up.
They pass the bottle and toast each other.
—Winners, winners, win—ners!

Shouldn’t they get inside somewhere? Are the police coming? They don’t have guns but they have sticks. It doesn’t take much to break bones.

It was a boy, a bored boy. And she made the mistake of smiling because he looked foolish with the gun that was too big for him. He looked like the boys at school in the class below hers. But a boy with a gun is different from a boy with a book. Enraged, he used the butt. She lifted her arm in time to protect her head. That was when she knew they were going to kill her, like they’d killed the other girls when they’d used them up. It had been hard to run with a broken arm. When she reached the Scottish mission she found she was one of hundreds camped around the small, whitewashed building.

But they set her arm and gave her the job of teaching songs to the kids for Sunday school. The pure pleasure, like being shot through with silver: their out-of-tune voices, their habit of examining the ceiling while they were singing, how they tugged at their shorts or forgot the words. How they looked up at her and how she forgot what had been done to her. Until a man, some helper or teacher, came into the room and the kids went silent.

More than the brandy, Minoo wants the crisps. Can she just ask? Will she get her change from the three pounds? Minoo takes a mouthful. The liquid is harsh, but not as harsh as the beer that the soldiers forced them to make in the evenings, before they spread out the women—

Sheila and Kenzie drink quickly and pass her the bottle, but Minoo hands it back. *I drink very slowly.* It is necessary to reduce the heart-beat. It is necessary to breathe the heart back to normal. Kenzie nods, swallows.
—Yer first time robbin’? I was skerrit ma firs’ time.
Then brays.
—I wasnae! No one fucks wi’ me.
—Shurrup, Kenzie. She’s not used to it.
Kenzie hangs over Minoo. Minoo counts: One-one-hundred, two-
one-hundred, three-one-hundred.
—You should do somethin’ about yersel’. Hey —
Kenzie turns to Sheila.
—Less cut her hair!
Sheila puts an arm out.
—Yer bevvied.
—Am no.
Kenzie roots in her bag and pulls out a small pair of scissors,
—Come on, Soo-dan. Ah-ll mek yeh look gor-gee-uss.
She snaps the scissors in the air.

Minoo breathes. Fifteen-one-hundred. Sixteen-one-hundred. It’s
never an attack until —
Sheila tries to wrench the scissors away but Kenzie shoves and
Sheila falls backwards. Kenzie with the scissors jawing open and
shut. Laughing.
Minoo counts. Twenty-two-one-hundred. Twenty-three-one-hun-
dred.

Sheila tries to grab at Kenzie’s legs, but Kenzie swoops forward,
the scissors rasping. Kneels in front of Minoo. Snips a chunk of
hair. Stares. Laughs, looks over her shoulder.
—She let me do it! Wouldja believe it?

There is no time to decide whether to move or not to move.
Minoo stabs rigid fingers into the solar plexus. Kenzie buckles,
gurgling, heaving on the bald earth.
No time to decide.
Minoo snatches the scissors, closes the blades and aims straight for
the neck.
Sheila’s platform shoe connects with Minoo’s hand and the scissors
drop, hitting Kenzie on the temple.

Kenzie gasping,
—Bitch! I’ll fuckin’ kill yeh!
Sheila looks at Minoo.

—*Go.*

Minoo, on her feet, backs away, wants to run but can’t. Kenzie staggers upright. Aims a punch at Sheila and misses.

—Kenzie!

A new voice. Male. The black hooded outline approaches. Hands stuffed in his hoodie pouch pocket. There is no decision to move. Instantly, the scissors are in Minoo’s hand, blades forward. He won’t be able to get anywhere near. If she just runs now. If she just runs. The feet don’t move. Scissors pointing out.

Kenzie coughs.

—Fuck’re *yūd* doin’ here?

—Just got off. Y’know.

It is the boy from Tesco’s. He stands there, the hands fumbling in his pockets like they’re trying to escape.

—Thought you’d come down here for a quick one, didja?

—Kenzie, it’s not like that.

The boy moves closer. Kenzie’s face has changed. Softer. She smiles a little. Looks at the boy from the wild scourings of eyeliner.

—Och, c’mon then.

He helps Kenzie to her feet. Picks up her bag. They walk off together. She doesn’t look around or say goodbye.

Sheila sighs, picks up the half-full bottle of brandy.

Minoo,

—This is her boyfriend?

—She goes with him sometimes.

Beat.

—I want my change.

—Wha’?

—My change. You took my three pounds.

Sheila rummages in her pocket and hands over coins.

—C’mon. Let’s go the pub.

*I want the crisps.*

The alcohol is thrumming in her chest, her stomach. Heart banging from the attack that wasn’t an attack. The rules are different here.
Sheila,
— Look at the state of them feet.
Minoo looks down at the pale green flip-flops against the dark skin, black toenails.
— Yes.
— Yeh gorra get some shoes.

They head back along Govan Road and push into the Brechin Bar. Old men at the bar, pooltable busy, young guys standing in shouldered-off groups, groups of girls sitting around small tables. Bartender swinging glasses down from the rack above, calling an order over his shoulder. What’s yours? The tall dark beer glasses, short pale glasses of gold gleaming on the dark wood.

Sheila digs in her pockets and pulls out coins.
— Giss the money. C’mon. It’s for the drinks.
Minoo hands back her change.
— We got enough for a couple of ’alves. Wait ’ere.

Minoo stands near the door, back against the wall. The police won’t come now. But even so, her heart is juddering, beating its own time in a way she remembers. Out, get out, out, get out.

Sheila comes back with half-pints of a pale liquid and they head to the small room at the back where the noise falls away. Back against the wall, facing the doorway, Minoo holds the cold glass in cold hands, stares into the condensation. Trickles clear small, winding paths. That one is hers. The one that stops suddenly is her mother’s. Her brothers’, her father’s, the baby’s.

Sheila swallows a mouthful.
— I suppose it’s none of me business, but what really happened over there? How come yez all had to leave? They all murderin’ yez, like?
Minoo releases the glass.
— I’m from Kosti. It is a big town in North Sudan. It is below Khartoum. Do you know Khartoum?
— I saw that Sudan on the telly. Africa, righ’? I love them beads you lot put in yer hair, yeh?
Minoo was once one of those girls on the telly. She and her mother fetched firewood and balanced 15-gallon jerry-cans of water on their heads. Each night her mother braided her hair. That was before the soldiers came.

—So did them church lot come and save yez?
The glass of beer: pale gold running with tears.
—Those church people tell lies. They tell lies to us in our country and they tell lies to us in this country. And then the girls are preg-nant.
—Yeh. It’s always the fuckin’ men.
Sheila tips the beer back. As she swallows, Minoo sees a thin, pale line across the left side of the throat.
—Someone cut you?
She gestures to Sheila’s throat.
—Yeh. Me dad. Got pregnant off his best friend, didn’t I?
—But—his friend—
—Don’t remember nottin’. Drunk, wasn’t I? Me dad went mad.
Lucky me mam stopped him.
Minoo is silent. Everything tumbles like a bad movie. Purple-white lights in Tesco’s, scissors, brandy, cold blank sky, a man cutting his daughter’s throat.

Screech and bellow as something is murdered in the bar. Sheila’s eyebrows hitch, one pierced with a silver stud.
—That’ll be the karaoke. You ever done the karaoke? C’mon. It’ll be a great cultural experience.

She was looking at me, yeh, me, and I could tell it wouldn’t be long…
In the bar people shout above the music. Girls draped around each other, me, yeh, me. Explosions of laughter. Cheering. The men in the crowd are shouting almost louder than the small, middle-aged man with a microphone right up to his yellow teeth.

Ab love rocknroll put another dam in the jukebox baby

—Let’s us have a go, eh? You an’ me could sing something, yeh?
Sheila pushes to the front and says something to a bearded man with a clipboard. He nods. Sheila comes back.
—We’re on next. You ready?
Minoo looks around for the door.
—I don’t know these songs—
—It doesn’t matter. Just follow along.
—But I—
—You can sing, righ’? Everyone can sing.
—What?
The music is terrible, painful, blistering. The song ends and cheers
overtake any remaining conversation. Laughter.

Her mother and father, her three brothers, sitting on stools, everyone
laughing because they have eaten. Her brother has washed
the utensils. Mother said, *He will make a fine husband*. And they all
laughed. And her stomach was warm.

A girl in a short skirt sings, loud, earnest, flat. And then Sheila is
tugging on her arm.
—It’s us.
*Ooze.*
The grinning faces gel, congeal, melt, pull apart. She can’t tell if
they’re friendly or not. Sheila holds on to her sleeve as someone
slurs,
—*Whurr dya find thus one?*
Sheila shouts over the music,
—Ignore them. Ignorant load of shite. There’s the screen. Just sing
along.
The blue screen begins to scroll words. Minoo looks at Sheila who
starts to sing over a chirpy steel guitar.
—*Ah trad so hard my dear to show that yer mah every dream, yet yer afraid
each thing ab do is just some evil scheme…*
Sheila nods at her. Minoo looks back at the screen. Her tongue is
frozen. Someone shouts,
—C’mon, hen. Sing!
Minoo opens her mouth and whispers,
—*keep us so far apart—*
And is saved by the roar of the crowd,
*Why can’t I free yer doubtful mahn’d and melt yer cold cold heart.*

She stares hard at the blue screen, mic in a death grip. When will
it end? They get to the *cold cold heart* line again and a big man with
a thick, red beard, bellows along, a few words behind. This echo-
ing effect makes the song even longer than it is. Minoo watches
the man sing, his head up, eyes squeezed shut, and his pint of beer clutched to his belly.

As she finishes the song, she is weeping. The man opens his eyes. His face and neck are running with sweat. Even his pale-gold eyebrows are damp. He stares at her, through the cheering, the clapping, the whistles.

The memory of smell:
Her mother: wood smoke, a sweet smell, body lotion.
Her father: oil, cigarette smoke, the cold of being outdoors.
Her brothers: dirt, trees, small-boy sweat.
Her sister: baby hair.
When the memory of smell goes that’s when the person begins to fade.
In the dream, she tells herself to stay awake to remember. As she breathes, their voices come back, their bodies flicker in the firelight, they move the air around them and she can feel how they are.
We are well. You will not leave us. We don’t think you can forget us.

Someone says,
—Even the wee black one’s cryin’. God love ’er.
The red-bearded man strides across to the stage and holds out his hand. Minoo takes it, steps down, and he leads her to a corner of the bar.
He orders two whiskeys and places one in front of her.
Nods his head. They clink glasses. He leans forward.
—Yeh sing like ’n angel.
—Thank you. I saw you singing, too.
—Ma wife. She took the young ’uns a’ff tae Manchester. Might as well be Africa—no offense. Eight years ago. She can rot in hail, the auld besom. It’s the kids. I miss ma kids.
He knocks the whiskey back.
—Ye got family?
—Dead.
She surprises herself with the Scots accent: deid.

He nods.
—Bastards. In the war were ye? Hurd about tha’.
—Aye.
The Scots word comes suddenly, easily. Her mouth can do new things. She can sing. She can speak the Scottish language.
He nods again.
—Aye. Them as done the war, they got it comin’, angel. Don’t you worry. They got it comin’ bug time.
He tilts his head,
—Angel. Guid name for ye.
Points at her hair.
—Y’even got a wee halo.
She lifts a hand to touch her hair. Halo.
—Ma name’s Preston Robert, but everyone calls me Pirate. It’s tha beard.
—It’s a good name. Pirate.
—Naice the way ye say it. Pi-rate.

Sheila arrives.
—Y’alright, hen?
—This is Pirate.
—A pirate are, yeh? And what’re youse sayin’ to me mate?
—I was complimentin’ yer friend on her sungin’. Ye’re nae bad yersel’.
Sheila grins,
—Well, thanks, then.
He raises his glass to Minoo,
—Ah hope ta see ye once again, Miss Minoo.
He shuffles away.
Sheila rolls her eyes at Minoo.

They leave the broken karaoke hearts behind and walk out into Glasgow’s narrow streets. Sheila talks about some shoes she can give Minoo. Pink trainers.
—They’re not new, but they’ll keep yer feet warm.

The mist has come swirling back. Sheila turns off onto another street before Dalreoch Station.
—Well, this is me, then. Yeh gonna be alrigh’? Gorra place to stay, like?
—Yes, thank you. My place is not far.
Minoo hesitates,
—I had a good time. You are a nice gurrl, Sheila.
Sheila laughs,
— I see yer pickin’ up the accent. Very nice. Come round the pub t’morrer nigh’. I’ll bring them shoes.

Minoo walks through the curling Glasgow mist to Dalreoch Station. Beneath her hiding place, a loose pile of chipped bricks and wooden palings, she finds her sleeping bag and the Seventeen magazine she lifted from Tesco’s a week ago. She slips between the splintered walls of the broken shed. There’s a faint glow from an orange light in the parking lot. She opens her magazine and finds the fashion advice. *It’s time to put away those summer shoes. Make sure you store them properly.*

What would it be like to be so rich that you could have shoes for each season of the year?

A scuffling and sliding close by. A tin can goes bouncing across the parking lot. She shoves the magazines and sleeping bag beneath a loose plank. She wedges herself behind a broken piece of hardboard.

It might be the Scavenger Man, the one who collects empty bottles. She has watched him pick patiently through torn pieces of paper, searching for a number, a sequence of letters that make sense. It might be bored boys looking for a distraction. It might be someone with too much time and not enough sleep.

The orange parking lot light is too faint to reflect the sweet-bright shine of the scissors in her hand, blades forward.