

# Gwen

‘Goldie Goldbloom takes her readers on an exciting journey into the early twentieth century and introduces them to an extraordinary group of artists in London and Paris. Her story is full of surprises, inspired sexual conjectures, moments of pathos and romance, all illuminated by her vivid imagination.’

– *Michael Holroyd, author of Augustus John: The New Biography*

‘Erotically and intellectually charged, this is a story of artistic becoming, of life’s swirling waters of desire, ambition and the search for aesthetic truth. *Gwen* is a ravishing achievement, a dazzling work of art in its own right.’

– *Dominic Smith, author of New York Times bestseller The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*

‘This is a masterful book: *Gwen* is brilliant and strange, compassionate and wild. Goldie Goldbloom has done the difficult thing, she has written a book about a very private artist’s relationship to her art, her struggles with men and family, her unconventional sexuality and the fusion of these things that Gwen John achieved in her work. This book is startling and beautiful, it is a powerful tribute to a great painter and in the end it brings us back to Gwen John’s art, to see it with different eyes.’

– *Audrey Niffenegger, author of The Time Traveler’s Wife*

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# Green

A NOVEL

G O L D I E   G O L D B L O O M



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The next tide will erase the way through the mudflats,  
and everything will be again equal on all sides;  
but the small, far-out island already has its  
eyes closed; bewildered, the dike draws a circle

around its inhabitants who were born  
into a sleep in which many worlds  
are silently confused, for they rarely speak,  
and every phrase is like an epitaph

‘The Island I’, Rilke 1907

## A PARTIAL LIST OF THE WOMEN AUGUSTE RODIN SEDUCED:

Camille Claudel, who fell in love with Rodin as a teenager, greeted her models with a cudgel studded with nails, and gave birth to several of his children, so they say, though the children did not live with her and were not acknowledged. She wrote out a contract for Rodin that included the clause, "I will not spend time with other women." He signed, but then crossed out his signature. Or maybe it was she who crossed it out. After sending a bag stuffed with cat shit to a French government minister, she was dragged from her studio and ended up in Montdevergues Asylum for thirty years. Starved to death under the Nazis.

Hilda Flodin, a Finnish sculptor, with a big mouth and big rough hands and a great red bush. She liked to shove Rodin, to push him so he began to fall, and then catch him by the arm and haul him upright again. She got married and moved back to Finland after posing for his lesbian studies. Hit by a bus.

Rose Beuret, de facto wife to "The Sultan of Meudon", crept around their garden, inspecting the hedges to see if there were women hiding in them. Sometimes, there were. Froze to death.

Duchesse Claire Coudert de Choiseul, an American bulimic, became Rodin's city "wife" in 1908, despite her husband writing letters of complaint to both Rose Beuret and Rodin. She bought

a gramophone to the Hôtel Biron, and she lay with Rodin under a red eiderdown in the studio, running her fingers through his white hair, listening to Gregorian chants and folk dances from Auvergne. She was as funny and as raunchy as a monkey, and used to tell lurid stories until Rodin burped uncontrollably. Killed herself by drinking a beer stein of lye a year and a half after he died.

Isadora Duncan, the dancer, was called to his studio to model for him, but she smacked his hand when he squeezed her breast. "I'm not a peach in the market," she said. Her neck was broken when one of her long scarves became tangled around the rear axle of a car in which she was riding.

Judith Cladel, his faithful biographer, liked to walk in the garden with him, and feed the ducks small scraps of bread left over from lunch. He, in turn, liked to feel the velvet of her skirt, so that she came to always wear velvet, summer and winter, to please him. This accounted for her faint odour of sweat. Died, in Paris, unmarried, of a broken heart.

Madame Sada Yacco, a Japanese geisha, would not undress but rubbed her silk kimono in circles over his flesh until he cried out. Liver cancer killed her, but she also had cancer of the lips and tongue. In the end she could not drink and her lips were moistened with a cotton ball dipped in milk.

Malvina Hoffman, a sculptor, couldn't stand the way Rodin measured her breasts with an old quill, so she ran off to New York after smashing all the clay models he'd made of her. Died of a heart attack at eighty-one, in her studio, where she lived with a Miss Gullborg Groneng.

Lady Victoria Sackville-West was forced by her husband to burn the nightgown she wore for Rodin. Written on the fabric in Indian ink, the words: *I should like to buy you and have you for keeps. Would you be very expensive?* Died alone with shopping lists pinned to her bosom, in a cottage at Brighton, of dementia.

Hanako, a Japanese dancer, squatted to piss on his floor. Her urine ran between the cracks in the stones, and on warm afternoons, when the sunlight fell directly on the old slabs, it reignited her odour of pineapple and lotus, and he could still smell her, twenty years later. Her real name was Hisa Ohta. Her house was destroyed by an American bomb, in Japan, in 1945.

Rita took dozens of close-up photographs of Rodin naked and then tried to sell them to the newspapers, who refused her offer. She got rich from selling them to all the women in Rodin's life instead. Threw herself into the Seine, but hit a barge.

Anna and Adele Abruzzi, Italian sisters, one pale and fair, one dark, voyeurs of each other's liaisons with Rodin. They both fell pregnant and gave birth on the same day, in a room and with a midwife Rodin paid for, though it was claimed, afterwards, that they ran away with "Russian lovers".

Corsi, a model with a third nipple. Rodin paid her thirty centimes each time he looked at the nipple on her thigh. Gwen John had one too. Vanished.

Giganty, she of the extraordinary clitoris. Rodin renamed her. Her original name was forgotten. Died in childbirth.

## GWEN

Clara Westhoff, Rilke's wife and a sculptor. Rodin suggested she use kohl on her eyes, but she used a kind of ink that was later linked with her death.

Nuala O'Donel, an artist, grew jealous when she discovered that Gwen John entertained Rodin in her bed and saw him almost every day. She wrote a sad little note, then put her head in the oven and turned on the gas.

Comtesse Anna de Noailles, the poetic daughter of Romanian Prince Gregoire, despite her high birth, demanded that Rodin choke her and slap her face. She looked forward to dying. She was curious about it, so she said. Unsurprisingly, by strangulation.

Marie-Louise Fuller, a dancer, stole an entire box of Gwen John's watercolour paintings, thinking they were Rodin's. Some of them were his, but most of them were Gwen's. It was hard to tell the difference, because they'd been influencing each other for *years*. Fuller died of pneumonia, brought on by the effects of too much damp paper in her bedroom.

Gwendolen Mary John

# BOOK ONE: AUGUSTUS

## DORELIA IN A BLACK DRESS:

Gwen met Dorothy McNeill accidentally, at a party in 1902. Piccadilly's Café Royal held the celebration of Auguste Rodin's sale of his *Saint John* to the South Kensington Museum. The French Ambassador was there. The entire London art world was there. The *King* was there. Gwen, of course, didn't have an invitation. She was no one. Her brother Augustus, however, was. "Please," she'd begged him. "I want to see the man who is turning art on its ear!" He'd laughed at her, but agreed to sneak her into the Ladies Lounge through the back entrance. Though she was timid by nature, she pretended she was brave and famous and beautiful. She wore her best pink linen dress, the one that was inharmonious with her red hair. She smelled of mothballs and, behind the ears, a bit like lemons and mildew. No one spoke to her. Her skirt was too short, and her gloves far too mangled, and her hair too full of paint speckles for her to be noticed. She dragged a chair into the doorway to the main café, in between the punchbowl and an old man, hoping at least Rodin would come over to watch her drawing the tinkly women who arrived through the front entrance, and who fluttered around the petits fours. *Glacé, salé, sec.* Glazed. Salted. Dry.

For reassurance, she touched the portraits folded into her pocket, one Gwen had made of her mother, and the other, her mother's sketch of her as an eight-year-old child. The two of them sketching each other late one afternoon. Her mother her first art teacher. The forgiving yellow light of autumn, her mother leaning over and gently correcting Gwen's pencilled line, smoothing the lines of concentration on the little face, leaving a pale blue fingerprint on her child's cheek. "You're such a

wonderful little artist, Gwennie,” she’d said and for some reason, a knot tied itself in Gwen’s throat. Gwen hadn’t known, then, that it would be the last time she drew her mother. She hadn’t known that within weeks, her mother would sicken and become thin and ochred and die. She hadn’t known how strange it would be, to regularly find her young mother trapped in the drawing as if she had never died, as if she were still thirty, young, beautiful, smiling, unchanged, still sitting in that spill of autumn sunlight, drawing with Gwen. Or how she too would remain frozen at eight. She hadn’t known time could hang, immutable, eternal, in an image. She hadn’t known that the knot in her throat would be impossible to untie. She hadn’t known either, that when she washed off the smudged blue fingerprint, she was removing the ghost of the last time her mother would ever touch her face.

A small someone wearing a black dress with a white Holland apron rushed into the café and bumped against Gwen, causing her to crush the portraits between her fingers. The girl announced loudly that her name was Dorothy, and said she’d gone to look in the windows of the Museum of Practical Geology after work, seen the world’s largest man, almost eighty-seven stone, a gorgon, she said. She’d dodged several dustcarts with their refuse masticators that almost decapitated her, watched the mails being driven out from White Horse Cellar – her favourite thing in the whole wide world was the sound of the post-horn on a foggy evening, which this evening wasn’t but it was still a lovely sound, don’t you think – she’d admired the horses bedecked with ribbon rosettes and flowers on their bridles, bought a sponge off one of the Hebrew children standing there selling oranges and pencils and brushes to the travellers, had her boots polished *while she was wearing them* by a man in the street, contemplated buying a waterproof cape at Aquascutum but decided it was far too dear for the likes of her, stopped to see the collection of monkeys at the Pantherion, sat for several minutes with the flower-sellers under the statue of Eros in

Piccadilly Circus while wiping the smudges of boot blacking off her stockings with her handkerchief, until the line of Jews and Russians stretching from the Alien Registration Office and the protestors trying to push them into the road had obscured her view of the busy street and she'd finished with her stockings anyway, so she'd wandered through the maze of tiny unnamed arcades and back lanes between Regent Street and Piccadilly Circus and then she'd heard the ruckus. Curious, she'd slipped in through the unlocked back door to the Café Royal, a door that Augustus, as usual, had forgotten to close behind him.

Gwen rolled her eyes. "For goodness sakes," she said, smoothing the crushed portraits over her knee. "Shut up. There's something more important in the world than *you*." She gestured towards the crowd in the next room.

"What's going on?" Dorothy whispered, crouching down next to Gwen. There was torchon lace around the edges of her pinafore. A shop girl in uniform, but a shop girl with money.

"The King is here," said Gwen. She pointed out the big man with his silken top hat tucked under his arm and his drooping moustaches and his belly squeezing out between his buttons, who stood in the centre of the crush. Gwen still hadn't really looked at the girl beside her. She *refused* to look. From the sound of the girl's voice and her incessant chatter, she was probably someone who had climbed out of the dustbins at the Ragged School for Girls in Covent Garden and clawed her way into a secretarial position by sleeping with the manager. Someone well below Gwen. "He came to meet Auguste Rodin."

"Who's that?" Dorothy stood and leaned on Gwen's shoulder to see what she was drawing. Gwen covered the portraits of her mother and her with her hand and tucked them away in her pocket again. She held out her sketchpad instead.

"He's a very famous French sculptor." Gwen's crayonned women were shrill and elongated and ever so slightly absurd.

She turned to brush off this dolt who didn't even recognise

Rodin's name. Glittering black eyes, an extraordinary shade of purple-black, filled with hundreds of shivering candle flames. Skin like an ironed linen tablecloth, richly fragrant: incense, rum, saffron, black cumin, bitter orange, smoked ebony, cedar, cloves, cinnamon, myrrh. Every sound crisp. A fork, falling to the floor, sounding like the bell in church when wine changes into blood. "They're rather dreadful," Gwen muttered, blinking. She felt scorched by the girl's eyes.

"Not at all. They're brilliant. *You're* brilliant," Dorothy said. "You're *absolutely* my heroine! A *lady* artist! What's your name again?"

"Gwendolen Mary John," said Gwen, who hadn't introduced herself, and now had to repeat her name twice because she'd spoken into her hand and Dorothy couldn't understand the mumbled syllables. A *heroine*? It was hard enough being a human being.

"But you're Welsh!" cried the girl, delighted. The shop assistant's smock a costume, a disguise. The prattle, part of her act. "Your accent is quite charming. I don't suppose you ever teach drawing to little sillies like me?"

Dorothy was clearly no little silly. As she asked the question, she lifted an eyebrow and smirked. This was a woman who knew the effect she had on others. Gwen, who had been about to reject the proposal, saw something move in that alluring face and agreed instead, and a handful of florins were poured into her tiny, paint-stained palm, reserving her services for the following Tuesday evening.

"Mister Roodan should come and see what you've been up to," said Dorothy. She was squeezed between the punchbowl and Gwen, her breath all down Gwen's neck, stirring the fine hairs next to her ear, making the gooseflesh rise on her arms.

"*Monsieur Rodin*. I don't think he can see me," said Gwen, shaking her head. She could barely see *him*. "Not back here." She touched the portraits in her pocket and felt emboldened to try

to edge her way into the main room.

“You’ll get into trouble.” Generally, only men were allowed to drink in bars.

“That might be fun,” Gwen said. The policy was strictly enforced, but perhaps on this occasion, the rules might turn out to be more flexible?

But within a few minutes, a waiter pushed her chair backwards into the doorway of the Ladies Lounge. “I’m sorry, Miss,” he said. “But unless you’re wearing a cut-away and trousers ... the coppers could be having us up on a charge.”

“I told you,” said Dorothy, and the girl touched her shoulder.

Ferns ran down the centre of each long table near the bar and the room for the men smelled darkly of the forest, of timber and civet, of leather and bracken and duff. The red velvet chairs were covered in ashen dandruff from the gentlemen’s cigars. Great clouds of smoke drifted overhead. Dozens of candles burned in the gilded candelabras, their light bouncing from the mirrored walls to the green marble pillars to the glittering caryatids, all the way up to the golden ceiling.

Two dim gaslights burned behind Gwen in the Ladies Lounge. The chairs provided for the women were unquestioned deal. The room filled with a blur of powdery perfumes, lilac and lavender and lily and rose. The women chattered and ate canapés, jingling their charm bracelets, their backs to the main room. Gwen sniffed, again and again, to see if she could catch a whiff of Dorothy, of the smoked ebony scent of her, the rum.

She sighed. Women could be such a distraction, right when she must not be distracted. She would not allow herself even one more glance at Dorothy. She turned her head to the side. A bearded old man with his top hat clamped between his knees sat forgotten, next to her in the doorway. He had a magnificent white rose in his buttonhole. He looked surprisingly like the King. Gwen, fretting at the impropriety of the arrangement, said, “Sir, wouldn’t you be more comfortable with the gentlemen?”

His nose twitched. He leaned further out into the main room and cupped his ear as if to better hear what was being said.

“Sir? This is the *Ladies Lounge*.”

“Apparently,” said the man, “it’s to be the residence of *the Jews* too, whether they be the first Jewish member of the House of Lords and best friend of the King or not.”

Baron Rothschild! The newspapers said he was the head of the clique of greedy Anglo-Hebraic financiers who had dragged the British Empire into the disastrous Boer War for their own monetary gains! There were whispers about black magic, spells that had enchanted the monarchy. Behind her, Dorothy gasped and stiffened, then pivoted on her heel and walked away. The Baron’s voice didn’t change at this affront. It was calm and deep, cultured and infinitely patient as he introduced himself. He didn’t have Fagin’s accent. His nose wasn’t even a tiny bit hooked like Shylock’s. Neither was he thin and hunched the way the newspapers depicted him. Instead, he was a well-padded man with excellent posture and the faintest hint of a German accent. But for all that, still a Jew. Gwen had taught Augustus to throw away, unread, letters that arrived for him bearing the name of Jewish correspondents.

Now, her lips clamped around her own name, she inched her hand down the side of her chair and carefully withdrew her skirt from the Jew’s vicinity. She felt cold and then very, very hot. She didn’t say anything further to the Baron and after another minute had passed, she hitched her chair a few inches in the opposite direction from the traitor.

Just moments before, she had been willing Auguste Rodin to notice her sketching during the party, to address her as a colleague, to show the crowd that a woman, too, could be a great artist. She sighed. She was no longer in the mood to receive Rodin’s attention. God forbid he should see her sitting right next to a Jew! Then she was flooded with disgust for herself. Here she was, hoping her position as a woman would

be ignored and the great man would give her a chance, all while she ignored the Baron the same way women were usually ignored by men. She spat into her handkerchief. The hypocrisy tasted like frogs.

Rodin was still surrounded by a group of young men, all sculpture students at The Slade, all yelling his name, pushing and shoving. Every so often one of these men would come to get a glass of punch and step on Gwen's foot or drop canapés on her head or spill pickle juice down her neck. She'd called for the manager and the waiter to help her. She'd made angry noises but Baron Rothschild had only turned his head and sniffed. She'd even called out to the pianist who sat bowed over the silent Bechstein waiting for his cue, but with the King and Rodin in the room, all of the staff were busy and the waiters ran past her with trays full of chiming glasses.

"Son of a fiddler's bitch!" Gwen said, after a man stepped squarely on her drawing. All this fuss over the creator of the *Saint Jean Baptiste*. She should never have come. Now that she was here, she couldn't remember what it was about Monsieur Rodin that had compelled her to attend the party. She certainly hated his hideous statue. The bronze looked just like her brother. Legs spread. Beard jutting. A field of crazed energy. Small balls.

She stood up, slid out a hatpin and poked the man who had stepped on her drawing sharply in the back. "You," she said, prodding him again. "Where are your manners?" He didn't turn around and just then, all of the men, more than half of the London art world, raced out onto the street roaring like a single ferocious beast. Even Rothschild stood, released from his exile, and walked through the café and outside. The students unhitched Rodin's gleaming black coupé from the horses and took up the traces themselves. John Singer Sargent swung up to be the coachman. Gwen's brother, Augustus, in front of the

others and not bearing any of the weight, had the bit between his teeth and was pawing the ground. At any moment, he'd lift his tail and let fly with a steaming pile of manure. He was the bloody ringleader. Of course.

Gwen and Dorothy walked to the front window and sat back down in the abandoned café. A finger of coffee trickled off a nearby table and tapped against the floor, an impatient sound as if the liquid were waiting for something to change.

Outside, the young men, cheering, waited to pull the coupé down the street. Rodin stood up on the driver's bench, waving to the crowds, kissing his hand in every direction. He had something in his pants the size of a grown squirrel and kept pulling the corners of his frock coat back so that his pleasure was more, not less, visible. Rodin turned and caught Gwen's eye and smiled and her heart leapt. He made a gesture as if he had painted something and nodded his head towards her. He'd noticed her working! Dorothy squealed, "He's looking right at you!" Gwen smiled eagerly and held up her notebook to show that she'd understood his message, but then she caught sight of his abominable squirrel and blushed and looked down. How exposed he was! The display of one's *squirrel* must be a French custom. *She'd* been caught recently rubbing herself intently against a street lamp and almost been arrested for public indecency. Augustus had had to come and convince the bobby to let her go, and then her brother had been unmerciful in his teasing. Everyone expected *him* to exercise his squirrel. If he *didn't* seduce his models, they'd have thought one of the rejected girls had chopped off his manhood. She blamed Queen Victoria, the frigid bitch, who while alive had spread the rumour that a woman who enjoyed a romp in the hay was a whore. Gwen was no whore – she'd had the chance and turned it down – but she was fond of a little pleasure between the sheets, and now, a faint image of Rodin unbuttoning her shirt waist and peeling the sleeves down her arms came to her, unbidden.

“Did your brother leave you money to pay the bill?” called the waiter from behind the counter. Gwen reluctantly turned towards that side of the room. Reflected together with so much gold, she looked as if she were wearing armour. A hero. But a hero has to be brave in some way.

“Why do you only pay attention to me when you want something?” Gwen grumped to the waiter, as she smoothed out her drawing on the counter. The outline of a shoe across the entire sheet. Forgetting that she wasn’t holding a pen, she signed her name with the hatpin. Too late, she made a flourish that ripped through the paper and left a long gouge in the marble. She looked at the gouge, licked her finger and rubbed at it. Dorothy offered to pay for the damage and was rebuffed. A white line showed clearly in the deep green stone of the bar.

“Here,” said Gwen, handing her drawing to the waiter. “One day that will be worth thousands of pounds, so you’d best hang on to it.” In the mirror behind the bar, she saw Dorothy glance at her with respect. It didn’t count, looking at the girl in the mirror. It almost wasn’t a distraction at all.

One day, Gwen thought, my students will pull *my* carriage down the street, shouting and cheering. One day, I will have glamorous lovers lining up to kiss my hand. One day, I will be brave. And I will take myself to Paris and introduce myself to the man who saw the artist sitting in my dark little corner, drawing, Rodin.

When Gwen was sixteen, Gwen’s father hadn’t wanted her to go to the city, to The Slade where all the bad girls lurked, puffing on cigarettes and baring their legs, but she had argued and fought and scratched. She wanted the same education in painting technique as Augustus. Though he was younger than her, he’d been sent to school two years earlier. It was Gwen who’d won prizes as a child for her drawings. She’d won a tiny bronze sculpture of a hand that was supposedly by Rodin and she’d sent

it to Augustus in London to admire. He gave the ugly prize to a beggar in the street, he wrote back, because it was obviously a fake.

In the same letter, he enclosed a sheaf of his new drawings, which, irritatingly, were miles better than they'd been just six months earlier. She burned the sketches one by one in the kitchen stove, half mad with desire and frustration. She wanted her life to mean something. She didn't want it to be over in a flash, like her mother's. And what would *her* work look like if only she had a good teacher?

Gwen didn't want to sit upstairs with a tin of watercolours and paint sunsets after she'd finished putting the children to bed. She wanted to stride through the academy halls, a modern-day knight, in her brother's high-heeled boots. She wanted to meet Whistler like her brother did, and talk with him as if he were a confidant and a friend. She wanted to learn how to lay oils on a canvas and conjure skin and bones and glittering hair. She wanted to learn to paint eyes, tilted just so, that expressed sadness, or a chin held slightly at an angle, expressing arrogance or temper. She wanted to look on naked bodies and break them into a series of planes like Rodin did on his good days. She wanted brushes that bore the marks of her hands and her teeth, and she wanted the crease on the outside corner of her neck to smell of turpentine. So she locked herself in her room in Tenby and she refused food for fourteen days. On the evening of the fourteenth day, when her father sat outside her door, listening to her weeping from pain and exhaustion, he had broken down and cried through the door, "You may go, you bloody little tyrant! But for God's sake, get up and eat!"

And she had screamed back, "I will be worth it, Father. I will!"

She'd moved to London the very next week. She was seventeen years old, and terrified because her father had told her he wouldn't pay for a thing besides the tuition.

She got down from the train, stepping into mud and gravel and decomposing leaves. Clouds of steam, smelling of wet laundry. People waving. Not to her. She touched her mother's portrait, then picked up her own small box and moved through the stream of people hurrying into the station. They did not seem to see her and she was pushed from one side to the other. Barking her knuckles on a stone wall. Everything rushed and grey and cold. Droplets of moisture furred her eyebrows and trickled down into the sockets of her eyes. She had been to London twice before. There had been tulips then.

She took her time walking to the street where Augustus had his flat. He'd said he would meet her at the station. She hadn't expected him but still it stung. She took a deep drag of the London air. It was cool and thick and full of cinders. It burned her throat going down and her tongue coming back out. It smelled of acorns. "I am going to be an artist," she said to herself. *An artist. An artist.* She thought of the small bronze hand she had won and wished it were in her box and not lost. She wished she were brave and did not tremble quite so much.

She passed a man with a cart selling hot chestnuts. She passed a woman selling Yorkshire puddings filled with gravy. She passed pheasants and geese hanging by their necks from hooks. How would she paint them when she knew more about art? She went along the road and turned right at a sign marked Howland Street. It would be All Hallows' Eve, it would be Guy Fawkes Night, it would be Christmas, it would be Easter. She wouldn't see the ocean for years. It might snow.

Down a little lane she went. To the side there was a courtyard through an arch, and in the middle, an oak tree. A man with a gentle face sat under the tree, reading a book. The masonry looked older than any brickwork she had ever seen, and better laid. She pinned her box to her chest with her elbow and lifted her cold hand and waved to the man. It was an auspicious start. Everything she did in London should be chosen carefully. A

sacrifice should have meaning. But the man looked right past her and did not wave back.

She could not put her hands in her pockets because she was carrying her box. Her fingers were blue. Yellow and red and orange leaves fell. Horse chestnut, whitebeam, ash, tree of heaven, Turkey oak, red oak, fig. They carpeted certain parts of the road. Her footfalls were muffled. A leaf stuck to the toe of her boot. A flock of starlings flew out of the whitebeam, each with a bright red berry in its beak.

As soon as she was in her room, she would unpack her paints and warm them between her thighs so the oils didn't congeal. She would set up her easel in the place with the best light and she would clip a fresh sheet of paper to the frame. She would light several candles. She would work all night. Perhaps she would draw the birds with their berries.

When she saw Augustus, she ran to him and hugged him and he rubbed his beard over the top of her head once she had withdrawn the pins from her hat and laid it to one side.

"So, you are really here then?" he asked and she nodded. He had not offered to carry her box up to the rooms.

The fire was already lit though, and her room was warm and there was a small copper kettle singing on one side of the hearth. She found a cup with a blue willow pattern on the table, and a teapot.

"I missed you," Augustus said shyly, coming up behind her and wrapping her in his arms.

"Of course," she said, opening her box. "I missed you too."

The last time she had seen him, he looked exactly the same. But she. She was not the same. He'd seen the prize. And now she would be going to school with him. What did he think of that? He didn't say.

That night and each night afterwards, she lit three candles and put one underneath her easel and one to the side and one on the table where whatever it was that she was sketching lay. She

did not go to bed until sleep overcame her. The floorboards were black oak, yellow from smoke and from varnish. The walls were painted puce. The ceiling was made of blackened tin squares. The light reflecting off the walls was green and rippled. If she squinted, it almost seemed as if she was underwater. Outside her window was a huge beech tree. Its leaves had already fallen. It had long sticky buds at the end of each twig. When she was anxious, when she was hot, she put her hands outside the window and wrapped her fingers around the branches of the beech. She never undressed. She never washed. She painted for twenty hours a day or until she fainted. She could not bear to waste time.

“Leave your frock at the door,” Gwen said to Dorothy their first day of after-work classes, three days after the party for Rodin. “We shall be studying the human body.” Gwen unbuttoned the top of her own itchy woollen bodice and fanned her flushed face with her palette. She had almost translucent skin and the slightest upset turned her face crimson. She wasn’t upset now. At least, she didn’t think she was, but her nose was a stunning and unaccountable shade of alizarin red.

She halfway hoped Dorothy would do a bunk, run screaming from the terrible lady artist of Howland Street, because even though Gwen needed the money, she also hated giving drawing lessons to incapable, incurious, indifferent little snots, but Dorothy gave her an odd look.

“Hello to you too, Miss John,” she said.

Gwen had planned to crunch slices of apple or handfuls of nuts, and force Dorothy to copy the ugliest busts of Roman centurions in the basements of the nearby museum. She’d looked forward to sending the girl with the candles in her eyes back dozens of times until she cried from frustrated pride. Those eyes would be extraordinary, full of tears.

Gwen would laugh Dorothy out of her room. “Call yourself an

artist?" she'd say, crumpling up the girl's sketches and throwing the papers after her. "You haven't even *begun* to see."

Gwen was determined, come what may, to see everything, to see *beyond* everything, to use to the utmost an opportunity she never thought she'd be given. Starving for fourteen days was the least of what she would give up. She'd expect the same dedication from Dorothy. The girl had said Gwen was her heroine. Well, then, she would have to learn that a hero had to be brave in some way. She'd tell her so as soon as she was undressed and exposed, standing cold and barefoot.

Even when she and Augustus were children, still living at home, they had set challenges for each other. Draw love, he'd said to her. Draw hunger. Draw jealousy. Draw lust. Draw sex, she'd said to him and he'd tried and then she'd tried and then their drawings had been discovered by their aunts and the aunts had run away the same day, in horror.

Draw deformity, she'd tell Dorothy.

Sometimes, especially if her students' ribs and waists were distorted from corseting, she had them strip and stand in front of a mirror to sketch the muscles and the bones of their own bodies. She could tell that Dorothy wore her corsets tight, and looked forward to forcing the girl to draw the atrophy of her pectoral muscles, her tiny inverted nipples, her bruised and flaking skin, the compression of her tenth and eleventh ribs. Without regular food, Gwen had shrunk to a size that didn't require corsets. She was glad of her own distortion. Some mornings, she spent a minute or two looking at herself in the lovely old pier mirror, thinking she was *almost*, but not quite, handsome. Other mornings, mornings when her room looked squalid, or when she'd spent the last of her pennies days earlier, or when she had a cold, or when her vision blurred and she felt she might fall over, or when Augustus had teased her about the lamppost incident and offered to take care of her needs himself,

she didn't feel quite up to the task. She'd scavenged the mirror from a rubbish tip outside a home in Belgravia, a grave of mirrors, choosing it because the greyish spots and the cloudy haze behind the mercury glass made reflections look as if they floated within someplace far away, someplace not in her real everyday world.

"Are you afraid of me?" Gwen barked at Dorothy when the girl hesitated. "Or a prude? Strip, I said!" It was their first day of classes, a Tuesday evening, and Gwen still had not greeted her student. Dorothy made no move to take off her fancy gown, so Gwen stamped her foot and made as if to run at the girl, to frighten her.

She loved making her students jump. She wasn't quite sure why she enjoyed it, but there was a distinct and particular spike of pleasure each time a quaking girl startled at Gwen's demand to take off *all* of her clothes. Still, Dorothy was no quaking girl. On her lips, the beginning of some unfamiliar expression, surely not a sneer?

Gwen loved to control the things she could control: her cats, her little room, her students, her meals. Her life constantly spiralled into messy disorder. Her mother had died an ugly death when Gwen was a child, a few weeks later her father had abruptly moved the family to a different town, ghastly maiden aunts had taken over the maternal role for six years, her beloved brother Augustus had seduced her at thirteen and then dashed off to art school, only reappearing at irregular intervals to force himself upon her when he felt like it. After Gwen finally escaped Wales for London, Augustus seemed alternately uninterested in her and obsessed, but in no discernable pattern. Even Gwen's favourite tomcat had betrayed her by giving birth to a litter of kittens.

Still, for two years now, since coming to London and fighting with Augustus and finding her own basement room, she'd had peace. She had somehow accumulated a small cadre of lacklustre

students who couldn't get a place at The Slade; Whistler had singled her work out for praise; she'd won another major prize for a portrait she'd painted and then it had sold for a good price; she'd made friends who didn't know Augustus or her father or her aunts and who thought her accent charming and her simple homemade clothes winsome and her lack of money merely an artistic affectation.

Now, she refused to be knocked from the sidewalk by crowds. She called out when a lecturer ignored her. She made all her students strip and stand shivering in her cellar, though they were the ones paying her. The pretty ones, she seduced.

But that day in the spring of 1902, when Gwen told Dorothy to strip, the other girl did not do what every other girl before her had done. She didn't quiver or shake or cry out. Instead, she sneered. She didn't startle and this complacency was, in itself, unsettling.

"Make me," Dorothy said.

It was a schoolgirl taunt, but she still didn't open even a single button. Her face had several dimples on each side and she tilted her head and shook out her shiny green-black hair and looked out of one eye more than the other and the corners of her dark red mouth turned up ever so slightly and a tiny wedge of her tongue came out and wet her lips. Gwen's nose shone crimson and sweat gathered beneath her breasts and the hairs on her arms, one by one, stood up.

"I will," said Gwen, her voice flat and inharmonic, then sharp and full of irregular overtones. "I *will* make you." Dorothy was the first woman in two years who had stood up to Gwen, who was more ready, more open to experience than even Gwen herself. She changed everything. *Draw sex*. Well, here she was.

In the strange light that straggled through the filthy windows from the street, Gwen thought Dorothy looked like a serpent, sent to evict her from the tiny Eden she had created for herself

in London. The other woman would open her almost black lips and a thin forked tongue would emerge to sample the air and smell what it was, *exactly*, that Gwen most loved. Gwen's sweat redolent with her secrets. What would she lose this time? Did she have anything *left* to lose?

"Strip," gasped Gwen again, all the air gone from her lungs. She was seconds from fainting. She put out her hand and slapped Dorothy's arm, trying to slow her breaths. "Hurry! I don't have all day!" The ocean, the great rollers that rose up from the seabed and moved majestically ahead of the wind until they curled over and crashed onto the pebbled beach. The *crsssh* of the foam on the strand. The hoarse calls of the gulls as they twisted in the wind. The khaki water below the sloping grey shoulders of the cliffs. But the ocean didn't help. On her wall, a drawing from Rodin's party, run through with the hatpin. The tinkly women, those bastions of proper society with their stiff upper lips and iron stays, their willingness to ignore anything that did not conform to their view of the world: *Glacé, salé, sec*. And miraculously, Gwen did not faint and instead, stood glaring at Dorothy.

"I told you to strip, and if you want to be my student," Gwen said, an edge in her voice now that she'd gotten her breath. "You'd better rip off that rubbish right now, or you may as well go along and find yourself a nicey-nice lady painter to teach you."

Dorothy's face broke slowly into a broad smile. "Who says I want a nicey-nice lady painter? Otherwise, why would I have hired *you*?" She peeled off her dress and tossed it onto the floor as if it were worthless and always had been. She unhooked her corset and bent to set it upright on the floor under the easel, and then lifted her arms and pulled off her chemisette. She stood, laughing at Gwen, leaning against a block of wood that until then had looked like an ugly pillar meant to hold up the cellar ceiling, a block left behind when men came to declare the building condemned. She stood there as naturally as if she had

sprouted there, as if all the winds in the world would never stir a single hair on her head, as if she were a sprite in her element, and the rejected pink gown was some excuse or a disguise to her essential nature. “Well?” Dorothy said, the girl’s eyes locked on Gwen’s, a challenge. “Please won’t you teach me how to paint, Lady John?” *Please*, sibilant, a long lisped *s*, serpentine.

Sensation receded like water down Gwen’s shins until the last gurgle of feeling left her toes. *Glacé, salé, sec*. The edges of the room cackled and swayed. A window opened like a mouth and shut itself again. The walls rumbled. Small silvery fish flickered in her vision and she put out her hand to catch them. The portrait on the wall stretching longer and longer, then rolling up with a snap. The hatpin leaping from the wall, impaling her pillow. Somehow, she found herself next to Dorothy, running her fingers over the girl’s powdered shoulders. Dorothy’s skin rippling under her touch, as a horse shivers a fly off its hide. “Paint?” Gwen said faintly. “You’ll never have a better teacher than me.” She looked around and took up a nearby brush, her favourite, softest sable, which she licked and dipped into a smear of Hooker’s green on her palette. “Observe my hand,” she commanded, and she spiralled the tip of the brush around the girl’s breast, binding her round and round with her art, and finally coming to a point. There was very little difference between a hero and a villain, she thought. Which, then, am I?

Gwen’s legs were still gone. Her body ended somewhere just below her ribs, in a hot and hazy freshet. Her ears rang. Non-existent things scuttled in the corners of the room, leering at her, dark and treacherous. Dorothy, however, did not seem bound. If anything, she had grown to twice her original size.

Beyond Dorothy’s amused black eyes, all Gwen could see was that green snake encircling soft flesh, hissing despite the apple in its mouth. With her last bit of courage, she said, “Dorothy is the wrong name for a girl like you. It’s a lie. From now on, you shall be Dorelia.”