

## PATIENCE WHEATLEY

### March 1945. A Private in the Canadian Women's Army Corps, Working in the Casualty Section of Canadian Army Headquarters in London, Thinks About Uniforms

Our corporal in the Casualty Section  
wears a battledress tunic  
nipped in at the waist,  
pressed with sharp pleats,  
against regulations.

He's dark  
his hair's too long for the army  
and curly, he lights  
two cigarettes in his mouth  
with one match  
like Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca.

His girls  
are red-lipped  
cockney civilians  
with long permed hair and  
flowered utility crepe dresses  
they're looking for cheap Canadian Exports  
which we in the army  
get free from MacDonald Tobacco.

Our corporal  
doesn't think much  
of us CWACS  
drably uniformed  
plain hair pinned up above the collar  
intended by the army to be  
mothers in civilian life.

He flashes white teeth  
and tells us his ambition:  
to run a travelling  
*barbotte*\* game in Montreal  
a string of dancing girls  
at Rockhead's Paradise.

He flicks  
black eyes  
over our brass-buttoned  
padded breasts  
encased in khaki baratheia  
perhaps imagining and rejecting  
revolving tassels on our nipples  
ostrich feathers  
sequins.

We CWACS agree  
a uniform has compensations:  
it makes a man  
take a good look at  
your face

\* *Barbotte* is a gambling game which was played  
illegally in Montreal in the forties.

### Stardust

So long ago at the War's start  
when Venus sparkled in the west  
and the heavy scent of roses  
drew us out onto the long gallery:

the cedar trunk smell  
of the borrowed dress,  
blue net over taffeta  
embroidered with rosebuds  
childish puffed sleeves:

the raucous band  
hired for the regatta dance  
"Six Lessons from Madame La Zonga" and  
"Stardust":

we danced cheek to cheek  
in the velvet night  
the long skirt  
catching splinters  
the just-risen moon's  
shining path  
pulling us towards  
the dark shore across the lake

the touch of his lips,  
the guilt—and the thrill  
O the intoxicating thrill  
enhanced by danger  
and another fear—  
that this dancing young man  
would die.

*Patience Wheatley's poetry has been published previously in  
cws / cf. She has also had two poetry collections published by  
Goose Lane Editions: A Hinge of Spring and Good-bye to  
the Sugar Refinery.*