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 barathea 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.