

"First Drill"

by Lorraine Whelan

The black boots are heavy,
their leather stiff and itching.
They blister our heels
in the July sun.
I check for my reflection
in the spit-polished toes,
stumble over someone else's foot
and then my own.

Gupta from the second platoon faints
before we have marched a quarter mile
and is taken aside to be revived in the shade.
She is even more fragile than I.

The rest of us continue
to the show ship,
where we about face
and complete the morning exercise.

We rest easy and I look for a face
that doesn't look like the face
on a recruitment poster.
I worry about my own face
jammed between collar and cap:
I too am in uniform.
I am an Ordinary Wren.

A few faces start to separate
from between the green shirts
and new felt berets.
Smiling, I drift toward them
and am greeted in return.
We rebel against last names,
requiring more information
than can be read
printed on black and white pins
above our hearts.

Allan, Tim, Mike and Betty,
Bruce, Sandy, Dan and I
huddle for some small talk.

A shouted order comes to fall in
and we form rows hurriedly,
awkward in our recall of the patterns
of official regimentation.

The guy next to me is gung-ho.
Even in my peripheral vision
he makes me cringe:
he puffs out his chest,
his face purples from holding his breath.
Acne is ready to burst
from his forehead and chin,
and his head is shorn close.
He looks like he plans to fight
in some global war.
He's seen too many movies.
This is the Reserve,
There is no war.

Our platoon's Leading Seaman
marches over and yells at Wright
for looking like a garbage bag.
I focus on the neck in front
and silently agree.
MacLennan examines the rest of us,
picks out a few more slobs,
complains of long hair and pancaked hats.
I am berated for the creases
in my package-fresh top.
Alcock grovels his apologies
for a loose shirt-tail.
I stifle a giggle and stare
until my eyes begin to cross.
Forward, we return to our dry ship.

The first morning over, we break military formation
and double to the snack truck on the jetty.
Groups form fast and I mingle
with the gang of first-names I had met earlier.

We sit on the dock, boots dangling over the lake.
We establish a daily routine that changes little
over the next few hot summer months.