

Ode to Your Boots

By Julie Gilmour, for her daughter Ruth

On this occasion, the day
of buying a brick
inscribed with your name,
your class in Troop November,
the words “loving memory”
and the years of your life,
a brick to be tread on in a plaza
by other cadets—on this day,
I remember your boots.

I protested (remember?)
when they calloused your toes,
crippled your lovely feet.

But I also watched you stand
in the August New Mexico sun
with your unloaded rifle,
bending your knees slightly
so as not to topple over,
marching off in formation
in those boots, proud mother
that you were the recruit
at training who ran ahead
and then back, on cold mornings,
to tell the last cadet she could
do it when she didn't think so;
and glad that you had trouble
keeping those boots as shined
as they wanted. That was you,
scuffed and blonde and brave,
all Hello Kitty pink heart,
cheerfully marching your tours
when punished for rappelling
out windows, for smoking—or
taking a friend's crises to heart

at the wrong time of day.

The boots are gone. The brush
remains with me, soft and round,
bristle tips stained regulation color
(though all the marching
never regulated you):
wild, sensate, spending to the last
waking hour, then more,
wounded, perforated with affections;
every gap and hole pouring
soul and heart into others' hands
and eyes and sore feet, marching
over brick because it was worth it,
even in the rain, even with the hurts.

And now you pull *me* up from mud.
Laughing, you urge me on
to the next hill, where you've already gone
in your shined-enough boots.