

**From Walt Whitman's *Leaves of  
Grass* (1867)**

**CAVALRY CROSSING A FORD.**

A LINE in long array, where they wind betwixt green  
islands;  
They take a serpentine course—their arms flash in the  
sun—Hark to the musical clank;  
Behold the silvery river—in it the splashing horses,  
loitering, stop to drink;  
Behold the brown-faced men—each group, each  
person, a picture—the negligent rest on the saddles;  
Some emerge on the opposite bank—others are just  
entering the ford;  
The guidon flags flutter gaily in the wind.

**BEAT! BEAT! DRUMS!**

1

BEAT! beat! drums!—Blow! bugles! blow!  
Through the windows—through doors—burst like a  
force of ruthless men,  
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation;  
Into the school where the scholar is studying:  
Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must  
he have now with his bride;  
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, plowing his field or  
gathering his grain;  
So fierce you whirr and pound, you drums—so shrill  
you bugles blow.

2

Beat! beat! drums!—Blow! bugles! blow!  
Over the traffic of cities—over the rumble of wheels in  
the streets:  
Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses?  
No sleepers must sleep in those beds;  
No bargainers' bargains by day—no brokers or specu-  
lators—Would they continue?  
Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt  
to sing?  
Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case  
before the judge?  
Then rattle quicker, heavier drums—you bugles wilder  
blow.

3

Beat! beat! drums!—Blow! bugles! blow!

Make no parley—stop for no expostulation;  
Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer;  
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man;  
Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's en-  
treaties;  
Make even the trestles to shake the dead, where they  
lie awaiting the hearses,  
So strong you thump, O terrible drums—so loud  
you bugles blow.

**VIGIL STRANGE I KEPT ON THE  
FIELD ONE NIGHT.**

VIGIL strange I kept on the field one night,  
When you, my son and my comrade, dropt at my side  
that day,  
One look I but gave, which your dear eyes return'd,  
with a look I shall never forget;  
One touch of your hand to mine, O boy, reach'd up as  
you lay on the ground;  
Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-contested  
battle;  
Till late in the night reliev'd, to the place at last again I  
made my way;  
Found you in death so cold, dear comrade—found your  
body, son of responding kisses, (never again on  
earth responding;)  
Bared your face in the starlight—curious the scene—  
cool blew the moderate night-wind;  
Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around me  
the battle-field spreading;  
Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet, there in the fragrant  
silent night;  
But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh—Long,  
long I gazed;  
Then on the earth partially reclining, sat by your side,  
leaning my chin in my hands;  
Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with  
you, dearest comrade—Not a tear, not a word;  
Vigil of silence, love and death—vigil for you, my son  
and my soldier,  
As onward silently stars aloft, eastward new ones up-  
ward stole;  
Vigil final for you, brave boy, (I could not save you,  
swift was your death,  
I faithfully loved you and cared for you living—I think  
we shall surely meet again;)  
Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the  
dawn appear'd,

My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd well his  
 form,  
 Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head,  
 and carefully under feet;  
 And there and then, and bathed by the rising sun, my  
 son in his grave, in his rude-dug grave I de-  
 posited;  
 Ending my vigil strange with that—vigil of night and  
 battle-field dim;  
 Vigil for boy of responding kisses, (never again on  
 earth responding;)  
 Vigil for comrade swiftly slain—vigil I never forget,  
 how as day brighten'd,  
 I rose from the chill ground, and folded my soldier well  
 in his blanket,  
 And buried him where he fell.

### **A MARCH IN THE RANKS HARD- PREST, AND THE ROAD UNKNOWN.**

A MARCH in the ranks hard-prest, and the road  
 unknown;  
 A route through a heavy wood, with muffled steps in  
 the darkness;  
 Our army foil'd with loss severe, and the sullen  
 remnant retreating;  
 Till after midnight glimmer upon us, the lights of a  
 dim-lighted building;  
 We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by  
 the dim-lighted building;  
 'Tis a large old church, at the crossing roads—'tis now  
 an impromptu hospital;  
 —Entering but for a minute, I see a sight beyond all  
 the pictures and poems ever made:  
 Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving  
 candles and lamps,  
 And by one great pitchy torch, stationary, with wild red  
 flame, and clouds of smoke;  
 By these, crowds, groups of forms, vaguely I see, on  
 the floor, some in the pews laid down;  
 At my feet more distinctly, a soldier, a mere lad, in  
 danger of bleeding to death, (he is shot in the ab-  
 domen;)  
 I staunch the blood temporarily, (the youngster's face  
 is white as a lily;)  
 Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene,  
 fain to absorb it all;  
 Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in  
 obscurity, some of them dead;

Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the  
 smell of ether, the odor of blood;

The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms of soldiers  
 —the yard outside also fill'd;  
 Some on the bare ground, some on planks or  
 stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating;  
 An occasional scream or cry, the doctor's shouted  
 orders or calls;  
 The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the  
 glint of the torches;  
 These I resume as I chant—I see again the forms, I  
 smell the odor;  
 Then hear outside the orders given, *Fall in, my men,  
 Fall in;*  
 But first I bend to the dying lad—his eyes open—a  
 half-smile gives he me;  
 Then the eyes close, calmly close, and I speed forth to  
 the darkness,  
 Resuming, marching, as ever in darkness marching, on  
 in the ranks,  
 The unknown road still marching.

Source:  
<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1867/>