

POEMS ABOUT WAR

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,
Tis a large old church at the crossing roads, now
 an impromptu hospital,
Entering but for a minute I see a sight beyond all the
 pictures and poems ever made,
Shadows of the 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 abdomen),
I stanch 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 ob-
 scurity, some of them dead,
Surgeon operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of
 ether, the odour of blood,
The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, 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 odour,
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, ever in darkness marching, on
 in the ranks,
The unknown road still marching.

- Walt Whitman; about 1862