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From the Archives: War and Poetry

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From the Archives

War and Poetry

War and poetry seem an odd mix. One associates poems with the lighter side of nature and war with man's darker realms. But war strikes at elemental impulses and feelings, at life and loss, bravery and fear, at the deepest reaches of human nature, and it has inspired many participants and observers to spill their reactions in poetry. No less a man's man than General George Patton wrote poetry to express his thoughts on war. From antiquity to our age, wars have inspired volumes of poetry by their participants, and many of the luminaries of literature have written of war in verse.

One of America's great poets of the 19th century was Walt Whitman. Best known for his *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman worked as a nurse during the Civil War, and he had a brother who was wounded. Among his poems of the war was this one.

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 below 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 upward stole,
Vigil 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 deposited,
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.

Sources: Andrew Himes, with Jan Bultmann and others, eds., *Voices in Wartime: The Anthology* (Seattle: Whit Press, forthcoming 2005), pp. 78-79; Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Modern Library, 1993), pp. 380-81.