

The Hospital Ships

CARMINE SARRACINO

They might have freighted dry goods—
blouses and trousers, spools of bright
gingham— from ports to upriver towns.
But these days they carry farm boys, mostly.
Like this load of New Yorkers in stacked
white hammocks stained red, none of whom
ever before traveled 20 miles from home.

Under a crescent moon the ships
churn into Baltimore harbor, slowly rocking,
creaking, so that many of the boys, dreamy
with anodynes, smile into their mothers' faces.

Some will be delivered dead. Others
missing the legs, hands, feet and arms dropped
beside the surgeons' tables for burial in pits.
Many expected to heal in days will die.

Soiled gauze must be removed, slough washed off,
fresh lint and bandage reapplied. The boys will need
someone to write a letter, read the Bible, someone
to return the next day, and promise to return again.

This time of night in Baltimore
whorehouses and bar rooms ring with revelry
(the good citizens tucked long since abed)
as these ships steam in from Chancellorsville.

At the end of Wharf 6, in the dark,
a sack of oranges at his feet,
Walt Whitman stands waiting.