

THE SOLDIER'S TALE

Once two friends were sitting at a bar,
Thinking there was nothing that could mar
Their friendship or engender enmity.
But they were wrong, as shortly you will see.

These two were both fine soldiers, none was better,
And both could follow orders to the letter,
Even into rivers of hot lead.
One was Tod, the other one was Ted.

They were childhood friends from a small town,
And on the day they doffed their cap and gown,
Both enlisted, neither would say nay,
For if one went, the other would not stay.

Together in Iraq they served a tour,
And then another, surer now than sure
That after each had saved the other's life,
No lover could divide them, nor no wife.

But at that bar there was a girl so hot
That both these friends were smitten on the spot.
Her long blond hair went down below her waist,
And breasts, half showing, begged for just a taste.
She wore a sweater open to the cleft
And a short, tight skirt. Whatever there was left
To see of her was bursting through her clothes.
And her name, appropriately, was Rose.

"The Yellow Rose of Texas," Tod exclaimed,
But she was a Virginia girl, she claimed,
Like them, small town, and just their age to boot.
As they talked, the friends stared at her fruit,
Each imagining that she was his
Exclusively, so fragile friendship is,

And wished the other vanished, gone, kaput!
Two young and healthy specimens in rut.

There was, however, no way one could lose
The other, nor could Rose at that point choose
Which one she wanted, and so soon all three
Were often in each other's company,
Hanging out or going here or there,
As near inseparable as any pair.

Eventually, each male wanted more,
And there was undeclared a silent war
Between the former friends for Rose's love,
As both looked hungrily at every move
She made, and melted at the thought
Of savoring at last the joys he sought.

One day Tod couldn't stand it anymore
And asked Ted, "What are we pretending for?
I want Rose for myself, and so do you.
Let's tell Rose and see what she will do!"

"True enough!" said Ted. "And I agree
It should be Rose who tells us who will be
Her lover, who should stay and who should go,
If it be either one of us. We know
She likes us, but perhaps only as friends,
While what I feel for her each moment rends
Me into bloody rags! I cannot sleep
Or eat for want of her! Instead I keep
Her face in front of me, and dream she's mine.
But I can't make a move when all the time
You're with us like a constant chaperone
Who'll never leave the two of us alone!"

"Alone?" Tod raged indignantly. "Alone?
I'd rather smash your head in with a stone
Than let you touch what's mine by right of love,
The greatest that has ever mortal moved,
I have no doubt -- I feel it in my heart,
That every day is freshly torn apart,
And torn apart again, and then again,
Each time I think of her with other men!"
And so the two agreed to leave to Rose
Which one gets to stay and which one goes.

But Rose was not so ready to agree
To choose which of the two contestants she

Would want to keep and which she'd throw away.
"I love you both!" she weeping said. But they
Insisted that she choose one or the other.

She would, she said, keep one just for a brother,
The other for a lover all her life,
And thus be both a sister and a wife.
But they were adamant that they would not
Accept less than the most desired spot,
And if not chosen, then would disappear,
For less than all was more than they could bear.

And so at last she said she would decide
Which of them she'd spend her life beside
When they came back from their next tour. For why,
She asked, choose now? She did not want to lie,
But told them that she feared what might transpire
In war, and that revealing her desire
Now might lose the love of the survivor,
Whose passionate return might well revive her.

Angry and dissatisfied, these two
Former friends bade their love adieu,
And soon were shipped out to Afghanistan
To fight the now resurgent Taliban.

Secretly each wished the other would
Not return, for then for sure he could
Enjoy the lifelong love of his sweet Rose.
Still, however hid, such feeling shows.

The two just barely spoke, and only when
Their duties forced them to, for they were then
Engaged in firefights both day and night,
And they, good soldiers both, did what was right.

They couldn't help but think, though, what might happen
If one were at the other's back. For passion
Sometimes overrules the god of war
And lets a rival rival be no more.
Both equally were knave and victim here,
Touched by the temptation and the fear.

One night, as they awaited the next day,
Knowing the anticipated fray
Would be the fiercest they had ever seen,
Both prayed to God to save them, and redeem
Their lives now sunk so deeply in despair,

For there was ample cause for sadness there.

Tod prayed for courage, and the strength to do
Whatever God might ask of him. And, too,
That his company might win the fight
And crush the enemy, for then he might
Return to his sweet Rose victoriously
And leave Afghanistan at peace and free.

Ted prayed for love, that it his heart might seize
And end the hatred in him by degrees,
So that cleansed he could return to Rose.
For each may harvest only seed he sows,
And if he would enjoy the fruits of love,
Then that must be alone what his heart moves.
He felt regret for many things he'd done,
The enemies destroyed, the battles won,
Yet not one inch of ground gained towards peace,
For in the heart is where all wars must cease.

Two prayers to God, of opposite import,
Yet both would find the answers that they sought.

At dawn the company moved out, with Ted
Leading the platoon that went ahead
To reconnoiter where the enemy
By best intelligence was thought to be.

Ted was lost, of course, in thoughts of Rose,
Mentally removing all her clothes,
When suddenly they started taking fire,
Undoing in an instant all desire.

Soon they were surrounded and could see
Nothing but the vaunted enemy
Firing from all sides as they took cover,
Each providing succor for the other.
Some were wounded, some already dead.
Now we switch to Tod, forsaking Ted.

Tod from a distance heard the battle rage
And lickety-split appeared on center stage,
Racing towards the battle carbine blazing,
Hoping that the hell that he was raising
Might distract the ambushers enough
To think that this was real and not a bluff.

And so it happened: the Taliban withdrew

As Tod's platoon came racing into view,
Recklessly exposed to enemy fire
Like seraphim descending in a choir,
As though the vanguard of a mighty host
About to turn its enemies to toast.

But just one Taliban, before he fled,
Turned to fire not five feet from Ted,
Who threw himself upon him, but too late
To save Tod from his self-appointed fate.
The bullet went right through Tod's head and came
Back out behind with pieces of his brain.

"Oh, no!" cried Ted. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no!"
But nothing that he said made it not so.

The Taliban was knocked cold to the ground,
And in a rage Ted almost fired a round
Right into him, to shred him into bits,
As one might who relieved himself in fits,
But then restrained himself, for one ought not
Revenge a wrong when anger is still hot,
Nor take a life to satisfy some pain
That then will doubtless come around again,
And then again, like ripples in a pond.
For every evil echoes far beyond
What you or I can see, and stirs the air
In ways that stoke the anger everywhere.

Ted secured his prisoner, then turned
To give his bloody friend the kiss he'd earned,
Holding him and rocking back and forth
Until his love had conquered all his wrath,
And sorrow like an evening darkness filled
His heart completely, now his friend was killed.

He had no thought of Rose, not even one,
And when his tour in hell was finally done,
He came back home to work upon a farm,
His only hope: to do no further harm,
But peacefully to live upon the land.

One day in town he heard a big brass band
Come thumping down the street, and followed it
Into the square, so full he barely fit
Against the storefronts lining the far side.

There upon the podium he spied

Tod's mother and Tod's portrait on a screen.
Ted wondered what this pageantry might mean
Until he saw the President hang on her
The prize that was the nation's highest honor.

Then followed praises of Tod's bravery,
How he saved his desperate company
By leading his platoon into the fire.
There was no sacrifice or calling higher.

And so on and so forth till the band again
Struck up its loud and soporific strain,
And soon the square was empty save for Ted
And Rose, who came across to him and said,
"I knew I'd find you here! Now tell me why
You never got in touch with me. Don't lie,
Please, for the truth is all I want. I see
A much-tormented soul in front of me."

Ted couldn't speak, but wept, and turned to go.
Said Rose, "You have no right to treat me so!
I loved you long, and would have married you.
Now just a bit of truth will have to do."

"The truth," Ted said, "is that I am no more.
When Tod died, so did I in this sad war.
For he died saving me, while all I thought
Was how his death might bring me what I sought,
Which was you, your body and your love,
While naught but selfish hate did in me move.

"And when I spared the life of him who shot
My friend, I felt some inner well-knit knot
Become undone, and all that was came flooding
Into me, the hating and the loving,
The bliss and bloody massacre, the murder
Holy -- lying, honesty, trickery, candor
Equally holy -- and I was holy, too.
Nothing mattered. Everything was true.
I wanted, needed, wished for nothing more
Than peace within, the antidote for war."

"You are my Ted," said Rose, "both good and bad.
The problem simply is that you are sad
And feeling guilty for what you have done.
But please believe me, Ted, that anyone
Might well desire a friend to disappear
Or wish a rival dead. But now you're here

And he just isn't anymore, not missing
Life and love, the sweet intent of kissing,
The fatherhood, the praise, the celebrations,
The memories, the pain, the altercations --
All, all to him is nothing, nothing at all,
As he is merely now what we recall.

"Death is the conclusion of the movie,
After which the passion and the fury,
The courage, cowardice, the shame, the meaning,
The love, the hunger, sacrifice, and seeming --
All is over, finished, done, complete.
Nor does one player get to keep his seat
Once it's over, lingering in the theater,
But everything there is has no hereafter.

"Tod is just a story we remember,
Nothing more to him or us. You render
Him no service in your grief, nor do
You serve the soul of anyone but you.
Grief is but a stage; its time is past.
Time to enter life again at last,
To live robustly, loving long and well
The family that will save you from this hell.

"Now turn to me, and I will be your wife,
Your lover and your friend for all your life,
And heal you, so that you may once again
Make joy the sweet companion of your pain."

Upon these words Ted came to life, as though
Some angel, just descended, bade him go
Back to the world to love, as well he would,
The woman who would bring him only good.
The universe receded into two,
And universal love to passion due.

Soon they were wed, and so I end my story.
Ted has got his love, and Tod his glory:
Each what he most sought, for fate is will,
As inner gods arrange our fortunes still.