My First Soldier

My soldier used to sit all day
In an empty lot beside his house
Full of violets and room
For his dog to dance in circles
Around him.
He sat and the dog circled.
The soldier also smiled:
Smiled constantly where he sat.
His smiling face sat like a smiling moon
As he picked the violets
And his little black dog danced
Around him.
We watched him sideways when
We had to pass that way.
Sometimes we passed that way
To watch him.
I never saw his mother.
My mother warned me away from him
With her softest voice.
He went to the war, she said,
And he came back broken.
Be careful and be kind.
Leave him alone.
I guess it was the warnings we got,
The old army clothes he wore
And his moon smile that drew us
To him. That and the dog and
The fact that he always sat.
We never saw him stand
Until one day the little dog
Danced out too far, out to the
Highway and—you may have guessed it—
Got himself killed.
That day the soldier stood in the empty lot,
Turned his empty moon face
Up to the empty blue sky
And howled an anguish that put
Our childish howls to shame.
After that, the soldier stayed inside,
So the empty lot then had only the violets,
Which still grew—in fact,
With no one there to pick them,
Grew better than ever.

Jan Heath