

Blood Brothers

—Winfield Goulden (101st Airborne)

Christmas Day, 1944, Bastogne, Belgium
Deep in the Ardennes Forest

The snow was heavy, wet and knee deep
It clung to me like glue
My eyebrows frosted
I stumbled across the village square
Tommy-gun on full automatic,
Approached the ruined church

It was an icy hell
We were devoid of hope
The only reality *fatigue*
Bone-aching, endless fatigue
Always, the fatigue

I slogged across the village square
Tommy-gun on full automatic
Approached the ruined church
I kicked open the door
Peering into the gloom
The place was a shambles
The roof collapsed—

And then, I saw them
sprawled before the ruined altar
Two soldiers
One dead American
One dead German

They must have surprised each other
At the same time
They must have fired
At the same time

Their torsos were torn asunder
But their faces calm and peaceful
Like saints fallen, sprawled
Each, in some crazy, last moment
Had fallen into the other's arms
Individual pools of blood intermingled
The American could not have been
more than eighteen
Red-orange hair
Freckles, a turned-up nose
The German was about the same age
Handsome, with blue eyes, light complexion
Long flaxen hair under his helmet

I looked down at them
And I remember thinking then
Even as I am thinking now
over a half-century later

What a strange place
For young boys
To be killing each other