

Christmas Time in the War

My father claims Korea's winters
are colder and more brutal
than those of Wyoming,
the state where he raised me.

I don't know if this is true
or if times of war are always
remembered poorly,
but of all my father's tales of Korea
his story of a frigid Christmas Eve in 1952
is the one I remember best.

While other soldiers prepared
to fight the bloody battle of T-Bone Hill
on a day sacred to most Americans,
my father and his army buddies got drunk.

In the true spirit of Christmas
they overindulged in several cases of beer
provided as an impromptu gift by a commanding officer,
then headed out on base.

Thrown out of every officers' club
within stumbling distance,
the motley crew returned to a crouching Quonset hut
and poured themselves into waiting cots.

Many of the water cans
placed by the pot-bellied stove to prevent freezing
tipped over under drunken feet,
covering the floor with inches of water.

An untended fire dwindled and
died
as the temperature continued to
drop.

Screams from an adjacent cot
jolted my father from drunken slumber,
and in the early hours
of an Asian Christmas morning
he struggled to free a hand
dangled from the edge of bed
and frozen to the floor.