

2000

Stain

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STAIN

Snow was falling last night when I returned
to my parish church. Snow is what brought me
back. Without it I couldn't have traced
my old bootprints, nor would the blood have been
as easy to follow—trailed as if every few steps
someone staggering home from the dentist,
with a handkerchief pressed to his mouth,
had paused to spit out the taste of metal.
Dulled by cold, bells hammered an hour
out of tune with the times.

It was as if the concussion of chimes,
the daily battering of the Angelus,
had worn away stone: below the steeple,
the neighborhood stood devastated—
windows blown inward, walls barely supported
by graffiti, backyards reduced to plots of graves.
The waifs, winos, and petty hoods
who once were local heroes, were wanted now
for crimes against humanity.

The stain, soaking through snow as if the wounds
of bodies half-buried in the frozen ground
were leaking through gauze, was visible
in every exhaled breath and in the fog
fuming from sewers and the exhausts of limousines
that idled beneath the blink of bar signs,
their brake lights reflecting across black ice.
The river, rusting before the embers
of bankrupt foundries, was an opened vein.