Stain

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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.