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Winter

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••WINTER

JUDY BLUNT

If this is winter, this is how: the leaves took one violent turn and were gone. Sudden like. Mornings a caucus of crows assembles in the stripped canopy over this street to decide on the sunrise. The debate runs later each day, bitch and argue, yea and nay, until a vote's handed up, unanimous—NOW! My neighbors and I, jerk-started to life sink to a rough idle at the edge of our beds, dry washing faces, cursing the birds. The cold floor. The sleet ticking twenty-nine degrees at the window. Almost light. Those with a view say the sun stumbles out of the mountains like a sickman, wretched and pale, dragging a pile of blankets. Those on the west edge of town watch it settle like a grudge before supper. Those of us in the center never look out. We rely on the say-so of crows.

Calendar says 'tis the season, though around the foundations of my house sweet William and marigold plants remain half-alive and unconvinced. Next door, the Border collie put to pasture in his own shit climbs the stack of patio chairs and leans over the fence, undecided. Across the street Evelyn drifts toward another new year with the last 93 lost in storage. She waves me over when I step out to collect the mail. *Is it time?* she asks, more anxious each day, *Is it time yet?* Almost time, I say, guilty of putting her off. I will find time tomorrow, I will take time, make time. Tomorrow we'll string the Christmas lights around her door and out on her window ledge, reading our way from one bent nail to the next by feel, every hook crucial, all of them buried elbow deep in paint. We'll prop her battered Jesus in the middle of light and ledge, and plug Him in. He'll reach out tentatively from the folds of his robe as he does every year, still willing to bless, but looking pained at the prospect. He buzzes faintly, but I have wrapped his frayed cord and tested his halo for sparks and it is my best guess and fervent holiday wish that once again this season he will not burn down her house.

When we are finished, Evelyn brews a pot of Red Rose tea, setting out tinned milk and sugar, and when it's time, I pour. Her small tray of cookies has been ready for days now. *Is it time?* Every year we sit facing the window and she smiles like a child, waiting for true dark. Jesus shines his best then, he always does.