

The Plate

Judith Chalmer

Along the road the winter birds are stuck
to the trees. It's cold. Chocolate doesn't last

an hour on the plate. Something's wrong
in the middle. Swallowing is hard.

The birds hang, round as apples, no more
than an arm's distance up. Our failing steps

disturb nothing but us, not the still brown
birds nor the rows of urban compost heaped

beneath coverlets of stiff white gulls,
nor the hawks who are somewhere in this

strip of furrows and trees. We can't go far
for fear of a sudden stitch, a catch of breath.

This level of illness is new. We turn to go home.
I realize, again, I'm in love. It happened

in a sea of summer freckles. It happened
as camembert softens in its skin, impossible

to refuse. Fingers full, I'm stuffed with love.
Before I knew it the square and the oval—

angled jaw, wondering brow, incalculable, thin
rays, all residue of smiles—were drilled

into my mind, described more distinctly, more convincingly than any text I've ever learned.

There are tests for what hurts her, ports and plastic tourniquets. The birds pillow their hearts

in stillness. I try not to worry. I try a few foods. Neither chocolate nor cheap novella helps.

But, alone while she sleeps, the sound loosed from my throat sings, helpless and bare

as any beast alive on legs to dance across ice in the glittering night: I am granted a great love.

