Jennifer Kornberger

In the Back of the Ambulance

To be human is to become visible while carrying what is hidden as a gift to others. This is the covenant of witness.

—Jane Hirshfield

He asks me, with the shy authority
of one who wears a borrowed uniform,
to *keep my eyes open*. His questions

firm into footholds for me to climb
out of a vestibular abyss; I focus on

his cheekbones—the wings of a nut-coloured
bird, his eyes, attentive as a spruce forest;

his proximity to the ailing, the injured, has lent
his hands an eloquence. I decide that if this
is my last conversation, it should not be
small talk. We speak

in English as if it were a language just
being born. He asks the usual about
snakes in Australia, and I uncoil his fear.

He confides that Betelgeuse was his first love,
that come October he will study astrophysics
in Vienna, even though he believes the maths

will crush him. Then, I understand the nature
of the emergency—this must be an exchange
of first aid. I try to rise to the role—
paramedic of poetry.

He presses his fingertips together, regards me
as someone who might know how a star
can stalk a person, how it can drop

like an iridescent spider into your web
of thought, spin you in the direction
of what is relatively true. Nothing in his

education can explain how the night sky is peopled,
or the solidarity he feels with the companion star
of Sirius which is very hot, but dark
as a family secret; the way he is

seized by fits of hope when a new nebula
appears, suddenly, like crocus flowers
after snowmelt. If the universe is the shape

of a saddle he must ride it to an infinite
destination and back, bearing news.

I sink back on the trolley I am strapped to.

Above us, dynasties bloom and disintegrate,
the light of vestigial stars shines on us.

The god of numberless things has not
forsaken him. It witnesses the delicate

equation that multiplies
between us in the twenty minutes
of life we share, and because

I will not see him again,

I keep my eyes open
until we pull in to Emergency.