Before Each Curtain, I Must Repair Myself, I Must Adapt

By Sonja Halvorson

Who knows what forest of trouble he knelt in,
blue pines and dog tags,
before I met him, if you can call it an introduction,
with a bullet clean through his wax-soft skull.

His body, now a slender sheath of warm organs
preparing for the electric hum of an elevator ride upstairs,
to be parceled out, gifted and scattered.
Living ashes.

After, we give ourselves four minutes,
to wash the hands, to wash the mind of
his starburst of laceration,
the cheek stippled brown with carbon, blue with fresh bruise.

This is exercise of a new kind, two more minutes to
move the heart back into place,
loosen the grip, reset the thermostat,
and remember
that there are others, in the lobby, awaiting you.

Our next patient,
naive to the wardeden silence next door,
only looks up from her phone once, to
swear at us for the delay.

She has a neck sprain and
I feel I have no poise in this.

I want to be nimble of heart,
to be decent through the throbbing of disappointment,
the imprints of sadness still palpable when we have moved on to
the less dying, but still scared among us.

She is not the patient that I wanted, but she is the one
I needed right then, a reminder
to give clemency where I can,
to see each patient partitioned,
each room a sovereignty, set apart.

Often our suffering is not relative to the
despair of others —
and there is a reason that pain-scales mean nothing,
each of us calibrated by different and imperfect hands.