

JENNIFER LIGHTY

That Which There Are No Words For

—in memoriam, Sandy Hook, December 14, 2012

All afternoon on the oyster farm
a great egret watched me work
hoisting bags of oysters
out of the shallow water
onto the dock to sort.

It was dark of the moon, tide lower
than I'd ever seen it, exposing rocks,
a pile of culch I'd dumped at the edge of the marsh,
mud speckled with dead slipper shells,
crabs that could be hibernating.

Oysters, sealed tight, holding
their mouthful of saltwater in deep cups
polished smooth inside by flesh,
passed through my gloved fingers,
sorting for market.

I wasn't thinking about thresholds,
how often we cross without knowing,
doors opening and closing
without a creak or click as the latch catches
and we wonder what side we are on now.

My body had taken over: bend, hoist,
dump, sort, back into the old bag
to grow another winter underwater,
or into a wider mesh
strung on a line close to shore for market.

I broke apart the fused ones,
pulled the beards off mussels
and tossed them overboard,
rescued small crabs who clung or froze,
imagining then I couldn't see them.

Minnows thrashed in my palms,
a surge of pure light and muscle.
When I released them back to the muddy water
through my cold fingers
joy flashed like quicksilver.

I wasn't thinking about thresholds,
I was on my hands and knees
pushing oyster bags through six inches of water,
sucked down when I tried to stand,
forced to crawl, cursing and laughing.

The egret, who had not moved in hours,
took a few elegant steps, rippling the calm.

Sitting up, kneeling in my waders,
waist-deep in mud,
I closed my eyes,
not because I knew what was coming,
but to see in the dark as well.

The white feathers of the egret so fine and smooth.
The marsh, golden in mid-December.

It was the day before our darkness made itself known,
that which we'd say about after,
There are no words for.
Crow call in the east answered by one at my back,
Prepare to be emptied.

The death of innocence is one way to learn
how to love. In the dark, I pray for another,
pure as white feathers, a breath
passing with ease through my body,
turned to the low sun moving across the marsh.