

Mark Doty

## THE WORD

White cotton cap, immaculate shoes  
and stockings, black coat over starched dress  
– nun nurse lab worker – she performs her work,

holding the book open in front of her, looking  
down through thick-rimmed black glasses, glancing up  
swiftly, so as not to take her eyes from the task,

covertly taking stock of who takes stock of her,  
spine of the holy text in her left hand,  
dark right forefinger tapping a random

or necessary passage, how has she chosen it?  
I would say she beats out a Jeremiad, cannot  
or will not speak and so this repeated iteration

is her form of witness, save that in her insistence  
she is striking with the hard tap of her fingernail,  
over and over, wearing the ink away

until the pages tear, lower half of the thin pages  
tatted, as if mice had been shredding  
the blessings and prohibitions for a nest,

ceaseless, the revelation that drives her  
so implacable she has no choice but to stand  
pointing to or punishing the book or both,

she insists on revelation while tearing away at the word  
that is everything to her and it does not deliver her and  
therefore she must go on wounding the book

in public, her art, displayed for us, unvarying,  
in the station at 34th Street and Sixth Avenue,  
a bitter night just after the turn of the year.