

# The New Criterion

## Poems

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### Alternating currents

by [Mary Jo Salter](#)

#### 1. Reading in the dark

Imagine, if you will, a hotel  
room fronting Niagara Falls. Helen  
Keller has been brought here by  
her teacher, Annie Sullivan,  
to meet their good friend Dr. Bell,  
inventor of the telephone,  
who has long worked with the deaf.  
Helen, thirteen, already known  
around the world for having thirsted  
at the well of knowledge in her own  
backyard, where Sullivan had spilled  
water in one hand and spelled  
the word into the other, now  
lets him lift her hand in his  
like a receiver, and gently press  
it flat against the window's ear.

The glass is cold. And through her splay  
fingers a liquid thunderbolt  
of vibration charges and discharges  
at once, so thrilling in its force  
that she nearly tastes the spray—  
though, one must add, the girl is made  
of words more than of anything ...

**Mary Jo Salter** is the author of *Open Shutters: Poems* (Knopf).

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