

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's upcoming book is *Open Shutters: Poems* (Knopf).

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