

THE LIGHT BRINGERS

a sequence of poems

by Eric Nelson



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DELAWARE RIVER POWER

The malarial porch light of houses
lining the river
shines on the calm surface
of its history, where America fell
in love with its own image.

At the bottom of light, darkness
churns like a generator.
Beneath hope of invention,
dim secrets lie lost there
and in our deepest memories.

Among them the nature
of darkness and the light
that shapes it; the distance
from hope to loss and back;
the purpose of the dead.

A child, turning in mother's water,
hears the river-whispered secrets
fade into the man-made light
when clinical hands slap
it into life.

THE QUALITY OF LIFE

By their various lights
they are known,
in a passing view of windows.

Dressed in green a woman walks
with flowers in a vase.
Gentle as a kiss she places them
on polished wood and steps away
to look a moment, then disappears.

On a kitchen wall the pots
and pans of convenience shine.
In the glow of an open refrigerator
a man stands with child in arms,
testing milk on his wrist.

A couple sit to supper,
heads bowed over white plates.
The light shows thinning of hair
as they bless and break bread,
and raise their eyes from grace.

The bulbs burn placidly
into the night, where darkness
waits to absorb them.

THE GROUND WORK

Mother used to drop me
at grandmother's house to play.
I always brought some soldiers
and my knife to wage great wars
on the famous banks of the Delaware.

She warned me not to get too near,
but the high grass at the edge
and oozy mud made perfect battlefields.
I dug catacombs for the dead.

Once when peace was struck
I wrapped the knife and buried it
to dig up after lunch.
It was longer than I remembered.

Grandmother hoped I learned a lesson,
not to bury things I loved.
She gave me a hug and a book
on the life of Thomas Edison.

Another knife was promised,
but I grieved the first
of all the coming losses,
that unearthed a life of invention.

THE WORK OF THOMAS EDISON

He was what we think
of America, practical
with a turn for the mechanical.

A free thinker he called himself
and worshipped hard work.
It gripped him like a vice.

Ideas were rarely his own,
but he'd work them to the bone
like a dog given right.

He was a hard man to figure.
Money was his mission only
if it bought time to work.

In his deaf lab he wore his eyes out,
sleeping only for a recurrent dream
in which he heard a river run.

He'd have no truck with art
nor matters of man's suspected spirit.
Indestructable matter moved him most.

But near the end he intended
to make a machine
that would detect the longings of the dead.

Patient as a corpse,
He set out to prove
that life goes on beyond us.

He knew if it was possible
his workmanship would carry
the scarcest urge of one world to another.

OCTOBER 21, 1879

The day Edison made light obey
his will, my grandfather struggled
to birth in a frame house
on the Pennsylvania side of the
Delaware River, near Washington's
Crossing, a stone's throw from Trenton.

Fourteen hours the steady autumnal
glow soothed his eyes to dreaming
of the world lit with his name.

She labored through the night
while gas lamps flickered on the wall.
In a moment between pain
she laid back on the wet pillow
and listened to the river
generate strong currents.

In the distance she saw him, his face
filled with light, carrier of invented
hopes striding into the future.
She held back a scream
when he urged his life
forward from darkness.

THE LIGHT BRINGER

The women in their houses
watched from kitchen windows
his wiry body shimmy a pole,
silver tools dangling.

They set aside the soapy dish,
picked up baby from the floor
and pointed to him, saying:
See the man, the man on the pole,
he's bringing light in the wires.
The child grabbed her breast buttons
and gurgled as she stared.

At the grocery store they gossiped,
who had light and where,
and wasn't it something to see
him in the high distance of morning
stringing electric wires
like party ribbons
straight across the sky.

Alone in their homes
they waited for him
to come like a lover comes.

AMERICAN STORY

He had clever hands.
Over each smooth fingernail
a morning sun rose, like over lakes
when it's a sign of clear weather.

Religion never took, even as a child
he knew no one walked on water.
The Delaware River, and funerals
of drowned boys taught him that.

He painted watercolors.
One hangs on the kitchen wall,
a ship anchored in the river,
people waving from the shore.

From the navy he married
a pretty girl for her beauty.
He came to love her and called her
long-waisted Mary when they were alone.

She bore him a son to bear
his name that died of mysteries
before he learned to speak it,
and a daughter, Emma, my mother.

Edison Electric took him on
running lines through the valley
to carry incandescence
into the bedrooms of farmers.

He believed two things so deeply
he didn't know he believed them:
First that the river murmured
to him a familiar wish.

Second that his life
was most alive when strapped
to a pole, live wires in his hands,
his eyes level with the sun.

THE PERSISTENCE OF VISION

"I had only one fact to guide me at all.
This was the principle of optics, technically
called the persistence of vision, which proves
that the sensation of light lingers in the brain
after the light itself has disappeared from
the sight of the eye." - Thomas Edison

*

It's child's play really,
a piece of cardboard
attached to string, on one side
a picture of a man with tools and wire,
on the other side a pole.
When the cardboard spins the man
climbs up, one fact at a time.

One day in his 36th year
he didn't come down.
When they unstrapped him his
forehead was black where it rested.
His fingers held the wires so tight
they used his pliers to unhand them.

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I brought a candle to his grave.
The cemetery was a meadow
of white silence on which I
intruded to find the mark
of my unknown grandfather,
who spent a short life running
light through the Delaware Valley.

Deep in a drift, my mind
as blank as the snow,
I shifted my weight for a thought
of his life or mine.

The wind blew bitter.
I knew better but I dug a hole
and planted the candle like a seed.
It couldn't hold a flame to winter.
I left it unburied in the face
of wind, and hurried away,
a sensation of light lingering.

ANNUIT COEPTIS

You wouldn't like me, Alva.
I am not the future
you had great hopes for.
I have a smart mouth,
little respect for utilities,
and a schizophrenic view
of America, land that I love.

If you could stand beside me
with the light from above
shining on the Delaware River,
and explain in that simple
aw shucks way you perfected
what you had in mind,
what it's like to be dead,
maybe I could make the connection.

My grandfather was your kind.
I'm told I am his image.
He was as innocent as you,
believing the future was
lines of light without end.
As I listen to the river run
rampant in its bed,
I am of two minds, both lost
in a vision of grace
gone blind.

THE TRUTH

I've told lies.
What I didn't know I invented.
My grandfather wasn't born
the day carbon glowed in a vacuum,
and no one I know ever spoke of his hands.
They were probably small and wart-ridden.

He never called his wife long-waisted Mary,
that was the lewd nickname of an early generator.
Margaret was her name and for all I know
he beat her when he drank too much.

Maybe the work frayed his nerves
and drove him to a bottle,
electricity was tricky business then.
He may have lived in living fear
of the day he would touch a wire
more alive than himself.

I can't say he was a good man,
but I am, I invented him that way
from the deep flowing fear which carries,
like the river, the echoes of the dead,
their hopes for us,
even the lies.

PASSING ON

Like the child's room we leave
after goodnights and kisses,
the past darkens after us.

O my mothers and fathers,
my hope-laden child, for all
love is, we grow old alone.

But the fathomless light
in the corner of our lives
runs the length of darkness.

Uncanny as the blind we tap
into our child's memory.
Our eyes widen to the night.

Less disappears than appears
in the dark
sources of discovered light.