

## The Turbine

*Monroe, Harriet, 1860-1936*

*To W. S. M.*

Look at her—there she sits upon her throne  
As ladylike and quiet as a nun!  
But if you cross her—whew! her thunderbolts  
Will shake the earth! She's proud as any queen,  
The beauty—knows her royal business too,  
To light the world, and does it night by night  
When her gay lord, the sun, gives up his job.  
I am her slave; I wake and watch and run  
From dark till dawn beside her. All the while  
She hums there softly, purring with delight  
Because men bring the riches of the earth  
To feed her hungry fires. I do her will  
And dare not disobey, for her right hand  
Is power, her left is terror, and her anger  
Is havoc. Look—if I but lay a wire  
Across the terminals of yonder switch  
She'll burst her windings, rip her casings off,  
And shriek till envious Hell shoots up its flames,  
Shattering her very throne. And all her people,  
The laboring, trampling, dreaming crowds out there—  
Fools and the wise who look to her for light—  
Will walk in darkness through the liquid night,  
Submerged.

Sometimes I wonder why she stoops  
To be my friend—oh yes, who talks to me  
And sings away my loneliness; my friend,  
Though I am trivial and she sublime.  
Hard-hearted?—No, tender and pitiful,

As all the great are. Every arrogant grief  
She comforts quietly, and all my joys  
Dance to her measures through the tolerant night.  
She talks to me, tells me her troubles too,  
Just as I tell her mine. Perhaps she feels  
An ache deep down—that agonizing stab  
Of grit grating her bearings; then her voice  
Changes its tune, it wails and calls to me  
To soothe her anguish, and I run, her slave,  
Probe like a surgeon and relieve the pain.

We have our jokes too, little mockeries  
That no one else in all the swarming world  
Would see the point of. She will laugh at me  
To show her power: maybe her carbon packings  
Leak steam, and I run madly back and forth  
To keep the infernal fiends from breaking loose:  
Suddenly she will throttle them herself  
And chuckle softly, far above me there,  
At my alarms.

But there are moments—hush!—  
When my turn comes; her slave can be her master,  
Conquering her he serves. For she's a woman,  
Gets bored there on her throne, tired of herself,  
Tingles with power that turns to wantonness.  
Suddenly something's wrong—she laughs at me,  
Bedevils the frail wires with some mad caress  
That thrills blind space, calls down ten thousand  
To ruin her pomp and set her spirit free.  
Then with this puny hand, swift as her threat,  
Must I beat back the chaos, hold in leash  
Destructive furies, rescue her—even her—  
From the fierce rashness of her truant mood,  
And make me lord of far and near a moment,  
Startling the mystery. Last night I did it—

Alone here with my hand upon her heart  
I faced the mounting fiends and whipped them down;  
And never a wink from the long file of lamps  
Betrayed her to the world.

So there she sits,  
Mounted on all the ages, at the peak  
Of time. The first man dreamed of light, and dug  
The sodden ignorance away, and cursed  
The darkness; young primeval races dragged  
Foundation stones, and piled into the void  
Rage and desire; the Greek mounted and sang  
Promethean songs and lit a signal fire;  
The Roman bent his iron will to forge  
Deep furnaces; slow epochs riveted  
With hope the secret chambers: till at last  
We, you and I, this living age of ours,  
A new-winged Mercury, out of the skies  
Filch the wild spirit of light, and chain him there  
To do her will forever.

Look, my friend,  
Behold a sign! What is this crystal sphere—  
This little bulb of glass I lightly lift,  
This iridescent bubble a child might blow  
Out of its brazen pipe to hold the sun—  
What strange toy is it? In my hand it lies  
Cold and inert, its puny artery—  
That curling cobweb film—ashen and dead.  
But see—a twist or two—let it but touch  
The hem, far trailing, of my lady's robe,  
And lo, the burning life-blood of the stars  
Leaps to its heart, that glows against the dark,  
Kindling the world.

Even so I touch her garment,  
Her servant through the quiet night; and thus  
I lay my hand upon the Pleiades

And feel their throb of fire. Grandly she gives  
To me unworthy; woman inscrutable,  
Scatters her splendors through my darkness, leads me  
Far out into the workshop of the worlds.  
There I can feel those infinite energies  
Our little earth just gnaws at through the ether,  
And see the light our sunshine hides. Out there  
Close to the heart of life I am at peace.