

Sunday School

Marilyn Bushman-Carlton

Each week the teacher gave us
something to be grateful for,
for we saw
with perfect pity,
even smugness,
certainly relief,
the conspicuous thing about him,
his missing right arm—
the urgent implication of a lesson.
We saw the cross he had to bear,
the visual aid of it,
the shrunken, shriveling stump
we imagined,
a weight beneath his pinned-up sleeve.
The loss was punctuated
by his whole and useful left arm,
its hand deftly,
proudly even,
holding notes or hanging loosely
from his shoulder.
One Sunday he used the phantom arm
as a metaphor, telling how,
as a foolish teen, he'd lost it waterskiing,
how he'd cast aside the rules
allowing the rope
to twist itself around his upper arm
like a string tied taut
around a baby tooth to rip it

permanently away.
After his story—
he must have wanted this—
we rose above our ferocious pity,
rose, if just a little, into empathy.
But as resolve so often goes,
some of us began to envy
his rise along the learning curve
and the distraction
his missing arm offered.
We were young, you see,
and anxious,
our crosses yet unknown.