

## 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.