



7-1-2001

Nobody Can

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Recommended Citation

Bushman-Carlton, Marilyn (2001) "Nobody Can," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 3 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol40/iss3/14>

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Nobody Can

That good child, George Washington
who grew up to be president,
hung at the front of the second grade room. It was February
and we were making cherry trees.

Stretched above the blackboard,
twenty-six large and small letters
fit exactly round and straight
within solid and dotted lines.
Even the snowflakes outside
stacked in sequence on the chainlink fence.

Our desks were cleared
and covered with sheets of white paper
which we'd branched and pink-blossomed.
To set the paint, Mrs. Putnam had shown how to dip them
quickly
into a bucket of water,
holding the paper
so the water wouldn't puddle in the middle
and spill.

There were boys and girls behind me waiting;
somehow water, lots of it,
slapped the floor, rivered.

She didn't see who did it,
but a boy told my name.
Jangling papers quieted;
a bell rang at a far end of the school.
Mrs. Putnam, with round-rim glasses, sometimes yelled.

But she shushed the boy, handed him a rag,
restarted the bucket line,
then led me softly to the back wall
where we hung my finished tree.

Later, she paused above my desk,
where I practiced a row of small *bs*,
my flecked tan paper torn and bruised.
You're doing fine, she whispered,
you'd need a ruler and compass
to make them perfect.

—Marilyn Bushman-Carlton