

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

Beverly Jackson  
**Last Communion**

Karen considers his skin. One might say gray, but no, it is like old putty, or the matte glass of an empty shower. The wrinkles of his neck crease like origami. Specks of blood around the stiff bandages over his breastbone.

A stout nurse studies dials on the ventilator, makes notes, and straightens the bedcovers over his thin body. "Your family's here to see you, Petey," she says, her voice running scales in feigned enthusiasm, the rhythmic *whoosh, click, hisss* of the machine in the background. Her palm lightly bats his cheek and in the hollows of his bony skull, his eyes spring open.

Karen's mother gasps and pushes her daughter forward. "You talk to him, honey," she says, shrinking away from the bed, face clouded.

*It shouldn't be me, Karen thinks, moving toward him, even as a kid, it was me. Why does she do this?* Close enough to be snared in his line of vision, she avoids eye contact, follows the tubes out of his nose, the suction catheter and its jar. *Where is my compassion, she wonders. When had he ever had any? is her answer.*

His forehead dives into deep trenches and his mouth begins to move, but no sound.

"See, he wants to talk," the nurse says. "I'll leave you to have a chat."

"Can he talk?" Karen asks.

"Of course not, dear. I was teasing. He's on a *ventilator*. but he's trying." Then she laughs. "Ta Ta. Be right back." The nurse gives a little wave as she swings out the door.

Karen leans forward to see if she can read her stepfather's lips. They move rapidly, and his eyebrows rise and fall in rhythm, an urgency in his fluttering fingers.

"What's he trying to say?" her mother whispers from behind.

Karen doesn't answer. She is afloat in the black pupils of his colorless eyes, the darkest memories of her childhood drowning her in them. His mouth moves up and down like a marionette's. She remembers that mouth, its breath, the moist proximity, and she drifts upward, looks down on him instead, as she pulls the strings, jerks his head forward and backward. She drifts, torn between amusement, shame. She lowers her puppet mother into the bed beside him and forces them to copulate, winding the breathing tubes around their wrists, their necks, her mother's coital shrieks spurt from his moving mouth. Her stomach lurches as she hovers over them.

The door pushes open, her mother jumps, and Karen, feeling dizzy, sits lightly on the edge of the hospital bed.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

The nurse smiles and adjusts the Venetian blinds so that the slats of sunshine on Pete's green cotton blanket disappear. "Have you all had a heart to heart?" she says.

Pete's fingers reach toward Karen, as his scowl deepens and his guppy mouth moves. His body is rigid.

"What's he saying?" Her mother's voice whirrs in the gloom like a gnat.

"We've just been telling Daddy how much we love him," Karen says to the back of the nurse. "Isn't that right, Mamma?"

"He says he loves you too," the nurse replies, not moving from the window, where she has tilted a slat to better see the street.

Beverly A. Jackson is a poet/writer/painter living in the mountains of North Carolina. Her work can be found in over 70 venues, in literary print magazines and on the web. Her chapbook "Every Burning Thing" is available from Pudding House Press. She blogs at [www.beverlyajackson.com](http://www.beverlyajackson.com).

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

