

Ellen McKnight

Denial

Pain has made an ascetic of her. Vespers, compline, lauds, it wakes her, her body a knot around the throb. Unlocking her limbs, she rolls her torso to the edge of the bed, braces her right elbow under her breast, and concentrates on one solid push over and out. She wobbles for a moment, then collects herself for the hunched march across the cold floor. Her altar, the toilet, to negotiate function past the tumor. Each day she wonders if this will be the time she won't succeed. She puts her left hand on her right thigh and breathes, shallow and quick, second-stage Lamaze; in between each breath, she gasps a prayer. She has her rituals, her designated clothing – soft and ugly, no zippers or snaps – her sweatshirt a tunic over a skirt of loose pants; she has her inner litany of vows to be good. She makes concessions over every detail in her life: *I'll let this car go ahead of me and the next one, no problem; I won't object when the doctors make me wait; I won't complain about the pain, no not at all not even to you.* She swears never to lie. She promises celibacy as a matter of course. She never presumes to expect a reply, but instead takes on both roles herself, supplicant and god-tyrant. Each morning she picks out one large chalky white pill of narcotic temptation and sets it in a porcelain ramekin by the sink, but stops her hand each time it starts to reach. Self-discipline, that's what's required. Control to replace its lack. In the mirror she can hardly discern any more the sharp, haughty nose, the stubborn bones of her chin. But she won't give in. *I did it*, she thinks when she reaches the night, as she lowers her chastened body back into bed. But then in the morning, the ramekin is empty. She lied again, if only once. And so the flagellation begins anew. She sets out a pill and drags her body away, a small desperate part of her fluttering behind, looking for a way to escape.