Behind Steel Doors

Everyone says she fought with bravery
and how courageously she toughed it out.
She was one of those people,
everyone says,
that never really let it get to her.
She just did what she had to do…
Chemo, puke, manage her remaining hair, take care of daughter
Chemo, puke, manage her husband, take care of daughter.
She was fearless.
She never whined. She did not complain.
She did not rail against God.
That’s what they say.

There is truth in that,
I know.
But I also know,
that here, with me,
she sometimes collapsed her managing, dissociated, take care of it all,
Be the good wife and good mother and do your Southern give it all a good smile thing.
Or if you can’t smile,
at least make of yourself an opaque mirror.
Here, with me,
hers faith sometimes was as shaky as the muscles that sometimes quivered
under the burden of her own weight.
And while, she never did whine,
(even with me)
she was,
in fact,
Terrified.

She was used to keeping the terror
deep down down deep in the basement,
behind the steel padlocked door
Along with all the other unwanted emotions,
memories, and unmet needs.
But every time, she told me,
someone said that word,
that peptobismal word
her insides would drop like that basket at the amusement park
fast and hard until she was convinced her entrails would surely pass her throat
and escape her mouth
until she was a vacuous cavern
her insides on the outside for everyone to see.
She should have been surprised that not even her closest could recognize that kind of terror. But she was highly skilled in the art of Southern privacy and she knew a thing or two about keeping the real self on the inside.

But this I cannot speak because our relationship, like her terror, a secret. I was one more thing she liked to keep down deep deep down in the basement.

I want to speak out loud now that she has passed. My impulse to free all the basement slaves moderated only by my commitment to secrecy to keeping the terror, unwanted memories, unmet needs and me deep down down deep in the basement behind the steel and padlocked doors.

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