

## 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,  
her 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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