

In Praise of Cowards

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No brave man could ever imagine
how much a coward can tolerate.
No hero could ever bear so much:
so many tiny bottles, tinctures of horror
to be shaken in bitter, stale water

and swallowed without flinching,
so many quick little razor slits
in his itchy scrotum. A coward learns
to tolerate any flagellation
from whatever strong arm flicks the whip.

The religion of daily drudgery,
the slowly broken spine of hope—
a brave man would run back to the mountain
and hide his heroic head in shadows,
but any coward learns to bear it.

So praise him, the boy who never knows
the quick, passing pain of a broken arm,
who never knows the beauty of the view
from the top of the tree. He learns to live
with loss, and, likely as not, to smile.