

CLEANING A HANDRAIL

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Footprints loop from every direction
toward the temple in a blaze of snow
that softens and quiets the land.

I am on the bottom level
cleaning the handrails—
cotton cloth and wood-cleaner—
some mix that won't stain the grain.

Rising a stair or two at a time,
I see in the glint of light—
pressing itself through wheat-etched glass
whorl upon whorl—
fingerprints stacked and unstacked
on the rails—little maps

from Idaho, Utah, Montana,
Africa, Ireland, Slovakia;
some so thin they could be angels,
some like children, some smooth
as old age, some etched like glass
with the cuts of work or ordinary living.

How many thousand fingers?
I smear them into each other
with the first pass;
then pass again on an upstroke:
hand, air, light, cotton, oil, fumes
all mix and polish and evaporate,
shine of wood, my arm fibers
bending into a lovely pain.

This handrail, wooden rod,
rising into light and light,
until even the dust motes shine
in a rainbow without color;
a slow, steady, stream rising
against gravity, cascading up
into clouds and light and sun.