

Category 11, Charlotte Wise Memorial: 1st prize

Poet's note:

I'm one who likes his ekphrastic poetry to be paired with the visual work that triggered it. Caillebotte is one of my favorite artists. I brought a postcard of this work back from France with me, and I look at it often. To check out his side of this conversation, I invite you to find the image online. (I should add that the floor is believed to be his own studio floor. For me it's a painting about getting ready to paint; it helps get me ready to write.)

GUSTAVE CAILLEBOTTE, *Raboteurs De Parquet (Floor strippers)*

Caillebotte presented his painting at the 1875 Salon. The jury, no doubt shocked by its raw realism, rejected it, some critics talking of "vulgar subject matter."

--from the Musée D'Orsay website

Three hand sanders: peeling a wood floor's glow
back to its natural light. They lean into

the strain of it, dug-kneed on lacquered boards—
dark strips, striped with light, that bear them onwards

like the grooves of tracks; they ride the task of it,
their bare backs arched to take the lash of light,

their stripped torsos buff as the naked wood.
Set on their stage as though choreographed: heads

of dark, slick hair identical; same pants,
skin; same pose of hard muscle held, made dance.

The flourishes, though, are a stubborn mess:
fat tatters of shavings; a bottle, a glass;

two work bags in the corner a slung smudge—
a vulgar thing to call art, this was judged.

Which may dumbfound us now. What beauty we
once had to strain, against good taste, to see.

Behind us, Caillebotte's window, its spare skyline.
Before us, our page; our task of bearing down.

Derek Kannemeyer