

# T H E B I C K E R S



M A R Y J O S A L T E R

It's as if he's edible  
himself, the overfed young man  
clutching a greenish pair of gloves  
like a bunch of steamed asparagus.  
His wavy hair is chestnut. His face  
is packed with juice, a pale pink cherry  
topping the pudding of his body,  
or topping what tops it first, the white  
dollop of a scalloped collar.  
His velvet cloak is a salmon color.  
Even the golden frame that hems  
him in is delicious, its baroque  
buttercreams of ornament  
the slathered icing on the cake.

His counterpart, a perfect match  
(at least by the measure of the canvas  
and the same resplendent frame)  
hangs just to his left. How strange  
I'd walked past without noticing.  
The painter's skill is just as fine:  
that lifelike treatment of the hand  
holding a small, improving book;  
the black shape of the suit set off  
by a paper-white, fine-pleated ruff  
and a bearded, balding head. A man  
who's prosperous but moderate,  
diligent and slightly peeved –  
the languid young man's father, surely.

Bartholomeus van der Helst  
painted them both, I'm reading now,  
in 1642. They were  
the famous Bickers of Amsterdam.  
The Bickers! Savor too the name.  
Picture the Bickers' League, a band  
of seven family politicians  
holding office all at once.  
Andries, the father here, was mayor  
time and again, a mercantile  
diplomat who sought to make  
the world safe for his shipping routes.  
Thanks to pragmatists like him,  
the Eighty Years' War stopped at last.

That was a topic van der Helst  
would paint too, as a grand tableau:  
"Banquet at the Crossbowmen's Guild  
in Celebration of the Treaty  
of Munster." Here the revelers are,  
deaf to whatever caused the war,  
shaking hands and doffing hats,  
lifting refilled pilsner glasses,  
and letting their long hose fall down  
into their floppy, wide-cut boots.  
Poor Andries, meanwhile – stuck  
beside that spoiled brat on the wall,  
his only child, Gerard, who ate  
the fruits of other people's work!

Opposites attract, and yet  
one Bicker only can endure  
at the Rijksmuseum gift shop  
as a refrigerator magnet.  
Gerard, of course. Who'd want his dad,  
that pious trading magnate, for  
a souvenir of all that's sour?  
It hardly matters he had cause.  
The old war of the generations

outlives all truces, and remains  
rich fodder for our snickering.  
Taking a seat at the café,  
I order waffles with whipped cream  
and can hear the Bickers, bickering.