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.