

DIANE SEUSS

Still Life with Self-Portrait

I look at Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts's *Still Life with Self-Portrait* and I want to touch him. I suppose he was a bad man. Weren't all men bad back then? Weren't women bad as well? Or did they only exist within the confines of the badness of men and thus come to be known as good? I have existed within the confines of the badness of men. Men have existed within the confines of my own badness. I'm bad enough to admit I liked it when men existed within my badness rather than the other way around.

Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts appears to be the kind of bad man who likes to trick the eye. He favored *trompe l'oeil*, optical illusion. In *The Reverse of a Framed Painting* he paints the front of the painting as if it were the back, complete with wood grain, framing nails, and a tag—number 36—seemingly stuck to the painting with sealing wax. Aside from this, there is no content. He has offered you his backside and called it his frontside, has offered you nothing and called it something. You've known men like Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts.

In *Still Life with Self-Portrait* he paints a painting of a painting. It is an unremarkable still life on what seems to be black velvet. White grapes with a tendril from the vine still attached, three peaches, an opened walnut, and a cut squash. One corner of the velvet canvas appears to have peeled away from the frame on which it's mounted, exposing the wall, the wooden frame, and the stitched

hem along the reverse side of the fabric.
The still life rests on a little shelf he's painted
to mimic a real shelf. It holds his pipe, his
tobacco jar, his brushes, and two pegs
on which hang his gummy palette and a rag.

Alongside the painting of the painting
is a tiny self-portrait that seems to be pinned
to the wall as one would pin a dead moth
to a display board. It is ostensibly the artist
himself, his thick, black hair brushing the top
of his shoulders, his white collar turned down
beneath his paunchy face, his eyes not meeting
mine but gazing off over my left shoulder.
With annoyance? I think he looks annoyed.
Or he's creating the illusion of disinterest.
I've known that kind of man. Or he's thinking,
"This isn't my real face I've painted. She will
never really know me." A man said something
like that to me once: "You don't know anything
about me," a man I'd lived with a long time.
My whole life I've wanted to touch men
like Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts
but they will not let themselves be touched.