

Self-portrait (Rembrandt)

by Christien Gholson

1

Old Man Rembrandt's face looked into mine. In this painting he is perpetually 63, a year from death. I was 51, death close

from a recent funeral. What did he see? The ones who stopped in front of the painting and lingered were all older, their faces

lined, slack, beginning that slow decline, like mine; the skin's longing for earth.

2

Who am I? It used to be a question of failure. *How can you not know . . . at your age? We watched each other for an hour.*

His face, his eyes, told the story of falling, how light falls, is revealed by the shadow of deep furrows, thick folds. *Who am*

I? Did he answer that question for himself when he stared back at this portrait?

3

Staring into his face, I felt my own, how parts were frozen by fear, fear of everything moving around me, fear of things

that happened long ago, the muscles around my eyes retreating, wincing, waiting for the blow; but also parts that were more

relaxed, reaching out, listening, curious, wondering *Where is the end of this thing called I?*

4

On the morning of that recent death, there was a crow on a bridge rail. A few black feathers lifted and fell in the wind. *Who am*

I? Old Man Rembrandt stared into me, into himself. The crow's call turned the answer into the question's echo: *Who am I?*

Light falls. Darkness reveals light that is always falling. Down the hall, in another gallery, someone laughed.

National Gallery, London