that last pastrami sandwich smuggled
from Manny’s after my brother picks me up at the airport
in the rustbelt city we grew up in and then abandoned.
We can’t ever feel the exact heartburn

after standing in the lunch crowd line, after shouting
“Pastrami” at the corned beef guy,
making him turn his bulk and knives to carve
from the peppery slab, after eating both halves

and the pickle and the entirely excessive latke, watching
the grease from that extra sandwich we ordered
speak with a spreading mark on the white deli bag.
We can get pastrami. There will be pepper, salt, and fat;

meat cured to the color of an heirloom rose. But
we can’t sit on a park bench with our father
as he eats the sandwich, the one we hid
from our mother because she wouldn’t have approved

of all the cholesterol. We can’t get back
my father eating without dropping one cracked peppercorn, one
single caraway seed, though his brain no longer told him where his
feet were or his cousin’s name. He still knew

how to hold the gargantuan sandwich, with as much feeling as a
blues harp before letting loose the most wailing riff
— I don’t even know who I gave that harmonica to—
we can get a guitar and a fiddle and two chrome-glorious

 accordions. But if we pick up an instrument, it won’t
sing. Not the way the August heat beat down and the greased
paper bag glowed incandescent and the pickle shone
as my father offered it to my brother, who stood dripping

on the rip-rap after clambering out of that great lake, his mild
beer gut hanging companionably over his swim trunks.