

## *We Can't Get Back*

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  
spread 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.