

*Arthur's*

What's painted on the side says *Paradise*,  
but this is Arthur's Diner no matter whose  
spatula cracks eggs into the hissing spit

of ham and bacon frying on the grill,  
in that little kitchen with just enough headroom  
behind the counter to go mad. But Arthur,

he sang, all morning long, making Boot Mill  
Sandwiches while Dot, his wife, miserably took  
your order as if she hoped it was the last,

her eyes so sad for all her days inside  
an idle train car where construction crews  
and kids cutting class from the high school

sat on stools, shoulder to shoulder, breathing grease  
on *Herald* headlines about the Sox, Celts and Pats.  
Now Arthur's gone, dead not long after Dot.

And Artie Jr. sold the place then left,  
I think, for Florida. But it's not so easy  
erasing place and so the new face flipping

burgers becomes the booths and Formica, the cheese  
stacked in diamond towers for peeling's ease,  
becomes the guy pretending not to see

the students cockroach to the basement when  
the cops raid the restaurant for truants  
who can't afford to bust parole again.

Slathering butter on French toast, he exists  
as someone else's Arthur or Al or Ed.  
And the diner insists itself beside the river

always younger than the water, but  
more ancient as well, heavy with the sink  
of chipping paint, of taped-up ducts dumping

their rainbowed grease into the Eastern Canal.  
It sits shadowed in the hip of the mill,  
as if it wished this street of winter potholes,

more propped shack than greasy spoon, painted  
black, with windowpanes bloodshot when caught  
inside the dawn. This place, for me, a stove

during those biting rains of March I worked  
landscaping lawns, pretending the work was work  
I was supposed to do, probably taking checks

from guys basically living in their shoes  
so I could be blue-collar for a season  
or two. And I worked hard and I worked long,

busted my ass for whatever buddy was  
my boss that spring through fall. But I could quit,  
would not have to cut and haul and thatch until

at last there was nothing left of my back.  
Twenty years later, Arthur's new owner slaps  
a plate in front of me: the butter-grilled roll,

homefries, egg and triple meat of Arthur's  
famous and delicious. *Who am I if it tastes  
as good?* I think. *What am I if it's dry?*