What’s painted on the side says \textit{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 \textit{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?*