Love Poem to the First Woman I Hated

*for Joey, my boyhood friend*

Julia, you were the first.

Uttering your name over the toilet
I gripped myself like one of the weapons
you bragged your gangster friends
carried for protection.

For his protection, your son
carried his silence like an i.d.

At twelve Joey was stealing clothes,
pocketing money where he could,
trying to adopt your foul language
Into the shy lyric of his painful voice.

Julia, you slut.
Waiting for your son, I saw you
cross your legs slowly,
the hem of your stocking still a
blindfold over my eyes.
I remember you pointing the knife, for fun,
your laugh an edge of steel against his fear.
You didn’t see the wound flowering within…

Joey never made it out of sixth grade.
Even now the needle marks in his arms
are nothing more than ellipses
of an overdue composition.
In and out of jail
the bars he gripped could have been
the bones of your shoulders.

Julia, the red light in your bedroom
burned its promise through
the cold of my adolescent night;
it burned in the small fire
under the back porch
where Joey and I warmed our hands;
it burns now, aflame in my heart,
Ross Talarico

not sex, but love
for the boy who reached out toward
such an awful woman…

And now, at a time
when the simple lyric of confession
becomes the sick chant that
drives us; at a time when I wanted
to say only Joey loved you, he loved you,
he loved you…

now I make my way back
eyeing your legs turned bone,
and caked red of your thinning lips
and the rusted edge of the voice you plead with.
You should have known the one violent deed
separates the boy within from the man
who will stand before you.

Kneel, Julia.
Unlatch this thick belt.
Pray for your dying son.