

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.