

John Foulcher

Absence

I'm dancing barefoot

Heading for a spin ...

— Patti Smith

I sold what little soul I have
and took that job at Trinity:
the lure of a 'superior' school
was only money, really – a father

has to keep his kids. The kids
there, though, were granite, a clique
of chiselled dandies, scholars in the kind
of bile that trickles from a glance,

that settles in a sneer. Only
Will seemed different, always
in the distance, always somewhere else.
The day when he skipped chapel,

tired of all that saintly babble,
I had to dole his penance out.
There had to be detention, but I knew
frittered post-school hours would be for him

the easy way, and so we talked instead
of mystery and matter, the myth
of punishment, the myth of just reward.
He listened, smiled and lost himself

in sunlight settling on the floor,
the wind-washed trees beyond the glass.
He liked the afternoon – enough,
he teased, for truancy to get another run,

as if attention totaled love.
My feral daughter, Sophie, fetched him
once to stay with us when he'd been scorched
by family, the soul-devouring flames.

He slept in our spare room, lingered
in the morning, sorting through
my random rows of music from the ark:
Hendrix, Zeppelin, The Ramones,

all that pointlessness. I lent him *Land*
by Patti Smith. But after graduation
I lost him on his muddy path,
heard only scattered prattlings,

a kind of washing of the hands:
he didn't 'come to much'. God knows
he had the brains, and more than that,
a heart, that burned to ash inside the years

he hovered around hospitals,
was meted hours and drugs, then let
loose and left, the threads of ampler love
unstitching on the breeze. Gradually

he wilted, tilting into tiny crimes.
In the end, they sectioned him:
turning out his pockets, he handed over
all things sharp, but no one took

his belt. He hung there in the morning,
bare feet bathed in flawless light,
all truths understood, all paradoxes
clear. I never got my CD back,

a measly price for absence. Still,
I like to think he's out there, drifting
on the solar winds, dancing in the crash of stars,
with God and all the devils watching from the dark.