

Robert Johnson

Little is known of the devil,
but it's said you could hear him play the juke joints
of the Mississippi Delta in 1933.

His rhythm came from the swamp
and slid its belly over the earth,
choosing gravel over heaven.

It's said he sped up dice in the gambler's hand
and crackled to the dances of women,
creating a burn that would outlast Muddy and T. Bone.

The hands that clasped together at the crossroads
could vibrate the strings of a guitar
until inhibition lost, and bodies swayed as if possessed.

What isn't said is how the devil pushed away Jim Crow
on nights when his music seemed as suitable as moonlight.
How he was forced to hustle town to town

while singing the song of a culture
that had progressed from shackles to ramshackles.
It isn't said that the devil was a black man

placed on the outskirts of society
who created one of America's favorite myths:
a shadow behind six steel strings.

