Because It's Raining on Robert Johnson's Birthday

James Finnegan

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Because it's Raining on
Robert Johnson's Birthday

Which is the way it should be.
No round-faced sun high over the city
shining like the bossman, bright and white,
when the line restarts
for the morning shift.
The rain turning into sleet, into steel,
guitar picks coming down and the sound
of freight trains sliding through the railyard,
strumming the fretwork
of ties and track.

Last night I dreamed
he was tramping down the shell roads
of Louisiana,
his clothes rumpled and torn.
Following him,
looking over his shoulder was his shadow
wearing a tuxedo, black as scorn.
I could hear bloodhounds hunting coon
on the ridge at dusk, digging out
the moon from its lair of night.

The door of my room chained, rattling
when the loaded coalcars pass
carrying the burden of darkness
into morning light.
The lamp left on, the shade
dusty as mothwings.
On the nighttable
an insidious still life—
a fedora, no shotglass or syringe, just my pen
and a few crumpled bills and change.

This morning it rains for Robert Johnson.
He shakes my shoulder
saying wake up whiteboy.
This day ain't goin' away.
Nobody askin' ya to believe in the blues
just because.

James Finneghan