

## The Debt

Once a year we hear  
the words of Martin's dream,  
and he receives a boulevard  
for every city in this land.

It doesn't pay  
the debt we owe.

In a state where you  
stood by while he was killed  
an airport now is known  
for Medgar Evers.

It doesn't pay  
the debt we owe.

And sometimes you repeat, by rote,  
a song that Ella also sang. But no,  
not even this, nor placing  
one Black face inside  
the whitest of your houses  
pays the debt we owe.

Our debt sprouts roots  
which dig that deeply:  
down into a soil on which  
these huddled masses toiled  
without relief—though  
they, too, had a yearning  
to breath free.

Your prestigious universities,  
cathedrals, mansions, palaces  
of culture or of sport  
and so much more—even  
“amber waves of grain”  
of which you sing  
with so much pride  
(from sea to shining sea)—  
have grown upon  
this ground, fertilized  
long ago by unpaid blood  
and tears.

“God’s grace was shed on thee”—  
‘tis said, and yet they rarely note  
that this was at the cost  
of someone’s unpaid blood  
and tears.

“Times have changed”  
I hear you cry and it is true:  
strange fruit does not so often hang  
from southern trees these days.  
It rots away instead in prison cells  
or finds itself cut down too soon  
upon a ghetto’s street.  
The stolen labor, land and lives  
just continued by another name,  
you see, even after someone realized  
that it might serve you just as well  
to mark the end of chattel slavery.

The debt,  
I note, is still  
compounding as we speak.

Stories such as this will often  
find their end upon a moral,  
so here’s how this one goes:  
The time is now  
to pay the debt we owe.

The time has come  
to pay the debt we owe.

Steve Bloom  
September 2014