W.E.B. Du Bois

WRITINGS
The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade
The Souls of Black Folk
Dusk of Dawn
Essays and Articles

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XI

Of the Passing of the First-Born

O sister, sister, thy first-begotten,
The hands that cling and the feet that follow,
The voice of the child's blood crying yet,
Who hath remembered me? who hath forgotten?
Thou hast forgotten, O summer swallow,
But the world shall end when I forget.

Swinburne.

Unto you a child is born," sang the bit of yellow paper that fluttered into my room one brown October morning. Then the fear of fatherhood mingled wildly with the joy of creation; I wondered how it looked and how it felt, — what were its eyes, and how its hair curled and crumpled itself. And I thought in awe of her,—she who had slept with Death to tear a man-child from underneath her heart, while I was unconsciously wandering. I fled to my wife and child, repeating the while to myself half wonderingly, "Wife and child? Wife and child?"—fled fast and faster than boat and steamcar, and yet must ever impatiently await them; away from the hard-voiced city, away from the flickering sea into my own Berkshire Hills that sit all sadly guarding the gates of Massachusetts.

Up the stairs I ran to the wan mother and whimpering babe, to the sanctuary on whose altar a life at my bidding had offered itself to win a life, and won. What is this tiny formless thing, this new-born wail from an unknown world,—all head and voice? I handle it curiously, and watch perplexed its winking, breathing, and sneezing. I did not love it then; it seemed a ludicrous thing to love; but her I loved, my girl-mother, she whom now I saw unfolding like the glory of the morning—the transfigured woman.

Through her I came to love the wee thing, as it grew and waxed strong; as its little soul unfolded itself in twitter and cry and half-formed word, and as its eyes caught the gleam and flash of life. How beautiful he was, with his olive-tinted flesh and dark gold ringlets, his eyes of mingled blue and brown, his perfect little limbs, and the soft voluptuous roll which the blood of Africa had moulded into his features! I held him in my arms, after we had sped far away to our Southern home,—held him, and glanced at the hot red soil of Georgia and the breathless city of a hundred hills, and felt a vague unrest. Why was his hair tinted with gold? An evil omen was golden hair in my life. Why had not the brown of his eyes crushed out and killed the blue?—for brown were his father's eyes, and his father's father's. And thus in the Land of the Color-line I saw, as it fell across my baby, the shadow of the Veil.

Within the Veil was he born, said I; and there within shall he live,—a Negro and a Negro's son. Holding in that little head,—ah, bitterly!—the unbowed pride of a hunted race, clinging with that tiny dimpled hand,—ah, warily!—to a hope not hopeless but unhopeful, and seeing with those bright wondering eyes that peer into my soul a land whose freedom is to us a mockery and whose liberty a lie. I saw the shadow of the Veil as it passed over my baby, I saw the cold city towering above the blood-red land. I held my face beside his little cheek, showed him the star-children and the twinkling lights as they began to flash, and stillled with an even-song the unvoiced terror of my life.

So sturdy and masterful he grew, so filled with bubbling life, so tremulous with the unspoken wisdom of a life but eighteen months distant from the All-life,—we were not far from worshipping this revelation of the divine, my wife and I. Her own life builded and moulded itself upon the child; he tinged her every dream and idealized her every effort. No hands but hers must touch and garnish those little limbs; no dress or frill must touch them that had not weared her fingers; no voice but hers could coax him off to Dreamland, and she and he together spoke some soft and unknown tongue and in it held communion. I too mused above his little white bed; saw the strength of my own arm stretched onward
through the ages through the newer strength of his; saw the
dream of my black fathers stagger a step onward in the wild
phantasm of the world; heard in his baby voice the voice of
the Prophet that was to rise within the Veil.

And so we dreamed and loved and planned by fall and win-
ter, and the full flush of the long Southern spring, till the hot
winds rolled from the fetid Gulf, till the roses shivered and
the still stern sun quivered its awful light over the hills of
Atlanta. And then one night the little feet pattered wearily to
the wee white bed, and the tiny hands trembled; and a warm
flushed face tossed on the pillow, and we knew baby was sick.
Ten days he lay there,—a swift week and three endless days,
waisting, wasting away. Cheerily the mother nursed him the
first days, and laughed into the little eyes that smiled again.
Tenderly then she hovered round him, till the smile fled away
and Fear crouched beside the little bed.

Then the day ended not, and night was a dreamless terror,
and joy and sleep slipped away. I hear now that Voice at mid-
night calling me from dull and dreamless trance,—crying,
"The Shadow of Death! The Shadow of Death!" Out into the
starlight I crept, to rouse the gray physician,—the Shadow of Death, the Shadow of Death. The hours trembled on;
the night listened; the ghostly dawn glided like a tired
thing across the lamplight. Then we two alone looked upon
the child as he turned toward us with great eyes, and
stretched his string-like hands,—the Shadow of Death! And
we spoke no word, and turned away.

He died at eventide, when the sun lay like a brooding sor-
row above the western hills, veiling its face; when the winds
spoke not, and the trees, the great green trees he loved, stood
motionless. I saw his breath beat quicker and quicker, pause,
and then his little soul leapt like a star that travels in the night
and left a world of darkness in its train. The day changed not;
the same tall trees peeped in at the windows, the same green
grass glittered in the setting sun. Only in the chamber of death
writhed the world's most pitious thing—a childless mother.

I shirk not. I long for work. I pant for a life full of striving.
I am no coward, to shrink before the rugged rush of the
storm, nor even quail before the awful shadow of the Veil.

But hearken, O Death! Is not this my life hard enough,—is
not that dull land that stretches its sneering web over me
cold enough,—is not all the world beyond these four little
walls pitiless enough, but that thou must needs enter here,—

thou, O Death? About my head the thundering storm beat
like a heartless voice, and the crazy forest pulsed with the
curses of the weak; but what cared I, within my home beside
my wife and baby boy? Wast thou so jealous of one little
cog of happiness that thou must needs enter there,—thou,
O Death?

A perfect life was his, all joy and love, with tears to make
it brighter,—sweet as a summer's day beside the Housatonic.
The world loved him; the women kissed his curls, the men
looked gravely into his wonderful eyes, and the children ho-
ered and fluttered about him. I can see him now, changing
like the sky from sparkling laughter to darkening frowns, and
then to wondering thoughtfulness as he watched the world.
He knew no color-line, poor dear,—and the Veil, though it
shadowed him, had not yet darkened half his sun. He loved
the white matron, he loved his black nurse; and in his little
world walked souls alone, uncolored and unclothed. I—yea,
all men—are larger and purer by the infinite breadth of that
one little life. She who in simple clearness of vision sees be-
yond the stars said when he had flown, "He will be happy
There; he ever loved beautiful things." And I, far more igno-
rant, and blind by the web of mine own weaving, sit alone
winding words and muttering, "If still he be, and he be
There, and there be a There, let him be happy, O Fate!"

Blithe was the morning of his burial, with bird and song
and sweet-smelling flowers. The trees whispered to the grass,
but the children sat with hushed faces. And yet it seemed a
ghostly unreal day,—the wraith of Life. We seemed to rum-
ble down an unknown street behind a little white bundle of
posies, with the shadow of a song in our ears. The busy city
dinned about us; they did not say much, those pale-faced hur-
rying men and women; they did not say much,—they only
 glanced and said, "Niggers!"

We could not lay him in the ground there in Georgia, for
the earth there is strangely red; so we bore him away to the
northward, with his flowers and his little folded hands. In vain, in vain!—for where, O God! beneath thy broad blue sky shall my dark baby rest in peace,—where Reverence dwells, and Goodness, and a Freedom that is free?

All that day and all that night there sat an awful gladness in my heart,—nay, blame me not if I see the world thus darkly through the Veil,—and my soul whispers ever to me, saying, "Not dead, not dead, but escaped; not bond, but free." No bitter meanness now shall sicken his baby heart till it die a living death, no taunt shall madden his happy boyhood. Fool that I was to think or wish that this little soul should grow choked and deformed within the Veil! I might have known that yonder deep unworldly look that ever and anon floated past his eyes was peering far beyond this narrow Now. In the poise of his little curl-crowned head did there not sit all that wild pride of being which his father had hardly crushed in his own heart? For what, forsooth, shall a Negro want with pride amid the studied humiliations of fifty million fellows? Well sped, my boy, before the world had dubbed your ambition insolence, had held your ideals unattainable, and taught you to cringe and bow. Better far this nameless void that stops my life than a sea of sorrow for you.

Idle words; he might have borne his burden more bravely than we,—aye, and found it lighter too, some day; for surely, surely this is not the end. Surely there shall yet dawn some mighty morning to lift the Veil and set the prisoner free. Not for me,—I shall die in my bonds,—but for fresh young souls who have not known the night and waken to the morning; a morning when men ask of the workman, not "Is he white?" but "Can he work?" When men ask artists, not "Are they black?" but "Do they know?" Some morning this may be, long, long years to come. But now there wails, on that dark shore within the Veil, the same deep voice, Thou shalt forgo! And all have I foregone at that command, and with small complaint,—all save that fair young form that lies so coldly wed with death in the nest I had builded.

If one must have gone, why not I? Why may I not rest me from this restlessness and sleep from this wide waking? Was not the world's alembic, Time, in his young hands, and is not my time waning? Are there so many workers in the vineyard that the fair promise of this little body could lightly be tossed away? The wretched of my race that line the alleys of the nation sit fatherless and unmothered; but Love sat beside his cradle, and in his ear Wisdom waited to speak. Perhaps now he knows the All-love, and needs not to be wise. Sleep, then, child,—sleep till I sleep and waken to a baby voice and the ceaseless patter of little feet—above the Veil.