# Native Guard[1]

*If this war is to be forgotten, I ask in the name of all things sacred what shall men remember?*
—FREDERICK DOUGLASS

## *November 1862*

Truth be told, I do not want to forget
anything of my former life: the landscape's
song of bondage—dirge in the river's throat
where it churns into the Gulf, wind in trees
choked with vines. I thought to carry with me
want of freedom though I had been freed,
remembrance not constant recollection.
Yes: I was born a slave, at harvest time,
in the Parish of Ascension; I've reached
thirty-three with history of one younger
inscribed upon my back. I now use ink
to keep record, a closed book, not the lure
of memory—flawed, changeful—that dulls the lash
for the master, sharpens it for the slave.

## *December 1862*

For the slave, having a master sharpens
the bend into work, the way the sergeant
moves us now to perfect battalion drill,
dress parade. Still, we're called supply units—
not infantry—and so we dig trenches,
haul burdens for the army no less heavy
than before. I heard the colonel call it
*nigger work*. Half rations make our work
familiar still. We take those things we need
from the Confederates' abandoned homes:
salt, sugar, even this journal, near full
with someone else's words, overlapped now,
crosshatched beneath mine. On every page,
his story intersecting with my own.

1. Epigraph from "Address at the Grave of the Unknown Dead" by Frederick Douglass, Arlington, Virginia, May 30, 1871; quoted in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* by David Blight. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2001.

The first regiments of the Louisiana Native Guards were mustered into service in September, October, and November of 1862—the 1st Regiment thus becoming the first officially sanctioned regiment of black soldiers in the Union Army, and the 2nd and 3rd made up of men who had been slaves only months before enlisting. During the war, the fort at Ship Island, Mississippi, called Fort Massachusetts, was maintained as a prison for Confederate soldiers—military convicts and prisoners of war—manned by the 2nd Regiment. Among the 2nd Regiment's officers was Francis E. Dumas—the son of a white Creole father and a mulatto mother—who had inherited slaves when his father died. Although Louisiana law prohibited him from manumitting these slaves, when he joined the Union Army, Dumas freed them and encouraged those men of age to join the Native Guards. (From *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War* by James G. Hollandsworth. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995.) [Trethewey's note.]

### *January 1863*[2]

O how history intersects—my own
berth upon a ship called the *Northern Star*
and I'm delivered into a new life,
Fort Massachusetts: a great irony—
both path and destination of freedom
I'd not dared to travel. Here, now, I walk
ankle-deep in sand, fly-bitten, nearly
smothered by heat, and yet I can look out
upon the Gulf and see the surf breaking,
tossing the ships, the great gunboats bobbing
on the water. And are we not the same,
slaves in the hands of the master, destiny?
—night sky red with the promise of fortune,
dawn pink as new flesh: healing, unfettered.

### *January 1863*

Today, dawn red as warning. Unfettered
supplies, stacked on the beach at our landing,
washed away in the storm that rose too fast,
caught us unprepared. Later, as we worked,
I joined in the low singing someone raised
to pace us, and felt a bond in labor
I had not known. It was then a dark man
removed his shirt, revealed the scars, crosshatched
like the lines in this journal, on his back.
It was he who remarked at how the ropes
cracked like whips on the sand, made us take note
of the wild dance of a tent loosed by wind.
We watched and learned. Like any shrewd master,
we know now to tie down what we will keep.

### *February 1863*

We know it is our duty now to keep
white men as prisoners—rebel soldiers,
would-be masters. We're all bondsmen here, each
to the other. Freedom has gotten them
captivity. For us, a conscription
we have chosen—jailors to those who still
would have us slaves. They are cautious, dreading
the sight of us. Some neither read nor write,
are laid too low and have few words to send
but those I give them. Still, they are wary
of a negro writing, taking down letters.

2. The Union ship *Northern Star* transported seven companies of the 2nd Louisiana Native Guards to Fort Massachusetts, Ship Island, on January 12, 1863. The lines ". . . I can look out / upon the Gulf and see the surf breaking. / tossing the ships, the great gunboats bobbing / on the water. And are we not the same, / slaves in the hands of the master, destiny?" are borrowed, in slightly different form, from *Thank God My Regiment an African One: The Civil War Diary of Colonel Nathan W. Daniels*, edited by C. P. Weaver. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998. [Trethewey's note.]

X binds them to the page[3]—a mute symbol
like the cross on a grave. I suspect they fear
I'll listen, put something else down in ink.

## *March 1863*

I listen, put down in ink what I know
they labor to say between silences
too big for words: worry for beloveds—
*My Dearest, how are you getting along—*
what has become of their small plots of land
*did you harvest enough food to put by?*
They long for the comfort of former lives—
*I see you as you were, waving goodbye.*
Some send photographs—a likeness in case
the body can't return. Others dictate
harsh facts of this war: *The hot air carries*
*the stench of limbs, rotten in the bone pit.*
*Flies swarm—a black cloud. We hunger, grow weak.*
*When men die, we eat their share of hardtack.*[4]

## *April 1863*[5]

When men die, we eat their share of hardtack
trying not to recall their hollow sockets,
the worm-stitch of their cheeks. Today we buried
the last of our dead from Pascagoula,
and those who died retreating to our ship—
white sailors in blue firing upon us
as if we were the enemy. I'd thought
the fighting over, then watched a man fall
beside me, knees-first as in prayer, then
another, his arms outstretched as if borne
upon the cross. Smoke that rose from each gun
seemed a soul departing. The Colonel said:
*an unfortunate incident*; said:
*their names shall deck the page of history.*

## *June 1863*[6]

Some names shall deck the page of history
as it is written on stone. Some will not.

3. Illiterate prisoners would sign letters written on their behalf with an "X."
4. A durable cracker of flour, water, and salt.
5. On April 9, 1863, 180 black men and their officers went onto the mainland to meet Confederate troops near Pascagoula, Mississippi. After the skirmish, as the black troops were retreating (having been outnumbered by the Confederates), white Union troops on board the gunboat *Jackson* fired directly at them and not at oncoming Confederates. Several black soldiers were killed or wounded. The phrases *an unfortunate incident* and *their names shall deck the page of history* are also from *Thank God My Regiment an African One: The Civil War Diary of Colonel Nathan W. Daniels.* [Trethewey's note.]
6. During the battle of Port Hudson in May 1863, General Nathaniel P. Banks requested a truce to locate the wounded Union soldiers and bury the dead. His troops, however, ignored the area where the Native Guards had fought, leaving those men unclaimed. When Colonel Shelby, a Confederate officer, asked permission to bury the putrefying bodies in front of his lines, Banks

Yesterday, word came of colored troops, dead
on the battlefield at Port Hudson; how
General Banks was heard to say *I have*
*no dead there*, and left them, unclaimed. Last night,
I dreamt their eyes still open—dim, clouded
as the eyes of fish washed ashore, yet fixed—
staring back at me. Still, more come today
eager to enlist. Their bodies—haggard
faces, gaunt limbs—bring news of the mainland.
Starved, they suffer like our prisoners. Dying,
they plead for what we do not have to give.
Death makes equals of us all: a fair master.

*August 1864*

Dumas was a fair master to us all.
He taught me to read and write: I was a man-
servant, if not a man. At my work,
I studied natural things—all manner
of plants, birds I draw now in my book: wren,
willet, egret, loon. Tending the gardens,
I thought only to study live things, thought
never to know so much about the dead.
Now I tend Ship Island graves, mounds like dunes
that shift and disappear. I record names,
send home simple notes, not much more than how
and when—an official duty. I'm told
it's best to spare most detail, but I know
there are things which must be accounted for.

*1865*[7]

These are things which must be accounted for:
slaughter under the white flag of surrender—
black massacre at Fort Pillow; our new name,
the Corps d'Afrique—words that take the *native*
from our claim; mossbacks[8] and freedmen—exiles
in their own homeland; the diseased, the maimed,
every lost limb, and what remains: phantom
ache, memory haunting an empty sleeve;
the hog-eaten at Gettysburg, unmarked
in their graves; all the dead letters, unanswered;

refused, saying that he had no dead in that area. (From *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War.*) [Trethewey's note.]

7. In April 1864, Confederate troops attacked Fort Pillow, a Union garrison fifty miles north of Memphis. One correspondent, in a dispatch to the *Mobile Advertiser and Register*, reported that, after gaining control of the fort, the Confederates disregarded several individual attempts by the black troops to surrender, and "an indiscriminate slaughter followed" in which Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest purportedly ordered the black troops "shot down like dogs." (From "The Fort Pillow Massacre: Assessing the Evidence," by John Cimprich, in *Black Soldiers in Blue: African-American Troops in the Civil War Era*, edited by John David Smith. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.) [Trethewey's note.]

8. Men who hid to avoid conscription into the Confederate army.

untold stories of those that time will render
mute. Beneath battlefields, green again,
the dead molder—a scaffolding of bone
we tread upon, forgetting. Truth be told.

2006

## Miracle of the Black Leg

*Pictorial representations of the physician-saints Cosmas and Damian and the myth of the miracle transplant—black donor, white recipient—date back to the mid-fourteenth century, appearing much later than written versions of the story.*

1.

Always, the dark body hewn asunder; always
one man is healed, his sick limb replaced,
placed in the other man's grave: the white leg
buried beside the corpse or attached as if
it were always there. If not for the dark appendage
you might miss the story beneath this story—
what remains each time the myth changes: how,
in one version, the doctors harvest the leg
from a man, four days dead, in his tomb at the church
of a martyr, or—in another—desecrate a body
fresh in the graveyard at Saint Peter in Chains:[1]
*there was buried just today an Ethiopian.*
Even now, it stays with us: when we mean to uncover
the truth, we dig, say *unearth.*

2.

Emblematic in paint, a signifier of the body's lacuna,
the black leg is at once a grafted narrative,
a redacted line of text, and in this scene a dark stocking
pulled above the knee. Here the patient is sleeping,
his head at rest in his hand. Beatific, he looks as if
he'll wake from a dream. On the floor
beside the bed, a dead *Moor*—hands crossed at the groin,
the swapped limb white and rotting, fused in place.
And in the corner, a question: poised as if to speak
the syntax of sloughing, a snake's curved form.
It emerges from the mouth of a boy like a tongue—slippery
and rooted in the body as knowledge. For centuries
this is how the myth repeats: the miracle—in words
or wood or paint—is a record of thought.

1. Roman Catholic church and basilica in Rome; among the relics preserved there are chains said to have bound Saint Peter when he was held captive in Jerusalem.