

● Jan. 1, 1863: President Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing enslaved African-Americans in rebelling states. The text is read aloud at thousands of gatherings, including at a Union Army encampment in Port Royal, S.C.

Imagine the scene I cannot write. The Colonel steps onto the platform, reciting to himself: I'll tell you how the sun rose, a ribbon at a time. It is New Year's Day. The president has signed the historic war measure.

The Colonel was not alone in his feeling that after the disgrace of Bull Run, the Union needed to take Port Royal Island, and after the slaughter at Fredericksburg, Port Royal needs this convocation. White women in bonnets and white men in vests crowd the platform. The Colonel studies the First South Carolina Volunteers arrayed before him. It is the first black unit. The men of his regiment adore campfires, spelling books and tobacco, but none of them drink. Most have freed themselves. Take a ride on a federal gunboat and join the Cause. Everywhere, the Colonel sees black women in their Sunday kerchiefs. God's blessings are on dress parade.

The Colonel hands the Emancipation Proclamation to a penitent white man who used to be called Master over in Beaufort. The Colonel said Oof when he first got his copy. The orderly's breathing told him that he, too, had read the Proclamation, had felt power naked, actual armed-rebellion naked, suppressing said rebellion naked, shall be free naked, maintain freedom of said persons naked.

The prayer is over. The former master of cotton is no orator, but the Colonel is where power and freedom are forging God's naked sword. He marvels at the Lord's invention, the sheer darkness of his men. Is it not glorious to be handsome.

The Colonel receives regimental colors and the Union flag from a New Yorker who will not cease addressing him. Ten cows revolve on spits, and the New Yorker will not be still. The Colonel fights to remain in this sacred place where every heart desires the same thing. Beyond the live oaks, another steamer arrives on the blue water.

Seated nearby are the camp's brilliant surgeon and its most beautiful schoolteacher, the Colonel's friends from home, Boston. The Surgeon reads his wife's letters to the Schoolteacher. It is not that she is a black woman and he a white man. A free black woman whose family is richer than either of theirs, the Colonel did not say. The Surgeon's beard is shining, and the Schoolteacher's head is uncovered.

The New Yorker will not yield the flag. The Colonel's wife is an invalid, and the Surgeon's wife is plain. The Schoolteacher is an unfair quadroon beauty, the Colonel has told his friend. She and the Surgeon love to talk of their love for horses, moonlight and the Cause.

The Colonel has the flag in the silence. He slowly waves the flag, thinking this is the first time it may hold true meaning for them. An elderly black voice begins, *My country, 'tis of thee*. A few black women add their voices. Suddenly, many. The Colonel quiets the white people so that only black people are singing.

The Schoolteacher continues to sing, and so does the Surgeon. *Let freedom ring*. This is war, the Colonel smiles.

By Darryl Pinckney

● July 30, 1866: During a constitutional convention called for by abolitionist leaders, in response to the Louisiana Legislature's refusal to give black men the vote, armed white people attack a crowd. More than 35 people die, mostly black men.

The bodies all around began to cook and swell in the heat: fingers the size of pickles, forearms rising like loaves until as big and gamy as hams festering in the noontime sun. When the Secesh police began their rounds, Lazarus got to crouching, then creeping, until — at last — he had to lie down among the dead, confining himself between two fallen neighbors, readying himself for the shot to the head.

Just hours earlier, all of colored New Orleans in their finest had come out: veterans from the Louisiana Native Guards had amassed at the procession's front, joined by one or more bands that began to blaze and bray their trumpets and trombones once struck up by some hidden concertmaster. Seamstresses, maids, cooks, bricklayers and longshoremen: They'd all come out at the behest of Roudanez, owner of the black folks' paper, as well as Dostie, the radical Republican dentist Democrats declared a race traitor and nigger lover. The white Republicans could not get votes over the Confederate Democrats without colored men, nor could the colored man get the vote without the whites who fought against the Confederate Redeemer cause.

"Thirty-seven niggers dead," Lazarus had heard someone say while he played possum. "And that fella Dostie."

Such a pus and rot he'd never smelled before. Needling choruses of gallinippers hiving above yards of bursting flesh. Rodents hurrying forth with their ratchet scratching at wounds. Midges inspecting tonsils on display. Then there was the nearly silent sound of worms at work, underworld missionaries unsewing men from their souls.

It wasn't until 3 o'clock that the military finally came and gave orders as to what should be done; the wounded were to go to the Freedmen's Hospital, which had once been Marine Hospital. The dead were to lie out in the hundred-degree heat until another wagon became available, and there was to be martial law for the rest of the night, lasting who knew until when.

The ride to the Freedmen's Hospital killed a few who weren't yet dead. A jolting ride over cobblestones, banquettes, undone roads, bricks from the riot left in the middle of the street, while the whole hospital was filled with big moans, the smell of grease and camphor, wet wool and kerosene.

They rolled him onto a flat cot, then put yet another man on top of him and jostled them both through a dark corridor. The blood from the man on top of him seeped into Lazarus's eyes, ran in thin tickling trickles into his ears, clumped in thick waxy clots in his nose, his hair.

It scared him to death to be so in the dark, and try as he might to push the dead man off him, he could not. They carried him into a room, a place that was even more foul-smelling than the stench of bodies swelling in the sun. When his cot passed the threshold, the men who'd been carrying it dropped it, sending the dead man falling to the floor, only the sound didn't sound like Lazarus expected it to, but more like a clank and clatter, as though the heavy doors of an armoire or chiffonobe had been banged shut. The men who'd been holding the cot retched, one, then the other.

By ZZ Packer