

This Week's Montage

—*Juneteenth*

Comparative Haiku

selected by

Allan Burns

Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on 22 September 1862. It took effect, legally, on 1 January 1863 but had little immediate impact on the life of most southern slaves. In Galveston, Texas, emancipation was enforced at last only with the arrival of Union troops on 19 June 1865. That date is celebrated as Juneteenth (a portmanteau of “June” and “nineteenth”); it’s an official holiday or observance in twenty-nine U.S. states and the District of Columbia and is observed informally in most other states, as well as some other countries, including Japan. *Juneteenth* is also the title of an edited fragment from a 2,000-plus page manuscript by Ralph Ellison (1914–1994; author of the classic *Invisible Man*, 1952), published posthumously in 1999. So, especially with that literary connection in mind, the day—which seems invested with extra-special significance this year—provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the work of haiku poets of African descent. For this gallery I’ve selected haiku by the famous novelist Richard Wright, who mentored Ellison and composed more than four thousand haiku in the final years of his life; Geoffrey Wilson, whose *100 Mississippi Delta Blues Haiku* sequence is filled with pungent allusions and humor; and Jamaica’s Raquel D. Bailey, a rising star within the haiku community.

You can learn more about Juneteenth here: <http://www.juneteenth.com>

Richard Wright (1908–1960)

Geoffrey Wilson (b. ?)

Raquel D. Bailey (b. 1978)

In the falling snow
A laughing boy holds out his palms
Until they are white.

The consumptive man,
Who lives in the room next door,
Did not cough today.

One autumn evening
A stranger enters a village
And passes on through.

A wounded sparrow
Sinks in clear cold lake water,
Its eyes still open.

In a silent room
A feather rises slowly
And floats in the heat.

An empty canoe
Turning slowly on a river
In the autumn rain.

Hopping on the fence,
A sparrow casts its shadow
On a horse’s flank.

from *Haiku: This Other World* (Anchor Books, 2000)

Juke joint’s blue light
Drifts across the bayou.
Moonshine laughter.

Dawn at Faulkner’s grave—
Busted whiskey bottle and
Chrysanthemums.

Town square. Empty
Except for pigeon droppings
on Robert E. Lee.

Bright moon night.
Crows in the sycamores
Watch the rice come up.

Civil War buffs
Recreate every detail
But the dying.

Too hot to make love.
Where did all those
Children come from?

Summer silence;
suddenly an insect’s
blue electrocution.

from *100 Mississippi Delta Blues Haiku*
[http://web.archive.org/web/20060616182651/
http://people.txucom.net/geoffw/](http://web.archive.org/web/20060616182651/http://people.txucom.net/geoffw/)

moonlit sky
he rubs the ice cube
against her lips

a soft melody:
drops of rain
from each leaf

blue heron
still . . . in the stream
our shadows

a cloud-hung sky
listening
to one last tune

he refuses
to let go
tangled old vines

his black and white picture
still in the window . . .
gray winter clouds

lightning
we measure the lengths
of our scars

1–2 from *Simply Haiku* 6.3, 2008
3 from *Mainichi Daily News* No. 708, 2008
4 from *Other Poetry* 3.3, 2008
5 from *Wisteria* 10, 2008
6–7 from *Simply Haiku* 6.4, 2008

Previous Montages

May 31: Forms
June 7: Water Works

Next Week's Montage: Summertime

Masaoka Shiki
Peggy Willis Lyles
Garry Gay