

This Week's Montage

—*Life & Death*

Comparative Haiku

selected by

Allan Burns

Decoration Day was first celebrated on 30 May 1868 to honor Union soldiers who had fought in the American Civil War (1861–1865). The date had been chosen specifically because it was *not* the anniversary of any of the conflict's battles. After World War I its significance (which had been resented in the South) was expanded to include commemoration of American casualties of all military actions, and after World War II it became commonly referred to as "Memorial Day." In 1971 Congress moved the observance from its traditional date to the last Monday of May. Haiku through the ages has often exhibited an elegiac impulse, and so it is fitting that Memorial Day provides us with an opportunity to contemplate the work of three poets—representing different generations of the English-language haiku movement—whose work stares death in the face even as it celebrates the continuity of life. The death of Nick Virgilio's brother in Vietnam transformed Virgilio into an elegiac poet of intense concentration and power. Haiku such as "flag-covered coffin" and "sixteenth autumn since" extended the expressive range of English-language haiku and profoundly influenced subsequent developments in the genre. George Swede is famous for the humor, poignance, and unexpected ironic twists of his haiku and senryu, which often engage the darker side of existence. And Chad Lee Robinson has established a reputation as one of the finest young haiku poets in the U.S. with haiku of great depth and resonance.

Nick Virgilio (1928–1989)

George Swede (b. 1940)

Chad Lee Robinson (b. 1980)

the sack of kittens
sinking in the icy creek
increases the cold

deep in rank grass,
through a bullet-riddled helmet:
an unknown flower

flag-covered coffin:
the shadow of the bugler
slips into the grave

winter evening:
leaving father's footprints
I sink into deep snow

my dead brother . . .
hearing his laugh
in my laughter

sixteenth autumn since:
barely visible grease marks
where he parked his car

on my last journey
alone on the road at dawn:
first sight of the sea

from *Selected Haiku* (Burnt Lake Press/Black Moss Press, 1988)

the beetle I righted
flies straight into
a cobweb

from the lovely white shell
in the tidal pool
a claw

spring breeze
my dead grandfather's rocker
creaks on the porch

drought
graveyard grass
still green

dead roadside deer
a snowflake melts
on its open eye

at the height
of the argument the old couple
pour each other tea

the hooked fish's
last gasp . . .
its eye on me

1–6 from *Almost Unseen* (Brooks Books, 2000)
7 from *The Heron's Nest* 9.4, 2007

shooting star
the span of her hand
across my chest

miscarriage—
she braids sweet grass
in the summer wind

my brother's gravestone...
under the moss a darkness
that won't come off

crooked sticks
in a crooked row:
dragonfly graves

spring rain—
speaking of the dead
in a softer voice

muggy night
the child's breathing turns
a paper moon

buffalo bones
a wind less than a whisper
in the summer grass

1–3 from *A New Resonance* 4 (Red Moon Press, 2005)

4 from *Modern Haiku* 36.3, 2005

5 from *The Heron's Nest* 7.3, 2005

6 from *The Heron's Nest* 9.2, 2007

7 from *The Heron's Nest* 9.3, 2007

Previous Montages

May 10: Women's Experience

May 17: Bashô's Journey

Next Week's Montage: Forms

O Mabson Southard

Marlene Mountain

John Martone