

# Labor Day

from *A Field Guide to North American Haiku*<sup>1</sup>

Charles Trumbull

This installment of the Field Guide looks at an example of an Observance, which is one of the eight topics of the Japanese *saijiki*, or haiku almanac. In Japanese haiku, Observances include all manner of dates and times of the year that human beings celebrate: public and national holidays and memorials, Buddhist and Shintō festivals (as well as some Christian holy days), traditions, and death dates of famous persons. Because our Field Guide series focuses on English-language haiku, this go-around I have chosen an American holiday, Labor Day. Reference will be made to Canada's Labor Day, which originated independently but is also observed on the first Monday in September as well as to labor holidays elsewhere in the world.

Wikipedia informs us:

Beginning in the late 19th century, as the trade union and labor movements grew, trade unionists proposed that a day be set aside to celebrate labor. "Labor Day" was promoted by the Central Labor Union and the Knights of Labor, which organized the first parade in New York City. In 1887, Oregon was the first state of the United States to make it an official public holiday. By the time it became an official federal holiday in 1894, thirty states in the United States officially celebrated Labor Day.

Over the years, however, the linkage of Labor Day to the workers' movement has all but disappeared. In *haikai* "Labor Day" can be found more often in ironic senryu than in serious haiku:

<sup>1</sup> 'A Field Guide to North American Haiku' is a long-term project along the lines of a haiku encyclopedia-cum-*saijiki*, a selection of the best English-language haiku arranged by topic and illustrating what it is about a given topic that attracts poets to write. When complete, the Field Guide project will comprise multiple thick volumes keyed to the several topics in traditional Japanese *saijiki* (haiku almanac) and Western counterparts, notably William J. Higginson's *Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac* (1996). These topics are: Season, Sky & Elements, Landscape, Plants, Animals, Human Affairs, and Observances. The current compilation presents 'Observances: holiday: Labor Day plus, in part, May Day.' The haiku are selected from my Haiku Database, currently containing almost 380,000 haiku. Publishing these miniature topical haiku anthologies is an experiment to test the feasibility of the larger Field Guide project. Critique and suggestions, supportive or critical, are warmly invited; please comment by e-mail to [trumbull@at.comcast.net](mailto:trumbull@at.comcast.net).

Labor Day  
the indolence  
of flags

Michele L. Harvey, *The Heron's Nest* 20:2 (June 2018)

Labor Day  
no strikers  
at the factory gate

Larry Rungren, *Boston Haiku Society News*, October 1997

Labor Day  
the silence of the bulldozer  
sitting in the rain

James Chessing, *Bottle Rockets* 32 (16:2, 2015), 22

Labor Day  
in the acequia madre  
water runs clear

Elizabeth Searle Lamb, *hokku* from "Water Runs Clear,"  
a Solo Kocho Renku, Lamb, *Across the Windharp* (1999)

Labor Day  
filing for  
unemployment compensation

Caroline Giles Banks, *The Clay Jar* (2013), 52

my PC  
unwilling to start up  
Labor Day

Suzuki Teiichi, *Mainichi Daily News*  
*Haiku in English*, Sept. 1, 2014

For most people now, Labor Day marks the end of the summer season—  
one last blast before the weather changes—much as Memorial Day is  
welcomed as the beginning of summer. This is thus a time of wistfulness  
and reflection:

Labor Day weekend —  
half-an-hour left to watch  
the outgoing tide

Paul Watsky, *Modern Haiku* 29.1 (winter–spring 1998), 16

Labor Day  
—locking summer into  
the empty cabin  
Carol Purington, *Haiku Headlines*, September 1999

Labor Day  
the roller coaster  
sighs to a stop  
Dian Duchin Reed, *Acorn* 40 (spring 2018)

Labor Day weekend  
I dump the McDonald's bag  
for the last few fries  
Charles Trumbull, *Bottle Rockets* 6:2 (#12, 2005), 10

Labor Day  
a spot of barbecue sauce  
on the face of my watch  
Carlos Colón, *The Heron's Nest* 10:4 (December 2008)

wearing white  
after Labor Day  
spinster's diary  
Edith Muesing-Ellwood, *Modern Haiku* 42:2 (summer 2011), 104

If Labor Day marks the end of summer, it equally signals the beginning of autumn. The mood is a return to serious pursuits. Beachgoers and campers have to go back to the office rat race. In my day, too, school started a day or two after Labor Day, both of which emphasized the swing of the pendulum from the joyful and frivolous to the serious and even lonely. Higginson mentions Labor Day in passing in his discussion of the start and end of school and says it is an early autumn topic for haiku.<sup>2</sup>

Labor Day evening:  
crescendo of crickets and  
returning traffic  
Joyce W. Webb, *Dragonfly* 3:1 (January 1975)

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<sup>2</sup> 'End of School,' in William J. Higginson, *The Haiku Seasons: Poetry of the Natural World* (Tokyo, New York, and London: Kodansha International, 1996), 132.

Labor Day traffic  
the whole field full of  
drying onions

Jack Barry, *All Nite Rain* (2008), 35

ELEGY: E.E.

cummings left )a leaf)  
no lonelier than our (fresh(  
fall of labor day

Raymond Roseliep, "A Scale of Haiku" [sequence],  
in *Love Makes the Air Light* (1965)

back to school  
unlearning  
the whole summer

Sanjukta Asopa, *The Heron's Nest* 13:4 (December 2011)

Taking the longer view, autumn is the season when we begin thinking about what comes next: winter, the end of things. Preparations must be made.

chilly ...  
the last Labor Day float  
out of view

Tyrone McDonald, *Modern Haiku* 39:2 (summer 2008), 57

deserted beach  
alone with the waves  
of Septemberness

Jane Reichhold, in *A Dictionary of Haiku* (1st ed., 1992)

Labor Day  
the fall cheeks  
of a chipmunk

Michele Root-Bernstein, *South by Southeast* 14:3 (2007)

labor day—  
I dust off  
my resumé

Tim Singleton, *Temps Libres/Free Times Favorites*

Labor Day  
finally  
I join AARP

Marsh Muirhead, *Modern Haiku* 42:1 (winter–spring 2011)

Coming two months before election day in the U.S., the long weekend used to be the beginning of the political season, and in the last century political speeches an integral part of town Labor Day picnics and parades. No longer, I think—at least I find no haiku capturing that bit of vanishing Americana. Still, occasionally one can find a bit of sociopolitical commentary in a haiku:

no illegals  
at the festival —  
Labor Day

Ruth Holzer, *Bottle Rockets* 18 (9:2, 2008), 27

Canadians also celebrate Labour Day in pretty much the same way as is done in the United States, enjoying a long weekend in the country or at the beach and reflecting on the ending summer or anticipating the fall:

Labor Day frost  
great to have a job to have  
a day off

LeRoy Gorman, *Modern Haiku* 26:2 (summer 1995), 32

Labour Day —  
house flies soak up the last rays  
on the fence screw heads

Richard Stevenson, in Amarjit Sathi Tiwari et al., eds.,  
*Painting Sunlight: A Trilingual Canadian Haiku Anthology* (2015)

*Fête du Travail*  
*découverte au retour du chalet*  
*le calendrier indique juin*

Labour Day  
back home from the cottage  
June on the calendar

Jocelyne Villeneuve, trans. William J. Higginson,  
in *Wind in the Long Grass* (1991)

at the beach  
back to school  
sale

Marco Fraticelli, *Between Each Wave* (Haiku Canada Sheet 1998–99)

In Europe and many other places May 1 is the workers' holiday. The origins of the May Day holiday lie deep in Gaelic and Wiccan (the Beltane holiday), Roman (Floralia), and Germanic (Walpurgisnacht) traditions as spring festivals typically featuring flowers, bonfires, dancing, and sweets. Such celebrations of May Day are still common worldwide. Most haiku poets writing about May Day focus on traditions such as flowers, fertility, and rebirth.

May Day —  
bees collecting nectar  
from wilted azaleas

Kuniharu Shimizu, *The Heron's Nest* 4:8 (August 2002)

May Day  
the jingling shins  
of Morris dancers

André Surridge, *Kernels* [Web] 2 (summer 2013)

May Day  
a balloon escapes  
the subway car

Jeanne Emrich, *Moonset* 1 (2005)

May Day carries the sense of the beginning of summer. The modern appropriation of May Day, often renamed International Worker's Day or some such, as a celebration of labor and workers' rights seems to be almost accidental. Wikipedia notes:

The date was chosen by a pan-national organization of socialist and communist political parties to commemorate the Haymarket affair, which occurred in Chicago on 4 May 1886. The 1904 Sixth Conference of the Second International, called on "all Social Democratic Party organisations and trade unions of all countries to demonstrate energetically on the First of May for the legal establishment of the 8-hour day, for the class demands of the proletariat, and for universal peace."

Especially in these countries, May Day has gone beyond a celebration of labor into an occasion for patriotic parades and for state demonstrations of industrial and military prowess:

May Day rally  
political pamphlets  
folded into airplanes

Michael Fessler, *Blithe Spirit* 22:1 (March 2012)

*Maiprozession —  
im Asphalt der Abdruck  
eines Panzers*

Mayday procession —  
the impression in the asphalt  
of a tank

Martina Heinisch, translated probably by the poet,  
in Dimitar Anakiev, comp., *Kamesan's World Haiku  
Anthology on War, Violence and Human  
Rights Violation* (2013)<sup>3</sup>

Poets writing about this holiday must exercise caution. The term “Mayday” can also signify the international distress call, the voice equivalent of “SOS” in Morse code. Danger may be what the late Johnny Baranski had in mind in his haiku

May Day!  
cornfield furrows all around  
a missile silo

*Modern Haiku* 18.2 (summer 1987)

The Japanese celebrate Labor Thanksgiving Day (勤労感謝の日, *Kinrō kansha no hi*) on November 23. Like the Western May Day, it lays a modern proletarian holiday over an ancient harvest festival, *Niinamesai* (新嘗祭). The emperor still performs the traditional harvest ceremonies privately in the palace by presenting the year's newly cut grain to the Shintō gods. After World War II, Labor Thanksgiving Day was established as a secular holiday to mark the enshrinement of human rights and workers' rights in the postwar Japanese constitution. May Day is also observed by some in Japan.

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<sup>3</sup> Curiously, this haiku was entered in the 42nd A-Bomb Day Memorial Contest (2008) in Japan with the first line 'Way of the Cross.'

Labor Thanksgiving Day is a *kigo* for early winter, but both it and May Day (an early spring *kigo*) are used relatively rarely in Japanese haiku:

職移り職移り 勤労感謝の日

*shoku utsuri shoku utsuri kinrō kansha no hi*

*moving from  
a job to a job  
Labor Thanksgiving Day*

Usaki Fuyuo, Kaneko Tōta, Kuroda Momoko,  
and Natsuishi Ban'ya, eds., *Gendai saijiki*  
("Modern Saijiki") (1997), translated by  
Fay Aoyagi, *Blue Willow Haiku World*, Nov. 23, 2009

メーデーのない日本のストライキ

*Mēdē no nai Nihon no sutoraiki*

*In a Japan  
that has no May Day:  
strike.*

Tsuru Akira, *Tsuru, Sutoraiku* ("Strike"), 1937, translated  
by Richard H. Minear, 'The Proletarian Senryu of Tsuru  
Akira,' *Modern Haiku* 44.1 (winter–spring 2013)

ガスタンクが夜の目標メーデー来る

*gasu tanku ga yoru no mokuhyō Mēdē kuru*

*a gas tank is  
a destination for the night  
May Day comes*

Tōta Kaneko, in Kaneko Tōta, Kuroda Momoko,  
and Natsuishi Ban'ya, eds., *Gendai saijiki*  
("Modern Saijiki") (1997), translated by Fay Aoyagi,  
*Blue Willow Haiku World*, May 1, 2009

'Labor Day' in its various manifestations is a popular *kigo* or season word. As effectively as 'cicada' or 'autumn wind'—and rather focusing on human nature—Labor Day marks the end of the summer season and the coming of autumn