

Midsummer Madness

from *A Field Guide to North American Haiku*¹

Charles Trumbull

In *The Haiku Seasons* [106] William J. Higginson writes, “According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘midsummer’ is the period of the summer solstice, about June 21st. Corresponding words from some other Germanic languages are, ‘midsommar’ (Swedish), ‘midzomer’ (Dutch), ‘Mittsomer’ (German), and so on.” ... [‘Midsummer’ combines] with numerous other words to express phenomena associated with the solstices: midsummer fair, midsummer-night, midsummer rose, midsummer chafer (a beetle), midsummer daisy, midsummer madness, midsummer silver (a plant, also called ‘silver-weed’).”... Higginson presents this haiku of Adele Kenny’s to represent midsummer in his companion volume *Haiku World* [105]²:

midsummer morning—
the dead tree’s shadow
stretches upstream

Wikipedia calls attention to the festive aspects of midsummer in some cultures: “specifically the northern European celebrations that accompany the actual solstice or take place on a day between June 19 and June 25 and the preceding evening. The exact dates vary among different cultures.” *Encyclopædia Britannica* notes the antiquity of the Midsummer Eve holiday in the Nordic countries:

The celebration predates Christianity and is likely related to ancient fertility practices and ceremonies performed to ensure a successful harvest. The holiday was later rededicated to honour St. John the Baptist in Christian times. Although the meaning of the holiday has changed, some pagan customs still persist, such as the bonfires, which originally were believed to ward off evil spirits, and the focus on nature, which harkens back to when plants and water were thought to have magical healing powers on Midsummer’s Eve.

There is a distinction to be made here: “midsummer” is not a

specific date but rather a season, or more accurately, a part of a season. In the early 2000s the Japanese haiku and renku scholar Shōkan Tadashi Kondō promoted a version of the classical Japanese calendar that he called “seasonal spells”: “One year is divided into 72 five-day spells, and each of the spells is called by a typical seasonal phenomenon. It looks like a necklace of 72 different jewels. This provides the basis for the season words of Japanese haiku.³ The spells—keyed to Tokyo seasons—that Kondō identifies in early and mid-summer begin roughly on these dates:

芒種 (<i>bōshu</i>)	Grain Planting	June 5
夏至 (<i>geshi</i>)	Summer Solstice	June 21
小暑 (<i>shōsho</i>)	Slight Heat	July 7
大暑 (<i>taisho</i>)	Intense Heat	July 22

Kondō had initially presented his talk about seasonal spells at an HSA quarterly meeting in 1998 in Hot Springs, Ark., and intrigued Texas poet Susan Delaney with the idea. She devised a schedule of spells for her locale in Plano, Texas; it hewed more strictly to five-day periods and was more poetical than Kondo’s. These are Delaney’s seasonal spells for June and July:⁴

First morning glory	June 6
Crepe myrtles bloom	June 11
Grackles bathe in puddles	June 16
*	June 21
*	June 27
*	July 2
High 96	July 8
Muggy, no wind	July 13
First moonflower	July 18
Morning hints of autumn	July 24
Orb weavers build webs	July 29

In Japanese, the word for summer solstice proper is 夏至 (*geshi*). Gabi Greve in the *World Kigo Database* lists several *kigo* that add specificity to the summer solstice:

夏至の日 <i>geshi no hi</i>	day of the summer solstice
夏至の雨 <i>geshi no ame</i>	rain on the summer solstice
夏至の夜 <i>geshi no yoru</i>	night of the summer solstice
夏至夜風 <i>geshi yokaze</i>	windy night of the summer solstice
夏至白夜 <i>geshi byakuya</i>	white night of the summer solstice

Related solstice-centered *kigo* in Japan show that this season or spell is viewed less as an occasion for celebration than as an expression of weather to be endured, particularly the intense summer heat. Witness the *kigo* listed in the *World Kigo Database*:⁵

盛夏 *seika* midsummer; the height of summer

The rainy season is now over and summer comes with all its might, daily temperatures well over 30 degrees centigrade, which are called “midsummer days” (*manatsubi* 真夏日) in the weather forecast. Sometimes they last for about 50 days in Kyūshū.

真夏 *manatsu* midsummer; a day on which the temperature rises above 30° C

夏深し *natsu fukashi* summer is deep

Geshi—summer solstice, an early summer *kigo*—was not used often by the classic Japanese haiku poets. Shiki wrote a few, including this one, probably an autumn haiku (“longer days” is an autumn seasonal concept):

夏至過ぎて吾に寝ぬ夜の長くなる
geshi sugite ware ni nenu yoru no nagakunaru

past the summer solstice ...
the night that I can't sleep in
becomes longer

Shiki, trans. C. Trumbull

Two later takes on trying to sleep in the midst of a heat wave:

夏ふかしおのが匂ひと晝をねむる

natsu fukashi onoga nioi to hiru o nemuru

Summer deep I sleep the day with my own smell

Fujiki Kiyoko, trans. Hiroaki Sato, "Fujiki Kiyoko,"
Modern Haiku 31.1 (Winter–Spring 2000)

真夏の森は聖堂鳥睡り

manatsubi no mori wa seidō tori nemuri

heat wave

a forest is a sanctuary

where birds sleep

Hanatani Kiyoshi, trans. Fay Aoyagi, *Blue Willow*
Haiku World, August 21, 2013

And a few more contemporary solstice season-related haiku
from Japan:

夏至ゆうべ地軸の軋む音すこし

geshi yūbe chijiku no kishimu oto sukoshi

Summer solstice eve

the Earth's axis makes

a small squeaking sound

Wada Goro, retranslation by C. Trumbull from
Modern Haiku Association, Japanese Haiku 2001

蠟燭の火を蠟燭に継ぐや夏至

rōsoku no hi o rōsoku ni tsugu ya geshi

a light of a candle
given to another candle—
summer solstice⁶

Yo Mihoko, trans. Fay Aoyagi, *Blue Willow Haiku World*, June 22, 2013

This haiku makes reference to ‘midsummer madness,’ a theme in many Western haiku:

乱心のごとき真夏の蝶を見よ

ranshin no gotoki manatsu no chō o miyo

a summer butterfly
seems to go mad
look at it!

Awano Seiho, trans. Fay Aoyagi, *Blue Willow Haiku World*, July 1, 2010

エプロンに卵かかえて夏至通過

epuron ni tamago kakaete geshi tsūka

An apron
full of eggs
midsummer passes

Kitahara Shimako, *Modern Haiku Association, Japanese Haiku 2001*

Of even greater interest to the Japanese haiku poets writing about midsummer is the *kigo* 短夜 *mijikayo* or *mijika yo* (short night). In my research I find a total of Japanese 269 haiku using this *kigo*, not counting related concepts such as 夜のつまる *yo no tsumaru* (nights getting shorter) and 明急ぐ *ake isogu* (dawn hastens or dawn rushes in).

In the formulation “short night,” Gabi Greve of the *World Kigo Database* detects “a feeling of evanescence, ephemeral fleeting of things.” This is manifest in a number of 辞世 *jisei* (death poems). Here are two very similar *jisei* that identify a short night’s dream with the brevity of life.

短夜や我にはながき夢さめぬ

mijikayo ya ware ni wa nagaki yume samenu

A short night
wakes me from a dream
that seemed so long.

Yokoi Yayū, trans. Yoël Hoffmann, *Japanese Death Poems* (1986)

mijikayo ya mihatenu yume no gojū-nen

Nights grow short:
a dream of fifty years
breaks off before it ends.

Kafu, trans. Yoël Hoffmann, *Japanese Death Poems* (1986)

Hoffmann explains Kafu’s poem: “*Mijikayo*, ‘short night’ refers to a night of summer. At such time a person may sometimes waken from sleep with the feeling that the early dawn interrupted his dream.”

鼓子花の短夜眠る昼間哉

hirugao no mijika yo neburu hiruma kana

bindweed
because of short nights
taking a nap

trans. Jane Reichhold, *Bashō: Complete Haiku* (2008)
#425.

This is the only “short night” haiku of Bashō’s that we have found, and it is one of his least frequently translated. It is of interest because of the pairing of the short night with a flower, 鼓子花 *hirugao* (noonflower or bindweed), and the causality implied, at least in Reichhold’s translation.

Buson also juxtaposed the short night with an unusual flower, (柿の花 *kaki no hana* (persimmon blossom), also a summer *kigo*. The haiku seems to impart a message something like *carpe diem*:

みじか夜や浅井に柿の花を汲

mijikayo ya asai ni kaki no hana o kumu

A short night—
from a shallow well
scooping up a persimmon flower.

Buson, trans. Yuki Sawa and Edith Marcombe
Shiffert, *Haiku Master Buson* (1978)

Mijika yo was a favorite *kigo* of Buson’s; he wrote at least 26 haiku on the short nights of midsummer. Here’s another, one of Buson’s most translated; I have found 25 versions of it:

みじか夜や毛むしの上に露の玉

mijikayo ya kemushi no ue ni tsuyu no tama

Brief night!
Atop the caterpillar
a dewdrop

trans. Janine Beichman⁷

Issa wrote at least 33 haiku about short nights, many including flowers, including 女郎花 *ominaeshi* (maiden flowers), 躑躅 *tsutsuji* (azaleas), 草の花 *kusa no hana* (wildflowers), 草もば

か花 *kusa mo baka hana* (foolish flowers and clever flowers), an unidentified red flower, 赤い花 *akai hana*, and even 桜 *sakura* (cherry blossoms), which translator David Lanoue assures us are permissible to mention in summertime because they “bloom late in Issa’s cold and mountainous province of Shinano.”

Shiki wrote about 150 “short night” haiku, of which only a handful have been translated:

短夜のともし火残る湊かな

mijikayo no tomoshibi nokoru minato kana

The short night;
Lights remaining
In the harbour.

Shiki, trans. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku 3: Summer–Autumn*
(1951)

Blyth interpreted Shiki’s harbour scene as an example of evanescence, “It is a world not of yesterday and not yet of today, a short, transitory half-world, the short night.”

A second haiku of Shiki’s is suggestive of a *jisei* equating the shortness of the night to his few remaining years. The translators’ note, “This haiku was written on June 6, 1897 in a letter to Natsume Sōseki, who was teaching English in Kumamoto, Kyūshū. At the end of May, Shiki had suffered from a high fever caused by his tuberculosis. Shiki expressed, in the letter, the despair that he couldn’t tell his family, because he knew death was approaching.”

余命いくばくかある夜短し

yomei ikabaku ka aru yo mijikashi

how much remains
of my life
the nights are short

Shiki, trans. Shiki-Kinen Museum English Volunteers,
If Someone Asks ... (2001)

Here follow a few more representative “short night” haiku by
20th and 21st century Japanese poets:

短夜や火を消しにくる宿の者
mijikayo ya hi wo keshi ni kuru yado no mono

The short night;
An inn-servant comes
To put out the light.
Takahama Kyoshi, trans. R. H. Blyth, *A History of
Haiku 2* (1964)

短夜や乳ぜり泣く児を須可捨焉乎
mijikayo ya chichi zeri naku ko o
須可捨焉乎 (すてつちまおか) ⁸

Short night shall I toss away my child crying for milk
Takeshita Shizuno-jo, trans. Hiroaki Sato, “A Brief
Survey of Haiku by Women,” *Japanese Women Poets*
(2008)

短夜の性転換をいたしけり
mijikayo no seitenkan o itashikeri

short summer night—
the sex change operation
is also completed ...
Tsuji Momoko, trans. Patricia Donegan, *Love Haiku*
(2010)

短夜や遊ぶがごとき一生 (ひとよとや)

mijikayo ya asobu ga gotoki hitoyo to ya

short summer night—
a life that is similar
to playing

Hasegawa Kai, *Haiku-kai*, June 2012, trans. Fay
Aoyagi, *Blue Willow Haiku World*, June 7, 2012

In the far north of the Northern Hemisphere the sun never completely sinks below the horizon. This period of a week or more around the solstice is commonly called “white nights” (Japanese 白夜 *byakuya* or *hyakuya*; Russian белые ночи, *belye nochi*) or “midnight sun” (another translation of 白夜 *byakuya*)

белая ночь—

как долго звонит телефон
в доме соседа

white night—

the phone rings and rings
at the neighbor's house

Alexey V. Andreyev, *Moyayama* web page; trans.
C. Trumbull

white nights
mosquitoes singing
round the clock

Gérard Krebs, *Modern Haiku* 42.1 (Winter–Spring
2011)

乗り継いでのりついで来て白夜なる

noritsuide noritsuide kite byakuya naru

Changing trains
one after the other
the night of the midnight sun.

Naitō Hiroshi, *HI Haiku International* 46 (February 28,
2002)

帆船にムンクの貌 (かほのある白夜)
hansen ni Munku no kao no aru hakuya

Munch's face
on a sailing boat
midnight sun

Ishihara Yatsuka, *Haiku dai-saijiki* (2006), trans. Fay
Aoyagi, *Blue Willow Haiku World*, June 27, 2014

ALASKA

midnight—
the last of the sunset
in the curtain's folds

Cindy Zackowitz, *Modern Haiku* 30.1 (Winter–Spring
1999)

midnight sun
our wedding night over
in minutes

Anna Maris, *FemkuMag* 8 (January 2019)

If for the Japanese “short night” is a metaphor for the transience of life, in English the meaning is usually more mundane. A common use is to suggest that the night was too short to get important things finished:

On the shortest night
the cocks start crowing before
I've fallen asleep

James Kirkup, *Formulas for Chaos* (1994)

short night ... pairs
of coupling snails on grass
in dawn light

Thomas Heffernan, *Modern Haiku* 24:2 (Summer 1993)⁹

she comes to me
attired only
in a short night

Ernest Wit, *Black and White* (2016)

shortest night making the most of it

Charles Trumbull, from "Moonlight on a White Iris."
New Mexico Poetry Review 2:2 (Spring 2011)

A few more haiku on the topic of midsummer night:

the short night—
in my dream surfing
wave after wave

Tom Tico, *Spring Morning Sun* (1998)

even shorter
the summer night
with a full moon

Jane Reichhold, *A Dictionary of Haiku* (2nd ed., 2013)

all the short night long
looming on the sick room wall:
shadows of the moon

Nicholas A. Virgilio, *Frogpond* 11:3 (August 1988)

These short nights
sitting and drinking tea
ghosts knocking at the door

Brent Maupin, *Haiku West* 7:2 (January 1974)

at the corners
of the short night
a wall outlet

Emiko Miyashita, *Modern Haiku* 34.1 (Winter–Spring
2003)

Curiously, “long day(s)” is not a summer but a spring *kigo* in Japan, presumably the time when the days are lengthening but not yet long. In English-language haiku, however, the phrase “long day(s)” often conveys a summer feeling (if only because a summer season word is often present), for example:

grease oozes
from a Ferris wheel
the long day

Robert Bauer, *The Heron's Nest* 8:3 (September 2006)

a shovelful
of rattlesnake
the long day

Carolyn Hall, *The Calculus of Daylilies* (2017)

summer tide
no trace
of the lovers' long day

Jeb Barton, *Short Distance, Long Journey* (1997)

A good number of English-language haiku about midsummer focus on the solstice as a divider of the year in half or between two seasons and explore the duality of the situation when the sun has changed its gradient and has begun its descent into winter. These haiku usually use the solstice or midsummer as a metaphor for life events.

mid-summer's eve
my trip around the sun
is half-done

Jane Reichhold, *A Dictionary of Haiku* (2nd ed., 2013)

midsummer
a speedboat slices
the lake in half

Carmen Sterba, *The Heron's Nest* 11:3 (September
2009)

midsummer rains—
the glass on the stoop
half-full ...

Jim Kacian, The Betty Drevniok Award 2000, 2nd Place

mid-summer—
opening a beer bottle
with a beer bottle

Scott Metz, *Loch Raven Review* 1:1 (Fall 2005)

midsummer's eve ...
turning the record
to its flip side

Francine Banwarth, *The Heron's Nest* 18:3 (September
2016)

midsummer day—
the wrong way
on a one-way street

D. Claire Gallagher, *The Heron's Nest* 7:4 (December
2005)

Just as in Japan, midsummer in the West is a time of long days,
intense sun, stifling heat, searing winds, and drought. Here
is how some English-language haiku poets have characterized
the midsummer weather:

mid-summer heat—
sparrows fanning
in a pool of dust

Alex Feldvebel, *Frogpond* 20:2 (September 1997), 37

midsummer sun,
feeling my freckles

merge

Ebba Story, *Modern Haiku* 23.1 (Winter–Spring 1992)

the fence post
hangs upright in the washout—
mid-summer heat

William J. Higginson, Ebba Story and Michael Dylan Welch, eds., *The Shortest Distance* (Haiku North America 1993 conference anthology)

midsummer
the crack of clay
inside a kiln

Debbi Antebi, *Modern Haiku* 49.3 (Autumn 2018), 7

midsummer heat ...
on the whitewashed fence
the white nail's shadow

Robert Gilliland, *Frogpond* 20:2 (September 1997), 13

MID-SUMMER DUSK

Swallows twittering at twilight:
Waves of heat
Churned to flames by the sun.

John Gould Fletcher, *Japanese Prints* (1918), 89

a long day's end
mosquitoes along
the dry riverbed

paul m., *Modern Haiku* 32.1 (Winter–Spring 2001)

Midsummer night:
a boy with swollen glands
looks at the full moon ...
Eric Amann, *Cicada Voices* (1983)

midsummer night
the air conditioner breaks
the motel silence
Collin Barber, *Modern Haiku* 45.1 (Winter–Spring 2014)

midsummer heat
a water snake
orbits the moon
Seánan Forbes, *The Heron's Nest* 19:2 (June 2017)

Curiously, I found no haiku in English that refer to midsummer festivals or celebrations, with the possible exception of this one by a Swede, Jörgen Johansson:

midsummer's eve—
even the terrifying mongrel
decorated with flowers
The Heron's Nest 6:8 (September 2004)

However, some haikuists mention religious or philosophical aspects of the solstice season. An'ya's haiku, for example, has overtones of the pagan and Wiccan celebration of Litha, solstice eve, when devotees stay up all night on and congregate around a bonfire:

midsummer solstice
the bonfire luring me back
to my maiden name
an'ya, 1st HaikuNow! International Haiku Contest,
2010

the long shadow of a standing stone midsummer's eve
John Barlow, Robert Spiess Memorial Haiku Award
Competition, 2019, Honorable Mention

midsummer dawn
all the gods
are real
Bill Kenney, *Presence* 65 (November 2019)

Other poets suggest that midsummer is a season for love, or
else for seasonal hijinks:

who all'd you invite
to our mid-summer's dance?
fairy ring's fortune
Kelly Sauvage Angel, link from an untitled rengay
with Jamie Steckelberg, *FemkuMag* 10 (March 2019)

mid-summer
two white moths circle
each other
Brad Bennett, *Cattails* Premier Issue (January 2014)

midsummer night—
a rhinestone-studded sandal
caught in the brambles
Ruth Holzer, *South by Southeast* 16:3 (2009)

midsummer dusk
the splat
of a water balloon
Ed Markowski, *Tinywords*, June 22, 2007

In the same vein, there have been allusions in haiku to *A
Midsummer Night's Dream*, the acme of summertime gaiety,

full of professions of love and accusations of infidelity, fairies and rude mechanicals. Brian Biddle updates the Shakespeare allusion with puckish humour:

OBERON

I'll visit
her website
and with one byte
load her memory with virtual night.
Still 5:1 (Spring 2001)

And then Jim Kacian, considering all that we have been reading, suggests that we “have but slumber’d here / While these visions did appear”:

a dream so deep
there’s nothing left—
midsummer’s eve
Incense Dreams 3:1 (October 2019)

Endnotes

¹ “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 haiku are selected from my Haiku Database, currently containing more than 455,000 haiku. “Midsummer Madness” presents parts of the topic “Season” and the subtopics “midsummer” (381 haiku) and “summer solstice” (~300 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 cptrumbull@comcast.net.

- 2 Kenny's haiku earlier appeared in David Cobb, James Kirkup, and Peter Mortimer, eds., *The Haiku Hundred* (1992), 33.
- 3 Shokan Tadashi Kondo, "How to Make the 72 Seasonal Spells." Paper delivered at the 2nd European Haiku Conference in Vadstena, Sweden, 8–10 June 2007. Available on *The Haiku Foundation* website: <https://thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/files/original/b939dbf85b664026e13fef2c65c9fb46.pdf>.
- 4 Delaney's list is appended to Kondo, op. cit. See also Shokan Tadashi Kondo and Sirkku M. Sky Hilyunen, "The 72 annual spells in Tokyo, Japan and 72 summer spells in Virtasalmi, Finland." *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 22: 2 (2009), 89–97. Online at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08893670902786857>.
- 5 See Gabi Greve, ed., "Summer (natsu)," *World Kigo Database*: <http://worldkigodatabase.blogspot.com/2006/07/summer-natsu.html>.
- 6 The English version of this haiku is reminiscent of Buson's 燭の火を燭にうつすや春の夕 *shoku no hi o shoku ni utsusu ya haru no yū* (The light of a candle / is transferred to another candle— / spring twilight.). Translation from Yuki Sawa and Edith Marcombe Shiffert, eds., *Haiku Master Buson* (1978), 55.
- 7 Ōoka Makoto, *A Poet's Anthology: The Range of Japanese Poetry*. Translated by Janine Beichman. Santa Fe, N.M.: Katydid Books, 1994; cited in Gabi Greve, ed., *Edo—the Edopedia*, July 19, 2013. Ōoka writes, "Had [Buson] said *ue no* instead of *ue ni*, the weight would have fallen on the last line, *tsuyu no tama*, emphasizing the dewdrop's concrete physicality and giving rise to a different effect. A modern haiku poet might in fact be more likely to choose the latter route."
- 8 Sato points out that the last five characters in this haiku are in Chinese, and the poet added a colloquial Japanese translation in parentheses.
- 9 A similar idea was expressed by Carolyn Hall in *Modern Haiku* 43:3 (Autumn 2012): tortoises \ mating \ the long day.