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LOOKING PAST THE LILY:
LAYERS OF MEANING AND INTERCONNECTIVITY
IN NICK VIRGILIO'S HAIKU

By

ELIZABETH SANDS MOSER

A thesis submitted to the

Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

Graduate Program in English

written under the direction of

Dr. Geoffrey Sill

and approved by

Dr. Geoffrey Sill

Dr. Carol Singley

Camden, New Jersey October 2012

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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By ELIZABETH SANDS MOSER

Thesis Director:

Dr. Geoffrey Sill

Few American haiku poets can claim to be as enthusiastic and prolific as Nick Virgilio. Over a twenty-five year period, the Camden poet amassed a collection of over 20,000 haiku, many of them unpublished. His poetry covers the contemporary American experience, from gritty urban life in Camden to the erosion of rural American communities in the face of industrialization. The poet writes about the loss of his brother in Vietnam and the toll of such losses on the American psyche. Most of all, through his poetry, workshops and lectures, Virgilio worked tirelessly to get America back in touch the life-giving power of nature that surrounds our everyday lives.

This thesis is an exploration of Virgilio's haiku, both from his published work, *Selected Haiku*, and the unpublished Virgilio Collection from Rutgers University's Robeson

Library. The text discusses the differences between Eastern and Western haiku and the development of American haiku as an independent art form. Next, we turn to Virgilio's haiku themselves, applying the idea of "layers of meaning" to discuss the movement of the poems' point of view from the individual to the community to the entire society. We then examine thematic issues, such as Virgilio's address of Camden's poor and the dissolution of rural communities. Last, we end with a look at the poet's process of writing and revision with several examples of how he tirelessly revised and improved his writing over time.

Nick Virgilio's poetry uses the haiku's spare but emotionally powerful form to draw together nature and society into an inextricable bond. His potent themes and clear artistry will certainly appeal to a young generation growing up in the economic turmoil and changing values of today.

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Looking Past the Lily:

Layers of Meaning and Interconnectivity in Nick Virgilio's Haiku

Introduction

To many readers, it seems highly unusual that an American poet, much less a Camden poet, should choose haiku as his form of poetic expression. Yet, when Nick Virgilio stumbled on Kenneth Yasuda's *A Pepper Pod* in the Rutgers library in 1963, the foreign poetry's influence quickly ushered him into a literary career that won him fame as a Western haiku poet, not only in America, but also as far as Japan's Imperial Court. He published countless poems in haiku magazines as well as a book, *Selected Haiku*, and even scored interviews with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and on NPR's "Radio Times." Most remarkably, his Lily poem caught the interest of Japanese scholars and was famously translated by Kazuo Sato for Japan's Crown Prince, who held it in great esteem (Moss-Cohane, 285). Despite these great strides, outside of haiku-devoted literary circles Virgilio is not widely known in America. And so, as interest in the poet has been rekindled the recent publication of a new collection of his work, it is worth reexamining the poet's work for today's readers, writers and critics.

Much of contemporary literature is intensely personal, full of confessions and close-up views of an author's life, thoughts and feelings. Nick Virgilio's poetry distinguishes itself from the multitude of these works by embracing the haiku form and style, allowing him to transcend his subject, a single object or an individual, to strike at deeper layers of meaning. A single image of a homeless beggar through his poetry is elevated to reveal the struggles of modern society and questions America's concept of

identity. His snapshots of the lives of Camden dwellers are also a powerful, blunt address of Camden's poverty. His description of urban and rural America delves into questions of America's fracturing communities and the role that nature plays in the life of man. His mourning over his brother's lost life in Vietnam rekindles the painful emotions felt by friends and families of fallen soldiers. In the steps of Whitman, Virgilio's haiku addresses America itself, yet his poems focus more on the troubles of society than its triumphs.

Behind his finished works, the poet's constant process of rewriting and revising throughout his life has built the framework of meaning on which these heavy themes are supported. The Nicholas Virgilio Collection contains a great selection of the poet's unpublished haiku, correspondence and even samples of his own literary criticism. Through the linked verse, shared themes and imagery found in his work, the poet built meaning in layers like a painter laying color on a canvas. These connections between poems, some written years apart, make the study of Virgilio's work challenging but rewarding. Although the poet's unpublished work is undated, it is possible to follow his development in terms of style and theme throughout the collection.

Perhaps Virgilio's work may amount to to a modern American epic like Whitman's writing once was, but his poetry highlights issues that we as individuals, communities and a nation struggle with, and through his writing we are able to reconnect with the living pulse of our society. In order to fully explore and appreciate these aspects of Virgilio's haiku, it is important to first address the poet's history and background in Camden before turning to his choice of the haiku form, his thematic work, his process of rewriting and revision, and his place in today's literary landscape.

Section 1: History

It is undeniable that Nick Virgilio is best known as a contemporary Camden poet. As a city resident from his birth and his later years until his death, Virgilio and his poetry are deeply rooted in the city and his observations are those of a native, not an outsider. In an increasingly internationalized society, it is sometimes difficult to remember our roots and the history of the land we build our lives upon. Virgilio's haiku is a refreshing answer to such alienation, for much of it is deeply rooted in time and place, detailing the lives of Camden's poor and the struggles of ordinary men.

While modern society is often characterized as highly mobile, it is therefore rare by modern standards that Nick Virgilio chose to spend his entire life in one place, Camden, New Jersey, the city that shaped his poetry and personal views. He was born in June of 1928 and spent his childhood years working through the city school system, eventually graduating high school in 1946 ("Life and Death"). In 1952 he joined the Navy and traveled through Europe, yet he reportedly disliked being abroad and soon returned to America. He began post-secondary schooling at South Jersey College, today Rutgers-Camden, but finally received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Radio from Temple University (Virgilio Collection.) He then found a job as a radio performer working alongside Jerry Blavat and earned the nickname "Nickaphonic Nick." Later he worked several years as a sportscaster in Coatsville, Pennsylvania, and Wildwood, New Jersey. But after being laid off and suffering from a failed relationship, Virgilio returned to Camden at long last, nursing wounds of rejection.

In 1963, Virgilio stumbled upon a book titled *A Pepper Pod*, a collection of original haiku and English translations by Kenneth Yasuda at the Rutgers library

(O'Toole, 272.) Quite by accident, he discovered a new, innovative style of poetry to channel his observations and feelings in a short, succinct and expressive form. For the next 25 years, Virgilio amassed a collection of poetry estimated to contain over 20,000 haiku (Robinson, 2, O'Toole). He also published a collection of his work, *Selected Haiku*, which went through two editions, the last of which was released in the last few years of his life. Throughout the years, the poet made a name for himself by traveling to local schools and teaching poetry programs at universities such as Cornell, University of Pennsylvania, Villanova, Rutgers, LaSalle and the University of Virginia and delivering lectures at other colleges, schools and community group meetings (Virgilio Collection). The poet was relentless in pursuing publications, writing letters to haiku magazines and publishing companies on his World War II Remington typewriter, the same machine that he used to type his poetry. Virgilio's work appeared in a great number of haiku magazines such as *Modern Haiku* as well as in the collection, *The Haiku Anthology: Haiku in English* and even children's poetry books such as *Defining Moments* and *Knock at a Star: A Child's Introduction to Poetry*.

In his later years, Virgilio began to gain recognition outside the Haiku Society of America and the small world of haiku poets, appearing in a radio interview on the well-known Philadelphia radio station WHYY's "Radio Times" show. At age 60, he scored an interview on CBS's "Nightwatch" in what would be his first entrance into national television. Unfortunately, the poet's health refused to see him through, and he was rushed to the hospital in the middle of the taping of the show. Virgilio was a chronic sufferer from congestive heart disease, and his deteriorating health prevented him from making the great leap from a local Camden figure to a national poet. After his death, one

of his closest friends, Reverend Michael Doyle of the Sacred Heart Church in Camden, summarized the poet's last great grasp at recognition: "Another man would have been in a wheelchair...but I think this was the best way for him to die – squeezing the last ounce out of life, trying intensely to communicate with the world" (Avery).

Virgilio never managed to gain the national recognition he craved. Nevertheless, the forthcoming collection of many of Virgilio's yet unpublished works represents a new chance for the poet to gain an audience outside of the city he lived in throughout his life. With the poet's history as a Camden native and a tireless writer in place, it is important now to examine the haiku form, its contrast to *senryu*, and the blurred line between these two forms.

Section 2: Haiku and Senryu

Haiku Structure

It is certainly curious for a creative, outspoken man such as Nick Virgilio to have chosen such a short, tight poetic form to champion. Yet, while the haiku form is certainly restrictive in terms of its syllable and line constraints, the many conventions associated with traditional haiku pack each individual word full of meaning. The form makes such poetry suitable not only for natural observations, as many readers know, but also for commenting on human relationships and the human condition. In order to explore the special potential of the haiku, it is necessary to take a brief look at traditional Japanese haiku before turning to Virgilio's use of the form.

As haiku have trickled their way into Western contemporary writing, what both amateur writers and readers alike will readily tell you is that a haiku must consist of seventeen syllables, arranged in a rigid 5-7-5 syllabic structure. Without this, they insist, the poem is not a haiku, but simply a short, contemporary poem. This convention derives from the origin of the haiku in the traditional Japanese *hokku* or “hook,” the first few lines of the longer poetic form, *haikai no renga* (Sato, 250.) This insistence on syllabic structure becomes particularly problematic in Western verse. Japanese syllables are shorter and more uniform than English ones, and the language is also built with natural linguistic “stretch”—words can be shortened without losing meaning and filler syllables like “ya” are frequently added as emphasis or as verbal ellipses to fill out a line. Furthermore, traditional haiku often include a seasonal word or *kigo* that not only gives the poem a sense of time and place, but also connects it with a host of emotions associated with the season. Of course, Japanese haiku in its modern form has also been

written in Japan for centuries, having developed as early as four hundred years ago with Matsuo Basho. Western poets are disadvantaged by the difference of their linguistic structure and lack of a haiku tradition.

Due to these traditional restrictions, Western haiku writers face a particular problem: should a poet confine himself to the rigid 5-7-5 syllabic structure of the traditional Japanese haiku, or should he venture beyond these restrictions and risk condemnation from his community and readers? Thankfully, the Haiku Society of America and other prominent haiku writers have concluded that the Western haiku form is distinctly different from the traditional Japanese form. In the introduction to *A Haiku Path*, Elizabeth Searle Lamb writes, “Worse...is the fetish that a haiku *must* be 5-7-5... but Basho, Buson, et al. did not feel they had to stick to it” (8). Just as Western writers today take liberty with traditional forms for poetic reasons, so did Japanese haiku poets as the haiku form was developing. In fact, some Japanese haiku can grow as long as 19/20 syllables (67). Below is an instance of Buson’s haiku that takes liberty with form:

As the moon-brilliance westward makes its crossing, so
cherry-blossom shadows eastward slowly go.

Gekkou nishi-ni watareba

Hana-kage higashi-ni ayumu kana

In the original Japanese, instead of exhibiting the usual 5-7-5 syllabic structure, this poem follows a 11-8-5 pattern for poetic purposes. The second and third lines are joined together here for poetic balance, which is not unusual considering that Japanese haiku are often written vertically in one line. The English translation parallels this structure with twelve syllables in the first line and six and seven in the second and third combined lines.

The second line combined with the third balances out the poem into a neat parallel structure, both aurally and typographically. William J. Higginson interprets the elongated first line as emphasizing the slow passing of time (68). The lengthening of time is also matched by the lengthening of the shadows of the blossoms and the trees. This poem would not be possible with the restraints of the 5-7-5 poetic structure, for its very effectiveness lies in the uniqueness of its form and syllabic length.

Experimentation is a crucial part of the development of form, and the older a poetic form is, the more it is necessary to push the boundaries and restrictions of the form in order to reinvent and refresh it. Just as the sonnet has been continually redefined in the West, so has the haiku in the Japanese tradition. Interestingly, other writers who have explored Virgilio's work, such as Michelle Robinson in her 2004 essay, "Japanese and American Influences on Poetic Form and Content in Nicholas A. Virgilio's Haiku," have maintained a classicist approach, pointing out how the poet used traditional Japanese rules and structures in his English haiku. Robinson explains how Virgilio shaped his work to fit in with R.H. Blyth's guidelines for haiku in English.

Although Robinson's interpretation of Virgilio's form is certainly correct and well founded, I believe that creative poets such as Virgilio who find themselves on the forefront of a new poetic form do not intend to write themselves into a box. To distinguish oneself from the other early experimenters of the haiku form, one must try the rules and then break them for artistic purposes. Even though the haiku form is still a relatively new discovery to Western poets and not as well worn as the sonnet, for example, it is inappropriate for the trappings of an old form to weigh down the budding possibilities of its reinvention. In fact, the translation of the form from one language and

culture to another opens the poem up to a whole new realm of possibility. Writers such as Virgilio, through their constant experimentation and iterations of the same poem, test the limits of the Western haiku and discover what is the best and most natural choice for their language and style. In one of his unpublished critical essays, Virgilio describes his choice of form in his haiku:

I *approximate* a “form” that consists of 17 English syllables with sense or phrase-determined line-breaks. The poet should never let the form attract attention away from the poem. An approximation is *necessary* for natural expression.
(Untitled Essay [4] with Virgilio’s emphasis)

Virgilio preserves the concise form of the haiku, approximating its effect in a manner that coincides with the structure of the English language. He rightly insists that form should never distract or disagree with the poem’s content, and that natural expression is favored over rigorous attention to syllabic structure. The poet breaks his poem around natural, “phrase-determined” line breaks in the same way that Japanese haiku classicists shaped their own poetry. Virgilio’s view can be summarized colloquially in his interview with the *Inquirer*: “‘Does it have to be 17?’ Virgilio says. ‘Well, you’re not making cupcakes, and you’re not wearing a straightjacket. If you’re short a syllable, so what? You say enough and no more.’”

And so, although the Japanese haiku tradition has much to teach Western poets, it is equally if not even more necessary for writers to strike out into new territory and discover the potential of haiku in English. Although many poets may draw heavily on Japanese haiku for inspiration, haiku in English is clearly a unique poetic form. “Japanese conventions,” Lamb concludes, “can well help in putting across genuine emotion...but I do not think they are absolutely necessary.” Rather, Virgilio and his compatriots have adapted and recreated the America haiku as a new art form.

The Role of Senryu

There is another important area to discuss before diving into Virgilio's work: the role of man's relationship to nature and human nature in haiku. Both are important components of traditional haiku and both play crucial roles in Virgilio's poetry. In order to truly appreciate the haiku form, it is necessary to understand the difference between haiku and senryu in both their Japanese and American interpretations.

There are several common aspects of a haiku that distinguish its form from its brother, the senryu. The common haiku almost always begins with an address to nature and highlights a snapshot of time, a single isolated observation of the natural world. This observation is then connected with a revelation of higher meaning, such as thoughts of death, life, rebirth, love, or another strong human emotion. Such a connection is subtle but stirring, and the tension between the two elements produces the enjoyment of the poem. But there are other instances in poetry where a haiku is primarily concerned with the human element rather than an observation of nature. These are not traditional haiku, but senryu. The Haiku Society of America notes that these poems are similar in structure to the haiku, but often are humorous or satiric (*Haiku Path*, 66). This is not always the case, but satiric senryu are relatively common. Their tone differs greatly from the traditional haiku, but they are an important subset of the form. Virgilio has published many famous poems that certainly should be considered senryu, though not in the satiric tradition. His war poetry, which highlights his views on Vietnam and the tragedies within his family, is an example of this form.

In Japanese, senryu are less bound by the traditional necessities of haiku, such as references of nature and seasonal words. Because of flexibility, the form has allowed

poets to comment on the human condition more directly than in haiku, as well as make comments on the politics and culture of their day. Today, it is common for Japanese amateurs to write witty senryu highlighting and commenting on aspects of modern life. The relative openness of the form allows writers the freedom to write from experience without worrying about the heavy literary trappings of traditional haiku.

In order to further illustrate the difference between haiku and senryu, below are four poems, two of each kind from Japanese and two of Virgilio's published poems:

静かさや	shizukasa ya
岩にしみ入	iwa ni shimi iru
蝉の声	semi no koe

Lonely stillness---
a single cicada's cry
sinking into stone
(Basho, 22)

heat before the storm:
a fly disturbs the quiet
of the empty store
(Virgilio)

泥棒を	<i>dorobō wo</i>
捕えてみれば	<i>toraete mireba</i>
我が子なり	<i>wagako nari</i>

Catching him
You see the robber
Is your son.
(Senryu Karai)

raising their voices
discussing Reaganomics:
hookers on the bus
(Virgilio)

The first two poems of the set are unquestionably haiku. Both poems reference the season of summer that gives their haiku a sense of place. Basho's poem focuses on the cicada's cry and how it contrasts with the stillness of the Ryuushaku temple that he describes in his travelogue, *Narrow Road to the Interior*. Cicadas are an integral part of summer experience in Japan, and the rising and falling of their cry adds a new dimension to the quiet temple. The great stone of the temple architecture is cool to the touch and plays against the heat that bolsters the cicada's noise. Similarly, Virgilio's haiku uses many of these same elements to shape his own haiku, though he replaces traditional Japanese imagery with a familiar American scene. The poem conjures the city's late afternoon summer heat as it builds before a thunderstorm. Here, too, a creature comes to disturb the quiet anticipation, but instead of a cicada Virgilio chooses a common housefly that lazily makes circles inside a store. Like Basho's poem, mankind does not appear but is implied. Basho feels the stone and hears the cicada and his reader shares in the poet's sensory experiences. Virgilio adapts this perspective, and even the empty store like the temple is devoid of man and movement, distilling the peaceful feeling of solitude.

In contrast, the last two poems quoted above are easily recognized as senryu by their focus on human interaction, social commentary, and clever tone. Senryu Karai, after whom the senryu itself was named, introduces a situation from daily life, yet one that inspires surprise, among many other emotions. The figure of the robber is introduced in Japanese in the first line, but the revelation that the thief is the narrator's own son doesn't appear until the last. This delay causes suspense and a surprise ending that hinges on the contrast between the poem's first and last lines. Virgilio's poem is analogous, introducing a group of unknown figures discussing "Reaganomics." The

reader assumes that they must be intellectuals, but the clever retort arrives in the final line when we discover that the speakers are “hookers on the bus.” The contrast between the elevated social commentary and the women’s socially degraded occupation produces the sharp, clever slap of the senryu.

Although these examples appear relatively clear-cut in their divisions, many haiku tread the border between haiku and senryu in regards to tone and content. Yet, what matters is not how we label these poems, but how well each poem makes use of its form, how it creates tension through the contrast of two observations and how it evokes emotion and provokes thought from the reader. In an untitled essay, Virgilio reflects upon his own poetry and their relation to senryu:

Like Buson, most of my haiku are ‘human-oriented’ but nature is an integral part of each. This ‘human-oriented’ approach often produces haiku-senryu, or pure senryu. However, I think this is the best approach to haiku for a *Westerner*, rather than Basho’s ‘nature-oriented’ manner. To write like Basho, one must live as he did. (Untitled Essay [4], Virgilio’s emphasis)

One of the most crucial lessons in writing a haiku is to write from life. When Virgilio mentions writing like Basho, he reminds his readers that he was a wanderer who traveled Japan and lived a relatively solitary life. Virgilio’s life as a Camden resident could not be more different. But as Basho was surrounded by nature and embodied it in his writing, so did Virgilio with the men and women whom he lived amongst. His “human-oriented” approach was true to life, and he created haiku that shared senryu-like aspects, since the nature in Camden is almost always bounded, created and altered by man. To Westerners who are used to poetry that focuses on mankind and man’s relations, this approach may be the best way of introducing Eastern ideas and forms like the haiku to the American readership.

Section 3: Layers of Meaning

Now that we have a fuller understanding of the background of the haiku tradition, the uniqueness and potential of haiku in English, and the differences between haiku and senryu, it is possible to better appreciate the artistry of Virgilio's poetry. Over the years, the poet has accumulated an astonishingly large body of work, much of it unpublished and much of it iterations of previous poems with subtle changes in wording, punctuation and stylistic choices. From extensive research of both published and unpublished works, several thematic and stylistic issues emerge as the most interesting and discussion-worthy: Virgilio's approach to his subject matter and use of layers of meaning, his discussion of Camden's poor and disenfranchised, his address of larger American issues such as urban and rural identity, and finally his revision and development of linked and interrelated poetry over time. These four issues cover a few of the most interesting aspects of Virgilio's body of work, and through the exploration of them readers can gain a greater appreciation of his contribution to the development of haiku in America and his poetry's place in contemporary literature.

One of the most unfamiliar ideas mentioned above is the way Virgilio's poetry employs different layers of meaning. By this, I mean to suggest that his haiku extends beyond the subject of the poem and the scene or individual involved. A haiku that primarily focuses on the poet or narrator, or one whose personal issues do not resonate with a great variety of readers, or one that does not suggest a higher meaning is a failure of the poem's purpose. The haiku form itself explicitly resists a focus on the poet or narrator and instead gestures to larger issues and concerns. In fact, the haiku's brevity prevents any sort of personal story from being told that would draw attention to the

author. Like a traditional Chinese brush painting, the individual is dwarfed by the greater dramatic landscape that surrounds him. Virgilio's best work transcends the individual and strikes at higher levels, addressing a group or community within society, or even the entirety of society itself.

In order to better understand how layering works, let us turn to one of Virgilio's haiku from *Selected Haiku* (54) as an example:

the blind musician
extending an old tin cup
collects a snowflake

The first layer of meaning lies at the individual level. The poem presents us with two images: a blind musician holding an old tin cup in public, waiting for the rattle of coins of a donation, and a snowflake, delicate and cold, landing in the cup. The tension of the images suggests what the poem does not explicitly state, including the poor, worn state of the musician, the dinginess of his clothing, his drawn facial expression and the chill of the snowy air. The individual level here is the most subtle, for we do not know exactly what the man is thinking, but the sadness of the single snowflake and the cold develop upon what he must feel as he sits waiting for an act of charity.

The second layer of resonance occurs at the level of the group or community. This includes Camden residents and other locals who have seen the man and have witnessed his circumstances or lived through it. Perhaps the man is a common sight at a certain street corner and locals expect to see him each day and wonder when they do not. Here, the musician retains his individuality, as others may know him by name and interact with him personally, but the community shares and feels the desperation of his

condition. The author belongs to this level of connection, for he has witnessed and recorded this moment in the musician's life.

The third layer of connection lies at the level of society itself. The musician and his poverty are abstracted—society as a whole does not recognize him as an individual, but has observed others like him sitting on street corners with faded cardboard signs, gazing out at passing traffic. As one among a sea of poor, homeless men and women, the musician and his condition stir emotion in a vast number of readers from all over the nation in all levels of society. The subtle political message embedded in the haiku gives the poem a senryu-like quality, but without overtly condemning society or promoting a path of change. Rather, through the use of an individual, the poem highlights a man's plight and doing so stirs compassion in readers from both local communities and the rest of American society.

It may come as no surprise that the poems about strangers gain such complexity since the poet is able to distance himself from his subject more easily than with more personal poetry. But even Virgilio's personal poems are able to carry multiple layers of resonance, for many strong human emotions are understood and shared throughout society. Virgilio's poems on his brother's death in Vietnam are intensely personal, but the emotions that he presents on the individual level easily echo throughout broader layers of meaning. Take the following poem from *Selected Haiku* (21):

on the darkened wall
of my dead brother's bedroom:
the dates and how tall

The level of the individual presents the most intense emotions, those of Virgilio after his brother's death in the Vietnam War. The contrasting images occur between the hard truth

of his brother's death and the fact that he will never come home to his old bedroom, to the childhood reminiscence brought upon by the markings and dates of his brother's height over the years. The author is reminded of his childhood in memories that are crudely incongruous to the fact that his brother is gone forever. It is as if Virgilio has returned to a state of childhood innocence where he struggles to understand and reconcile himself with the fact that death exists and has claimed someone dear to him.

The second level of significance, the community, is implied but eclipsed by Virgilio's own personal anguish. His ailing mother as well as his family and friends no doubt feel the pain of the brother's sudden death. The third level of society abstracts Larry Virgilio as one of the valiant soldiers killed in combat in defense of his country. Many Americans struggled to overcome the emotional anguish of losing their loved ones to the war, and the honors and memorials the government erected to celebrate the war heroes reinforce these values. On the other hand, other members of the society reacted to these deaths by protesting the government and the war. Virgilio's poem does not explicitly state his stance on the war, but focuses on his personal struggle to handle his brother's death. Virgilio has a large collection of poems about Vietnam, but none explicitly state his political views at the time of his brother's demise, although he has mentioned his anti-war views in public readings (Mote, 286). Rather, it is up to the reader to share in the poem's emotions and decide his own reaction to the events.

One of Virgilio's most evocative war poems appears in *Selected Haiku* and is dedicated to his brother by name. This poem (17) takes a distinctly different approach than the previous one, but still contains the three layers of meaning that lend the haiku its significance:

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

In the previous poem, Virgilio starts at the personal level with a mention of his brother, and then lets the poem flower into wider circles of meaning. Here, he introduces imagery of the wilderness with long, untamed grasses with the incongruous soldier's helmet among them, marked with the scars of war. Although his brother is not mentioned directly, the poem still begins at the personal level. His brother does not exist in the poet's memory, but instead occupies the space of the "unknown flower," a symbol of innocence and fragility in the midst of the jungle war zone. The word "unknown" holds a great deal of meaning, referring to his brother's innocence, the strangeness of his presence in the alien landscape, and the symbol of peace that a flower represents in wartime.

This last connection brings us to the third layer of meaning. It is difficult to ascertain the community level of meaning, since the poem takes place in a remote location without the presence of other men. Yet, the poem is easily interpreted from a national point of view with the haiku's representations of peace. In this interpretation, Virgilio's brother stands for any unknown and unrecognized soldier who fell in the country's wars, such as those celebrated in The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The lone flower brings up a famous image of the Vietnam protest movements, where a peaceful protester threads a flower into the barrel of a policeman's gun. The peaceful flower makes the cold steel of the weapons seem absurd and out of place, a clear overreaction to the protesters' benign demonstrations. Virgilio's flower acts in this same manner to the helmet that it has grown through, turning it into pot and shelter for the plant rather than a

tool of war. In the end, the flower represents the hope that when the war ends, nature and the nation will recover, grow, flourish and overcome its war-filled past.

The layers of meaning interpretation of Virgilio's haiku helps the reader unlock the complexity of meaning in this poetry. Whether the poem's subject matter is a stranger or a brother, these poems contain themes and emotions that all readers can understand, appreciate and sympathize with.

Section 4: Camden and Community

The layers of meaning in Virgilio's work lend his poems the complexity true to the haiku form, yet style alone is not the only notable aspect of the poet's collection. Virgilio's discussion of his hometown of Camden and the city's poor and disenfranchised distinguish his work from his contemporaries. Rather than focusing on the beauty of transcendent nature, the poet uses the haiku form to evoke feelings of sympathy, sadness and regret at the desperate state of Camden's poor. As a lifelong Camden resident himself, his poems succeed at putting faces on the city's poverty.

The importance of Camden to Virgilio's work is highlighted in his speeches and demonstrated in the poetry itself. In an interview with Marty Moss-Cohane on WHYY's "Radio Times," the poet explains just how crucial the city is to his poetic drive:

Marty: What keeps you in Camden? And I guess people don't think of poets living in Camden [or even] know that Walt Whitman was there but...but certainly it's a city that has died. Perhaps it's coming back to life...but why are you still there?
 Nick: I traveled all over the country and I wasn't creative...I'm creative at that home at 1092 Niagara Road, and if I leave that home, I'm not creative any more. I got roots there...
 Marty: And this a home you've grown up, your whole life...
 Nick: Thirty-nine, since '39 I've been there. I lived in Camden, I lived in the slums when I was a kid, you know...common-law wives and bootleggers...and we had a nice home, and we didn't have that much, got a dime spendin' money a week, a dollar for Christmas, you know. (281)

Virgilio's experience as a child growing up in the slums of Camden acclimated him to the day-to-day mentality that the city's poor were forced to live with. The poet was lucky to have a steady family to support him throughout his schooling, though the Virgilios were by no means rich. But the city was where the poet developed his personal views and experiences. After traveling through parts of the east coast and Europe with dissatisfaction, he returned to Camden and found a renewed creative energy that fueled

him until his death. Yet, when Virgilio writes about Camden, he doesn't use his background to garner poetic sympathy, but to express the hard facts of life that he has witnessed and vicariously experienced through his poetry. As an insider, he is able to unflinchingly address Camden's poverty, but with the understanding and sympathy of a local member of the community. As a result, his poems are touching and fascinatingly effective at grasping the truth and solemnly evoking emotion from his readers.

Virgilio's Camden poems are often stirring in their directness and simplicity, both of which add to their emotional effectiveness. The poet is sympathetic toward the poor, though not overly so as to taint his poetry with his own personal convictions. This poem from *Selected Haiku* (59) highlights harsh reality while maintaining the distance of an observer:

on the cardboard box
holding the frozen wino:
Fragile: Do Not Crush

Camden's homeless are impossible to overlook, and Virgilio selects one stirring image of the risks that the poor are forced to take. At the individual level, the tension arises between the image of death, the frozen wino, and the ironic lettering on the box, "Fragile: Do Not Crush." The dead man is not the box's original cargo, and yet the package's former contents were handled with more care than the human being that now lies inside of it. In fact, it is society's continual neglect of its poor that leads to unnecessary deaths such as in this man's case. But Virgilio does not open the poem with a blazing political message; rather, it is the reader who interjects these thoughts in response to his emotions. In this manner, the poet is able to stir his reader without alienating him with political overtones.

While Virgilio often highlights the difficulties of the city's poor, sometimes it is hard to decide exactly where the poet's sympathy lies. For example, the two poems below, the first from the *Virgilio Collection* and the second from *Selected Haiku (60)*, focus on two groups constantly at war:

The morning fog lifts,
and the policeman's body
drifts down the river.

cold morning rain –
gathering under the canopy
friends of the mobster

The first poem focuses on a police officer as a victim to a terrible, unattributed crime. Unlike the city's poor who frequently end up at the bottom of the river, Virgilio instead captures the image of the victimized policeman floating over the water. The morning fog, a peaceful covering for the land and water, contrasts to the policeman's cold body and is transformed into a death shroud. When he is discovered he becomes more than just an individual, but another figure to add to the rising death toll of the city's endless chain of violent crimes.

Yet, Virgilio does not restrict himself to the policeman, whom the public supports and heralds as the word of the law. Rather, the second poem demonstrates that even those working against the law deserve a measure of sympathy. In the first two lines of the poem, the reader encounters a familiar scene of the cold, rainy morning of a funeral. It is natural for any reader to sympathize with this universal depiction of grief, but the third line comes as a surprise to many when we discover that the man in the casket is in fact a mobster. Many of those who encounter this poem might resist Virgilio's sympathetic stance on principle, but that does not change the fact that the man's friends

and family sincerely mourn him. In reality, mobsters like this one are just a single group of players in the cycle of violence that has impoverished and destroyed what was once a thriving and successful city.

It is impossible to discuss Nick Virgilio as a Camden poet without also discussing Walt Whitman and his contribution to the city. Whitman was certainly an active figure in Camden. He published several editions of *Leaves of Grass* while living there and entertained famous writers and locals alike. He built a great mausoleum to house his remains in Harleigh Cemetery, and his funeral was a grand public event. All of these events contributed greatly to Camden's culture and renown, and Whitman is undeniably the city's most well known writer. But how then can we compare Virgilio's and Whitman's contributions? In his Eulogy, Father Michael Doyle explains the differences between Whitman and Virgilio and the eras that they lived in:

He has been compared to Whitman and the two men could not be more unlike each other. At a time when this country was a sophomore...energetic, powerful, eager, overworked, and dominant, Whitman tried to put all the movement of the nation to the music of his ever-expanding words. His Camden was a bustling city with its wharfs and ferryboats, its factories and its people. Whitman could grab onto that. But Nick Virgilio came along and his Camden was poor as a plucked chicken and he elevated its tragedy in kernels of beauty that will be the stars of our future.

Doyle's speech is difficult to argue with—indeed, Whitman lived at a time of great American industrial expansion. New factories made goods cheaper and easier to produce. Technology like the railroad unified America and broadened the ordinary man's horizons of knowledge and culture. The country's future seemed bright and full of wealth and potential. Camden itself was a transportation hub that received railroad passengers and transferred them to Philadelphia through its ferry service, which Whitman mentions in his writing.

On the other hand, Virgilio's Camden could not be more different. The city today contains fewer businesses and many travelers and tourists are lured to nearby Philadelphia, deterred by Camden's rising crime rate. Small businesses are victim to theft, or struggle with the extra expense of hiring tight security. The city's citizens are impoverished, have little access to fresh food by its lack of grocers, and its children are mired in an underfunded schooling system. While Whitman's Camden residents were exposed to other regions through the traffic of travelers and ideas, today's locals are shut in by their poverty and lack the funds to move out of the city in search of better opportunities.

How then can Virgilio paint an optimistic picture of the world when the city around him is trapped in poverty and fear? Yet, the suffering that the poet has observed throughout his life is as great a fuel for creativity as America's past achievements. Just as the Greek playwrights found beauty in tragedy, so does Virgilio find beauty in the city's poor and downtrodden. Doyle's description of the poet's accomplishments, that "he elevated its tragedy in kernels of beauty that will be the stars of our future," cannot help but contain a ray of hope. As long as Virgilio's poetry inspires its readers, Camden's culture is kept alive. If and when the city ever recovers from its pitfalls, his writing will be a source of inspiration and a small point of light in a dark patch of history. And so, while it is impossible to compare Whitman and Virgilio directly because of their many differences, it is true that both men provided Camden with what it needed: Whitman, with a rallying call to embrace the future's promise, and Virgilio, with homage to the city's poor that raises their suffering to the light.

Section 5: Larger American Issues

Camden remained an important part of Virgilio's life and poetry to his death, yet it is undeniable that, like Whitman, his poetry spoke not only to his city, but also to larger issues about the very nature of America itself. The poems that we have so far explored have not only highlighted the struggles of the individual and the community, but also have tied themselves to larger issues that define society and how we as individuals conceive of our nation. Virgilio's poetry explores these issues that define American character, from the dichotomy of urban and rural America to the critical role that nature plays in our increasingly urbanized lives.

Many of the poems that we have focused on have represented Camden and its urban plight, yet all the more interesting is the fact that one of the other settings that Virgilio often turns to in his writing is small-town America. The poet's memories of his youth reflect an earlier time when the city was still a close-knit community, but his observations paint a picture that could suit any small town of this country. Take, for example, the two poems below from *Selected Haiku* (31, 63):

the town barberpole
stops turning:
autumn nightfall

atop the town flagpole,
a gob of bubblegum
holds my dead brother's dime

The first poem presents an image of a barberpole—an artifact that is familiar with those of Virgilio's generation but less so with today's youth. The usage of "the town" indicates that we are not talking about a sprawling metropolis, but a small town, perhaps only with one barber. This is not the Camden of today, but a memory of an earlier, more idyllic

time. Yet, even the memory this poem evokes is tainted with regret. As autumn passes, the days grow shorter and the barber is forced to close earlier. The passing of time and the change and decline of the town has made memories of this early time appear outdated, at least for a city like Camden. But all across America, small towns stuck in the past still exist. Virgilio and many others even today yearn for a return to what they believe to be a “simpler” time. This sympathy echoes through politics, culture, cinema, and even in some areas of literature. Yet, always a realist, Virgilio does not deny in his poetry that this concept of America is soon to be lost.

Although the first poem is more ambiguous about the poem’s location, the second poem forces the reader to believe that Virgilio’s setting is none other than the Camden of his youth. In his return to the city, the poet observes or imagines the remnant from a scene from his childhood: his brother’s dime glued to the top of a flagpole with a wad of gum. This is a personal poem, but Virgilio does not overwhelm it with egocentric past reflections, but rather lets the observation speak for itself. The reader imagines the poet’s brother playfully shimmying up the pole on a dare and planting his dime at the top in an act of rebellion. In the earlier interview, Virgilio mentioned that a dime represented a week’s allowance for the boys, and so planting the coin rather than spending it must have been a significant act. For Virgilio, it is inextricably tied to his childhood memories; to locals, it reminds them of a time when Camden was still a community; and to his national audience, it connects them with an earlier, carefree time that they yearn to return to. Even though Virgilio might write about his hometown, his poetry evokes sympathy in his readers who connect the poetry with their own innocent youth.

Yet, small towns do not wholly define America, just as its inner cities do not. Throughout his travels, Virgilio visited various parts of America and a few of his haiku mention the beauty of the nation's rural communities. These two poems from *Selected Haiku* (14, 29) combine distinctly American elements with the traditional haiku appreciation of nature:

a distant balloon
drifting over the county fair
eclipses the moon

empty farmhouse:
moon in the rain barrel
hatching mosquitoes

The first poem begins with a familiar image to any American: the spectacle of the county fair. The poem opens with the image of a balloon, most likely a brightly colored hot-air balloon rather than a helium one judging by the distance, although helium balloons are also associated with county fairs. Hot-air balloon rides are only possible in rural areas because they require plenty of open space to make a landing, and in many places in America, especially the West, one might see a balloon in the air on any particular day. County fairs bring with them associations of many other American traditions like carnival games and Ferris wheels, fried food and sweets, helium balloons and prizes for pigs, all of which readers associate as simple, positive products of American culture. Among all of the playfulness of the first two lines, the third line comes as a bit of a surprise. When the balloon crosses the moon, the reader is forced to turn away from the human spectacle and confront nature itself. It is ironic that the balloon for a moment replaces the moon and insulates the fair in its own world of color and festivities. But when the balloon passes, the moon is revealed and the reader is faced with the greater force of nature.

Rural communities rely on bond-strengthening activities such as fairs and other celebrations to unify its citizens, but the great sprawl of farm communities and the eroding community bonds in modern times make these fairs seem quaint and small when viewed from the height of the balloon.

The second poem turns to the farm communities themselves. Interestingly, just as in the first poem, the scene is set but there are no people there to populate it. The farmhouse is empty, perhaps even abandoned, and the rain barrel is full enough to let the light of the moon in over its high lip. Like a child leaning to gaze at the water, the moon gazes down at it from her high perch. The water, rather than being used to water the livestock, is hatching mosquitoes in its idleness. On one hand, the silence of the poem mimics the serenity that many associate with farm life and the simple, seasonal work that brings man back to the earth. In this line of thought, the poem offers the urban reader a chance to get back in touch with his agricultural roots and the natural, cyclical lifestyle of his ancestors. On the other hand, Virgilio doesn't offer his reader the figure of a farmhand or livestock, even from a distance. The farmhouse is silent and uninhabited, and readers are forced to accept the fact that there are few small privately owned farms compared to a century ago. Large companies dominate the business and landholders have sold their farms and moved to urban environments. The myth of the simple farming community is as much an American trope as the small-town community, and both face extinction in modern times, a fact that Virgilio makes clear in his poetry.

In the face of urbanization and the destruction of small towns and farming communities, how then can the individual get back in touch with his roots in nature?

Virgilio voices the struggle of man to get back to nature in his interview on “Radio Times”:

We’re not in touch with nature, and it’s high time we did... We cannot be reactionary and go back pre-industrial-revolution, but we’ve got to get back to the earth somehow. We wear shoes. We’ve got rugs under here—we never touch the earth. My grandfather before he died picked up a clod of earth and said, ‘You think you’re better than this?’ We’re made of earth, you see. We should get back to the earth, and that means we can’t, like I said, we can’t be reactionary. (In Memory, 280)

Virgilio opposes the reactionary view of returning to the past, and his poetry, as we have explored, showcases the reality of the erosion of traditional America, its small towns and close-knit rural communities. Instead of getting caught up with nostalgia for the past, the poet insists on confronting the present and drawing beauty from even the bleakest American landscapes. Even in Camden, a city mired in urban decay, Virgilio brings out the beauty of nature unnoticed by others. The following poems from *Selected Haiku* (14, 25) bring to light the beauty hidden within a landscape seemingly devoid of nature’s touch:

incoming fog
is covering rocks and hulls
with flocks of gulls

the bare maple sways
and a tire on a wire cable
swings in the spring air

The first poem opens with a description of a shipyard, perhaps inspired by Philadelphia’s expansive docks and warehouses. The scene most likely begins after dusk or before dawn, when the fog clings to the chilly water. The third line introduces a familiar but unlikely subject for a nature poem: seagulls. Many consider the birds a nuisance, but the poem lends them beauty by describing them as a fog that descends on the rocks and boat hulls. Through his description, Virgilio transforms the ungainly seagull into a graceful

creature that covers the landscape like a gentle blanket of fog, drawing out the inherent beauty of the urban landscape. The second poem brackets an urban image with descriptions of nature, bringing an air of lightness to the scene. The poem opens with a maple tree with bare limbs supporting a tire held by a wire cable. The large rubber tire, often stacked in heaps in junkyards, is here used as a child's toy. Today's children do not have the option of playing in fields and forests, and instead must wrestle their creative energies on a landscape of asphalt, rubber and steel. But Virgilio's tire swing is not suspended from metal poles as in urban playgrounds; rather, a tree supports the swing, and the spring air blows it back and forth. Nature itself wrestles with the tire and forces the child to note its presence. With spring in the air, the tree will soon leaf and shade the ground where children will play. Although nature will never be as central to our lives as it once was, it still shelters us and encourages our creativity.

Virgilio himself embraced the creativity that nature lent him through his poetry, and yet he also made sure that nature was a part of his personal life and spirituality. In an article in the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, the poet takes the writer on a detour on the way to his house to visit a piece of nature that he finds special:

“Park over here. Yeah. Right here.”

He stepped out of the car into the thin spring shade of a huge tree, and suddenly he decompressed.

What is this, an oak tree?

“No,” Nick said. “This is an American basswood, a linden. The neighbors are -ed off because it drops fuzzballs. They want to cut it down. If they do, they'll cut my heart out.” Nick threw his arms around the tree.

“I think this tree is holier than I am. You don't have to tell a tree to be a tree. That tree is a -ing tree. And it is a tree to the end. But how about human beings? We're not often ourselves. You can learn a lot from trees. That's why I say we are not better than anything else in the universe (Rossi).

To the poet, the tree represents a universal truth that he tries to embody in his poetry: the tree is simply a tree, and nothing else, just as his poems are what they describe, and not a mask, an analogy, or a political message. Whether or not Virgilio is a pantheist or simply a nature lover is beside the point. Where the neighbors see an inanimate obstruction, Virgilio sees a pure form, perhaps a relic or a symbol of nature living and thriving in a depressed urban environment. Man is simply a part of nature, a tiny figure on a great landscape painting, no greater or more powerful than the life around him. His sincere belief allows his poems to be free of personal attachment, hit many levels of meaning at once, and to describe nature yet let it speak for itself.

Section 6: Rewriting and Revision

Virgilio's address of larger American issues of identity and the decline of nature in modern life has made his poetry prized by readers and critics alike, yet one of the most interesting and least discussed issues of his work is his constant act of revision.

Throughout his life, the poet continually revisited old poems, some years old, and rewrote and reworked them into his new works. This process varied, for sometimes he chose only a few words or an image, while at other times he rewrote the poems themselves, changing wording, punctuation and line breaks in an attempt to perfect the original. Other times, the poet used old images in long chains of linked verse, like the *renga* linked verse tradition where Japanese haiku originated. Some of these contain discreet haiku, joined by theme and image, while others blend into freeform verse whose lines still retain their haiku succinctness. These linked verse are unique in the Western haiku canon, and demonstrate one aspect of the Japanese tradition that adapts well to the West.

Although Virgilio's collection of unpublished work contains over 20,000 haiku, not all of these are unique. Many are revisions and iterations of haiku the poet had written previously. In her introduction to the chapter on Virgilio, O'Toole explains the daily ritual and constant practice of revision:

He often rose at 4:30 A.M. doing yoga headstands and consuming some cleansing mix of vitamins and fresh fruit or vegetables, before descending to his monastic cellar workspace lined with books and boxes of manuscripts. It was here that he wrote and rewrote many thousands of haiku, only a fraction of which have been published (a friend recently scanned 40 legal sheets of haiku, 20+ to a page, before finding one she recognized from any publication or reading!). (O'Toole, 272)

Virgilio turned to his previous poetry in part to refine his work for publication, but because many of his poems were left unpublished, the poet clearly had another reason for rewriting old haiku instead of creating new work. The poetry chosen for Virgilio's

Selected Haiku reveal an interesting correlation. Many of its poems are interrelated in terms of theme, and the book often groups them in a way that leads from one theme to another. Virgilio's haiku on the death of his brother appear near the beginning of the collection as the poet works through his absence in a number of poems. The book then turns to poetry about Camden, wherein the poet finds remnants and memories of his brother interspersed with observations of the city's nature and people. Death returns as a theme later in the book with his father's death, and ends with poetry about life's journey and the poet's declining health. The poems lead the reader on a path that is somewhat chronological, but more strictly organized in terms of theme and the stream of the poet's ideas. The connections between these poems are more than coincidental; they showcase Virgilio's process of revisiting old haiku and give a sample of his personal life over time. In practice, the poet often used his old poetry as inspiration for new poems, settling on an old image or phrase and using it as the seed for a new poem.

Rewriting is a process of renewal in which old words fuel new ideas. Virgilio brings up the importance of rewriting and the difficulty of finding language and inspiration for his work in an interview: "Writing is rewriting. If it wasn't...my God--- see, the mind is a waste land...There's so much garbage out there, there's so much dead language. Every once in a while in this abandoned mine, you'll find a little nugget" (O'Toole, 285). Virgilio's process of rewriting involves searching through old ideas with a new mindset in hopes of finding the right phrase, image or idea to run with. The process must have certainly been time consuming, especially since the poet's unpublished collection contains no dates or handwritten organization. The same poem that you encounter on the first page of the Virgilio Collection can appear many sheets or folders

later, rephrased slightly with various iterations on the page as the poet revisited and reworked it months or even years later. The poet's metaphor of searching through a mine is a strong way to describe his process of rewriting: he sifts through his old work, tossing aside all poems, lines and words that he considers "dead language" before settling on a word, an image, or an idea that he feels has the potential for growth. The most successful of these Virgilio has published, but each piece published represents the culmination of this extensive, time-consuming process. Virgilio mentions in a personal letter that "many of my poems stem from ideas that I have been working on for years" (Virgilio Collection). Perhaps the reason Virgilio only published a fraction of his poetry is his insistence on getting rid of "dead language," and yet his high standards have led to his popularity in the haiku movement in America and overseas in Japan.

In order to examine the poet's process of revision, let us look at two versions of an unpublished poem that appear in the Virgilio Collection:

The young widow,
how long and grey her hair has grown
and wore the wedding band.

The young widow's hair
how long and grey it has grown
and autumn wind-blown

The first poem appears on the fifty-sixth page of the collection, while the second appears on the sixty-fifth. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine the dates of these poems, since few of the unpublished poems have dates, and the order of the collection has not remained the same since the works were delivered. Nevertheless, the quality of the second poem is much higher than the first. The first poem shifts between three different images, none of which are strongly connected by emotional or artistic links. At first, we

are presented with a young widow in entirety, which indeed does contrast with the long, grey hair of the second line. But the third line undermines this connection by moving to her wedding band, which is too overt for Virgilio's usual style, and does not add to or reflect on the previous images. Her hair has changed, but the wedding band does not add anything new to the poem, since we already know that she has not married since she is referred to as a "widow" from the outset.

The second poem is a vast improvement on the first, both in terms of technical and thematic issues. The most obvious difference to many readers is that the second poem follows the traditional 5-7-5 syllabic structure, while the first has an uneven 4-8-6 layout. While we have discussed earlier that many good haiku can be written outside the traditional structure, such departures should be for a reason. The first poem's unevenness does not seem to contribute meaningfully to the poem. Also, the syntax of the first poem has been twisted to fit inside the form, making the line sound unnatural. The second line focuses on the widow's grey hair growing, but the third line's interjection of the wedding band makes it seem as if the long hair is wearing the ring, not the woman herself. The second poem corrects this by eliminating this unnecessary switch of subjects. The latter also contains formal elements that enhance the poem, such as the use of end rhyme in the last two lines paired with the internal rhyme with "young" and "long" in the first and second. These examples display confident control of language that the first poem lacks.

Thematic focus also benefits the second poem, giving it a feeling of unification that the first lacks. For example, the first line of the second poem is altered so that the reader faces not the widow herself, but just her hair, which holds greater symbolic importance. The change of the noun to the pronoun "it" makes the word less conspicuous

and lets the reader focus on the quality of the hair, its length and growth and its graying, transforming it into symbolic funerary garb that the widow has worn for years. The third line's "autumn wind-blown" admittedly creates an overt rhyme, which some readers might object to, but the traditional season word supports the widow by underscoring the passage of time and analogizing her aging to the decay of autumn into winter. The image—for Virgilio only focuses on one here, instead of three—gives the poem its strength and emotional effect. Although we cannot know for sure that the second poem was written after the first, the second poem's artistry shows the development of the poet's ability and style and demonstrates the necessity of his constant process of rewriting and revision.

The Virgilio Collection contains a few selections of poetry critique written by the poet himself, and one of these, titled "A Journey to a Haiku," narrates an instance of revision where the poet joins two haiku into a third unique poem. The poet begins by describing the circumstances behind the conception of the first poem, when he passed a local graveyard whose grass had been trodden down by visitors:

The grassy graveyard...
not a blade where children played,
near the battleground.

Months later, the poet created a new poem with a distinctly different setting:

The plantation ruins:
a bulldozer levels
the slave quarters.

A third poem emerged blending the two poems into one imagined reality:

Near the battleground
where children play in the grass:
the graveyard of slaves.

A fourth poem came as the poet evened out the imagery, changing the odd “children” into “cattle” that are more naturally suited to the environment:

Near the battleground
Where cattle graze in the grass:
The grave mounds of slaves.

The first two poems present two vastly different settings, but after attempting to revise the poems separately, the poet realized the innate connection between the images of the poem, such as the “battleground” and “graveyard” with “ruins” and “slaves.” The third poem is the result of their union. Virgilio struggled with several issues present in the fourth poem, such as the repetition of “graze” and “grass,” clearly an instance of “dead language.” “Battleground” and “grave mound” were moved closer together to promote their unity. The vague phrase “near the battleground” was sharpened to give the poem a greater sense of place. The final version that Virgilio presents us with resolves these issues:

Where the cattle graze
near the grassy battleground:
the grave mounds of slaves.

This last version is much more succinct and unified than the previous drafts, promoting movement from general to specific, unifying like images, eliminating dead language, and utilizing assonance to tie the first and last lines together. The exercise also tracks Virgilio’s progress from one poem and concept to other related haiku that are combined into the final product. Without the poet’s insistence on revising and reworking his poetry, these poems would not be nearly as potent and polished as they appear in his publications.

Yet, Virgilio does not always use his process of revision to polish old poems into publishable material; in some instances, the Virgilio Collection shows the poet reusing an image or idea later as a seed for a new poem. For instance, both poems below share the image of the rain barrel to different effects:

The empty farmhouse:
 mosquito larvae
 rise in the rain barrel.

The empty rain barrel:
 snowflakes, faded leaves and blossoms
 and one cicada shell.

The first poem appears on the one-hundred and fourth page while the second appears on the thirty-eighth of the collection. The first poem is a common example of Virgilio's traditional nature haiku. The empty farmhouse introduces a rural setting, abandoned and left to nature. Nature indeed is at work—mosquitoes are hatching and rising from the rain barrel, creating life where there was none. The second poem reintroduces the rain barrel, but this one is drained and empty of water. Instead, it contains the remnants of the four seasons: snowflakes, leaves, blossoms and a cicada shell. Its singular number and its placement alone in the final line emphasize the cicada shell as the most important object in the barrel. In fact, the cicada is a common image in Virgilio's work, appearing explicitly in four of the published works in *Selected Haiku*, always in the third line and always alone. It is easy to say that the cicada is the poet's patron creature, in many cases standing in for the poet himself. Cicadas appear in many of his summer poems, cutting the silence just they did in Basho's cicada poem at Ryuushaku. But it also appears in the form of its shell, such as in this poem from *Selected Haiku* (62) below:

from the willow
it fell into the empty grave:
cicada shell

The cicada shell is the only thing left of the insect when it sheds its skin on the trunks and limbs of trees. These shells often last far into the fall when the leaves turn brown and match their hue. And so, when the cicada shell appears at the bottom of the rain barrel, it is loaded with meaning. In one sense, it represents the poet and how he feels under the weight of the changing seasons and the passage of time. The fact that the barrel is dry and barren may also represent his feelings about his age and deterioration. At the same time, it also links to the poem above about his brother's sudden death and his struggle to cope with his absence. The empty rain barrel poem is unique in the fact that it links itself to two other poems, as well as to traditional Japanese haiku through its imagery. Certainly, this series of poems can be considered linked verse, and if the poet had chosen to publish them, it is likely that he would arrange them to display the intimacy of their connection.

There are several other instances of linked verse in the Virgilio Collection that never made it to publication. One of these is a politically charged series of poems that shows clear hostility towards the middle class and blames them for Camden's poverty. The negativity that they display is probably one reason the poet chose to never publish them, since the majority of his readership came from such a group. Nevertheless, these poems are an excellent example of Virgilio's linked verse at work and are worth examining.

Unlike most of the poet's work, these series of poems are titled and printed together on one sheet. The poet's address appears at the top of the page, and there are few handwritten correction marks visible, indicating that this is one of the later drafts (see Appendix for a reproduction of the poem). The poems that follow are separate haiku that are linked by imagery and the progression of time. One of the most obvious ties between the haiku is the back-and-forth movement that occurs throughout the series. The reader begins in the suburbs and is rushed down into the city with the sewage. In the end of the linked verse, the sewage smell is bottled and sent back to the suburbs by the poet. The city's residents then flee back into the suburbs and leave Camden to the poor who are unable to escape. The cyclical movement further proves that this phenomenon will continue unless steps are taken toward change.

Many images reoccur through the linked verse, but "sewage" is the one that carries the most weight, as it directs the flow and backflow of the poem and poisons all in its wake. It first appears in line 2 of the first poem as it is "flushed down ten thousand toilet bowls." The alliteration is set up to trick the reader, whose ear is attracted to the repetition in order to increase their shock and disgust when they stumble upon the image of the toilet. The filth from the suburbs flows downhill as it is "rushed to Camden town" in the following line. Following the first haiku, the sewage resurfaces in each haiku after, appearing wherever the poet turns. It "reek[s] in the heat" and poisons small children who are innocent about the politics that have brought disease into their lives. The hypocrisy of the suburbanites appears in the fourth poem when they refuse low rent housing for the city's poor while giving a nod to export sewage to Camden. This is where the political potency reaches its peak, for urban families can only blame the

suburban middle class that has destroyed their chance for finding low income housing and at the same time has poisoned their children.

The poet so far has laid low in these verses, letting the situation speak for itself. Yet in the following haiku, he pictures himself in the Camden landscape. As a resident himself, this is a fair leap to make, though an unusual one for a haiku:

driving my Honda
through the eight foot sewage pipe:
hot wind

The car protects the poet from the filth of the sewage, but the imagery still leaves the reader with a lingering sense of disgust. It is hard to imagine Virgilio squeezing his car into a sewage pipe, but the city itself has become so infested with filth that its roads and narrow alleys have become sewage pipes themselves by channeling the dirty water of the suburbs. The gaseous heat of the hot wind increases the feeling of oppression forced on the poet and the other city residents. Although it is unusual for Virgilio to directly insert himself into his haiku, his choice here indicates his solidarity with fellow Camden residents and his strong stance against the cruelty that the suburban families have forced upon them.

Virgilio's poem itself is one of the city's few rebuttals, and in the next haiku verse the poet strikes back directly against the attackers:

bottling the foul smell
of raw sewage, sending it
back to the suburbs.

Since the city and its residents have no recourse against the suburbanites and their political power, only the poet has the power to take revenge on behalf of his hometown. The linked verse in itself has bottled the sewage smells in its lines, and when the set is

published the same suburban families who created the sewage will consume his verse. It's a clever and dirty act for a poet to use, but the only way that he can pump the sewage back uphill is by bypassing the political process entirely. These verses were never published and they might have given Virgilio's reputation a "foul smell" if he had ever chosen to do so. Nevertheless, the fact that such poems even exist in the poet's collection shows his solidarity with the other Camden residents and his devotion to his city. Perhaps with knowledge of the poet's charitable intentions, this poem will come to be accepted by the general readership.

The linked verse ends with a disheartening haiku about the present reality of Camden's situation. The city's last middle class residents, disgusted by the sewage and filth, pack their bags and leave Camden to its destruction. Fittingly, they do not blame themselves for the fate of the city, but the "poor blacks" and other minorities who had nothing to do with its putrefaction. The "oppression" of the city from the title is sealed here, where the poet ends not with a message of hope, but one of desperation. This linked verse represents a searing retort to the arrogance and affluence of the middle of class. Each individual haiku is linked to the others through theme, imagery and time, and the final poem links back to the first in an endless circuit. As linked verse, the series of these haiku is more powerful than any one haiku alone. Each haiku can function individually but gains its strength by its links to the surrounding poems. By combining the clarity and succinctness of the haiku form with the length of a traditional Western poem, Virgilio's linked verse reaps the best of both worlds.

As a poet of a new verse form, Virgilio lacked the benefits of centuries of Western poetry to support his poetry. Yet, Virgilio's poems are inarguably as deeply

imbued with meaning as other native poetic forms. Revising and rewriting allowed the poet to make connections between individual haiku and linked verse and enriched them with deep layers of meaning. As the poet revisited poems from the past, they resurfaced in his later poetry, some of them in his published collections. What we are left with, then, is a poetic autobiography, an interpretation and selection of the poet's life by the poet himself. A reader can follow a single haiku from *Selected Haiku* back into the unpublished collection and find its iterations and interpretations as the poet rewrote and reworked it over the years. These poems are related to the others on the page, which are then connected to many others. From this great web we can follow Virgilio's development as a poet, piece together a portrait of Camden and its changes, and capture the poet's opinions, views, preferences and habits. Perhaps the poet never intended to leave such a legacy, but his collections of papers and poems are a priceless heritage that haiku writers and the Camden community should appreciate.

VIII. Conclusion

Nick Virgilio's haiku are exceptional in their uniqueness. His constant process of writing and revision has laid the foundations for a complex web of meaning where poems can be appreciated not just as individual works, but also as links to other poems through imagery, theme and wording. Through linked verse and traditional haiku, the poet has created a collection of interconnected poetry that shares meaning and gives us insight into the poet's thoughts, feelings and opinions, even though he does his best to disguise them in many of his individual poems. These poems also paint a picture of a changed America, no longer the country of progress and boundless opportunity as it was in Whitman's time, but an urbanized, alienated America that nonetheless holds special beauty in its human relations and in its persistent connection to nature. Virgilio's haiku are particularly skillful at highlighting the plight of men and women whom he encounters in Camden, and he captures snapshots of them in his poetry. His objective approach portrays them plainly and truthfully, and such directness evokes a raw emotional response from his reader. Yet, each haiku is not merely a picture of a single man's broken life, but also evidence of Camden's struggle and the problems of America as a whole. Without manipulative rhetoric or political agenda, Virgilio artfully highlights the issues of our age.

What place, then, does Virgilio have among his fellow haiku poets and the Camden literary tradition? It is impossible to dismiss his work as a mere Japanese imitation or a textbook example of R.H. Blyth's haiku guidelines. Western haiku is vastly different from traditional Japanese haiku, and has developed into an entirely new art form. In Virgilio's work, syllabic count, seasonal imagery and other formal

constraints are eased and more often than not ignored for the sake of greater artistic expression. Yet the soul of haiku, its concision and emotional effect, is preserved. As any poetic form must grow and test its formal restraints, Western haiku has grown to suit new languages and contemporary issues. Virgilio's haiku boldly tackles new forms, language and issues that distinguish him from his traditional peers.

At the same time, Virgilio's attention to Camden's citizens, the urban poor, the dangerous struggle of the city's policemen and even the lives of gangs have made him a guardian of the city's literary tradition. Whitman wrote about his time, a time of invention and innovation, while Virgilio wrote about the hardship and alienation that man suffers. But both men defined the greatest issues of their age and helped build the identity and cultural values of their city. Although Virgilio may not be as well known in America as Whitman was, his contribution to the city is unmistakable. Yet, Virgilio's poetry does not only focus on Camden, but also addresses contemporary America's identity issues. Many of his poems highlight the disruption of rural communities and the disappearance of small towns that once represented the heart of America. The poet's contributions to the discussion of these problems on a national scale makes a strong argument that Virgilio should be recognized not only as a local, but also a national poet.

There are many other aspects of Virgilio's work that merit discussion. One aspect of his poetry that I have ignored is his non-haiku poetry, such as his single-word poetry and his early freeverse. The single-word poetry could even be considered an evolution of the haiku, the epitome of poetic concision. His early freeverse could easily be compared to his later haiku in order to discover how the poet's images, style and concision were adapted and improved in the haiku style. Another neglected issue is Virgilio's prose and

correspondence. Many of the poet's haiku are typed on the back of old letters from friends, publishers, fellow poets, even lovers, all of which lends a stronger biographical background than this essay has presented. Perhaps most interesting are Virgilio's letters and critical essays that examine his work and that of others. I have referenced several of these in the text, but these works are complex and warrant a deeper examination than their discussion in this essay. I hope that future scholars with an interest in Virgilio's work will do justice to the issues that I have neglected.

It has been over twenty years since the poet's death and his work is finally regaining the national attention that it had once received. A new edition of his previously unpublished work, *Nick Virgilio: A Life in Haiku* edited by Raffael de Gruttola, arranged by Rick Black and published in 2012, has brought his haiku to a new generation of readers. The haiku's spare but emotionally potent form and Virgilio's powerful themes and clear artistry will certainly appeal to a young generation growing up in the economic turmoil and changing values of today. Just as the haiku form reinvented itself in the West, so will Virgilio's poetry find new life through his young readers' minds.

Appendix A

The Oppression of Camden

down from lush suburbs,
 flushed down ten thousand toilet bowls:
 rushed to Camden town

In the city street,
 leaking sewage from the suburbs
 reeking in the heat.

city schoolyard
 small children fallen ill:
 smell of sewage

"No low rent housing"
 says the suburbs. "Yes" to sewage
 piped to the city.

driving my Honda
 through the eight foot sewage pipe:
 hot wind

bottling the foul smell
 of raw sewage, sending it
 back to the suburbs.

packing and leaving
 the city in wrack and ruin:
 blaming poor blacks

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