

Book Reviews

REVIEWED BY NICHOLAS KLACSANZKY

Nick Virgilio: Collected Haiku 1963-2012, edited by Geoffrey Sill (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2023). 372 pages, 6" x 9". Perfect soft-bound. ISBN: 978-1-958408-13-1. \$30.00 from <https://redmoonpress.com/>

Nick Virgilio (1928–1989) is a household name in the English-language haiku community. Most of us who are familiar with his work have seen only his highly anthologized poems, though. To truly understand the breadth of styles and themes Virgilio employed, *Nick Virgilio: Collected Haiku* is an essential read. It presents every single haiku of his that was published from 1963 to 2012—all 921 of them. This volume is also crucial for his legacy, as it contains about 700 haiku of Virgilio's that were previously no longer available in print.

The editor, Geoffrey Sill, provides a comprehensive yet relatively succinct introduction to Virgilio's life and poetry career. Sill discusses the poet's initial inspirations for writing haiku and how he developed his writing over his lifetime. Showcasing examples of Virgilio's work over a lifetime, the introduction also ponders the power of the poet's legacy and his critical reception over the years.

In the main part of the book, the haiku are organized by year. It is fascinating to see the journey of Virgilio's craft not only as a poet but also as a reflection of American haiku's evolution from 5-7-5 syllables with rhyming and punctuation to one-liners with only a few words and other forms that we now see today in our community.

Below, I will comment on haiku in the collection that I deem important or striking chronologically—especially ones that have not been previously discussed.

1963

Between drops
of holy water on the casket —
spring rain.

The holy water and the spring rain seem to be a fine encapsulation of Virgilio's recurrent themes of religion and nature.

1964

Falling whitely,
through a rising hawk's shadow . . .
the sound of the falls!

The use of synesthesia and stark imagery showcases how much Virgilio knew of Japanese haiku and his penchant for imagistic poetry.

1965

Pine needles fall,
and fine rain opens the pores
of the lake.

The synergy of nature and surreal imagery elevates this haiku.

1966

The first cicada —
sure the town dentist hears it
on the way to work.

Virgilio seems to be fond of cicadas, as the creature appears numerous in his work. The touch of humor and sound in this poem wins the reader over.

1967

The funeral cortege . . .
a riderless horse takes the sun
and wind along.

I enjoy how the reader has to fill in the details and explanations.
The scene that is set is at once melancholic and majestic.

1968

The long uphill road:
an old monk's silhouette
against the autumn moon.

This displays the poet's forays into zen haiku and the influence
Japanese translations of haiku had on him.

1969

A blind evangelist
preaching on the street corner:
the summer wind.

There are many tones in which the reader could interpret this
haiku, which is a definite plus.

1970

The old wind-swept house
weather stripping hums a tune
in a minor key

I can hear the care and worry of nature for the house as it tears it
down.

1971

the plantation ruins:
a bulldozer levels
the slave quarters

Virgilio often wrote about historical events. We see here also the lack of capitalization, which differs from his earlier work.

1972

The canyon river:
an empty rubber-raft
attempts the rapids.

The carved-out canyon pairs well with the empty rubber-raft, which is now independently moving and perhaps self-aware.

1973

Faraway barking
through the frozen darkness:
deep in my feather bed.

I enjoy the sense that no matter how much we try to create distance between nature and ourselves, nature will always be a part of us.

1974

A drooping hydrangea
drinking the moon's reflection
drains the pool dry.

Virgilio wrote many haiku with the moon as the subject and this one has an intriguing feel to it. We can imagine the hydrangea gathering the light and power of the moon.

1975

Christmas alone
removing the frozen snow
from the tombstone.

The comfort of a tombstone is a poignant subject. This haiku most likely relates to the poet's brother, Larry.

1976

From the small coffin
dripping all summer night long:
the song of the ice.

Another fine elegy that demonstrates the continuation of life after death.

1977

empty classroom:
horsefly on the blackboard
walks the chalk line.

Coincidence, intelligence, intuition, or simply attraction? The mysteries of the actions of the horsefly provide a sense of humor and space for the reader.

1978

Old rabbi
unrolling Torah scroll:
bitter cold

The cold could represent the rabbi being not yet fully knowledgeable of the mysteries of the Torah; the history the holy document

represents; or maybe the length of both the bitter cold and the Torah being long.

1979

adding a new name
to the war memorial:
cold morning rain

There are various interpretations of this haiku that hinge on who is adding the new name to the memorial.

1980

at the open grave
drowning out the priest's prayer:
autumn downpour

Here is another strong example of religion and nature intermixing, with nature eventually overpowering our rituals.

1981

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

The bugler gives respect to the fallen soldier and the shadow slipping into the grave indicates eternal homage—even if it may be subtle.

1982

empty farmhouse:
moon in the rain barrel
hatching mosquitoes

Besides being a fine elegist, Virgilio was excellent at capturing the remarkable in desolate places.

1983

selling her favors:
putting her youngest brother
through seminary

A senryū that is charged with morality, religion, and familial fealty.

1984

St. Francis' statue
extending an open hand
collects bird droppings

This senryū contains humor and religious commentary wrapped up in one.

1985

thrusting the price tag
in the eye of the striped bass:
the evening sun

Virgilio plays with shape, commerce, and humanity's ruin of nature. There is a hint of guilt, too.

1986

barefootpatheadstone

[barefootpathheadstone]

This is the first publication of a one-line haiku by Virgilio, seen in *Wind Chimes* #18. It combines words that share letters, and in the brackets, the poet gives clarity without the meshing of words.

1987

her shadow shaving the hair from its legs: the heat

A unique image. Even the shadows are shaving their hair to get relief from the heat.

1988

empty street market
pounding wooden counters:
winter downpour

This haiku leaves me with a feeling of there never being a dull moment. Even times of solemnity can be colorful and boisterous.

1989

from the darkened road,
through the leaves of the linden
the far lights of home

Nick Virgilio passed away on January 3, 1989, due to a heart attack. Many tributes were published in journals and magazines in response. I find this poem, published in *Frogpond* 12:1, to be akin to a *jisei*.

Following the year of Virgilio's passing, journals and magazines continued to publish his work.

1990

the wind-swept prairie:
a stampede of tumbleweed
leads the Great Peace March

Besides the fine sense of sound in the words used, Virgilio presents a poignant connection between the natural world and human protest.

1991

leaving father's footprints:
I sink into deep snow.

It appears that the poet is wearing his father's boots and is taking a walk in the snow. The act of sinking into deep snow has multiple emotional overtones that can be explored by the reader.

2005

Gnarled hands
reaching for the palette
Autumn Sunset

The publication of Virgilio's work took a hiatus and resumed in 2005 with a single haiku. It has unusual capitalization as compared to his other haiku, but the emotional effect is potent. Autumn sunsets are commonly more colorful and vivid and gnarled hands are doing their best to represent them.

2012

after the spring storm . . .
the farm girl washes her hair
in the rain barrel

In 2012, the collection *Nick Virgilio: A Life in Haiku* was published. It contains many stirring haiku, but it's often the simplest of moments that inspire readers. By washing her hair in the rain barrel after a spring storm, the girl is perhaps imbued with the powers of the sky, and ultimately, the flow of our natural existence.

Nick Virgilio: Collected Haiku ends with the sections: *Editorial Notes*, *Sources/Further Reading*, and *Index of First Lines*.

If you are a student of haiku history and want to witness the evolution of one of the pioneers of American haiku, this collection is well worth the price tag. Though some critics might note that several of Virgilio's poems now seem padded and/or imitative of early Japanese translations, the sharpness of Virgilio's imagery coupled with his talent for understated poignancy in much of his work vastly outweighs these critiques. ◻■

REVIEWED BY KRISTEN LINDQUIST

deepening leaves: 2022 Seabeck Haiku Getaway Anthology, ed. by Lisa Gerlits and Antoinette Cheung. (Haiku Northwest Press, Bellevue, WA: 2023). 74 pages. 5.5"x 5". Hand-stitched softbound. ISBN 978-1-953092-05-2. Price: \$25.00 includes shipping in U.S.; mail check to Haiku Northwest, 3213 W Wheeler St. #4, Seattle WA 98199.

The production value of this small, limited edition (of 100) anthology is very high: the front cover is beautiful handmade paper from the Philippines, with a hand-stitched binding. Inside, fine monochromatic artwork precedes each of the book's five sections. The final section, of haiku with personal dedications, is further set apart by a square of what feels like handmade tissue paper. A lot of care went into designing this book; it feels like something special before one even gets to its content!

And the poems within sustain that feeling. The anthology features (mostly) haiku by more than 50 poets who attended Haiku