The other bard of Camden

Star-Ledger, The (Newark, NJ) - Thursday, December 12, 1996

By Amy Ellis Nutt, for ***The Star-Ledger***

Jersey State of Mind

The two roads, believe it or not, diverge in a yellow (and green) wood, just inside Camden's Harleigh Cemetery. The old graveyard, if you don't already know, is the final resting place of one of America's greatest poets, Walt Whitman.

It is also the final resting place of one of America's least known poets, Nicholas Virgilio. At the fork, just beyond the cemetery's main gate, visitors are presented with an option. They can either follow two white signs directing them down a path to the large mausoleum that is Whitman's. Or they can follow four white signs to the grave that is Virgilio's. If you take the latter option, you eventually find yourself on the downslope of a small hill overlooking a pond. Nestled amidst a trio of trees is Virgilio's plot, marked by an unusual headstone: A full-size granite podium engraved with one of Virgilio's most famous poems, an example of the spare, 17-syllable verse form known as haiku. In the 1960s the poem was widely published in Japan and was even translated by the country's crown prince:

Lily:

out of the water . . .

out of itself

Virgilio, who died in 1989, wasn't always a literary genius. Born in 1928, he spent most of his life in Camden's Fairview section in a red brick rowhouse with his parents and two younger brothers.

A communications major at Temple University, Virgilio worked with Philadelphia radio legend Jerry Blavat in the '50s before landing a job as a sportscaster in Texas.

Disappointment in love and struggles with depression brought Virgilio back to Camden in the early '60s. Shortly after his return, while browsing through the library at Rutgers University, Virgilio happened across a book of Japanese haiku. The attraction was immediate.

Within a year the former radio announcer was embarked upon the life of a professional poet: publication in literary journals; talks in local bookstores; readings at elementary schools; readings from the steps of the city library; even readings from his favorite stool at Camden's Elgin Diner. Virgilio was also a regular guest on National Public Radio, and in 1985, his first and only book of verse was published to critical acclaim.

Then, in January of "89, as he was about to appear on a national late- night talk show, Virgilio collapsed and died of a heart attack. He was 60 years old.

Part Picasso, part P.T. Barnum, Virgilio was both literary pioneer and unabashed self-promoter. He would collar customers at the Elgin or reporters in the city hall press room, to get them to listen to his haiku. When an interviewer once asked him why he wrote, Virgilio's answer conveyed all the urgency of a man on a mission: "Because I want to be alive," he said. "You gotta take the leap. You've got to use the imagination, you've got to try to do God one better."

Camden's greatest native poet, however, was also a virtual pauper. In his lifetime, he made no more than a few thousand dollars from his poetry and survived on his family's small savings and a meager pension from a stint in the navy. Virgilio was so poor, in fact, that he liked to say, wryly, that he "wore dead man's clothes," referring to the occasional neighborly donations that came his way.

The short, stocky poet, who looked more like a longshoreman than an aesthete, was probably best known, at least in literary circles, for his later haiku with their gritty urban images. They are poems that speak of Camden's dereliction, its "buckled billboards," "warehouse watchdogs" and "street-corner prostitutes."

The Rev. Michael Doyle, pastor of Camden's Sacred Heart Church and an old friend of Virgilio, says of the poet: "He mined the most beautiful things out of the misery of Camden." In his lilting Irish brogue, the 61-year-old priest recites a favorite haiku:

on the cardboard box,

holding the frozen wino:

FRAGILE: do not crush

Today, Tony Virgilio, Nick's brother, is the only surviving family member. Larry, the youngest brother, died in Vietnam in 1967; the father, Anthony, in "79; and mother, Rose, just three months before Nick in "89.

Tony, who is 67, still lives in the family's three-bedroom house. With its well-worn furniture, old black rotary phone and 60-year-old baby pictures, the Virgilio home looks like it has been trapped in a time warp. Stuck behind a painting on the wall is the same palm frond that can be seen in an old newspaper photo taken of Nick at home nine years ago.

Virgilio's study is in the basement. Carved out of a chaos of boxes, old furniture and clothes in hanging bags is his work area, just the way he left it: an old gray linoleum kitchen table next to the washer and drier, and above the table, a bare, 250-watt light bulb strung from the plywood ceiling. Next to the light bulb, a crucifix still dangles from a bent wire hanger.

On top of the desk are Virgilio's ancient battered Remington typewriter, a sheaf of faded poems, an old playbill and a Gerber baby-food bottle filled with paper clips. Tony keeps the 1,500 extra copies of his brother's book in boxes piled against one of the basement's cement walls.

After Nick died, Tony became a kind of curator, helping to organize the Nick Virgilio Haiku Society, which publishes a quarterly newsletter, holds an annual haiku contest for students, sponsors workshops and celebrates Nick's birthday every year with a graveside reading on June 28. For Tony, it is all clearly an act of love. "When someone puts their heart into something," he says, "you should give them their due. I just feel I owe Nick that."

Down at the Elgin Diner, owner George Vallianos remembers Virgilio in such detail, you can almost see the muscular muse sitting in his favorite seat at the end of the counter, with his usual order of a bran muffin and cup of decaf. "He was a pushy kind of guy" says Vallianos of the friend with whom he grew up. "But he liked people, and he always liked to get them thinking. He'd say to me, "What do you think of this one?' and I'd listen to something he'd was working on. I sometimes drove him to readings and interviews. We even had a 60th birthday party for him here at the diner. Appetizers and wine. A full house. Even so, there were lots of people outside, but Nick couldn't refuse anyone. He just brought them all in."

As far as Father Doyle is concerned, Virgilio's memory remains very much alive.

Hanging in the kitchen of the church rectory is a photo of the poet, beefy arms folded across the back of his Remington, his large bald pate looming over the top.

Doyle keeps a whole desk drawer filled with Virgilio's photos, poems, letters and other memorabilia. There are even copies of the poet's old grammar school report cards.

Tenderly, the old priest fingers through each item, recalling his dead friend: "Nick would go down to the market at Reading Terminal every weekday," he says, "and with the little money that he had, he'd bring back fruit, fish and vegetables to the rectory. Then he'd make tea, wash up the dishes and hit you with a couple of haiku before going off again. Nick was close to my heart. I loved his simplicity, his childlike-ness. He always wanted to show you what he had done."

Like Whitman, what Virgilio had done was to excavate his own life and the life around him, searching for the poetry that was everywhere-in Camden's crippled neighborhoods, on its broken-down piers, in its people.

Oddly enough, you don't have to read Virgilio's poems to know this about him. You need only come to Harleigh Cemetery and follow those four white signs. Or stop by the quiet Virgilio house on Niagara Road, or the Elgin Diner, or Father Doyle's church.

It is hard to imagine a road a less traveled.

Did it make all the difference? Obviously.