

**Sean Dougherty, director/producer. *remembering Nick Virgilio*.** Available from the Nick Virgilio Haiku Association. Contact Mary Heron of the NVHA: [mhheron@verizon.net](mailto:mhheron@verizon.net).

by Michele Root-Bernstein, East Lansing, MI

This short, well-crafted documentary should be on every haikin's to-watch list. Nearly as concise, and in its own way as revelatory, as its subject's life and poetry, *remembering Nick Virgilio* opens the door to the poet and his place in the story of English-language haiku. The documentary immediately draws us into Virgilio's creative process as a man and as a writer. We hear him speak of the Philadelphia church bell he heard striking the hours—and the twenty years it took him to render his experience in haiku. (Rick Black and Kwame Dawes refer to this poem in their conversation in this issue; see pp. 110–11.) As the poet puts it, he found the words to the haiku when he found the inner meaning of the moment—the experience of the bell was happening inside himself.

The Nick Virgilio we meet in the film pursued his inner life with dogged determination. Day in, day out, his routine included yoga, long walks, food markets, and about eight hours of writing at his manual typewriter. When asked why he didn't use a word processor, which allowed for rapid editing, he answered that “words shouldn't be so easy to change.” What they should be is clean, clear, surprising, and focused on creating a picture, though the picture may not be pretty. Virgilio loved to buttonhole his friends and read a haiku or two to see what grabbed them. He loved to read the first two lines and ask, what did they expect in the third line?

A good haiku went somewhere else, pushing against expectation, whether linguistic, aesthetic, or experiential. In *the sack of kittens / sinking in the icy creek / increases the cold*, a poem featured in the film, Virgilio handled all three masterfully. Along with the oppositions of warm kittens and cold water, of life and death, the sound values throughout convey

the underlying emotional distress evident in the divergence of action in the final line.

Towards the end of the film, we hear Virgilio talk of his effort to become “a tight little package of humanity” in order, he says, to have something to offer. Crack open the phrase and what is on offer clarifies: an unpretentious self, stripped of all that is extraneous; a self that is deliverable; a self that is universal in its purpose: to express, to share, to connect, to make a mark worth making. Virgilio not only mailed himself to the world, he recommended the essential exercise to us all. Watch the film, study the man and the poems, love the poems, and prepare your own parcel.

