

**Nick Virgilio, Walt Whitman, and the American
Poetic Tradition: An Interview with Kwame Dawes**

Rick Black, Arlington, VA

To mark the third anniversary of the publication of *Nick Virgilio: A Life in Haiku*, which was named one of the best haiku books by the Touchstone Distinguished Book Awards (2012) and the R.H. Blyth Haiku Book Awards (2013), I interviewed poet, writer, and editor Kwame Dawes.

In 1998, Dawes and I became friends following a poetry reading at the University of South Carolina. I had lent my copy of Nick Virgilio's now out-of-print book, *Selected Haiku*, to the reader and he left it with Dawes to return to me. Subsequently, Dawes went on to become editor in chief of *Prairie Schooner* at the University of Nebraska and I founded Turtle Light Press. *Nick Virgilio: A Life in Haiku* was published after I found out that a large stash of unpublished work by Virgilio was being kept in the archives of Rutgers University in Camden, NJ.

In this wide-ranging interview, Dawes compares and contrasts the work of Walt Whitman, who is considered in large part the father of modern American poetry, and Nick Virgilio, one of the pioneers of the American haiku movement. Both of their lives and poetry were transformed by war—in Whitman's case, the Civil War; in Virgilio's, the Vietnam War. In addition, Dawes reflects on being a poet in America and finding one's voice as well as the place of haiku in the American poetic tradition.

Rick Black: You know, Nick Virgilio is buried right near Walt Whitman in Camden, NJ—he's literally a stone's throw away—and they strike me as comrades-in-arms though they have polar opposite styles. I mean, Whitman is so verbose and Virgilio so pithy; yet both deal with war and nature in their poetry.

Kwame Dawes: I like the connection that is implied by the proximity of their graves but I think also in terms of the larger project. It seems to me that Virgilio was very committed like Whitman to speaking from a personal lyric place, a place from within himself, as well as in a communal way.

So many of his haiku assume a dynamic relationship between the individual and society; they assume that the poet is at once a voice of internal introspection but also burdened with the task of articulating human feelings that should resonate with people outside of himself.

One of the biggest gifts that Whitman gave to poetry—not just poetry in America, but poetry in general, in the world—is, of course, his sort of willful defiance of the inherited European poetic forms, the strong metrical verse and the strongly rhymed verses. His willful defiance of that is in the spirit of, I think, a kind of American newness. But also in the sense that his poems are so much about ego, and not ego in the pejorative way but about the individual—a sort of joyful engagement with the individual. There’s a very un-British lack of bashfulness about the individual and the self, combined with what was a clear kind of commitment to try to speak for a nation. You know, I mean, “I sing America,” this is the kind of monumental role that he assumes for himself. I see more similarities than would seem obvious because in a sense Virgilio takes on a form that is not endemic to American culture. At a time when there is at least a feeling that there is an American aesthetic, an American poetic, he decides to do something with a Japanese form, and he does it with such a lack of guile, with just a clear sense that, “It’s available to me and I’m most comfortable in this space.”

And so, in a sense, Virgilio is pushing against the expected; he is pushing against the norm out of a kind of willful commitment to what his vision is. And in that sense I think he is very American and in that sense I think he is very much like Whitman. Recently, I was reading Whitman’s writing about nursing soldiers in the Civil War, and just the raw honesty of his expression, the sense of his brokenness in that act [impressed me], and I think that that kind of commitment to people and their bodies and their lives is also there in Virgilio’s work, so I think the connections are great.

RB: What other similarities do you see between them?

KD: The thing that I was thinking about a lot was the way in which Virgilio's haiku also trace a physical landscape. They're very much rooted in the Northeast, they're very much rooted in Camden, New Jersey. There's a way in which he's writing that space into being by being true to these haiku, these small poems, and Whitman definitely saw his own work as articulating the Northeast, too. Again, they're not exactly the same locations—[Whitman spent the first half of his life in New York before he left for Washington, D.C., during the Civil War]—but they're similar efforts to write into being those landscapes and those spaces.

the old neighborhood
falling to the wrecking ball:
names in the sidewalk¹

tenement roof:
tilted TV antenna
touches the moon

the blind musician
extending an old tin cup
collects a snowflake

RB: You talk about the way Whitman was speaking for a nation or “singing America.” That's not my sense of Virgilio. He's writing about things that matter to Americans, you know—about the Vietnam War in particular—but it's out of his own particular experience. I feel like he's singing for himself and his family. And, as a result, America's able to share that song.

KD: Where I push back a little bit on that is the anger that I see there; the kind of despair and anger that I see in Virgilio's work is not free of a sense of him being implicated as an American in the discussion about war and that kind of thing. In a sense, he is voicing what was commonly true—the anxieties and conflictedness of a large proportion of the American population in that engagement, so I think it's profoundly American. When you as an individual speak to power, you're

not just speaking to power on your behalf, you're clearly speaking to power on the behalf of people who share your view, and I think that's clear in his work.

You know, the truth is Whitman lamented the war but he wasn't "anti-" the war. He lamented the horror of war but he decided to focus his attention on the people who were being shaped by this horror rather than speaking against it, against the larger question of why are you doing this and why are you doing that. But I think Virgilio is doing something riskier in some ways because he's speaking about something that is being carried out that I don't think he agreed with.

RB: How is Virgilio different from other haiku writers? What's unique about his work?

KD: The difference actually speaks to Virgilio's achievement—and the achievement is what most poets seek to achieve—and what they seek to achieve is the kind of mastery of form that allows them to be distinctive in voice. In other words, they so master the form that the form disappears and their voice begins to be what defines it.

So, in many ways as much as it's a simple task to say, "Issa is a haiku poet" or "Basho is a haiku poet," I think that anybody who has immersed themselves even slightly in their work would not be comfortable to simply say that these guys are represented by the haiku. There's a voice that Basho has that is his voice. It is incidental that this is the form that it emerges out of and that sense of its incidental nature is because of the mastery of the form. It's the authority with which he takes the form and turns it into something that speaks in a voice that is natural and honest to what we think or imagine to be the imagined voice of the poet. And so the best poets manage to—and I use this word guardedly—manage to transcend the form. In other words, they're using the form but they really sort of leap outside of the form and they can manipulate the form in remarkable ways. And I think that's one of the great things that Virgilio achieves. It's in this sense that Virgilio's haiku strike me as being remarkably adept, they just seem to be masterful,

they seem to be so natural. It doesn't feel forced; there's that level at which he seems to have found the language, the words that can be contained in that very tight and really, really challenging form.

The other statement that I'll make is more specific to what he's actually doing in individual poems. One of the things that I find very striking is the way in which he layers symbolic possibilities in his pieces. There's a level at which we read the poem as the simple observation of a moment and we are familiar with that as the haiku but in each of those moments there's a kind of symbolic weight to some of the images that he creates, and that symbolic weight goes deeper and deeper, so it works on different levels. It's layered with different meanings and what I find admirable is how he manages to do that. So, if he's writing about war he will take a simple image that's not necessarily a commentary on war, but as you start to think about it more, you realize that he is doing more things with that image than meets the eye. In a sense he is employing what I think is the hallmark of modernism—it's the metaphor, the lyric metaphor—and I think he's finding ways to pare it down into the haiku while still maintaining the tensions that are inherent in that lyric metaphor.

shadowing hookers
after dark:
the cross in the park

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

Thanksgiving alone:
ordering eggs and toast
in an undertone

At the end of the day, I keep enjoying his work because he does it well. You're not worrying about annoying clichés or images that aren't fresh. The other thing that I appreciate about his work is that he's still rooted in the physical landscape, the

physical space. The poems—and I think this is consistent with the haiku—are not willfully cerebral. If there’s any cerebral engagement with it, it’s in response to the world we see in front of us. There seems to be a dogged commitment to the idea of what we see and what we sense, what our senses engage, and I find that very appealing.

RB: More generally speaking, do you see haiku as a genre as part of an American tradition, as a reflection of a kind of minimalism like that of Rexroth or Snyder?

KD: Or even Auden in some moments or William Carlos Williams. But, listen, I think the Japanese can say we’ve had a great influence on the haiku. You know what I mean? I think these writers, Rexroth and all these guys in classic American style—and this is one of the greatneses of American letters—is that it’s a greedy monster. It devours other styles and other cultures and then spews out something that becomes comfortably and distinctively its own, and it’s not bashful about doing that. And I think in that sense the haiku is influential in American letters but it is an influence, I think, more than anything else. To propose that it’s an American form—it would be to do so only in the spirit by which Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian writer, when interviewed and asked questions during a very troubling period for African writers about the use of language, the use of European languages for their work, where, you know, writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o were arguing that African writers should write in African languages and really questioning whether work that was being produced in European languages was legitimate or some kind of betrayal—and Achebe then said, “Well, I do write in a Nigerian language because English is a Nigerian language,” and that is a very provocative but interesting thing because what he was saying was that English no longer is for the English. There are so many Englishes . . .

RB: As transformed by, as being used by a Nigerian . . .

KD: That’s right. And it’s not used by a Nigerian as it’s used by an Englishman, and therefore it’s now a Nigerian language

in the same way that Igbo is a Nigerian language and Yoruba is a Nigerian language and Hausa is a Nigerian language.

So in that spirit the haiku, if only in that way (and that way is not an insignificant way), can be seen as American. But I don't think the poetry establishment grants haiku a tremendous amount of respect. I think the lyric, the lyric poem is still king, even over and above poems of political agitation, praise poems, all of those—the lyric poem is still seen as king.

RB: That's kind of what I was trying to get at—haiku often seems like the step-son . . .

KD: Yes, I think that's fair to say and remember that haiku is taught as something exotic. You know, in elementary school they say, "Let's do a haiku!" And the kids will do it but they're taught the haiku as a kind of, "Now we can do that, so let's go and write a real poem." This is to me quite unfortunate because it's a very shallow understanding of the form. I mean, the form is only known to be a form; it's not known for its rhetorical qualities, its rhetorical values. Its intrinsic philosophical values are never engaged in that preliminary introduction to the form. What is engaged is simply that it's the syllabic form and, if you meet the syllables, then you're good to go.

RB: Right.

KD: Which, of course, is asinine but I think that's still the case.

RB: Well, you know, maybe you could speak to that, to the way in which Virgilio's haiku are different from what I call these "junk" haiku or faux haiku.

KD: Well, one thing is that he's not enamored by 5-7-5.

RB: No, in fact, he was one of the first to break out of the prevailing use of that syllabic pattern, to take haiku in a new direction, to break that . . .

KD: Yeah, and I think that gesture becomes a gesture that says that he has abandoned the superficiality of the form, the superficial treatment and engagement with the form, but he's actually reaching for something that is within, that is buried inside the form.

lily:
out of the water . . .
out of itself

bass
picking bugs
off the moon

I think, look, his massive contribution and achievement is to say, "It's enough for me." I don't know how to explain it better but it's to say that as a poet, with all the instincts and all the passions of writing poetry that any poet has in America or anywhere else, I find that when I pour myself into this form, it is enough for me. The form gives me challenge after challenge. The form is a universe where I can still play around. I don't feel as if I'm constrained by it. I am challenged by it; I am expanded by it. His work carries that feeling for me. In other words, his work does not carry the feeling that, "Okay, I need to say something brief here and let me just use this form to say something." You see what I mean? For him, he's saying, "The form is everything. I'm fine with the everything of the form. It's enough for me."

And I think that's significant, I think that's quite monumental. And, of course, the other part of it is to say that I have space to move in here, I have space to write different things, I have space to play with different things within this form, the form is not a constraint in a negative way. I mean, all poetry is constraining in the way in which it intentionally says, "Let us create a frame within which we're going to build a universe." Right? But what he is saying is that this is not a debilitating constraint, this is an empowering constraint of challenge.

RB: You know, in terms of Virgilio's Italian American heritage, is there something special that he would hold for us?

KD: You know, I think the problem with that is . . .

RB: I don't mean to label him as an Italian American writer, he's an American writer and I'm not trying to pigeonhole him . . .

KD: No, but I think that's fine. I can't imagine that this would be a problem for him. As long as he thinks . . . I mean this is one of the things as poets that we have to engage and wrestle with is that as long as we think, as long as we live with the idea of family, with the idea of nation, with the idea of race, with the idea of nationality, with the idea of community in our lives, then in a sense to separate our art from that discussion is probably a mistake; it's ultimately disingenuous. And by that I mean, there's this great essay by Langston Hughes—he was 24 years old when he wrote, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” —and it begins with a statement, I'm paraphrasing here, that recently one of the young Negro poets said to me, “I do not want to be a Negro poet, I just want to be a poet.”

And then Hughes goes on in that same paragraph and he proposes a preposterous kind of rejoinder to that and says the meaning of that statement, of course, is that the poet wants to be white, and this is where he takes the argument. And, of course, it is provocative because he then goes on to argue in the rest of the essay that in the context of American society the very act of saying, “I do not want to be named a Negro poet,” compels you to have to want to be something else, and that something else presents what Hughes describes as American standardization, which is essentially whiteness, as the norm. So, this poet does not want to be mistaken as black, so Hughes' question to him is, “Who do you want to be mistaken for then?”

I've raised that because I think Virgilio is an American poet but that does not mean that he's not an Italian poet and it doesn't mean that he's not a Catholic poet or a poet who has wrestled with his Catholicism. It does not mean that he is not all of those things and it does not mean that the Italian community or the Catholic community will not find an affinity for him because, in a sense, his work reflects his own experience and history and so on. Because his confidence as a thinker and a

writer grows out of the power and authority that comes with his patriotism and his Americanness, but it also grows out of the community of support, that awe, the anxiety of support that would have come from being an Italian American. After a while when we talk about a writer being of a certain grouping or a racial grouping or a community grouping and so on, we are not necessarily delimiting what they write about. What we are doing is saying that this, too, becomes part of the narrative of that group.

Anyway, that's a long way of saying that Virgilio is as much an American poet as an Italian-American poet. I can't say the elements of his poems beg that, you know, point to that, but I think his idea of faith, the idea of what the church means and does not mean, and the idea of how he positions himself within that is part of that experience, as you said, and that tradition in a way that another person might not have at all.

my palsied mother,
pressing my forehead on hers
this Ash Wednesday

Easter morning:
finishing up Communion wine
in the sacristy

RB: You know, Cor van den Heuvel is a pretty well-known haiku critic and anthologist and he has called Virgilio's series of poems about the loss of his youngest brother in Vietnam, "one of the finest elegies in the American poetic tradition." Your thoughts about that statement?

KD: There's a whole list of writers who have written poems of loss and poems of lament and so forth, and [they're] very varied and complicated. The elegies on war and victims of war exist in the work of people like Yusef Komunyakaa and Brian Turner more recently.

But, listen, the claim for Virgilio's elegy for his brother, I don't think it's a far-fetched claim. It's a moving, powerful, and

evocative sequence. It carries all the ideas of what a brother's relationship with another brother means. It's not just about his brother dying in war but it's about what it means to survive a brother, and what it means when that relationship is complicated by death in a war, especially in a war that was so problematic. I think it's a remarkable piece and I don't think it is a stretch to say that it is one of the great elegies in American writing.

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

in memory of Lawrence J. Virgilio

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

sixteenth autumn since:
barely visible grease marks
where he parked his car

RB: What is the relevance of Virgilio's work given the ongoing war in Afghanistan and our recent experiences in Iraq? What does he have to tell us? And how important is it for people to read him?

KD: I suppose one of the troubling confessions we can make to ourselves, we who are living in America today, is that we are living in a time when our leaders have been unable to end a war that has been waged for over a decade. It has never happened before. Is this, then, what it feels like to be a country at war?

It certainly does not feel as dangerous and as harrowing as it should be. But I think this is because we have accepted what is decidedly a collusion of silence and numbness that has been facilitated by technology, by the capacity of our society to proceed along very compartmentalized and sanitized lines while death and tragedy take place outside of our protected

mental and emotional spaces. I met a man a few months ago who told me that his job was to assassinate the terrorists who are plotting to kill Americans. He worked on a computer somewhere in Texas or Arizona. He sat there with a cup of Starbucks and a bagel, and he targeted people thousands of miles away, and on the command of his superiors, he clicked “send,” and sent death and destruction instantly. I imagined him sipping his coffee afterward. He said he found this to be a disturbing thing. He knew that there was something wrong with this. But he also knew that there was something about this that made sense.

So, here is what war means in America today and what Virgilio is doing is asking us to think about the implication of war. He is asking us to feel the weight of war. He teaches us how to empathize, teaches us to cope with the inexplicable horrors of our world. The poet will speak the unspoken and in so doing, the poem offers a way to manage pain. In light of where we are as a nation, I believe that Virgilio’s work is a challenge to all poets to think about why we are not writing enough poems about war.

In Jamaica, where my family lives and a place that I call home, over 1,500 people die by the gun each year. The nation’s population is just under three million people. I know that the toll on the psyche of that nation is grave. But what I believe that our poets have to do is push hard against the temptation to go silent, to withdraw, to cope, and to find ways to voice the tragic implications of these numbers. For all the places in the world where peace reigns, there are places of violence and conflict that demand the language of poetry. This, I think, is what Virgilio offers us by example. Were he alive, he would be, I am sure, writing poems about Iraq and Afghanistan.

RB: You’ve seen the film *remembering Nick Virgilio* by Sean Dougherty.² What are your thoughts about it? I especially like the beginning where there’s that poem about the bell and Virgilio’s own comments about it, about how it took him so long to get the last line of that poem ’til it just kind of reverberated within.

KD: I thought it was a wonderful film especially what you just described about him talking about the making of the haiku and the way it takes him time to notice what the last line is, that kind of exposition of the process of writing and the challenges of writing and the pleasures and rewards of writing, the peculiar circumstances of what it means to make art. I think those are all very clearly articulated in the film and what's nice about the film is that it shows this so-called ordinary person and how the community engages his work and is moved by his work. And, of course, it's showing how people are moved not only by his work but by him. It's a real interesting biography of a person, a biography full of praise.

But there's also a certain kind of stoic and handled sadness about it. I kept looking at the film and thinking in the crudest way, "This should be bigger; this guy's more important than this film makes him out to be. His work should be known in a broader sense."

after the bell,
within the silence:
within myself

RB: Could you see the film and the book, *Nick Virgilio: A Life in Haiku*, being used together to help teach writing?

KD: I think using the film and the book together would enhance the poetry's value, especially for the high school student in a writing group, or for someone who is thinking about writing. There's a sense in which Virgilio makes it seem as if everyone can do this, not just can but should, should have a life of creativity, should have a side of their life that is creative. And the democracy of that certainly appeals to me but, I think, it appeals to younger people, too. That they have permission to think creatively and to write creatively is, I think, one of the big values of both the film and the book. The book is nicely manageable because the haiku form is not inscrutable; it's something you can enter without a tremendous amount of investment and leave with a great deal. That's part of the richness of the form and that's probably one of the reasons why it won't disappear.

Notes

1. All of the poems cited in this article were written by Nicholas A. Virgilio and appear in the volume, *Nick Virgilio: A Life in Haiku* (Arlington, VA: Turtle Light Press, 2012). They are all reprinted here by permission of his brother, Tony Virgilio.
2. The film, *remembering Nick Virgilio*, was produced and directed by Sean Dougherty, an independent filmmaker. A copy of the film can be purchased from the Nick Virgilio Haiku Association. For more information, please contact Mary Heron of the NVHA: mhheron@verizon.net. See review of film in this issue.



Kwame Dawes is the author of nineteen collections of verse and numerous plays, critical essays, and books, and Chancellor's Professor of English at the University of Nebraska. Born in Ghana in 1962, he grew up mostly in Jamaica and has won numerous awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Barnes and Noble Writers for Writers Award, several Pushcart Prizes, as well as an Emmy and Webby for LiveHopeLove.com, an interactive website based on the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting project, "HOPE: Living and Loving with AIDS in Jamaica." His most recent collection of poems is Duppy Conqueror: New and Selected Poems, published by Copper Canyon Press in 2013. Dawes is the founder and director of the African Poetry Book Fund and the artistic director of the Calabash International Literary Festival.

Rick Black is an award-winning poet and publisher of Turtle Light Press. His haiku collection, Peace and War: A Collection of Haiku from Israel, has been called "a prayer for peace" by poet Kwame Dawes, and his most recent book Star of David won the 2013 Poetica Magazine poetry contest. He was haiku poet of the month in April 2013 at Cornell University's Mann Library.

