

## Remembering Rod Jellema



The Washington, D.C., literary community is reeling from our recent loss of Rod Jellema. My purpose here is to present the remembrances of writers and others who knew him well in one or more of his many roles. But let us begin by hearing his own voice once again on his favorite subject:

*Each poem that survives its own process of being made beckons you back for a few minutes for another look. If it looks unlike what you're accustomed to—good, that's the point. You don't have to analyze it; just let it do its work. And its work is to make experience in some fresh and direct way rather than to exult over it or chat about it or explain it.*

And a favorite of his own poems:

### **Because I Never Learned the Names of Flowers**

It is moonlight and white where  
I slink away from my cat-quiet blue rubber truck  
and motion myself to back it up to your ear.  
I peel back the doors of the van and begin

to hushload into your sleep  
the whole damned botanical cargo of Spring.

Sleeper, I whisk you  
Trivia and Illium, Sweet Peristalsis, Flowering Delirium.  
Sprigs of Purple Persiflage, and Lovers' Leap, slips  
of Hysteria  
stick in my hair. I gather clumps of Timex,  
handfuls of Buttertongues, Belly buttons, and Bluelets.

I come with Trailing Nebula, I come with Late-Blooming  
Paradox  
with Creeping Pyromania, Pink Appoplex, and Climbing  
Solar Plexus,  
whispering: Needlenose, Juice Cup, Godstem, Nexus, Sex-us  
Condominium.

In an era when our culture has been coarsened beyond recognition, Rod Jellema stands even now as a kind of beacon for those for whom he was friend, teacher, poet/essayist/translator, and genial, endlessly interesting companion at lunch, over single malt whiskeys, or at a concert.

In short, Rod embodied much of what makes human life worthy of praise. He was a cultivated man; he seemed to know nearly everything in literature, and he loved art and music, especially jazz and its improvisational magic, which for him paralleled the act of writing poetry, the act of discovery in real time. He was a generous man who delighted in the wonders of literature and wanted to share that pleasure with others. Rod's boyish enthusiasm—fully present at 90—was a joy for all who knew him. And if he liked your new poem, you might get a hearty "I love it!"; if not, he'd move on gracefully after a few incisive comments. And he loved to share his enthusiasms, whether New Orleans jazz, or paintings he'd picked up in England years ago, or his cornetist son David's remarkable mid-career mastery of the jazz clarinet.

Rod was a serious man who loved to laugh. I once suggested that he consider the subjunctive for a passage in one of his essays, to which he responded with a chuckle—"Oh no, that's not my voice at all." For all his erudition, Rod preferred a down-to-earth voice, a conversational tone. He eschewed the high falutin.

In recent years, Rod took on the role of Contributing Essayist here at *Innisfree*. Eight of his delightful short essays on poetry are available in *Innisfree 20, 23, and 24*. His essays on the work of Martin Galvin, Pattiann Rogers, James Wright, Donald Hall, and Louis Simpson are available in *Innisfree 15, 25, and 26*. And Rod was the subject of our Closer Look series in the spring 2011 issue, *Innisfree 12*. There, you can read more about Rod and see a collection of his poems. And more poems can be read in *Innisfree 8 and 11*.

He made such an impact on so many that he will surely live on in all the years of their lives, as in mine. An exemplar for us all, Rod was an affectionate man who through his mere presence, merely being himself, inspired in others an affection that lives on, as shown below in remarks that reveal a man both beloved and admired by all those whose lives he enriched. We begin with Rod's son David.



**David Jellema:**

Rod Jellema: Some Lines Noted from His Words

The advantage of experience and understanding that I have in 50+ years shared with my father to draw from in recounting threads of insight and wisdom about him, for a brief reminiscence, is roughly the advantage that a former Communist-bloc citizen has when entering the fabrics section of an American home decor mega-store for the first time: the overwhelming glee in more than can be fathomed or imagined, let alone be folded under arm and brought home. This endeavor to share just some things significant for me about my father is exciting in its possible scope, but very difficult.

One advantage I do already have though is that the themes of my father's character and the lovely facets of his life are amply revealed and exemplified in his work. You know this man when slipping into his poetry, his essays, his letters. And if you had the fine fortune to be one of his students, or among his acquaintances or friends, then through his animated workshops, lectures, stories, and conversations. There is a complementary integrity between his life and his

words. No abstractions, nor fantasies, nor wistful longings for anything but what he had had and wanted to continue. Nick Wolterstorff, at the memorial celebration in our summer place in Michigan this past July, noted that my father was a *grounded* person, grounded in these aspects and threads of his life. Anyone who knew my father will recognize many of these and hear such a familiar voice.

Dad delighted in his heritage from a small, sane, almost mythical people in the northernmost province of Netherlands, Friesland. Proud of the family emigration story and their adjustments to provincial regions near Lake Michigan, and of the graceful navigation by an intelligent and devout family encountering 19<sup>th</sup> century American peculiarities of religious practice, Dad studied the letters, papers, and oral stories of ancestors in his Dutch Christian Reformed Church tradition. He loved telling stories about colorful members of his family, most prominently his own father, but also a cousin named Dirk, and a legendary thinker named William Harry Jellema. All of them teachers (along with a dozen other teachers in this tribe) of history, English, creative writing, philosophy, art, music. This legacy gave much comfort, delight, and purpose to my dad. (Returning to visit village sites of these ethnic roots years later also further enriched him, yielding two award-winning books of their poetry in translation, despite his not knowing the language.)

Arising out of these streams are deep attachments my father felt for Lake Michigan. There were idyllic childhood days in Holland cottages by the Lake. There was a “famous” walk of two adolescents along its shore from Holland to Ludington. Much later, and farther north, there was a creative summer community envisioned (and partly established), three A-frames he built (with his sister and brother-in-law) overlooking the Lake, and the Lost Valley Lodge restaurant that regularly featured a local jazz band. There was the rehabilitation of an old farmhouse behind the dunes that became his summer haven for nearly fifty years. Dad cultivated this love in a balanced rhythm between those summers and academic years in the culturally nourishing suburbs of Washington, D.C. Dad invited his kids, his spouses, his friends, and his writ into that magic rhythm of the Lake, its waves and wind, its sunsets, and the fecundity of its joys and its tragedies.

The intersection of two country roads stands at the gate of this breezy, birdsy, wavy paradise a little north of the small town of Montague. It was at this intersection where his eldest son, age eighteen, died in a car accident with two other boys, and it was through this gate he passed every summer day for the rest of his life without John. They had shared a lot of fishing, sailing, and laughter. (John wanted to surf for a while before returning to college; he didn’t want “his old man” to know that he was messing around with poetry.) Dad outlived his sister, brother-in-law, two cousins named Dirk, a niece, a spouse (my mother), a distant nephew (and so forth . . .), all of them associated somehow with this magi-tragical place by Lake Michigan. Dad had much grace about this grief and loss there that was informed by his faith, and embalmed and swathed by his own writing.

I dare say little about his evident power, his gift with words; there are such excellent readers and writers who should do that. But, I have two things to highlight. In addition to what we (lay people) all enjoyed about his calmly resonant speaking voice and enchanting, musical reading, his savoring the sounds of the words he was reading slowed him into that rich pace. (Adversely, this drove him nuts when he tried to read novels at that tempo.) He did love the genealogies and etymologies of words, partly for the mere fun of their evolutions, but also in waving this banner when critiquing sloppy, contemporary use of vocabulary. Oh, and a third thing: He could quote long passages of Shakespeare, pages upon pages of poets (and even some Chaucer, to the delight of his Frisian colleagues).

Dad and I (and so many friends and students) had countless discussions about imagination and the creative process as the spark of a mundane life moment that tinders along word to word. I never caught the literary flame that brightened him, but I have written enough (journals, some poetry) to fairly engage him in many rounds of his fascination. Our shared love in the creative process found its broadest, common ground in the music he listened to, and that I play.

Awkward in left-handed excuses (he'd rather play ball), Dad as a lad never took to practicing instruments (piano briefly, very briefly; and clarinet, one of my instruments). But cousin Dirk (a later partner in founding Lake Michigan wonderland, Lost Valley) introduced my adolescent dad to recordings of young forms of American jazz (earlier than the swing pop of their day). Oh boy, did he then play a lot of air band horn after dinner, spin countless records in his head escaping English (!) class, and have a damn good ear for hearing the way the cornet, clarinet, or trombone could spontaneously create countless phrases of choruses to the same songs; that is, unfolding the infinite from within the finite strictures of a melody and its chords. (By the way, his book in progress of poems at the time of his death was to be titled "Chord Changes.") And more exciting to him than soloists' acumen was their ability to perform alchemy, weaving contrapuntal lines among each other into a front-line baroque-like fugue . . . extemporaneously! Much of his adult life he sought out record collectors and enthusiasts of the music (one of which was a WWII vet who eventually became his brother-in-law), wrote much of a book about this music, and supported it with attendance, writings, and participation in the local area jazz society. He found a surrogate in his own son, as I began to play cornet as a kid and found myself enchanted by the same music, surrounded by serendipitous opportunities both in Washington and in Michigan. Dad and I had years and years listening to this magic together, sharing winks, nods, raised eyebrows, and groans of delight.

In matters of religion and faith, Dad held gently. He attended church throughout his life, participated in readings (naturally), had good friends in the D.C. Christian Reformed Church he was member to since 1957 or so. He was devoted to keeping attendance, weathered some pastors and exulted in others. When he died, he was the eldest of the congregation. He felt loyalty to this tradition, had some laughs poking fun at its foibles, but deeply respected the Biblical socio-political consciousness of its more liberal wings. (He was a supporter of Liberation Theology in Central America and, much later in life, studied the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures.) He loved

an imaginative and well-crafted sermon; sanctimonious platitudes about morality or lifestyle didn't move him. In fact, there were a lot of beliefs in certain popular fundamentalist, evangelical, or charismatic sects that repelled him. Discussion about "spirituality" with Dad often settled into a run-off groove mocking escapism into Spirit or Light. More important, Dad's spirituality celebrated tangible material embodiment, thingness, and the exciting stuff when idea takes on form. (More valuable than pure light in and of itself, he'd say, is that light should reveal color, form and texture, not impart blindness.) His book title, "*Incarnality*," his own word in full celebration of his worldview, hints to his deeper religious leanings in the incarnation, God taking on a human form.

The stroke that hit Dad on February 23 this year eclipsed the work he was doing at the time, another book of poems and a book of essays about the creative writing process. In his last couple of months, Dad could communicate through words with some effort. Some came out that he shook back with a smile, knowing when they sounded that they weren't right. Some he couldn't locate. Some were efforts to recount a dream he had had the night before (which might have taken us a moment to realize). Certain things regarding night nursing staff or the food plopped in front of him got animated facial expressions. Some of the harder griefs I've had to embrace were the moments I simply could not understand him, or what he wanted.

A good friend of my father's, member of Dad's church, noted after a visit the irony of this tragic loss of speech to someone whose life had been in the service and love of words (as if I were to lose my hearing after being a musician all my life). I hold a different perspective on that. It was in perfect form (appropriate and inevitable) that the imaginative word issues forth, accomplishes multiplied creative purpose, and returns to rest in silence to complete its natural cycle. There came that gracefully humbling day when words had lost their usefulness and power for his creative art, legacy, livelihood, relationships. Fortunately, his time in this disorienting place was brief, and his grace through it noble; but that he visited a realm of quiet before his ultimate silencing reinforced in me the comforting sense of how poetic even the mechanisms of his very life played out.

I have many memories of our playing jazz records together. He could recall every note on these recordings he had loved all his life, humming along, gesturing with hands and nods as if playing or conducting their lines. ("Now, get ready for the clarinet solo opening . . . here!") But at that stage in his life, he often asked me what the name of the song was, noting that the music itself far outlasted, in his brain, the words of the titles.

With that, I want to recall a Frisian proverb my father liked ever since he first went to Friesland: "Ast it niet sègge kinst, must it mar singe."

*If it can't be said, it must be sung.*

### **Marie Pavlicek-Wehrli:**

He leaves his books of poetry, his essays and translations, the memory of his voice, so unselfconsciously conscious of the nuanced textures and cadences, the inherent memories embodied in our language, those we all share, across time and place. How often, as a student in his Writer's Center poetry workshops, one wanted him to read aloud one's own poem, pulled unsigned, anonymous, from that session's pile of poems. Just to hear it read in his voice was to hear it as something apart, as other, as art.

Poet and avid storyteller, teacher (though he preferred the term "midwife"—and I loved him for seeing the process of writing poems that way), he wrote his first poems at the age of forty, after he had already been teaching literature for years at the University of Maryland. These are the poems included in his first book, *Something Tugging the Line*, published shortly after the untimely and tragic death of his oldest son, John. Four more collections followed (*The Lost Faces*; *The Eighth Day: Poems New and Selected*; *A Slender Grace*; and *Incarnality: The Collected Poems*), as well as two books of translations of Frisian poems (*Country Fair* and *The Sound that Remains*). For years, he also worked on and revised a history of jazz manuscript, a lifelong passion he shared with family and friends, most especially with his musician son, David.

Rod continued writing poems, and, more often and with a different kind of pleasure and insight, essays on writing, teaching, and the work of other poets, into his 90th year. He understood the creative process, that it was a deeply human endeavor, purely democratic, requiring an attentiveness to the material at hand: language + the world around us. This, coupled with a willingness to trust the unconscious, would lead—if we listened carefully—to writing poems that embodied discovery, sight, insight.

I was a mother of two young sons, a painter with little time for sustained studio work but needing an outlet, when I first signed up for the first of many of Rod's poetry workshops at The Writer's Center. It was immediately clear to me that this was a different approach to making art and that I was getting a glimpse into a way of being that I intuitively understood and hungered for, but didn't know how to put together. It marked the beginning of what would be a long mentorship, unstated (Rod balked at those kind of hierarchical labels), and a friendship that will always feel like an inexplicable, wondrous gift.

### **Myra Sklarew:**

A child psychiatrist friend once wrote to me that "poetry is biological," that with the coming of language we lose the wholeness of experience, that to make a poem we are "sending a message to the preverbal, inner core, a message of discovery and novelty, of mounting tension and resolution." It was through poetry that many of us came to know and care for Rod Jellema.

Siv Cedering, Roland Flint, and others met in a workshop during the 70s at Cedering's home on Picasso Lane in Potomac, Maryland. The workshop originated in a class taught by Rod Jellema at University of Maryland in the late 60s and included Siv and Roland, Eddie Gold, Sue Gordon, Primus St. John, and Bill Holland who was teaching at Maryland at the time. The group continued after the class ended and gradually expanded following Rod's annual conference beginning in 1968: Poetry and the National Conscience, and included Ann Darr, Roland Flint, Siv Cedering, Linda Pastan, Merrill Leffler, Gary Sange, Alan Austin, Elisavietta Ritchie, John Pauker, Primus St. John, William Claire, and Myra Sklarew. William Stafford, Stanley Kunitz and Gene McCarthy occasionally joined us when they were in D.C. Rod remembers changing his role from "teacher" to "convener" in these workshops, which changed his view of leaders of creative writing from professor to midwife! Ann Darr once ascertained that some 60 books appeared from this group. Three of this group were later named state poets laureate: Flint and Pastan both served terms as Poet Laureate of Maryland, and St. John was Poet Laureate of Oregon.

In November 2013, Rod sent me an essay he had just completed: "Creative Indifference," about the way the line functions in a poem in a work he was reading by Marianne Boruch. She had begun her work with an illustration: how Thomas Edison, severely deaf, placed great value in what he could not hear, on "lines using enjambment rather than end-stops . . . in the silences he loved." Rod writes of somehow wandering back to Edison as he read on in Boruch's essay:

I was discovering something about myself as teacher and poet—that it's not intellectual laziness or torpor that had kept me away from studying and teaching prosody . . . . I mean simply that we can ignore the hum of critical discussion as a distraction from the satisfying work of handling creativity.

I've always wondered why James Wright agonized so over his divorce from iambic. As though he were violating a pledge and joining thieves and hoodlums.

So maybe it turns out I wasn't lazy—shamed by all those scholarly analyses I never read! Maybe I was only being respectful of poetry's immediacy, teaching by showing that immediacy rather than identifying its machinery, its means. Right now I feel exonerated by of all people that unschooled laboratory putterer who'd never had a course in high school physics, Thomas Edison.

And we here, who lag behind Rod in our own old age, have the great pleasure of reading his words in their immediacy as often as we wish. His great gift to us.



## Merrill Leffler:

### My Fifty-year Friendship with Rod

In 1967, Neil Lehrman and I were advertising for poems for *Dryad*, the poetry magazine we had the audacity, at least in retrospect, to even think about starting—we knew nothing about editing, let alone publishing, and not much more about poetry; nor did we know anyone else who was writing poems. I never had a course nor studied poetry in any formal way. Nevertheless we began! We advertised for submissions in *The New Republic* and a couple of other places I don't remember. At that time, I was a physicist-engineer who had just left NASA to work for an engineering firm where I didn't have to travel so much and could go to the University of Maryland at night to study English Literature; with his CPA, Neil was an analyst at the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Self-addressed envelopes of poems began a slow trickle through the mail slot in our garden style apartment in Silver Spring—one of early envelopes was from Rod. Our first issue in 1968 went on to feature three of Rod's poems—in the group he sent was "A Poem Beginning with a Line Memorized at School" that I immediately loved and wanted to publish. But I waited too long and in the meantime, he had sent it elsewhere and it was accepted immediately (see the poem, below).

Rod had invited Neil and me to his poetry class to talk about starting a magazine—that's as much as I remember, but that invitation led to our going beyond the anonymous editor and poet. When I left engineering for graduate school in English in the fall of 1968, Rod asked me to be his assistant for the second "Poetry and the National Conscience," that would take place at Maryland in spring 1969.

The conference Rod had conceived of brought together an extraordinary gathering of poets to take on issues that had been rocking the country. At the first conference in spring 1968, which featured James Wright, Daniel Hoffman, Louis Simpson, and Reed Whittemore, students had packed the auditorium. In 1969, which was even more explosive, we had Robert Bly, Theodore Weiss, Samuel Allen, Senator Eugene McCarthy, and John Unterecker. I wasn't the assistant Rod had been expecting: He was fond of saying years later that he hired me because I had been an engineer, which he equated with efficiency. "Why do you think I left engineering," I had supposedly replied—I think Rod had given me that witty line for the sake of the story!

In 1974, *Dryad* magazine was evolving into Dryad Press and Rod's *Something Tugging the Line* was our first book—in its final preparation, a parent's most terrible nightmare. Suffice it to say, the dedication reads: "This book went to press // For John // And is now // To the Memory of John F. Jellema II (1955-1973).

In 1979, Dryad Press published Rod's *The Lost Faces*—the book's dedication: "good friends, back to you: Ann Darr, Roland Flint, Margaret Gibson, Edward Gold, Linda Pastan, Ralph

Robin, Myra Sklarew.” The book leads off with “Incarnation,” a belief that was central for him, embodied as it is in his work. I should add that he wrote some wonderful poems that stay in one’s memory, among them, “Because I Never Learned the Names of Flowers” (he made up his own!) and “On Perhaps Meeting Miss Marianne Moore at the Library of Congress.”

A little more than ten years later, Dryad Press published *The Eighth Day: New & Selected Poems*, a book that is still in print and is still a treasure. I could write a great deal about Rod’s work, which I did in letters (make them a little shorter, he wrote!), but here, instead, is James Wright, remarks that Rod was surprised at and truly grateful for, coming as they did from one of the masters: “Poems [that are] entirely remarkable for the physical pungency of their language, their muscular and sensitive rhythms, their power of creating a particular world in its real time and place. Some of the poems are positively harrowing in their effectiveness, the truth and depth of their feeling, which, of course, can only be revealed by the most careful, intelligent craftsmanship.”

Rod and I hadn’t gotten together for more than a year—the night before his stroke, we met for dinner at a Greek restaurant where he often got together with friends and where he and Michele celebrated his 90th birthday. Let Yeats have the last words, for now:

Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by!

\* \* \*

### **Poem Beginning With a Line Memorized at School**

Whither, indeed, midst falling dew,  
Whither, Miss Pfisterer, black-dressed and balding  
Teacher of English, lover of Bryant,  
Whither did we all pursue  
While glow the heavens with the last somethingsomething?

Bradley Lewis, I mean:  
Who put aside with his cello and his brushes  
Our lusty masculine sneers at his graceful ways,  
Skipped the civics exam to father a son  
And now designs engines with Mozart turned up loud.

Kenny Kruijer, I mean:  
Expelled from high school for incantation with wine,  
Who bends the knee to his common daily bread,

Hacks everyday at bleeding sides of beef  
And cheers twice a week the college basketball team.

Michael Slochak, I mean:  
He always stuttered every dull thing he knew  
And then walked home alone — past home, to one gold  
period  
When, crimson phrase against the darkly sky,  
His jet purred into a green Korean hill.

—by Rod Jellema

**Linda Pastan:**

For some reason we called him “Jellema” then, never Rod, and he was the still point around which all of us aspiring poets revolved. His conference on Poetry and the National Conscience brought so many of us together, and his workshops, at various houses, kept us connected. When he had coronary bypass surgery, I wrote him the following poem. In it I say that his heart would beat its iambs out for years, and it did. But not for as many years as we would have liked.

**Coronary Bypass: for Rod**

So now they’ve made a detour  
to your heart, routed the blood  
like traffic through a different place  
past derelict scenery some call  
inner landscape—those aging  
monuments of bone and muscle.

Old friend, they’ve primed your pump  
to beat its iambs out for years.  
Next week you’ll write  
of tulips on the windowsill  
heart-shaped and red  
and drunk with oxygen.

(from *A Fraction of Darkness*, W.W. Norton, 1985)

**Sunil Freeman:**

I was in my late 20s when I met Rod Jellema at The Writer’s Center in the 1980s, although we may have unknowingly crossed paths at the University of Maryland a few years earlier when I was a student and he had been teaching since 1955, the year I was born. I had never been in a writing workshop, and knew nothing about what to expect, before finding the Center.

Fortunately, I had a perfect introduction to the process in two workshops with a fine poet, teacher, and ultimately good friend, Ann Darr.

Eager to branch out a bit, I signed up for a workshop with Rod, and so began a friendship of more than 30 years. Rod probably influenced my development as a writer more than any other person I've known. Those first workshops opened up a love of language I'd always had but never experienced with such intense focus as we talked our way through and into our draft poems around the table.

Rod brought a sense of inquisitiveness and humility, an ability to be surprised, that animated all the discussion those long ago evenings on Sangamore Road. I left those workshops with my head buzzing, so high on language that several times I walked all the way home to Arlington just to tire myself out enough to eventually fall asleep.

I joined the staff after The Writer's Center moved to Old Georgetown Road a year or so later, and continued to take Rod's workshops. When PBS aired *Voices and Visions*, a series about major American poets, he began offering workshops focused on close readings of poems in addition to the traditional writing workshops. The two, both centered around a loving exploration of language, complemented each other and drew many people. Most participants were poets, and over the years many of us became friends.

We explored the work of the Major Poets, but also enjoyed a particular treat Rod shared now and then: poems generated by young children who were fortunate to have him lead workshops in schools. The playfulness and sense of wonder he was able to nurture led to delightful, surprising results. At times it was almost as if language itself was playing through these young children, as it sometimes does with us.

I have fond memories of Rod and several workshop members often going to an unpretentious little bar called The Rolling Inn to chill out and continue the conversation after the evening workshop ended. We were so much younger, those days when the Center was on Old Georgetown Road.

I can't recall exactly when it happened, but at some point Rod and I began to see the Federal Jazz Commission, an extraordinarily talented traditional jazz ensemble that played at Colonel Brooke's tavern near Catholic University. (Public Service Announcement: Don't call it "Dixieland," a major faux pas I'm fairly sure Rod saved me from making when I was new to it all.)

Rod loved the music, had a deep understanding of it, and was well-connected with the vibrant community of fans. He also had a very talented son, David, who played cornet and clarinet, often joining the band when he was in town. I had casually enjoyed the music before meeting Rod, but leaned toward more avant-garde jazz.

Just as Rod had expanded my appreciation of poetry and language, so too the riches of traditional jazz came alive those many evenings in front of the bandstand. I don't know who got more out of it. Rod, happy to share his knowledge and love of the music, or me just soaking it up as the band made its joyful noise. A few times Martin Galvin, another great poet and teacher, and an old mutual friend, joined us to see the band. I was the youngster those evenings, and I enjoyed the camaraderie of being the kid with the two wise, wiser men.

Rod and I kept in touch, but we didn't see each other quite as often after he stopped leading workshops. (He "retired" and returned several times before finally moving on.) I'm grateful that he made it a point to make sure we got together for lunch just to share stories and catch up on news long after the regular "business" of workshop scheduling had passed. In one afternoon, conversation leisurely meandering after we discussed plans for a Writer's Center event, we discovered that we had both had the same cardiologist, a physician we greatly admired.

Connections. Rod and I shared one mystery that he mentioned several times over the years. At some point we discovered that we had lived near each other in Silver Spring when I was a child. He was on one side of Sligo Creek, and I on the other. His son John, who later died in a car accident, was my age, but we went to different elementary schools. This was in the golden age of "free range childhood," when children wandered in parks, exploring creeks, walking in the woods. From time to time Rod and I would wonder if perhaps we had seen each other long ago, perhaps crossing on the little wooden foot bridge, wandering, wondering in the park.

Rod's reading from *Incarnality: The Collected Poems* in February 2017 says a lot about his generosity as a poet, teacher, and friend. It was to be a major event at The Writer's Center, and he wanted to be sure that poets who had studied with him shared in the spotlight. Rod, Marie Pavlicek-Wehrli, Kevin Craft, and Mark Smith-Soto read poems in a celebration of workshops and all the good things that can happen when people come together to work and play at writing poems.

### **Jean Nordhaus:**

While I'd known and delighted in Rod's poetry for years, my real association began with the enthusiasm he expressed for a book of poems I wrote about Moses Mendelssohn, I suspect because its themes mirrored on certain levels Rod's own fascination with the intersections of religion and poetry. In his later years, he was occupied with a book of essays summing up the wisdoms gained over his years teaching poetry. I enjoyed working with him as an editor on several of these essays, which we published in *Poet Lore*. All my interactions with Rod were amiable, and I will miss his genial presence.

### **Tina Daub:**

RIP Rod Jellema, beloved poet, teacher and friend of many years. He nurtured the poetic aspirations of so many of us in the DC/MD area. I first learned about duende from him, about

taking leaps, about making an experience through words others can inhabit. He introduced me not just to the words of poets but to the poets themselves. And the delight and depth of feeling he discovered in certain poems was enchanting. So was his voice.

The Rod Jellema issue of the *Plum Review* sold out right away. His ekphrastic poetry series idea, an idea we developed over many coffees, is now an annual event at the Phillips Collection, cosponsored by the Folger poetry program. Perhaps his most famous poem, certainly a crowd pleaser, “Because I never Learned the Names of Flowers,” has that Jellema essence of word-loving imagination, humor & lyric intensity. He will be sorely missed.

**Stewart Moss:**

“Slangevar!”—A Poet’s Memory of Rod Jellema

In addition to our shared love of poetry—Rod as a marvelous practitioner and inspiring teacher and I as workshop participant eager under his tutelage to improve my craft—he and I discovered that we had a mutual love for Scotland. He’d studied for his doctorate at the University of Edinburgh, and I’d lived in Edinburgh in the early 1970s, working as a teacher across the Firth of Forth at the Queen Anne School in the ancient city of Dunfermline, where the 13th century King of Scotland, Robert the Bruce, was buried.

As our friendship deepened over many years, Rod and I nurtured this shared affection for Scotland and began meeting every few weeks in his apartment on Connecticut Avenue to discuss our poems, what we were currently reading and enjoying, and reminiscing about our days in Edinburgh. Given Rod’s irrepressible love of life and generous hospitality, single malt whiskey (as well as other distilled spirits) flowed freely during our conversations. Drawing from his vast inventory of memorized passages, he would break exuberantly into a recitation of favorite lines from Robert Burns or Hugh MacDiarmid, his sonorous voice taking on a nearly authentic brogue.

One of my most valued possessions is a Braid Scots Dictionary Rod gave me which, although I seldom refer to it for my own writing, occupies a prominent place on a bookshelf next to my desk. But even more precious is the store of rich memories I have of those meetings in Rod’s apartment where, whenever we raised our glasses of whiskey and wished each other a hearty “Slangevar!” or “Good health!” in Gaelic, we entered a place special to each of us that Rod greatly enriched by being there with me.

**Barbara Goldberg:**

Rod Jellema: A Tribute

They say the poet is not the poem. But in fact, Rod Jellema was very much like his poetry—elegant and earthy and expansive. He had a hearty appetite for life, food, and good conversation.

Rod, wife Michele, my late husband, and I enjoyed many a meal and conversation at the old Sorriso's, where Rod was partial to osso bucco.

Osso bucco, Italian for “bone with a hole,” refers to the **marrow** hole at the center of the cross-cut veal shank. The marrow is the inmost, best and choicest of foods—the **essential** part of the bone (maybe even its soul?). Rod would be amused to learn that marrow is also known as the seat of animal vigor. Rod was a “marrow” man.

He was also a Midwesterner and never lost his taste for peanut butter, bacon, and brown sugar. He didn't put on airs. Unlike many other poets, he was sunny, unflappable (for the most part), and tended to walk the earth with a light step. This is not to say he was not stubborn—he was inordinately proud of his Friesian heritage. Still, he was a dear, affectionate being and showed much kindness to me and others.

Many many years ago, I took a poetry workshop led by Rod at the Writer's Center when it was located on Old Georgetown Road. His axiom was to go for the image if you could get there, or if it came to you. He was kind and considerate to all—encouraged “free speech,” and was both a tough and generous critic. He loved getting books by former students and, when earned, lavishly praised them.

Before Rod, Michele and I embarked for our Puerto Rico adventure shortly before his death, I asked for his input for a difficult project I was working on. His insightful advice helped me break through my block in how to assemble prose, poetry, and translations.

And then we left for Puerto Rico—a place he and Michele loved and went to most winters. No matter that it was the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. The winds blew hard, there were frequent downpours and the electricity was not fully functional. We had a wonderful time—Rod was still writing, and still had a hearty appetite. He went out with the taste of salt air on his breath.

### **Grace Cavalieri:**

#### Thinking of Rod

The first thing Rod did that Autumn day in 1970 was to place his hands over his eyes as if he were seeing through lattice work.

I'd never seen a poem described that way. But let me go back—maybe I have the year wrong by one—however, George Mason University was having a poetry workshop and I submitted poems. I was to give a playwriting workshop there and wanted to check out the scene. Rod Jellema was “the poet” and never have I seen a grander entrance. A tall slim blonde gentleman in a tailored suit carrying a closed umbrella—perhaps my imagination added the umbrella, but no I think it was there, in his left hand like a walking stick.

He read our poems—and of mine (pointillistic as I remember) he showed how light and dark entered the poem by holding his fingers in front of his face, lattice like.

Since then I'd learn he'd survived one of the earliest heart surgeries I'd heard about. (He said "he had 20 years left." It turned out to be closer to 50.) He said that once he ate butter by the spoonful but no more.

In 1972 I invited him to be the guest poet at Ilchester, Maryland, in a convent where Antioch College was holding weekend poetry retreats. His voice, caring, and his attentiveness, his demeanor—well, they all still talk of it. Those were the hippie days. I wore Janis Joplin clothes purchased at "Divine Trash" in Baltimore. Rod appeared, always elegant, entering any room in any shirt. Gentle, beautiful Rod.

I could say through the years through the years—so I will—there's no other way to say it: He comes through the years. In 1974/75 I left Antioch to fundraise, to start a new radio station, WPFW. I decided then (What was I thinking?!) to finish my Master's Degree previously interrupted four times by children. I applied to Graduate School/ Education, University of Maryland/College Park but they were so glutted—no entering if you ever got so much as an undergraduate B—then always to Rod—I always went to Rod. He thought the English department was the place to go and shepherded me to where I was meant to be all along, with 18th-century literature where I found Mary Wollstonecraft—and then where I could sit next to Reed Whittemore while he taught/researched/wrote *William Carlos Williams: Poet from Jersey*.

Rod's appearances on WPFW are saved on tape where his broadcast voice and translations from "Frisian" are legendary. He was part of any project I've ever managed: Here's Rod's poem from The WPFW Anthology:

**Note to Marina Marquez of El Paso,  
Who Sublet My Apartment for the Summer**

We missed each other by just an eyelash.  
We never met, and yet this place  
is still your home before it drifts back home  
to being mine. The shelf that's empty  
of scotch keeps the smoke of tequila,  
a Flamenco album sidles up to Mahler's Eighth.  
I surprised the tortillas and hot chili peppers  
you left in our freezer  
as I put in a bag of potatoes.

I tiptoe when thinking the hairpin under the bed.  
This morning in the shower, my third day back,  
through steam I noticed again



the gleam of a single dark pubic hair.  
Sometimes I listen hard. At night  
in the vaguely foreign country of my bed  
I lie very still. I breathe it deep.  
I write you nowhere, afraid you will  
startle away too soon if I dare to tell you  
I miss you and wish you would stay.

In a later anthology, *The Poet's Cookbook: Recipes from Tuscany*, Rod gave us a wonderful poem about green beans, which was translated into Italian ("Fagiolini Verde.") Here's the first section of the poem where Rod challenges a pundit who says beans are not poetic.

### **Green Beans**

*The bean is a graceful, confiding, engaging vine;  
but you never can put beans into poetry . . .  
There is no dignity in the bean.  
—Charles Dudley Warren*

(1)  
spring-loaded vines  
on tendrils  
skinny up skinny  
poles and  
shoot for the sun.  
Their leavings are  
heart shapes that  
pinch to life  
small yellow crescents  
that plump  
like the knuckles  
on babies' hands.  
Each nub  
lengthens down  
to a green  
velvet composure  
that will curtsy  
and sway in the wind.

I saw Rod a few times in the past years—not long ago it seems—at Reed Whittemore's funeral. During the after-scene, Garrison Keillor seemed to have little capacity for graciousness, or for people. I rolled my eyes, but not Rod, who with cordiality went up and shook Keillor's hand

(against his will) to make up for Keillor's rudeness, as if to change the tone. That was Rod. He changed the tone.

After that (or was it before?), I saw Rod at Rose Solari's book party for "The Last Girl." The music was rocking and the booze was flowing. Rod and I sat together like the Old Guard we were. We sat together. We didn't have to say anything.

Note: You can hear his voice again by clicking this link and scrolling down to Rod Jellema: <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/media/poetpoem.html>

### **Judith McCombs:**

#### Anecdotes of Rod Jellema

When Rod Jellema first read for my Kensington Row Bookshop series on June 29, 2005, he had just learned that his latest book had won the Towson University Prize. Clarinda Harris, the Baltimore poet, who had just then joined our small pre-reading supper, rejoined, "And I just voted for you!"

I knew Rod's work as poet, translator from his ancestral Frisian, and gifted professor, but what sticks in my mind is what Rod did for his close friend, the poet Marty Galvin, for Marty's November 28, 2010 Kensington Row Bookshop reading. Marty's health had been failing for some time. To conserve his strength, I had scheduled him to read before Greg McBride, the other featured reader.

Rod—who knew how frail his friend really was—copied his emails from Marty to me: "Don't come! You'll be exposed to germs! Flu, lightning, Ebola!" Marty emailed me two days before the reading, regretting that "time held [him] pale and faded," and endorsing Rod to read for him.

That reading was packed, a record in fact, mostly with Marty's friends and students, eager to hear him once more. Rod's strong voice gave us Marty's strong poems, now and then pausing to note a master detail like the one that brought a girl glimpsed on a boardwalk to a life in its full dimensions. The audience was rapt, and so was I.

As the evening broke up, I overheard Rod talking with the poet-publisher Sid Gold, urging that they put together a Collected Poems for Marty, an event that followed a few years later. Rod had a way of making things happen.

### **Wendell Hawken:**

A master teacher, Rod's workshops at the Writer's Center mirrored his kindness and respect for all. That poems were submitted anonymously exemplified the way he focused on the work at hand, not the poet. Looking back, I feel blessed that his was my first poetry workshop. And how

he would bum a cigarette (usually from Marie) at the break.

**Mark Smith-Soto:**

Rod Jellema saved my life. Dramatic as that might sound, it's pretty much the truth. He didn't do it on purpose—he had no reason to suspect, any more than anyone in my family did, that my life needed saving. Mine was a secret despair all the bleaker for being kept well hidden from siblings and parents, who believed me to be an easygoing introvert, a good boy, generally content if rather daunted by the challenges of social intercourse. The truth was, I was desperately shy and lonely, caught in a protracted adolescent gloom that could easily have proved terminal. I wandered lost in suburban Maryland, had one friend even more unmoored than I was, and, as my undergraduate career progressed, I felt caged-in by my contract with the state of Maryland to teach two years of high school English in return for my university tuition and fees.

Although I had been a mediocre student at best before coming to college, once there I found my courses relatively easy and made my way through with an almost perfect GPA. But I loved only one discipline: poetry, the study and and reading and writing of poetry. And it was from Rod Jellema that I learned that it was all right to love it. His course on contemporary British and American poets was a revelation. There are some poems that to this day I can't read without hearing his voice, the gentle pulse of his search for resonance and implication in every word and line of the writings he delighted in sharing with his class. Pressing all diffidence aside, I forced myself to go to his book-glutted, untidy tiny office and asked him for permission to enroll in his creative writing workshop. After looking benignly at some samples of my work I'd brought with me, he took me in. I went home elated but nervous and uncertain: would I fit in?

As it turned out, the workshop was a place where poetry was privileged and poets were honored by a learned man who was generous but tough-minded (when called for, there was an iron fist in the velvet glove!), a real poet-teacher who found my work worthy of his encouragement. I was in my element, and my spirit flourished. Two semesters and three courses later Rod called me aside and asked me whether I had considered applying for a Danforth Fellowship. I had no idea what he was talking about, so he patiently explained that if I got one, it would pay all expenses for my graduate school education anywhere in the country. I was Ph.D. material, he said, and I should go for it. Nobody had ever suggested such a thing to me. I didn't know what to say. He offered to write me a letter of support and to recruit another of my teachers to do the same if I managed to come up with the completed application in time. The deadline was in two days.

It was Wednesday afternoon. I worked feverishly on a statement of purpose, made up all sort of futures I supposedly aspired to, included some lines of poetry Rod had praised in class, and got my application in just before the offices closed that Friday at 5:00 pm. A few months later, I received a letter informing me that I had been one of three University of Maryland students selected to receive the prestigious award. My world lightened, charged with possibility. With the financial support the fellowship implied, my father felt comfortable reimbursing the state for the

tuition waiver I have been granted, letting me out of my contract so I could proceed directly to graduate school.

I had been accepted by various English departments around the country, but Rod thought I should consider a doctorate in comparative literature given that I was bilingual in English and Spanish and had taken courses in both languages. Berkeley, he suggested, might be a good place for me. I have no idea what Rod saw or intuited in me, what he gleaned from the gloomy old-fashioned poetry and overwrought critical essays I'd handed in for his classes, but his suggestions made a giddy, wonderful sense, and I accepted them both wholeheartedly. When I went by his office to tell him my plans, he laughed his joyful laugh and said I would do beautifully. Only one thought, he added, suddenly grave and looking me in the eye, be careful you don't ever let academia rob you of your poetry. And that parting piece of advice was another way Rod Jellema saved my life.