

Rod Jellema: An Interview

Q: How did you come to poetry or how did poetry come to you?

A: I sort of walked into writing it backward from teaching the reading of it. I was teaching courses in twentieth century poetry and was noticing that you can do something else with the teaching of poetry than most people do. You can get rid of the whole business of restating poems by trying to trace the creative process of the poem. That began fascinating me. You have to be speculative about that, but I was trying to get students to walk through the poem that way—to follow the associations and sound patterns and all that. Forget about what it's *saying*, what it *means* or *intends*.

At about this time—I was nearing forty and resisting the temptation to think seriously about writing poems—I got a shot at teaching a creative writing workshop. A colleague of mine at the University of Maryland broke his leg and was going to be in a cast up to his armpits, for the second half of the semester. Someone had to take over his workshop. Could I? Well yes, of course. I had written no poems since my own college days—dreadful little things, inflated and artificial, published in a college magazine. I used to wonder, back then, what would happen, how far could I go, if I took seriously the making of poems and gave it some time.

Anyway, the chairman had heard me talk about getting students to read poems by noticing their processes. He must have suspected that I was a closet poet—and that was very nearly right.

So I began teaching creative writing before I was writing. I learned to let my students teach me. We got along fine, and they petitioned the chairman to keep me working in the workshops. I was astonished at the quality of the work these students were

doing—and of course, I was secretly becoming one of them, trying things out.

About the third or fourth semester that I was teaching these workshops, students would come up and say, in effect, “Okay Jellema, you teach a good workshop. Let’s see some of your stuff.”

Another kind of pressure was already there simultaneously. Writers often come in through the disorder of their own lives. My marriage was breaking, no wish of mine, and I felt pretty hopeless about it. Well, there it is. You make order out of chaos. Those first poems, struggling to get some order directly out of the materials of those sad feelings, were bad poems, of course. But finally I realized I could be making order out of something else and the order being made would transfer to this need for order in my own life. It’s a lot cheaper than a shrink (laughs) with something of the same effect.

And then I got lucky. I got to know a lot of other Washington area poets just launching their careers—Ann Darr, Siv Cedering, Roland Flint, Myra Sklarew, Eddie Gold, Linda Pastan, Primus St. John, Margaret Gibson—and we formed ourselves into a workshop that met for many years. I got to know Bill Stafford—“Gee,” I said to him, “I’m forty years old; how do I get started?” and he said, “Start where you are.” He helped to get me in Yaddo, though I had published only two or three little poems by that time; I came back to our workshop with a sheaf of pretty good poems. And then the writing took off from there.

Q: A lot of poetry comes from grief, doesn’t it?

A: Not necessarily. I think a lot of poetry comes from our inability to be satisfied by what we understand about any of our emotions. Grief, very much included. Maybe if we shift over to a work like *mystery*—the sense of mystery about death, for example, about any death, but then particularly when one comes close

—where you're forced to deal with it and make some kind of order out of it and the world again. So, in that sense, grief, yes; but how many wonderful poems have you and I seen about just a kind of joy and exultation? They often have to do with childhood—a big, big source.

Or just physical sensation, the delight of sensing something and then trying to catch the equivalent to that, trying to embody something of that in language. So I don't want to give grief too much credit. It is important, and when it crosses over to mystery, yes. But we all write about things that mystify us.

Q: Your bicycle poems include childhood, and the physical, and joy.

A: Yes, and partly I guess they were for me, as I was writing them, not just a kind of revisiting of childhood, but something of the imagination reflecting and thinking about itself all these years later and so extending those memories of my old blue bike and childhood and all that. What I was after, and I hope I got it, was a kind of seamlessness about that. You don't separate the adult poet in his sixties sitting there thinking about his bike from the beginning impressions of the kid. The simply unspeakable joy is as much *now*, creating experience on paper, as *then*, having part of the experience as a kid.

Q: Let's talk about mythic consciousness.

A: (Laughs) You're still trying to pass that course? All right, I think there is in experience and in language a level of awareness that is beyond the beck and call of conscious intellect. It has to do with what we imagine, with what we daydream, with what we feel deeply and dream. It has to do with the connections that we can make, with the associations that come shimmering off things if we pay careful attention. Poems and other art forms, touch that level.

We can call that mythic—mythic, not because it owes debt to myths from Greece, from Norsemen or whatever, but because we can recognize the patterns. Our mental responses and our dream images and our fears and our beliefs all of that are a way of trying to explain the realities that can't be grasped simply by conscious intellect. So something like Ulysses returning from the Trojan wars or Cain wandering, or Gilgamesh searching the darkness for his dead friend, or a love poem worked on this morning, recapitulates the mind encountering all kinds of levels of reality, and we're doing that sort of thing over and over. Language lets us into it quickly if we listen to language instead of simply using it as a tool. Language is a source. That wonderful intensity and flow of language in which one kicks off another image two lines later—these aren't logical, rational connections that we're controlling. Something a bit subterranean is moving through, resonating deep matters we almost remember.

Q: Maybe it's preconscious.

A: Yes, right! It's not because we've been influenced by the findings of modern psychology that we poets find ourselves writing so often about things that seem to be a kind of womb experience. It's because of a kind of preconscious awareness that's still there. We can still beckon it and language takes us there. Language never wants to make the insistence that some of our high school teachers did, that a word means only one thing. Language shimmers with other possibilities and those other possibilities are deeply historical and spiritual. They are things that are accumulated. They relate to sound patterns that are highly suggestive—the Anglo-Saxon part of our language in particular does that. We find ourselves submerging into that kind of mythic awareness and following out associations and strange linkings of images and overtones and undertones that mean far, far more than the words *mean* in the usual denotative sense.

So, I find that whole mythic patterning a very natural thing we do simply looking at our own language. It is not so much thinking about words—scholars can do that and that's worth something to us—but simply using them, simply picking up a pen and starting to push words across a page. That's where it really happens, where you start playing out the possibilities of words. Then all kinds of things happen, and mythic consciousness is one of them, but all sorts of other things happen too: all those wonderful associations and sound patterns and metrical moves that we're not thinking about when we're writing. We look back later and say Oh, something's happening there, and we cross out a word or two and substitute this or that to garner more strength into something unthought that has already begun to happen before we meant it to.

Q: How do you teach your students to trust the process and to let go of the editor, to let go of the person that steps in and says, alright I want my poem to do this and end in such and such a way?

A: Well...

Q: Or is it something that can be taught?

A: I don't know that it can be taught. It can be shown, encouraged, nourished. You can show students by example. If you can get them to try it out, they'll teach themselves and they'll teach each other. One of the secrets to workshops, which seem to me always the right way to teach the writing of poetry, is precisely students teaching each other. They're willing to try things out. You tell them to let go a little, no matter if it's a little bit scary...

Q: And it is.

A: You bet it is. It could be mistaken for mindlessness. It's a little bit like telling a kid to jump off a swing. There's Daddy saying, 'I'll catch you.' It's scary, but they get to trust not so much because you can teach them to, but because they demonstrate to

themselves that language is worth trusting, the process is worth trusting. They begin making things that they hadn't thought of and they say, wow, look what I made. That never occurred to me and yet it is me. It's right out of me. It's not just haphazard accident. I got free enough to get from under the control of intellect, but that only means that something else, my sense of language and the esthetic form of imagination, moved in with its less conscious kind of control. So something does catch them finally and its not quite Daddy catching them out of the swing. Lord knows that isn't the role of the teacher. The language, the mind, not just as intellect, that full sense of mind—total awareness, perception, all of that, catches the students. I call it creative process.

Q: It's said that we only use 10% of our brains. Do you think that "letting go" is a way of tapping into the other 90%?

A: Yes. That's the easy access we have to it. Letting go with something—letting go with paints and a brush and a canvas could do the same thing; or, if we've got some kind of start on musical scales and things...

Q: Composing...

A: Composing...and just trying it out. What's going to happen? What if? What if I put down this chord, where will it move onto within the kind of sequence that I'm now working? It's exactly what we're doing on paper with word.

A: Jazz, improv...

Q: Yes, and that's something I'm very fond of and interested in, and it's partly that link to the creative process—that ability to trust—making music where you've got only an idea of the basic melodic line. That's all. Your job is not just to horse around and doodle with it and put in extra notes. Your job is to improve it as you improvise. Make something new out of just that simple line.

It's very, very like what we're doing with language. In each form, there's a whole piece building. We've got kind of a sense as we're going along in a poem, at least the kind of direction this next line might take and that's about all. Now, can we trust? I even like to think that the kind of time pressure that's put on a jazz musician who's doing this would be good for us poets. We can doodle too long and then the controlling conscious intellect wants to get in there and control again. And it makes the job more difficult.

Q: And it makes the poem self-conscious.

A: Yes, very much so. The best way to blot out the editor in us, who interrupts with all those final-draft questions much too early, is with a kind of time pressure. The clock is ticking and you've got to keep moving.

Q: This is what automatic writing tries to get at.

A: Sure. And none of us really do it all that well. But I've always noted what a good effect it's had on a classroom full of people. It's hard to do individually. But get a classroom full of people, little kids, college students, it doesn't matter; give them a little exercise and tell them they have eight minutes in which to do it. What comes out of that isn't necessarily much as a product. But it's enormously valuable, because it teaches them the reality of the process, and they begin to see something that does happen. And when they get home, they're probably not going to put that time pressure on and do it in eight minutes but they get the feel of moving without relying on going back to consult with that editor who wants everything to be meaningful in the sense that prose is meaningful. That's a big limitation. We want the poem to be fresh and evocative in ways in which prose cannot be evocative when it's being tidy and meaningful.

Q: Is that "letting go process," that unedited voice, what some people call the muse?

A: I think so. This is a time when you and I are thinking about Bill Stafford, because he died recently...I suppose there's no one who taught all of us more about trusting that kind of process and the way in which you use it. Bill Stafford has a poem called, "When I Met My Muse," in which the muse says, "I am your own way of looking at things." And so, says Stafford, "I took her hand."

Maybe that's all the muse is. You need that liberty and yet that respect for the authority of what occurs to you within the process. Some call it a muse. That's too mechanical for me; I don't use the word *muse*, but Stafford's sense of the muse that he takes by the hand is wonderful—it's the process again. One of my sons called to my attention the other day that the word *museum* has the word *muse* in it, and I never thought about that before. We put in a museum things that the muse has inspired our civilization to make, which suggests by the way, that the holocaust museum shouldn't be called a museum.

I doubt that the muse is a real force that teaches us anything, except to liberate us to teach ourselves to experiment, to find our way, to have that joy of moving along and shaping things that we didn't know how to say. That's bigger than the popular notion of the muse.

Q: Can we talk about Jellema I and Jellema II?

A: No (laughs). Well, we can if we don't take it too seriously. I do feel a little like part II. In the past seven years I did no work on poems. I did some translating, and I was finishing up a teaching career that I wanted to end well. I retired from teaching a little early, and I think I was allowing for the possibility of getting back into the work of making poems. Friends asked why I was leaving the university early, and I didn't quite know, so I made a little

poem about it called "Early Retirement" that seems to suggest wanting to write:

I only want to get home before dark,
while there's still light
and summer,

before a voice
says *the cold is coming, time*
to go to bed now, I want to play out.

There may have been just a small bit of guilt in not writing for so long. Not much, though. In about the fifth year of silence a friend chided me with what the great Czeslaw Milosz said: when an ordinary person is silent, there are reasons; but "when a poet is silent, he is lying." Alright, that disturbed me a little.

Now I'm retired, and I've done some good creative loafing, and I'm again writing poems. Playing out. I feel astonished at times, as I did when I was forty—where are these phrases and images coming from? Maybe this time some of it comes from all those periods of time in the cold seven years when I wasn't expending or spending anything, but was probably accumulating a lot.

In the newer poems there are little threads coming through that are not things I have been thinking about. That's most welcome. And I find that for the last segment of the journey I am content to write much less about my self. Writing is a way of getting in touch with other people, and there's great unplumbed stuff out there, and anyway, I'm not my type.

Q: (Laughs) Tell me about "Poems for the Left-Hand."

A: Those sections of *The Eighth Day* relate a lot to what we've been talking about, the imagination, things beneath consciousness...

Q: Right-brain.

A: Yes, sure, that's right-brain. I am a left hander. I think fairly late in life I discovered I am a little quirky compared to other people, and it's ascribable to the fact that I'm right-brain dominant, and that has a nice kind of advantage in writing poetry. I feel perhaps a little freer than many people might to ignore the strictures of rational order—in fact, I regard them as the limitations of rational order. Go out there and skate the ice by yourself and find out what's going to happen. So the left-handed poems follow hunches. One of my students once said, there's a kind of mischief in the process of those poems. Yeah, there is and I think that's the left-handedness again. Nothing outrageous, just that quiet little bit of sly mischief moving through there.

In an early draft it seems alright to ride with a sound or an image that doesn't matter. It might have to do with what I go on to, and then I can change something else behind it. There is a little bit of defiance in taking that chance.

Right-handed poets do this too. But I think it's more difficult for them.

Q: What do you think of Brodsky's idea of mass distribution of poetry—poetry in the supermarkets, \$2 a copy?

A: I like all that. Yes, very much so. I have an insane little idea of my own about that...have the supermarkets sell lunchbags that have poems on them. Short little poems on lunchbags. You buy say 30 of them, there are let's say 10 or 15 poems on them. So, they repeat only a couple of times. That's in case you have other people in the family, but it's also in case somebody, in

encountering the poem the second or third time might like it better than they did the first time.

Now, no one's going to be serious and do that. I wish there were a way to get the things that poets do, the things they discover, the things they catch in language, in front of more people because I think most people would like them. I think the schools don't do the right kind of job. We make this very formal thing out of poetry and the teaching of poetry, and kids back away, as I did. I hated poetry in school. I just happened into a wonderful professor in college, and that suddenly changed everything. The pre-med student that I was became instantly the pre-med student who was also going to take a lot of literature and philosophy, and it didn't take very long at all to realize that I didn't have very strong motives for wanting to go into medicine. I was fascinated by language and the embodied vision I was encountering, and why can't other people encounter that? You don't have to go to college and find the one in a hundred professors to get that, but you aren't going to get that from the schools, I'm afraid.

The gap from elementary school to high school is strange. I used to go into elementary schools and I would take surrealist poems and run off copies—I used to do this with Charles Simic poems—and give them to third and fourth grade students. And they'd look at them and sort of smile. I'd read aloud and they would start nodding their heads. They'd have a question or observation or two. Right on.

Those poems work with a kind of energy that they project an immediacy of impact. They don't have to be filtered through the intellect and talked about: what does this mean, all that sort of business, the way we usually teach it. There's something there that the simple humanity in people does respond to if we let it. You just have to let it do its work. Now that doesn't mean lying back passively and letting it wash over you, but it does mean keep the intellect almost a little bit quiet, so that the five senses get opened.

Then you give into the whole movement of the poem—its sounds and cadences, its little leaps of association, its echoes, its archetypal resonances, its vision. Our senses are our simple elemental receptors as we walk about the world, and we keep shutting them down. Unfortunately, the educational system helps to shut them down rather than keeping them open. I wish I knew how to foment a revolution in which school kids defiantly read and quote poems *outside* school.

Q: There ought to be more poetry on the radio.

A: Yes. Of course, there's Watershed poetry tapes.

Q: They're pricey, and you're only getting one poet.

A: That's the problem. For a while Alan Austin at Watershed was trying a kind of cassette magazine of poetry, *Black Box*. I thought that was a better idea.

Q: Great idea.

A: And probably before its time. Back then not enough people had cassette players in their cars. Maybe there's still a way to do that, featuring different poets in each issue the way you do with *Plum*. Maybe that could connect to the something in us that responds to poetry right away. Partly out of necessity, teaching our kids grammar and mathematics, we let the life of half of the mind drift out to sea. We don't mean to kill it I suppose, but finally that's what our culture tends to do. We tend to kill it. God knows the usual kind of entertainment on television doesn't do anything to keep alive the active imagination or insight or sensitive response. On TV, it's all stock response, which poetry isn't. The TV producers—even the producers of the evening news—conspire and entertain us with violence, thereby keeping us fearfully and safely at home watching TV. Real literature invites us out to taste and see our broken, beautiful world.

There's another problem with the whole thing: people who mean to give poetry a wider audience—the World Poetry Association and such pop purveyors—do so by watering it down, so that it's not much more than stock response to sentimentality carved into little rhymed patterns and things. It's awful stuff and anyone ought to be bored by it. The real stuff you could get people to respond to.

Q: I've always thought poetry in high school ought to be taught by starting with modern poetry and then working your way back, so you catch the student's interest. My introduction to poetry was to memorize and recite Chaucer in huge chunks, out of the blue...

A: I had that assignment—memorizing the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English. I hated that assignment. By now, I'm glad I had it. I might have been glad at that time if I had been shown how it fits in.

Yes, moving back and forth between present-day poems and the poems of all past ages—that seems to me a good idea. If we can get students to respond to a poem that reflects the world around them, they might know that reading all that other stuff is worthwhile. Not just from now back to Chaucer, and then move slowly to now again, but maybe the way to do it is to jump around a bit between now and *Beowulf*, now and Donne or Browning or Keats. We could get them to see what a poem really *is* first of all if it comes from nearby.

Q: Let's talk about *The Eighth Day*. It seems that in this book, you are moving beyond the linear, the two-dimensional, even the three-dimensional: "the third side of the page."

A: Yes. Breaking the time frame, and that's partly what I meant by the "eighth day." God created the world in seven days, then what? Do we just start over again, like we do every week with

Monday? Or are we still in a kind of eighth day in which man, in God's image, keeps creating? And that's his job?

Q: In your new poems, you have a line, "If I were God..."

A: Yes. The woman in that poem functions (as God sometimes does) as a kind of Real Absence. Let's find it. The man in the poem waits. "An emptiness her size and shape/would move now to the window if he were God." And she would be right through the time frame, because when she looks out the window, she'll see a trolley move again of trying to see time by getting away from time. T. S. Eliot says that the job of the poet is to "alter the modes of perception." That's fascinating.

I had a wonderful uncle who was also my philosophy professor who said to one of my sons when he was in the fifth grade—it having been agreed between them what the term *binary* meant—he said, "you might want to think some time, David: what if God doesn't look at the world through the binary system? He finished lighting his pipe, and here's this little kid looking with great big eyes—he's probably still thinking about that. So am I. I want to stand back and see more.

It's there too in the simple shock of that wonderful little stanza of Wallace Stevens' in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird:"

I am of three minds
like a tree
in which there are three blackbirds.

Wonderful. There it is. We're out of the chains of the binary system. Thought scatters like birds. Reality is not positive/negative, right/wrong, black/white. And it's not just there are three, then it goes on. To me, the imagination is a direct route to reality. It's our faint memory of Eden. Poetry can get us there.

Paintings and music can get us there. We can experience it, as well as theorize about it. I was trying to get to some of this kind of thing in *The Eighth Day*.

The other thing I was doing in that book, trying to see differently, was to reverse the values of light and dark, doing a sort of celebration of darkness. Following symbolic light has been very important to our civilization for centuries, but I think we are living in a time when we have to distinguish kinds of light, and we're not going to be able to do that unless we get into the darkness where we dream and imagine. We have to go deep, deep into that dark and learn to be comfortable there for awhile. That's where there's the car station that's no longer there, under gaslights. There's that mystery, that's where we can meditate and miss each other and finally long for the light—but not have it confused with all the glare coming at us, the glitz and proud certitude. The brightest light we are likely to know about, aside from the sun, is the light of nuclear explosion. I don't trust the symbol of light anymore.

I don't think that theme in *The Eighth Day* came off very well. That's been frustrating. I feel better about it now, because when I resumed writing this past summer I found a simple, practical way to get that off my chest. I wrote—not for publication, but for use—a set called “Three Liturgical Prayer for Illumination by Way of Darkness.” Some churches, mine for example, have a moment before the scriptures and sermon in which the congregation prays for illumination—and I did these prayers in which that is done precisely through the medium of darkness. I like the practicality of it. That let me go on to other matters in newer poems.

Q: Galway Kinnell is another one who praises the dark.

A: Yes, and that great poem he has about light, about flash, “The Fundamental Project of Technology.” Then there are the Jim Wright poems, which mean a great deal to me. I think he is the poet of my generation, although Galway Kinnell's *Book of*

Nightmares may be the book of my generation. Both of them deal with those reversals of light and dark. Jim Wright's celebration of darkness in *The Branch of Will Not Break* is wonderful, and he works his way to that last book—the posthumous book, *This Journey*, where finally it's a celebration of light. And it's beautiful. He's earned his way to a whole new sense of light. He's not evoking the mottoes on college seals, little student lamps and candles and flames, that admonish us to pursue light. There's a lot of light in this world that I don't want to pursue. I want to judge the lights of our time, and I think we're only going to learn to do it if we get back to appreciating darkness.

Q: Let's talk about your new poems.

A: Alright. What shall we say about them?

Q: Well, I find remarkable differences between them and the poems in *The Eighth Day*.

A: Good. Let's turn this around for a moment, and let me ask you what you think those are.

Q: Well, for example, when I look at the bicycle poem in *The Eighth Day* and I look at the “Jellema II” bicycle poems, it seems to me that the newer poems have a lot more breathing space...

A: Yes, don't they? Yes...

Q: And seem more relaxed. So that in contrast, the old poem seems self-conscious. There's too much of the editor in there, and in every other line you've got a religious image...

A: And in the new sequence, those things come in...

Q: It's much freer. They come in naturally.

A: Yes. Thank you for noticing. The original bicycle poem I guess I now see as a kind of stock poem. I did look at it again

when I started playing with these other ones, and my response was pretty much what you said; it's too tight, too self-conscious. There's so much I could have done there, that I didn't do. So, let's just start with a blank sheet of paper and think about *sprocket* or *spokes*. I feel freer to spin out, like Whitman's "noiseless, patient spider." I used to think I was pretty good at that when I was writing *The Eighth Day*, and it was what I was trying to get students to do. I think I've learned a lot from my students over the years, but maybe particularly in the last seven when I could concentrate on that whole sense of process and what they're doing with it, watching it grow, and seeing where they shut it off too quickly to push the comment, because a kind of idea is taking shape and then I kept saying to them, "let it keep going, let it find its own shape. You're in too much of a hurry to round that out into an idea that's restatable." The seven years off—I love the biblical number seven—seven years of drought—while constantly looking at poems in process by other people at the Writer's Center and at the University of Maryland taught me that everything I've been telling them turns out to be remarkably true, more true than I realized.

I've always said a lot about the little word *play* in writing. We live in a culture that sees play as opposite of work, and therefore, a waste of time, but no—playing out line to a fish, playing a concerto, playing out the possibilities to a word or a phrase or a little thread of perception that's working its way through by association—this is good work.

Q: "Look for me in words like, *startle*, *plum*."

A: Yes, I said that in a poem, didn't I—gave that as my permanent address. Two of my favorite words. Plum always seemed to me a perfect word. It says so much what it is. You don't have to modify it. Everything that is characteristic of plumness, the skin, the kind of pressure within, the dark color, the shape, the music moving from plosive to humming, *plum*, the word is making

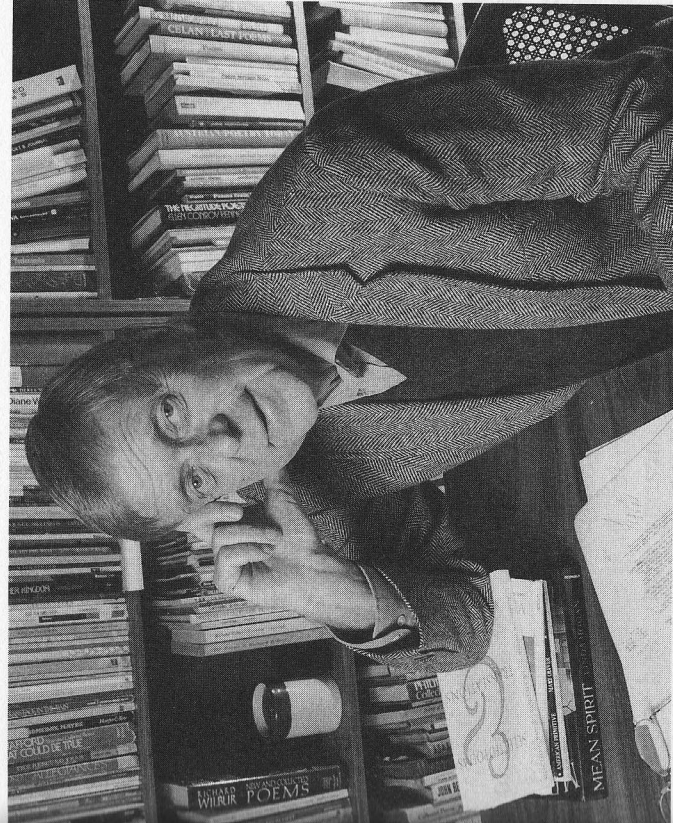
all of that. It doesn't stand for something. It is. *Startle*, same thing. *Startle* I love partly because when we put *le* as a suffix on words, it makes the diminutive form, so it could be a little star. I like that...

Q: And a little start.

A: Okay, yes! A little start and a little star! The verb sense of the word *to start*. You want an awful lot of words per poem to *startle*, and not just *startle* the reader, but *startle* you the poet in the process, because then the process goes on. If you use words like *plum* and *startle* in a line of poetry, it's going to change everything that happens in the next three lines, inevitably. They keep you moving in the search for ways of creating past understanding—what you will never know how to *say*. So that's where I like to hang out—with words that keep poetry the self-generating form that it is. I'm most at home there. Just as a painter would choose to live with tubes of paint rather than, say, an outline of his own metaphysics.

Q: Do you suppose we're about finished?

A: Never. But I am suddenly realizing how you've led us into a rounding off by getting the name of the magazine into the end of our little conversation, *Plum* indeed. Well, it's a good name. I hope that in your case, too, it changes everything that happens.



od Jellema is the author of three books of poems: *The Eighth Day: New and Selected Poems* (1984), *The Lost Faces* (1979) *Something Tugging the Line* (1974), and two books of translations, *The Sound that Remains: A Historical Collection of African Poetry* (1990), and *Country Fair: Poems From Friesland since 1945* (1985). He directed the Creative Writing Program at University of Maryland, where he taught from 1955 to 1991. In Spring of 1991, he was given the Pieter Jelles Award, Maryland's only national literary prize, for his translations of African poems. Other awards include an NEA Discovery Grant and National Endowment Fellowship. He teaches at The Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

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Photo: Mary Noble Ours.