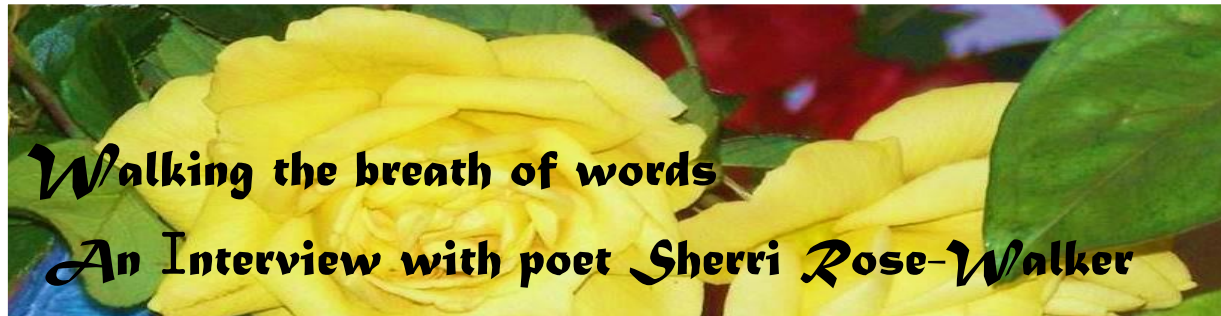


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Portraits & Roots

Walking the Breath of Words ~ An interview with poet Sherri Rose-Walker (page 1)



*Written by Jean Bartlett*

1.05.2018

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The garden that leads to poet Sherri Rose-Walker's front door is a color wheel of flowers, lingering birds and great stems of green. Through the entrance there is art, warmth, the comfort of books, and a history of love {photographs, fresh cut roses} between the writer and her late husband Bob Walker – all present and welcoming. Her backyard flourishes with rooted tales and storied branches. Beyond it, even when the sky is too misty for visitors to see the "Two Trees" on top of Montara Mountain, Sherri sees them. They titled her first chapbook. The following poem began Sherri's "Two Trees" series.

*The Space Between Two Trees*

On the mountain's curved shape  
a corona of misty light,  
blurring the moment when dark definition  
meets generosity of air,  
reveals two trees.  
Still points in the morning landscape  
born of an equal music,  
a discerning eye may see  
one tree brings the mountain's curve to pause,  
one begins it again.  
In the space between,  
possibility flowers and flows.

The inner eye opens  
a distant music is heard  
the river of light pours into the sky.

*(The Space Between Two Trees © August 9, 2004, Sherri Rose-Walker)*



For Sherri, years of reading the works of a great many poets helped frame her own voice on paper.

"I've never taken a class or course on poetry," the artist noted. "I have learned from reading the poets who reach my heart and illuminate my soul." This list is long and Sherri leaves it at the first 13 that come to mind: "Rumi, Hafez, Denise Levertov, William Stafford, Paula Gunn Allen, William Shakespeare, Joy Harjo, Rainer Maria Rilke, May Sarton, John O'Donohue, Linda Hogan, Van Morrison, and poetic philosopher Gaston Bachelard."

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## Portraits & Roots

### Walking the Breath of Words ~ An interview with poet Sherri Rose-Walker (page 2)



Sherri Rose-Walker at home, January 5, 2018.

(Jean Bartlett photo)

Sherri Rose-Walker is the eldest of four and the only daughter of Jeanne (Rose) Folsom and Rolfe Ames Folsom, Jr. An electrical engineer, Rolfe Folsom, Jr., graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) following the Second World War. He spent his career in the aerospace industry, eventually in a management position at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), where he continued to work as a volunteer after he retired. A homemaker, Jeanne Folsom was a gifted gardener who would go on to work for many years in a local bookstore. Later in life, Jeanne took classes in order to join the Environmental Volunteers.

"The Environmental Volunteers took groups of school children out into the local area and taught them about such things as plate tectonics, California Indian culture, and the local plants and animals."

Sherri was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts but grew up primarily in Palo Alto, California. Her family moved there when she was four.

"My parents believed the arts were essential. Not only was our home a place for the arts of all kinds, but both my parents practiced them and encouraged us to do the same. My father played the ukulele, clarinet, banjo and guitar, and sang barbershop with a local group. My mother taught herself to play the piano, was an amateur painter and created art in stitchery. Both were dedicated readers and both, later in their lives, wrote poetry.

"I wrote my first poem, a limerick, at the age of 7, though I don't recall anything about why I wrote it. The only thing I know for sure is that my Dad was fond of limericks, and that we did have books of children's poetry in the house, including that of Edward Lear."

As a child, Sherri wrote plays and filled her cast with neighborhood kids. She sang in her church choir. At 10, she was "Queen" in a production of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" at the Children's Theater in Palo Alto. She began journaling at 12 and has never stopped, and throughout all of her school years she wrote short stories, some poetry, and "voluminous correspondence." She took glee club or choir in both junior high and high school. She was a member of the drama department throughout high school. Performances included the lead role of Sarah in Archibald MacLeish's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, "J.B." At her graduation she was one of two "gifted acting" students to receive a cash prize. She also won a scholarship to take acting lessons from theater virtuoso Conrad Bishop. In high school she additionally experimented with weaving, collage art and learned to play the guitar.

"At the end of my senior year in high school, our drama class was visited by Margrit Roma. She had studied theater with the legendary German director Max Reinhardt." (Reinhardt, 1873-1943, fled Nazi Germany in 1938 and moved to the United States via Great Britain. Roma fled Hitler's Germany for Paris, then headed to Hollywood, eventually moving to San Francisco in 1964.)

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"Roma was looking to form a troupe of young thespians to perform Shakespeare. I signed on, and a more tempestuous 18 months I'd never had before. We staged a production of 'Romeo and Juliet,' in which I played Juliet's nurse. We built our own sets, made our own costumes, and tried to get to grips with Shakespeare! Once we had been tutored by Roma, we knew Shakespeare from the inside out! We did several performances in the community; a local newspaper drama critic summed it up: 'Amateur, but robust!'" (That troupe, New Shakespeare Company at Trinity, became nationally known.)

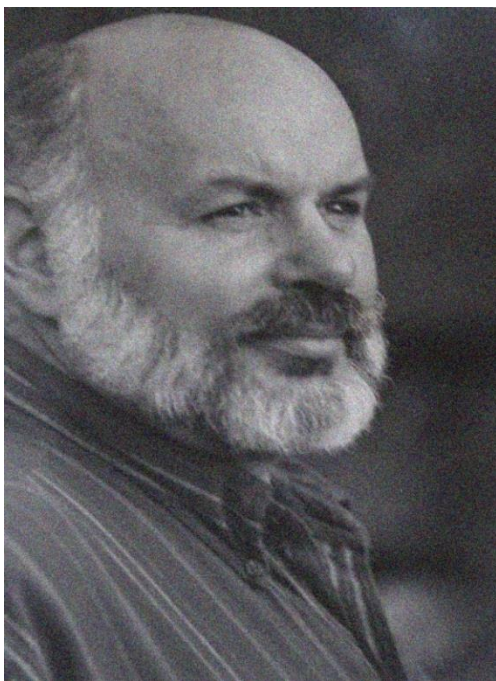
Following graduation, Sherri joined four drama friends to form "Unmasked Theater."

"Our purpose was to go to local high schools, perform short scenes, and then talk to the students about the joys and glories of theater. We wrote letters to all the local high schools. One of our members drew whimsical pictures on the envelopes. We were invited to perform, and did perform, several of 'our 'missions.' But, alas, inner dissension among us precipitated an early break-up of our group."

Sherri attended Foothill Community College in Los Altos Hills and then headed to San Francisco State University to study theater. But different interests and discoveries changed her course of study, and at SFSU she majored in anthropology and minored in special education. She would go on to receive her master's degree in special education. Throughout her days at Foothill, she performed in number of their plays. She additionally performed in Jean Giraudoux's anti-war play, "Tiger at the Gates," directed by her friend Conrad Bishop and presented by the community theater group, The Peninsula Religious Drama Guild. As the world outside of school beckoned, Sherri "withdrew from the world of theater."

She married for the first time in 1969. Her daughter was born in 1970, right before she finished her college finals. Marriage, raising a child, completing her thesis and helping her husband finalize his education, did not leave much time for writing. But she journaled and kept up with correspondence. She joined a writing group for a while and submitted several short stories, "without success." She also did some part-time work, which included working as a library aide at her daughter Joanie's school. Along the way she was encouraged to write by French-born novelist/essayist Anaïs Nin, whom she met at a Jungian seminar in Santa Cruz. She additionally received encouragement for her literary skills from *Atlantic Monthly*.

Her first marriage ended. She met Bob Walker when they both responded to a newspaper announcement of the formation of a community theater, and both volunteered to serve on the new theater's board. They married in 1981 and were married until his death from cancer in September of 2015.



Bob Walker, 1994.



Sherri Rose-Walker, January 5, 2018. (Jean Bartlett photo)



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In 1986, Sherri began writing poetry again and continued writing poetry until 1993. She then took a five year pause. In 1998, she and Bob, Pacificans since Valentine's Day 1992, were invited to attend a poetry reading at a little cafe in Half Moon Bay.

"The featured reader was a local poet, drummer and wood carver. His reading electrified me! I told him I wanted to start writing again, and he fixed me with a shamanic eye and said, 'Go home. Do it tonight!' So, I did. I wrote the poem 'Shapeshifter' for him. After that, Bob and I regularly attended this series which lasted for nearly 15 years. I continued to write, got the courage to read at open mic, and was a feature myself several times over the years. I haven't stopped writing since."

American poet and essayist William Stafford, 1914-1993, has long been one of Sherri's treasured educators. In October of 2006, she dedicated the following poem to him.

#### *Teach Me*

*(For William Stafford)*

He wrote a poem every day,  
allowing what would rise,  
and if the work didn't go as planned,  
*I lower my expectations*, he said;  
this man was too strong-hearted to go to war,  
found vaulted mansions in clods of earth.  
Meeting him only in print,  
I long to say, teach me;  
teach me that daily advent:

words bubbling up,  
humble, strong, surprising,  
dreaming as they rise  
a steady hand receiving them,  
guiding them to a spacious page,  
musing over them, attending them  
until, in gratitude,  
they become still music.

*(Teach Me © October 18, 2006, Sherri Rose-Walker)*



**In the poet's garden, January, 2018.  
Jean Bartlett photo**

**S**herri's husband Bob was always the first person to hear her new poems.

"In the 1980s, when we lived in the East Bay and I had begun writing, Bob would take me up to a little redwood grove, behind the Cal Berkeley football stadium. (It had) a miniature amphitheater and Bob would sit in the seats

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## Portraits & Roots

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while I stood on the platform and read my newest work. He told me this was because poetry wasn't alive until it was given breath. He was right."

#### *Hymn To Silence*

Some mornings, silence is counterpoint  
to the usual cacophony,  
softening energy's intention  
as the air gentles to reverence.

In the garden, time lengthens,  
birds' liquid notes  
echo the litany of leaves,  
offering a deeper point of departure.

Receiving stillness  
is blue heaven on the skin,  
a dawning joy,  
fluency leading toward  
transformation's house of gold.

*(Hymn To Silence © July 23, 2010, Sherri Rose-Walker)*



Bob Walker began his career as a journalist then headed off into rock 'n' roll. He was road manager for the psychedelic rock band, It's A Beautiful Day. He did a stint working for Bill Graham at the legendary Fillmore Auditorium. Educated in sound technology, "He was a co-inventor of the audio device Clear-Com, which enabled NASA engineers to hear one another through headsets while testing jet engines." He worked for a sound company for 10 years, and then went to work for a lighting and production company as a producer of large and small events.



**Bob and Sherri, 1979.**

"I have never had, nor will I ever have, so dedicated or so loving a mentor. We had shared, from the beginning of our relationship, a love of poetry. We read it aloud to each other, inscribed lines of our favorite poem – 'The Ivy

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Crown' by William Carlos Williams – in our wedding rings, and over the years, put together an enormous collection of poetry in our library. Bob used to say, with great satisfaction, 'We have more poetry than most book stores.' True.

"Bob did not deliver 'literary' criticism. But I learned to hope for a certain kind of silent response that meant he had heard the poem and that it had gone into his heart and found a home there. He once said he was in awe of my poetry. This may be the reason that he orchestrated both of my chapbooks." (The second chapbook is "Celtic Ray.") "They would not exist, had it not been for his devotion and work. During the last months of his life, he felt so unwell – we didn't know why then, the doctors told him he had the flu – and he was working 24/7 on a series of huge, huge shows on the Navy aircraft carrier Hornet. But when he came home at night, he worked on the computer layout for 'Celtic Ray.' There will never be a greater gift of love."

Sherri considers Bob one of her great muses and over the years wrote many poems for him. Since his death, she has written over four dozen more. "As he taught me, there is no end to love."

#### *Flowering Plum*

We'd been for a walk in the hills.  
Mid-winter was keeping most things bare,  
and the stream beds exuberant with rain;  
there were buds on river dogwood and willow.  
Stopping at a nursery,  
we admired another gathering of slender trees.  
Branches flushed red gave no hint  
of the sensuous foam of blossom  
later to clothe them in aphrodite pink.

Planting our tree in the garden  
with offerings of humus and water,  
we felt blessed  
simply to share our lives  
with this gracious, expectant presence.

*(Flowering Plum © January 30, 2006, Sherri Rose-Walker)*



#### *A Dawning Joy*

Growing confused in the noise and shouting,  
stumbling along the blank wall,  
some mercy released the voice of my longing.  
*Friend*, the word barely whispered  
Before the secret door swung wide.

Crossing the threshold to verdant silence,  
a bird offered one pure, still note  
to the glimmering moon  
as the poet held out his beautiful hands to me;  
I met them with my own.

Together, we wandered,  
dreaming iridescent words  
that hovered over us  
in a butterfly cloud of dawning joy.

*(A Dawning Joy © December 13, 2007, Sherri Rose-Walker)*

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### Walking the Breath of Words ~ An interview with poet Sherri Rose-Walker (page 7)

It was April of 2011 that I first came across the poet. Sherri had "inaugurated" every last Saturday of the month as Poetry Night at Florey's Book Co. in Pacifica, <http://floreysbooks.blogspot.com>. My part was to introduce these events in an article in the *Pacifica Tribune*. I interviewed Sherri, as is often done in the deadline-industry of newspaper reporting, without physically meeting her. (We have since met.) I discovered then as now, that Sherri's comfort with the journey of words was sweet and still, a transformative path through life's inexplicables.

Sherri explained the purpose of her Florey's mission, with a quote from incomparable writer Ursula K. LeGuin.

"I want to see poetry not as fancy pastry but as bread; the poem not as masterpiece but as life-work."

In January of 2018, Sherri elaborated on the extraordinary voice of poetry.



The poet reads at her home in 2011.

"The great poet Rilke said that poetry is the natural prayer of the human soul. What that means to me, what the quote from Ursula LeGuin means to me, is that poetry is ordinary, accessible, belongs to us all and is **in** us all, though it may never be outwardly expressed, written down, or shared with anyone – let alone published. All those things are circumstantial and after the fact. The fact is that when we need to express deeply felt joy, sorrow, exultation, rage, grief or despair, poetry rises up. It is the language of the heart.

"William Stafford said that writing is among the great, free human activities. If someone wants to write, needs to write, they don't have to buy fancy equipment, go to a fancy place, be trained in some fancy way – though, of course, some people will do some or all of those things. All they need is a pen and a napkin, or the back of an envelope. One of the things that most inspired me in my early years of writing was reading about people imprisoned for years who, without even pencil and paper, just kept saying their words over and over and over so that they **knew** them viscerally. No one could stop them, no authority, no punishment. They could look up through the bars of their prison window and see 'the teaching stars'...Dorothy Dunnett.

"Then there is the fact of language itself. Our native tongue, the mother tongue that we speak is rich with history, subtext, context, implication, connotation, symbolism, metaphor and complexities that etymologists spend their lives deciphering. The native speaker of any language inherits layer upon layer of meaning, and when you start to write, these layers rise up to help! I think it is also true that if you have done a lot of reading, things just seep in so that when you pick up your pen, words emerge that you didn't necessarily fabricate yourself. Now, after many years of writing, I very often have this experience; I am the amanuensis for much that is perhaps shaped by my life, which includes being a passionate bibliophile, but that I have not invented independently. We are all always building on the past.

"That isn't to say there isn't anything new. I think the past that writers and all artists build on – the 'cloud of archetypal images that feeds me,' as the poet May Sarton put it – is our foundation and our rock. But each new generation, or epoch needs to have things framed in language and image that makes sense to them. So, I think that writers, and all artists, need to find for their times, the way to express things that people of their times can hear. It is my conviction that there is a layer of bedrock, fundamental truth that roots our human lives in the wisdom of collective human experience. But because we have different ways of understanding, we need words and images and dancing and music, and all kinds of art, that clothe the archetypal truths in forms that we can recognize and embrace."

Years before Sherri and Bob moved to Pacifica, they began to host friends in their home to read poetry.

"We were always amazed by how themes would emerge, without any pre-arrangement, and it is more fun than anyone can believe who hasn't done it."

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### Walking the Breath of Words ~ An interview with poet Sherri Rose-Walker (page 8)

In 2010, the couple began to travel to poetry series in order to hear other poets and to give Sherri the chance to practice reading her poetry in public.

#### *The Dark Remnants of Night*

Night-hidden violence has ended.  
With the advent of morning, silence  
takes grief in her everlasting arms.  
Small sounds,  
innocent of lingering fear,  
slowly emerge;  
notes of fresh melody  
lend their purest resonance  
to the sacrament of the day.

Sheltering liquid bird call,  
litany of leaves,  
light, praising flower faces,  
the offering bowl of the garden  
lifts up the dark remnants of night  
to the tenderness of air,  
the mercy of the sky.

*(The Dark Remnants of Night © May 28, 2011, Sherri Rose-Walker)*



Sherri explained the set-up for a poetry reading – linens, flowers, a stand for reading – through a quote by Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart, "You have to set the stage for magic."

"A poetry reading is an endangered species. It is an event where – at least in the series I have done – people put away their devices, listen to each other, talk to each other in real time, eat and drink together, touch each other, and share things which might not be expressed in any other context. Poets give breath to the words of their hearts, they are received by the audience – and Florey's audiences are notable for their respectful, attentive receptiveness to all kinds of poetry – and it is amazing to see what can happen when people are moved by the power of language, and the depth of feeling that is often expressed. Sometimes, just the opportunity to speak your words out loud is a transformative experience for a poet, especially those new to it. It is completely different from just reading it (silently) on the page. When you read to others, you will sometimes hear those little exhalations, sighs, or indrawn breaths that tell you your words have resonated with someone's heart."



Sherri and Bob with poet Stephen Kopel, 2012.



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### Walking the Breath of Words ~ An interview with poet Sherri Rose-Walker (page 9)

Sherri's work has been published for a number of years, going back to 1994, in the *We'Moon* datebook and wall calendars, <https://wemoon.ws>. She has also been published in Bay Area *Poet's Seasonal Review*, *San Francisco Peace and Hope*, *Poetalk*, and Marin Poetry Center anthologies, to name a few. Two of her poems have been made into songs by the San Francisco-based band, Devi Vaani, a band dedicated to the Divine Feminine, [www.devivaani.org](http://www.devivaani.org). Sherri's chapbook "Two Trees" was first read at M. Coffee in Half Moon Bay in August of 2010. Her chapbook "Celtic Ray," which draws its title from a song by Van Morrison, was first presented in March of 2015, at the Poetry Kitchen in Los Gatos, hosted by Sherri's friend Erica Gross, at that time the town's Poet Laureate.

Sherri reflected on what her husband would have really wanted her to get across in this "poet" interview.

"I think he would want me to be revealed as a 'poetic champion.'" (This is a Van Morrison phrase, and Van Morrison is, as Sherri explained, one of the poets and musicians that she and Bob revered most.) "He would want me to champion poetry, and all the arts, because they are where the creative imagination lives and breathes and has its being – giving rest and nourishment to the human heart and soul. This is critically important, Bob and I believed, because in our increasingly impersonal, standardized society, heart and soul and all the delicate magic of life are constantly under attack. It's crucial for people to know that they don't have to fill the Coliseum, be published in *Atlantic Monthly* or win the Pulitzer Prize to engage with the creative imagination, and it is important that they do so! And it is essential to give breath to the efforts, even if it is to an audience of one!

"I think Bob would also want me to stand up and be counted, as a lover of language, a poet who is a woman, a person who has suffered and grieved, gone into darkness and come out with some surprising gifts discovered there. These gifts, not of my making, can yet be shared, and encouraged in others who also struggle and suffer and grieve. Our society is not receptive or welcoming to these parts of our common human life, but accepting them in ourselves and others opens us to generosity and compassion, gives us the freedom of the full spectrum of what it is to be human."

"Poetry is one of the great, free human activities," Sherri went on to say, "not only because there need be no money involved, but because – if you choose it – there is complete freedom from any outside influence or interference. Reading poetry can offer maps that guide and support you. But if you also write it, you are doubly blessed because coming into connection with creative imagination is a humbling, enlivening and illuminating experience that changes you – makes you more spacious, more compassionate and more human."

The following poem closes the poet's "Two Trees" series.

#### *Soli Deo Gloria*

Still faintly luminous,  
a ragged half moon faded  
as sunlight touched the mountain.  
Above shadowed slopes,  
two trees stood against cold, clear sky,  
a pool of light foaming at their feet.  
Fed by the river far below,  
and the secret lake,  
this confluence of light  
poured over the face of the mountain,  
illuminating it like a lover's hand.  
High above, birds celebrated the morning.

(*Soli Deo Gloria* © December 1, 2004, Sherri Rose-Walker)



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## Portraits & Roots

### Walking the Breath of Words ~ An interview with poet Sherri Rose-Walker (page 10)

There are so many Sherri Rose-Walker poems that call for presentation. The following poem, "written," the poet stated, "without intentionality, it simply came through my pen," is not so much to end this interview, but to re-introduce all readers to that great voluminous, compendium vessel which leads each passenger to the truth of their own tale. This poem was previously published in the online magazine *Blueprint* and well as the *We'Moon* datebook in 2013.

#### *It Is Time*

It is time to attend to the world  
and all that is in it;  
the benediction of light,  
the symmetry of soil,  
the poetics of decay.

It is time to move into the world  
walking toward the sun,  
navigating the terrain of longing  
as it leads outward,  
perhaps to the final edge.

It is time to attend the dying,  
The tenderness revealed  
when all defense is swept away,  
and it is time to attend dear enemies  
whose spite is an anagram for grace.

It is time, and more than time  
to go to the world with a begging bowl,  
barefoot, empty of language,  
to attend the messages of salvation  
in the dust of the road.

*(It Is Time © June 8, 2010, Sherri Rose-Walker)*



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\* \* \*

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