

Sherry Sheehan

FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

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Dedicated to Flakers Everywhere

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

FOREWORD

by Ed Dewke

Around the turn of the millennium, Sherry Sheehan ordered a copy of *Flake: Confessions of a Psoriatic* from the website, “flakehq.com.” Some weeks or months after her book purchase she emailed me to point out a few typos in my latest update of the website. I corrected those errors straight away and continued to do so for a decade. Sherry is a superb copy editor. At some point early on, Sherry very graciously encouraged me to have *someone* copy edit my next book, leading me to re-read *Flake: Confessions* and discover an embarrassing number of flubs. *Achhh*.

In late summer, 2001, Sherry sent me the first of what would be 38 poems in all — the rare delights that comprise this chapbook.

I would write pages about Sherry’s varied techniques, her musicality, but I would rather you, reader, drink that all in on your own. Let me tell you, instead, why you will love these poems like I do. There are at least two reasons why you will feel inclined to print this out and keep it in your nightstand.

Irony and humor together is one thing. People with psoriasis are usually sad or mad about it, rarely amused and beguiled, and almost never sensual. Virtually all of Sherry’s psoriasis poetry contains these ingredients in their recipe. I was overjoyed from my very first reading of the first poem she sent me, “Fingernails,” to discover this and if you haven’t read it lately, you’ll rediscover it now.

The second thing is Sherry’s deft application of a visible dance she calls “ekphrastic.” To be precise: *ekphrastic poetry*. (You can Google it. She didn’t invent the concept.) In this psoriasis poetry collection Sherry has six ekphrastic poems associated with the work of three artists: Robert Chapla, Judy Molyneux and Marco Rosales Shaw (see “Artists” on page 49). In them she sees aspects of the psoriatic experience — on varied levels, of course — and I am constantly delighted by the insights one can take away from playing “What’s in that painting?” with Sherry.

Sherry Sheehan was officially designated FlakeHQ’s Poet Laureate from 2006 through 2010, when the website stopped being updated. Irrespective of FlakeHQ, as long as I am psoriatic, Sherry Sheehan will be my Poet Laureate.

Ed Dewke
January, 2012

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

FINGERNAILS

August 2001

Wispy scales,
my fingernails.
Such stubby things
aren't meant for rings;
near them jewelry
is tom-foolery.

How bored I am
with gelatin,
a remedy
not meant for me,
though its use
with orange juice
is guaranteed
to supersede
results of lotions,
creams and potions.

One can get quite aggravated
when long claws aren't being created
by one's set of stubborn paws:

they don't grow nails,
they eke out flaws.

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FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

CYCLE
November 2001

Inflammation
Inhalation
Eruption
Exfoliation

Expansion
Frustration
Encrustation
Revulsion

Lamentation
Isolation
Depression
Incantation

Investigation
Medication
Rotation
Repetition

Discussion
Distraction
Exhalation
Remission

Elation.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

FLAKING LIFE

February 2002

Everyone's house has microscopic mites,
but where I dwell mites eat flakes and
ride on fur.

When a psoriatic lives with two fat cats,
the debris forever recur.

It's all a matter of scale,
these bits and pieces of white.
Large and small, they fall,
marking the place as my site.

The cat-fur clouds on the carpet
echo my own chunks of snow.
Could an aid for my shedding elbow
be a strip of flesh-toned Velcro?

Naked, I'm a spotted Dalmatian,
but covered in red and white,
at home in a medical journal,
outdoors an awful sight.

I'm not free to wear nothing at all,
nor even the normal short shorts,
since my retorts to comments I hear,
are shot through with disgust and remorse.

No cure exists.
Palliatives, yes.
Their effects wax and wane,
psoriasis, the bane
I've found no balm for.

Results I get once from the latest
"cure,"
don't work the next time. I'm not
quite sure

if my flakes on the floor
when I go out for coffee
could pass for pastry.
The heaps amaze me.

"Barista, though I have no fleas,
while you're at it,
could you vacuum me, please."

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

BRIGHT SPOTS

June 2002

As a child I looked up
from the grass I lay on
to stare at clouds floating above.

I'd glee in their shapes —
horses, dogs, the odd face,
all puffed up and looking like love.

Now adult, I glance down
at my carpet, dark brown,
to see flakes with odd shapes in them too:

songbirds flown, children grown,
pastry bits, ice cream cones,
an orangutan trapped in a zoo.

When I think what I've missed
because of my skin,
while I'm staring at flakes or the blue,

I remember my share in large spots of fun
and the people who ignored my skin's hue.
I glance up, I glance down, I let myself
frown,
then refocus on what's really true.

We all have our troubles,
not many are whole,
and our tolerance gives us the glue

to keep going in our lives,
enjoying what we can,
no matter the scowls of a few.

If we're here to learn lessons,
perhaps I've learned mine
and next time I'll return blemish free.

Bright spots won't peel off
so much of my life.
The new spots I live in will be

beach resorts, tennis courts.
They'll agree
with my happier skin, its psoriasis gone,
exposing a much freer me.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

bcc
July 2003

bcc

Those three little letters
in typewriter code were to show the
boss: "blind carbon copy."
The acronym now for me usually
means I've got basal cell carcinoma.

I've lost track of my own.
They're not what I count.
The amount's not the point.
The point's how I got them.

The docs in Hawaii said,
"Get lots of sun.
It'll help your psoriasis plaques."
Their islands shrunk faster
when sun blasted them,
but my sunburns peeled
skin in dry stacks.
Arriving near eyebrows,
My first cancer said,

"Now you're forty.
I'll start on your head.
I'm not melanoma, just basal cell.
Don't worry. I don't plan to spread."

Iatrogenic I've learned not to say
unless I want to be shunned.
Docs did what they knew,
and no one new better.
I tell myself that and keep mum.

Psoriasis looks a lot like skin cancer.
There were biopsies. Oh,
how they stung.
If I could go back
to the days of blind carbons,
before we were warned about sun,
when tans were so vogueish and
sunlamps were proffered,
I think now that I would have run.

EUCALYPTUS ENVY
July 2003

A eucalyptus
sheds its bark
the way we flakers
strip off skin.
It's no wonder
I feel akin
to this tree.

Had I its slender leaves,
I'd place them over me,
maybe quite gracefully
instead of hiding limbs
with slacks and sleeves.

If what grew under
my outer layer
were not inflamed
but palely fairer,
the way the eucalyptus is
when its thick skin disengages,
I'd flash a shin
now and then.



Painting by Robert Chapla

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

WHAT DIDN'T WORK FOR ME
November 2004

What worked for her
was skin you paint on
that she painted on
spots she had on
only her hands and feet.

I thought how neat,
and opened New Skin Liquid Bandage,
pulled out the industrial top,
dipped its brush below the edge,
and polished my ankle's spots.

The rubber cement-like sticky glaze
dried and cracked, and in several days
more layers peeled than ever before,
and more spots spread instead of fewer.

What worked for her was not my cure.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

THE DAILY DEAL

November 2004

What is the pleasure of the peel,
the crisp of skin that a fingernail
can lift like a potato chip?

Pastry flakes can also be mistaken
for my own, yet neither chips
nor flakes are what I shed.

Plotches of raised red
raise more so-called skin in scales
I must discard again and again.

I could fill a bag of Lay's
with what I produce, a glazed
doughnut's worth of crumbs

as I crumble outwardly,
stripping layers that don't know
how to stop forming.

Not removing them
results in buildup, a helmet
and armor of confinement.

Shedding it in the shower
combing it away after a four-hour
creaming brings brief relief

before unwanted resumption
of excess production
I deal with daily.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

BETWEEN US

March 2005

Sorry, I have to go.
I've got to take my skin off.
It piles up, you know.
No, you couldn't,
as normal looking as you are.

If you saw the red spots
under my clothes;
if you lifted my hair
to expose
my scalp,
the glow
beginning between us
would disappear,

so I'll take my skin
and its well-hidden
inflammation
out of this café.
I'll make a quick exit
before you detect it

rather than telling you
about the daily peel:
the spreading of medicine,
the wrap for a couple of hours
before removing skin bits,
washing off in the shower,

then, feeling new
scales pile up,
psoriasis,
its pervasiveness,
making my life
not mine,
but ours.

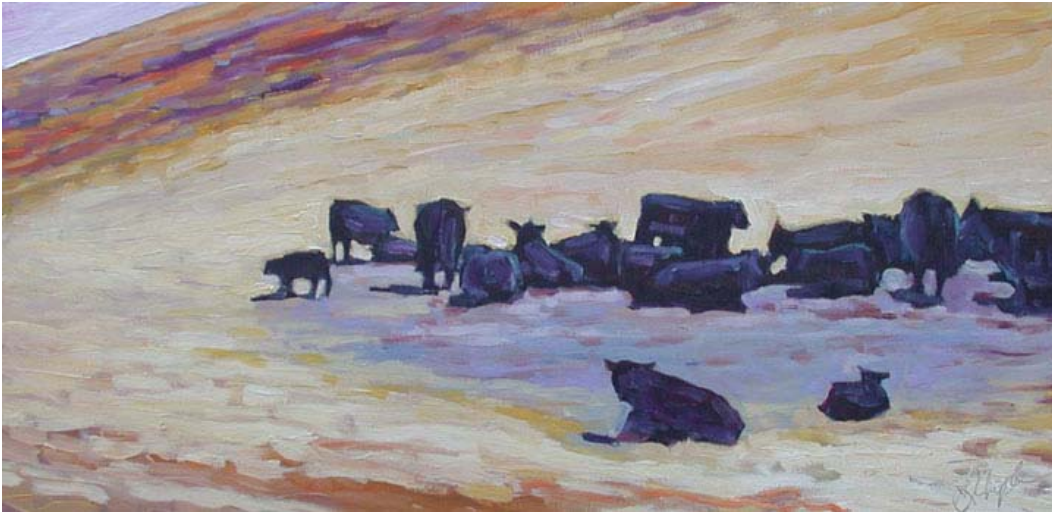


Painting by Robert Chapla

ALTERNATIVE PATHS
January 2006

Stare a while at this terrain.
Most eyes see a sunlit plain
where cattle roam. Psoriatics
who abstract from this graphic
spots of their own mottled skin,
thick with inflammation,
see psychic pain, best blamed
on fate. Add three cows who shun
the other one for a double illustration
of how an assumed path can be undone.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010



Painting by Robert Chapla

NO OWNER'S MANUAL
March 2006

If spirits of cattle
at rest on this oval
(a rise with no flies)
can sleep after slaughter,

perhaps there's a place
psyches cycle to wait
for upcoming lives
as they flow by like water,

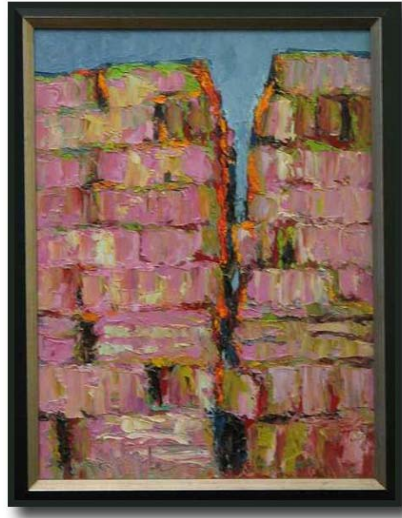
where roles are assigned
and some ask next time
for a happier plot. "Sure,

I liked my last life
but please, no skin strife
with too few repairs."

What clues were we given
for bods we can live in,
and why not a spare?

Bovines with rough hides
that are mottled don't mind,
when it's warm, living bare

unlike some of us
with psoriasis
who keep covered up
and can't help but fuss
when a faulty joint rusts
or our spotted skin crusts and tears.



Painting by Robert Chapla

PLAYFUL PARTING

May 2006

No, not that dermatological office illustration
of magnified skin, one thick hair emerging
through the top, flaky layer of keratin,
but a simulacrum, this painting of hay
stacked irregularity and pink inflammation,
its title implying humor for our shedding.
Fissures in pile-up, the final straw,
let me infer psoriasis, shown too close,
boxed for control, like medication, although
anthropomorphizing (maybe you do this),
I see two blocked stalwarts, swathed
in gauze for protection. They extend
bandaged hands, and face to face, fist
to fist, make a connection, almost as if
involved in their version of Brancusi's Kiss.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

SNOW GLOBE

September 2006

Dismissed from school for months
because of a full-body psoriatic
onslaught, I taste a skin flake
in homemade soup at lunch.
Spitting it out in disgust, I notice
more flakes floating atop alphabet
shapes and curse my condition.
With scalp, eyebrows, and face
under siege, I rise and rinse
my glasses so I can read
the words in the newspaper's
usual broth of letters. As I get
back into it, the recliner shakes.
Its wobble makes me wonder
whether the long predicted earthquake
will transform my sealed apartment
into a snow globe of white flakes
gently swirling above the toppling.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

COSTUMED

November 2006

In humid Hawaii
it is never not summer
in the coffee shop.

A day before Halloween
tall drinks of bare legs shimmer
and stop at short shorts
below barely-there tops.

The wearers are unaware
of their creamed-coffee limbs,
their tan chest, back,
and stomach skins,
native to them,
unchanging through
each muggy season,
the taken-for-granted smooth
covering they were born in.

Their glory greets
my visiting eye.
Here this autumn week
from the mainland,
I'm confoundedly confined
in a year-round costume
that shifts from flaky pastry
to bumpy muffin in a changing
combination of red-mango,
pink-passion-fruit, pine-
apple, and pumpkin skins.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

SCALE

March 2007

My much-married, once-in-the-movie-biz
mom long ago intuited that the majority
of men are visually led. When we shared
a cabin on a cruise, preparing her face
and figure for observation occupied
hours of her time, as my less
rewarding preparations did mine.

Again at home and caring for something
living besides myself, I scraped scale
from a newly afflicted houseplant.
Touching leaves white crud had
forced to curl, I recalled Mom's
words, uttered with compassion.
"If I had known what you would have
to go through, I wouldn't have had you."

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

PERSONAL GEOGRAPHY

March 2007

If the mass of us
with psoriasis
repeat our planet's patterns,
following its cues,
my cracked scalp is what's
most often in the news.

Its inflammations
and fresh eruptions
are global hot spots
of non-stop fighting,
wide conflagrations
reporters won't confuse
with peaceful places
lived in by the lucky few.

Take a look.
I have those too,
my sunny beaches,
waves in slow motion,
peaceful spaces
we'll migrate to.

Their only potion — suntan lotion.
Here's a splash for you.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

GODS PLAY WITH US

July 2007

Parched Tantalus
stretched far for fruit
to quench his thirst.
Gods got there first,
snatched every branch,
and when he spied
a pool below,
it drained, became
unreachable
like cures we hope
will work but won't.

Prometheus
provoked their ire
by stealing fire.
For their revenge
the gods arranged
long liver pecks
(like needle checks
for Methotrex-
ate side effects).

Gods also mocked
strong Sisyphus.
His push-up rock
always amused,
as we Ps do,
repeating meds,
some 'til we're bruised,
and on our spots
the daily goo.

Our skins don't bore.
Cracked reds and pinks
absorb gods for
a day or more.
Catch their broad winks
when any score.
They like their games.
They seldom snore.

When joints inflame
and scalps build up
in crusty piles,
and nails fall off
like broken tiles,
gods place the blame
on us. Insane!

They then perfect
attacks we dread,
add to their art
more ugly fun.
From head to heart,
they're never done.

Who doesn't wish
psoriasis
were but a myth
that we could kiss
goodbye with pith-
iness and wit,

but gods prevail.
If only they
would stop their play
with skin and scale,
revoke their jokes
(so long, so stale),
and lead us to
the P-cure grail.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

FLAKERS & PEELERS

September 2007

Only three percent of homes nearby have flaking paint.
Loose bark afflicts a similar fraction of trees —
eucalyptus, birch, cedar, and others I'll leave unnamed.

Imagining myself a robed judge on a break
as I walk protected from sun and stares, I decree
most neighborhood abodes to be well-maintained.

But if I were a house with flaking paint, I'd want rain
or sprinklers to rinse me, towels of fluffy leaves
to rub against, and an antenna or sharp limb

to scratch what itches. As a peeling tree, I'd feel the same.
After shedding my long-sleeved T, creaming with LCD*
and waiting at least an hour, the usual surplus skin

comes off in the shower. The relief for any of us three
(house, tree, me) when surface excess is stripped free
compares to having a sentence repealed, if only temporarily.

###

*Liquor carbonis detergent, a tar preparation used to treat psoriasis

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GRATEFUL ANYWAY

November 2007

"No, I wouldn't try the biologics. Besides,
you seem at peace with your psoriasis,"
said my dermatologist, looking up at me
the way one in authority sometimes does
to make things more equal, as I had with my kids.

"Not at peace," I replied, "but reconciled."
"Next time I'm coming back in a better body,"
I joked, not continuing with my thoughts
about how lucky she looked in hers, perfect
skin wrapped around youth and intelligence,

like a bar of smooth chocolate vs. my broken
piece with its bug parts and cheap wrap. Today
I was in that grateful state age can bring when
one has walked an hour through nature, downed
good coffee, and chatted and laughed with friends.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

A FLAKER'S FLOATER FACTS
November 2007

"Floaters swim in the eyes of more than half
the population your age," said my doc
when I checked in as Pig Pen from Peanuts, trash
swirling through my visual field like a Rorschach.

Spidery confetti reconfigured itself within
each eye while the usual spots frayed to make me
flake like a parade of one, as I shed old skin
that I viewed through my new vitreous debris.

Flakers are often assigned coverage grades.
Doc says the percentage of folks
with floaters is the same as their age,
so if your eyes stay clear through all your decades,
it's no joke, old bloke, you'll have beaten the odds in spades.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

BAGGAGE

January 2008

Hands other minds might also know
reach out to grab debris
beneath my airplane window.

a cool I'd like to be,
emerging from a swimming pool
in skin I dream unspotted,

Cloud scatterings for most
are fallen flakes for me
that trash earth's curving gleam,

smooth as that playful school
of dolphins being applauded
on every movie screen.

the planet's floorboards I must clean,
as I so often have
my own skin-littered paths.

Allotted baggage, plus excess
(vacation's excavation),
is stowed where it belongs

Returning from a stay
with family miles away,
their dark floors fading fast,

with other petty wrongs,
enclosed, packed tight,
far out of sight below,

I tilt my plastic glass
aswirl with melting chips
of ice and fizzy cool,

contained yet stretched like skin to shed
that layers me in splotchy red
until it lets me go.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

WRITERS WITH SKIN LIKE OURS

March 2008

Psoriasis bequeathed our scripts
to four whom I admire.
They've shared the skin that gives us fits
yet write about desire.

Try Baker's *U & I* and *Vox*
and Updike's oeuvre entire.
Nabokov's gone. He lifted off,
preceding Potter skyward.

Four psoriatics, two upstairs
who outgrew earth's attire,
I thank for books of theirs I've shared
and kept. I am a buyer.

Their covers, like an outer skin,
peel open for a look within
at tragicomic, feisty sin.

My psyche gets the benefit
of pithiness, complicit wit.
No silly pity ruins it.

So find yourself a place to sit,
and read these four fine conduits,
our pundits of psoriasis.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

NOISE
May 2008

"A facial disfigurement is the communications
equivalent of 'noise.'" -Edward S. Dewke,
Flake: Confessions of a Psoriatic

Synesthesia's sensory cross-
over might be required to hear
facial lesions erupt under
concealing creams that muffle
cries better than a closed fist.

Psoriasis, background static
of our lives, your knives serrate
any smoothness I might share.
Your shrieks tear through
my universe, shredding poise

that disintegrates with my skin.
Astronomers stare at the red-
shift, watching everywhere
break apart as far skies burst
into expanding galactic rifts.

On earth our small-scale
plaques redshift, separating
us from ourselves and the un-
afflicted, whose connections
are devoid of disfiguring noise.

Sherry Sheehan
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ARTFUL HOME BREW

May 2008



Treating recalcitrance with bored devotion,
I buy ground turmeric, blend it with lotion,
brew a suggested and new-to-me mix,
dab it on one leg, and hope for a fix.

Strawberry, saffron, and freckled, this painting
looks like a treatment that needs marinating
under the drape of a cool cotton sock,
hidden from gawkers but ready to rock.

Whether or not any native tribe claims it,
whether a snob of an art critic names it,
such a concoction could calm lots of spots,
yielding smooth skin minus pointillist dots.

Go, peeling canvas! Be gone, hexed graffiti!
Work for me, oh, balm — amaze like a deity!

Sherry Sheehan
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Painting by Judy Molyneux

RED BEACH
July 2008

It was hot, sweaty, and necessary
to cook them off, said the docs,
the spots I broiled after a salty
swim by basting my body
with baby oil for a better burn
while rotating on a sizzling spit
of land before we learned
about the ozone hole and sun-
related skin cancer, pre-SPF.

We knew so little.
And it worked.
Psoriasis abated, almost
disappeared. Epidermis
cleared enough that I endured
the boredom and sweat,
kept baking until forty
brought the first of many
basal cell carcinomas
that put a stop to being cured
like a piece of meat.

Years later I walk hatted
and sun-blocked into a gallery,
encounter *Red Beach*, and am
surprised to feel intense heat.
I remember rotating from supine
to prone and relive the feat
I performed for hours and weeks
at a time near my low-latitude home,
oblivious to the consequences,

as the doctors were then.
Do I see a hint of Munch's *Scream*,
his *Shriek*, his *Cry* in the painting's
lower right? I sigh and leave
the gallery of reawakened irony,
needing something to cool
and humor me. It arrives
in a recall of the once hip
Jack Kerouac ice cream koan,
glimpsed as if in the moving
'now' of a Rosetta stone.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

NO WAY TO LOSE
September 2008

I visit a doc on a rock
in the Pacific.
She loves her patients,
says they're terrific.
Some are lethargic,
more than they might be,
haul extra weight,
and, very much like me,
can't help but hate

scales. Why she
has two is that a few
must balance on both.
Doc carefully notes
what their girth hides
from their view,
then gets her tape
to illustrate
a healthier shape.

One supersized lady,
whom Doc describes
but does not name,
suffers our malady.
She could be two of me
and copes in vain
with cracked, inflamed

continents.
Doc claims they dwarf
my islands.
I see us morph
into planets
that constantly
shed terrain.

Losing ourselves,
we should shrink, I think,
but Doc blinks
when I mention legerdemain,
and kind as she is,
won't alter the number
my indolent planet has gained.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

HILLS & SKIN

November 2008

As we watch another housing development erupt
and spread over the hills across the river, my mother
begins to describe what it was like to feel the skin

of her last lover. Smooth hills we've viewed for
decades have begun to spew barnacle-like clutter.
We two psoriatics prefer our surfaces neater,

impossible to experience on ourselves,
therefore that much more desirable elsewhere.
Mom enjoyed years with her caressable gent

in his remarkable packaging until he rose
into the clouds like those above the far hills
we're now lamenting. Earthbound, still

in the kinship of our roughened skin, we witness
the hills' continued barnacling while musing
on memories of our much missed men.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

CRACKING THE CODES

January 2009

Those aren't jigsaw pieces
scattered on the floor.
They're parts of me, a puzzle
that will never reassemble —
the shed skin I've been housed in.

Perhaps I'd hold together better
if I were painted a single color —
brown, bronze, white, or cream —
not mottled, cracked, or spackled,
just smooth. I like to dream.

So far, no doc has put the picture
together. I've heard the occasional
cross word about the problem I've been,
like millions of others who also erupt
in flaking, red-spotted skin.

Some day smart scientists
will say to psoriasis: "This jig
is up; you can quit chasing Tetris."
Showered with kisses,
they'll feel what our bliss is,
and then off they'll go
to decode other glitches.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

IT'S ALL RELATIVE

March 2009

Her sympathetic receptionist
recognizes my voice
and gives me an appointment with
my dermatologist
the same day that I ask, since
the spot on my lip
might not be psoriasis.

I've had a multitude
of skin cancers removed
from forehead to shin
and need to know now
which conundrum I'm in.

When I put down the phone,
I cannot resist
laughing at the irony
of how relative it all is,
that at the top of today's
thoroughly selfish wish list
is a hope for the same old
diagnosis of psoriasis.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

CELLULAR CONVERSION

May 2009

- after my local newspaper's recent headline:
"Scientists Turn Skin Cells into Heart Cells"

While reading this sublime headline,
I think, of course, I'll give them mine.
My P skin cells proliferate.
Impatient? They won't have to wait.

Are not most skin docs now agreed
that P is known for excess speed?
Researchers could, no doubt, collect
more cells than even they'd expect.

A lot of fine professionals
can now reprogram from skin cells.
They make cardiomyocytes
by working through long days and
nights.

Cardiomyocytes, I read,
are bio tools that fill a need.
They're not yet safe for human use,
must live in labs, cannot get loose.

But soon they might rebuild weak hearts,
re-energize them, give them sparks.

If rebuilt from our flaky skin,
would hearts get itchy, so closed in,
beat way too fast and cause a din,
inflammation in bright alizarin,
shed lovers like we shed our skin,
or otherwise cause crazed chagrin,

or would new owners
of these hearts,
applauding donors,
glad for parts,

thank P's unending
gift to science
for heart-rending
death defiance?

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

A SOLIPSISTIC SOULILOQUY

September 2009

What of me is
I, I sigh
when I discard
the latest self-load
from my car
onto the road,

another lifted, loathed
piece of what used to be
part of my left knee
that I slid a fingernail under
while driving somewhere

because it bothered me,
like other places I think of
as part of me
I'd also separated from, one
chunk as large as a quarter,
a chunk of change,
although not silver
as in "silver scales,"
the psoriasis descriptor.

Is what peels off me
or not, I mutter
solipsistically,
remembering that quarter
and thinking now
of how
money, unlike bark or leaves,
won't grow on trees
or on me,
and how 'to be
or not to be'
is not my question,
mine being,
"Is what defies me
what defines me?"

Is the debris
from this perpetual
affliction barely different from
what normal people shed –
their hair, their hangnails,
the dust off their filed nails,
the biological detritus
of living, the particles left
when we're dead,
our possible souls
psoriasis free?

I'm vexed,
by not knowing
whether what departs
was really what I was, and
perplexed
at not predicting, much less
preventing, what wants to leave next,
what new Sisyphean section
of normal-looking skin
will soon flare neon
in an eruption
of immunological rebellion,

spotted parts a-peel again,
the overactive warrior cells
of me or not me,
I sigh
in repetitious self-inquiry.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

VAINLY PREOCCUPEYED

November 2009

My right eyelid
grew its own lid,
and provided
I don't lift it

to expose
what's underneath,
the bump that rose
red will stay sheathed

for now, at least.
Not far beneath
I flash front teeth
while talking to you

to distract you,
and I hope you
will not notice
my not blinking

while I'm thinking,
trying to hide my
extra lid, pre-
occupied by
vanity. Sty?

No, it's P.
My smoother side
now turned your way,
I ask at last,
"What did you say?"

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

POST-ITS & PLAQUES

January 2010

My new computer screen is flat,
unlike the energy hungry,
hot, and bulky CRT,
where I had space aplenty
for post-it-note bric-a-brac,

flakes flutter on my digital self,
each with a chore to track,
the perpetual goal being
to peel them off fast.

No more. Now that
comorbidities have been attached
to the psoriatic condition
by the medical profession –

documented depression,
diabetes, cancer, cardiac,
IBD, and other attacks –

my at-the-max post-it tasks
must lessen,
and perhaps plaques will too.

Fewer flakes make less of a mess,
so that when pressed by a boss to do
whatever multiplies stress,
I'll say, without compunction,
“Sorry, I can't. I'm obeying

the latest medical injunction
to stay calm, unharassed, and relaxed,
so please, kindly get off my back.”

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

SOUL TO SOLE

March 2010

A soul patch grows
below her lip.
A mustache—no,
it can't be snipped.

of goop, no tints.
It's not as bad,
since kisses there
don't make her wince.

She's not a Bro
for whom it's hip.
I think you know
psoria-Sis.

Her fanny pack
protects that patch
from playful smacks
her curves attract.

She can't be kissed
without this catch:
torn skin's a risk.
Protective masks

Each knee, alas,
has its own patch
she must not peel.
Each time she kneels
on floor or grass,
she feels ground glass.

inhibit bliss
and cause new rash.
What fix exists
outside her grasp?

As for her feet,
their skin is cracked.
Inflamed with heat,
they make a match.
Each tootsy has
its own sole patch.

She must not scratch
her elbow patch.
Just soap and rinse,
apply a dash

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

SUGGESTIBLE

May 2010

I'm so suggestible
that I catch a cold
over a cell phone if
whoever I'm chatting with
coughs, or worse yet,
describes symptoms,

so suggestible
that I break out in
a new scattershot of spots
when I see pictures
of another psoriatic's skin
in an undoctored photo
or artist's depiction, so

I wonder whether
attention-deficit disorder,
a Christian Science upbringing,
and dyslexia combined
to cause my condition –
that condition being
the way I convert a seen
or heard affliction
into its physical manifestation.

Many decades ago,
while my attention
was diverted by the usual
pitter-patter brain scatter,
a Sunday school teacher
tried her best to explain
'mind over matter,'
but this dyslexic, psoriatic kid
mangled the message, so
for me it's not just skin
but mind that's the matter.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

AN INSIDE JOB
July 2010

A finger tunnels in, identifies the rough parts
its nail knows want to be removed – barnacles
of ear-canal skin built up, run amuck, regrowing
daily, silently, no matter how often the fingernail
has its way. This is not like picking your nose
as a kid, a noiseless operation no one could hear,
not even you. Skin is not snot. Separating the ear
cave's crusty layer from what's underneath yields
a sound at lift-off like a wave breaking gently,
Velcro detaching, a tire scrunching gravel, or
the first crackle of teeth meeting potato chips.
Working with precision and delicacy, one can
sometimes extract a skin curl decorated by
a patina of wax. Backwards, the letters of skin
misspell nicks, which one must try not to inflict.
Backwards, the letters of snot spell tons, which
leads to a question for the dermatological
detective: If the normal human sheds 9 lbs.
of skin a year, how many pounds can a psoriatic
mine from two afflicted ears? In this aural
'roto-rooter' imitation, is the weight of wax
included in the sum of the annual equation?

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010



Painting by Marco Rosales Shaw

INTERIORS

after Ed Dewke's "Keith White Interview"

September 2010

It's sweet to sweat say some
who speak of a psoriatic
glitch that keeps us from
excreting sufficient quantities
of water to remove toxins
via our common outer layer
the way normal folks do.
Instead, we don't wick
enough, and our leaky guts
are inevitably overcome.

Increasing dietary alkalinity
is a suggested remedy,
and I, for one, plan to begin
upping my veggie
consumption while
decreasing my intake
of what Keith White
writes are the typical causes
of food-triggered
psoriatic inflammation.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

IF I WERE
December 2010

If I were a tree,
perpetually peeling;
if I were a house,
paint sloughing off too;

if I were a road
with ruts enough
to split thin tires,
a smart crew

would soon be hired
to make repairs,
sew up tears,
absorb stares.

If I were snow,
each flake would whiten,
leaving behind no
red to frighten.
If I were a cloud,
there'd be rain.

How cool, how smooth
the new terrain,
all inflammation
rinsed and tamed.
In my 'If I Were' world,
skin would never
complain.

Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ Poetry, 2001-2010

FlakeHQ Interviews:
Sherry Sheehan
FlakeHQ's Poet Laureate
Interviewed by Ed Dewke
in April 2007

Dewke: Sherry Sheehan is a flaker like all of us, but six years ago she began to send us poems. Sixteen have been posted here so far; each presents a unique image of what it's like to have psoriasis.



The talent visible in the small body of Sherry's work collected at FlakeHQ indicates a practiced poet and, over the years, in email exchanges with Sherry, I've been informed about some of her *other poetry endeavors*. She's sent me books and anthologies that contain some of her poems on themes other than psoriasis. All of this taken together, a picture of Sherry Sheehan, the professional poet, emerges. In the United States today being a poet is not the way anyone I know makes a living. There may be no poet in the United States today who earns a living wage through poetry. How, then, do we apply the word "professional" to poets?

In my mind a professional poet is one who turns out poetry with some regularity and it is good poetry, meaning it pleases the audience to which it is directed, and it survives some degree of critical analysis. And in Sherry Sheehan's case, professional includes a rich life keeping busy "around" her art: in poetry reading groups (Valona Deli "Second Sunday" Poetry Readings, Orinda's "Ina Coolbrith Circle," and "First Tuesdays" with Joel Fallon's Benicia Bards). She's been contest chair for the two Bay Area poetry contests that attract the most participation: The 81st Annual Poets' Dinner and the 85th Annual Ina Coolbrith Circle Poetry Contest.

In 2006, I dubbed Sherry FlakeHQ's Poet Laureate, a title she much deserved and, thankfully, accepted. —Ed

Dewke: I've been reading your poems about psoriasis for six years. They're all personal, but also composed with more or less "authorial distance" from your subject. I think this is what allows your humor, poignancy and irony. How long have you had psoriasis? How have you treated it?

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Sheehan: I've probably had psoriasis since age 5 or 6, when I returned to Hawaii with "cradle cap" after spending a couple of years in California with relatives. The bombing of Pearl Harbor led to the evacuation of many children. My dad enlisted in the Navy, and my mother stayed on Oahu, taking care of an elderly aunt, keeping their home and their parents' home going, and working in Censorship (cutting out parts of letters the enemy might be able to use).

Mom was appalled at my condition when I returned. I didn't remember her, nor do I recall that first scalp attack. Much later, as a continually barefoot preteen, I remember peeling large areas on my feet. Nothing was diagnosed until my first major outbreak at age 13, which resulted in home schooling for several months. There were no long sleeves in Hawaii, and girls then wore skirts at school, never jeans or slacks. I couldn't cover up and wasn't able to handle being called a leper by former good friends. My last two years of high school and first year of college were P-free. As a partying freshman, I earned Cs, but an outbreak of P my sophomore year propelled me to straight As.

Since those early years I've gone through several full-body outbreaks that included my face. Besides my Christian Scientist grandmother's arrival and stay until my teen outbreak remitted, treatments have included arsenic (little white pills that didn't do anything positive); Grenz ray that was also useless; Methotrexate (which did help, but was limited); localized cortisone injections; systemic cortisone injections (Kenalog), which worked a fast miracle but had to be discontinued due to now well-known side effects; and coal tar in cream and/or ointment I use to this day. Tazorac tried on one leg five years ago exacerbated spots already there that remain.

In 1993 the National Psoriasis Foundation held its convention in San Francisco. My husband and I attended and agreed to give Chinese methods a try after listening to the presentation by a doctor of oriental medicine. Her combination of acupuncture, herbal pills (six with each meal), and dietary restrictions led to loss of unneeded weight and a P retreat. For various reasons I had to quit after a half year. I wouldn't have been able to continue without being frustrated by the many dietary prohibitions of the Chinese regimen (no garlic, onions, chicken, shellfish, citrus, coffee, or chocolate, for instance). I've ordered the Deirdre Earls book, hoping that dietary changes will bring improvement and eager to understand the reasons for the recommendations, which the doctor of oriental medicine did not give when I asked.

Lying under low-latitude sun in Hawaii and Las Vegas kept P at bay for years, but I had to stop that routine at age 40, when my first basal cell carcinoma was diagnosed and removed. I've had so many cut/stitch procedures since then that I've lost count. I used to warn others about too much sun, but not everyone has genes for skin cancer, so I've stopped. I visit the

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dermatologist for skin cancer checks and procedures and read about new P treatments but have not been inclined yet to try the injectable systemics.

Dewke: You are a serious and hard-working poet and I know that your pieces about psoriasis are but a fraction of your total output. How long have you been writing poetry? What got you started? What keeps you going? Do you find writing about psoriasis helps you live with it?

Sheehan: Writing about psoriasis does help me live with it, but rereading how much I've written depresses me, since I prefer living as much as I can on the river (denial). I've written as catharsis since my late twenties. I wouldn't call most of it poetry, even when I used end rhymes and counted syllables. Personal crises have always been a catalyst to begin again, and having a keyboard has made it easy. I can't write with a pen or pencil for more than a few lines, but I can type for hours. The mundane inspires me these days. To quote a poet friend of mine, "I'm older than God," and it doesn't take much to get me tapping about something I remember, hear, or see, a new piece of art, a phenomenon in nature, or an oddity in the newspaper (I adore science articles).

Dewke: You introduced me to the concept of ekphrastic poetry, one definition of which is poetry inspired by visual arts. You have three ekphrastic poems at FlakeHQ — Alternative Paths, No Owner's Manual and Playful Parting, all presented here with reproductions of art by Robert Chapla. How did you get started writing ekphrastic poetry? How long did it take you to see psoriasis themes in these paintings by Chapla?

Sheehan: My aunt, who died at 99 two years ago, collaborated with Carmel painters, poets, and musicians when she was my age. She had been a well-tutored pianist (studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger) and had played a couple of times with symphony orchestras. She discontinued playing the piano and began writing poetry that was published in the local newspaper. Carmel mayor Clint Eastwood told her he bought it only to see what she'd written. He called her Carmel's poet laureate, although I don't think the designation was ever made official. She often visited and corresponded with her second cousin, poet Marianne Moore. Believing poetry might be in my genes (although my mother has little use for it), I began writing thank-you notes in verse. Later, reading a lot of poetry and realizing how much there was to it, I got more serious about it, although given the choice, I still prefer humor to gravity.

I met Bob Chapla either in an art gallery or at a long-running annual art show whose proceeds help the environment. I wrote a poem to one of his paintings and emailed it to him. Two possible reasons he didn't dissuade me are that he sometimes writes poetry himself and, as a longtime teacher, he is used to encouraging artistic pursuits.

Sherry Sheehan

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Writing to art (paintings, sculpture, music) is like taking a Rorschach test, in that each of us sees something different. I particularly like pointing out something in a piece the artist who created it didn't see and then does see. Similarly, I enjoy another person's response to what I've written when it shows me something I didn't know was there.

The three [c. 2007] Chapla paintings that for me contained possible psoriasis themes became available when I was probably already close to the thoughts his scenes provoked. His title, "Alternative Paths," was literal for me: isolation of one from the group that I've experienced as well as taking a path different from other (possibly more preferable) paths that are impossible with psoriasis. "Playful Parting" struck me immediately as a prickly Brancusi Kiss, and I'd just been looking at a dermatologist's graphic blow-up of skin so worked that in. "No Owner's Manual" let me play with the concept of repeating lives, since those cows looked immediately to me as if they were in another realm, possibly cloud borne.

Dewke: "Flaking Life," which we posted in February 2002, is the best concise description of psoriasis I've read — the rhyme is frosting on the cake.

The poem is "about" living with P; you managed in a handful of lines to sum up everything that's important for anyone to know who needs to know about living with psoriasis. These lines make my argument:

No cure exists.
Palliatives, yes.
Their effects wax and wane,
psoriasis, the bane
I've found no balm for.

What inspired you to write "Flaking Life"? How long did you work on the poem? How does it make you feel now?

Sheehan: Five years after emailing the poem to you, Ed, I must rely on my computer to give answers. The [file] properties function shows I started the poem in January 2002, which was when a Starbucks opened nearby. I remember confusing my flakes on the floor with pastry flakes already there. The computer informs that I revised it twice (I could have revised much more but clicked Save twice) and that I originally called it "My House." I'm glad you like the five lines quoted, but overall, I don't think it's a best, even if it was a good vent. I don't have, or want, a laptop computer so wrote the beginning in shorthand while sipping, completing it at home. How it makes me feel now is sad that Josephine and Napoleon, the two old cats who inspired part of the poem, have gone to cat heaven.

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Dewke: “Bright Spots” is another one of my favorite Sheehan poems (June 2002). I’ve got to reproduce the opening stanzas....

As a child I looked up
from the grass I lay on
to stare at clouds floating above.

I’d glee in their shapes —
horses, dogs, the odd face,
all puffed up and looking like love.

Now adult, I glance down
at my carpet, dark brown,
to see flakes with odd shapes in them too:

songbirds flown, children grown,
pastry bits, ice cream cones,
an orangutan trapped in a zoo.

No matter how many times I read this poem — this building of limericks? — I get to the last line quoted above — “an orangutan trapped in a zoo” — and stop short, ready to guffaw or bawl. Unquestionably one of the best tropes to jump out of a poem, for me, in many years! I could write paragraphs on the significance of what that means, because I’ve literally spent hours mulling it over. But of course, the most important attribute of the image is its jarring juxtaposition with everything else you’ve had to say up to that point. It is wonderful poetic humor draped around what becomes, as the poem proceeds, a sad condition.

Please, tell us the story behind “Bright Spots.”

Sheehan: Thank you for the enormous compliment, Ed. My face cracked from smiling, and my inner orangutan glowed in appreciation. Properties informs that it was written over nine days with six logged revisions and started with a dumb title, “Spots of Fun.” This one makes me happier than many others, because I’m remembering places where I’ve enjoyed myself, often without P to dim the fun, and imagining more of those better times in a next life. It’s a choice I make often: using imagination to fight depression about our intractable condition.

Dewke: In the first three lines of “The Daily Deal” (November 2004) we are aware that we are listening to someone in the know:

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What is the pleasure of the peel,
the crisp of skin that a fingernail
can lift like a potato chip?

One of my first eye-opening experiences when I launched FlakeHQ in 1996 was learning that others shared my macabre little secret — peeling scale off lesions was somehow ... fulfilling? *What is the pleasure of the peel*, indeed!

I've read "The Daily Deal" numerous times and I'm hesitant to define the tone of the poem. There is, of course, the expected Sheehan word-play and irony, but the overall feeling of this poem is not humorous. Perhaps I would define it as "resolve." The end of the poem:

Shedding it in the shower
combing it away after a four-hour
creaming brings brief relief

before unwanted resumption
of excess production
I deal with daily.

These two stanzas are an inhalation/exhalation — a sigh — by someone who is resolved to her situation.

Now, tell us what you were feeling when you wrote the poem? How did you intend it to affect the reader?

Sheehan: You are giving me credit for more altruism than I deserve by asking me how I intend any poem to affect the reader. As with most psoriasis poems, and often with others, I write to get the frustration out. Later I might think of its effect on a reader. When I wrote "The Daily Deal," I needed to cathart. Most of my life I've been aware of how many worse things there are than psoriasis, but occasionally it feels good to indulge in a gross self-pity party, even admitting to the perverse aspects of attacks on one's outer self. And that's what I felt like doing when I peeled that one off (couldn't resist, Ed).

Dewke: I want to focus on one more poem, one of your ekphrastic poems using a Robert Chapla painting as the visual inspiration — "Alternative Paths." Though you've written several poems posted at FlakeHQ that sweeten sadness with irony and even humor, I think among the 16 Sheehan poems we've collected, "Alternative Paths" comes closest to exposing the sadness (stigma, alienation...). Of course, Chapla's painting invites this with one of four cows turned away from the others and evidently headed off on an "alternative path." There is, however, a glimmer of something — hope? strength? — in the last three lines:

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... Add three cows who shun
the other one for a double illustration
of how an assumed path can be undone.

Am I taking tremendous interpretive liberties by saying these lines suggest the single cow (the flaker) is forced away from the group (“shun”) but just might discover marvelous things by undoing the assumed path in favor of an apparently lonely alternative path? The last three lines, of course, focus on the shunning, the undoing of the groups’ “assumed (proper) path.” Here is Sheehan’s sadness exposed. But all must be considered under the umbrella of the title of the poem, “Alternative Paths.” I see this juxtaposition as the *real* “double illustration” in this poem.

Sheehan: It now occurs to me that I don’t know whether cows get psoriasis. That flaking cow you introduced me to makes it possible in imagination. However, I don’t wish flaking on the bovine population, which already has enough to put up with.

For me now, being alone is often preferable to its opposite, but as a socially inclined, eager-to-fit-in, too sensitive heifer, I was much more likely to let an outbreak ruin weeks, months, years of life, because of what I perceived I was missing. Now an older cow who runs with a herd not as affected by appearances as my youthful buddies were, I put up with what psoriasis and skin cancers have done and continue to do to my appearance. Without a “control” (another me), I can’t say whether the path I took is better or worse than the one I’d have taken without these afflictions. It just is, and I don’t know how I could have forged it differently.

Dewke: Tell us about a positive experience involving your psoriasis. Have you written — or can we look forward to your writing — a poem about it?

Sheehan: Several positive experiences and a joke come to mind. So far none has asked for a poem. This past week at our usual Saturday deli breakfast with the gang (a gathering a few of us started the second Saturday of the new century), a longtime friend showed me a quarter-size pink spot on her shin, said it had peeled off and that she had put some lotion on it. She asked if I thought it was psoriasis. I showed her my shin, and we agreed it might be, although not being a dermatologist, I said I would never diagnose anything. She smiled and replied, “I guess I just wanted to be in your club.” Another positive was what my dear dad told me after a bad teen outbreak had subsided, that without psoriasis I would have been too perfect. The joke was a husband’s: “She has spots on her but(t) I love her.” Of course, the most positive P experience has been your naming me FlakeHQ’s first poet laureate.

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Dewke: You've been anthologized ... you share authorship of a book with artist Robert Chapla and another with Michigan artist Mary Reusch ... you have a web site ... you are building an impressive collection of ekphrastic poetry ... you *cathart* a lot. Obviously we hope all this will continue. Are you anticipating anything new or different in the future?

Sheehan: New, but maybe not so different: collaborations with artists I've not yet met as well as continued collaborations with those I have; coming across more writers with psoriasis (not that I wish it on them) such as Nicholson Baker, Dennis Potter, and John Updike. And last, reading the book written by your previous interviewee, Deirdre Earls, which just arrived. Following her recommendations (or failing to) might spark a poem that FlakeHQ will consider posting.

Dewke: On behalf of all of us, thanks for six years of informing us about our condition in a fashion that's opposite clinical and makes *much more interesting* reading; thanks for agreeing to this interview; and thanks in advance for *the next 16 poems* that we're confident the future will bring!

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Artists

Robert Chapla

- Eucalyptus Envy -8-
- Alternative Paths -12-
- No Owner's Manual -13-
- Playful Parting -14-

Judy Molyneux (<http://www.rebeccaart.org/>)

- Red Beach -27-

Marco Rosales Shaw (<http://marcorosalesshaw.artistwebsites.com/>)

- Interiors -39-

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About Sherry Sheehan

Sherry Sheehan, born and raised in Hawaii, was a school psychologist in Las Vegas before retiring to Crockett. She has published books with artists Mary Reusch (*PoArtry*) and Robert Chapla (*Across Currents*) and participated in ekphrastic exhibits in Crockett, Danville, Fairfield, Livermore, Martinez, Rush Ranch, Indiana and Michigan. She has had poems published in the *Carquinez Poetry Review*, in recent *Ina Coolbrith Circle Gatherings*, in every Benicia First Tuesday anthology (*Every First Tuesday* [2006], *Yesterdays* [2007], and *Windows & Skylights* [2010]) and other publications. Sherry was poet laureate from 2006 through 2010 for Ed Dewke's FlakeHQ.com psoriasis website and has less flaky poems at:

- <http://sites.google.com/site/sherrysheehanpoems/>
- http://poetrymatters.150m.com/index_files/pages_files/sheehan.html