

# On So Much Fire: An Interview with Feng Sun Chen

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**I notice both of these books seem to poke their fingers into mythology and biology, into bodily fluids and the growth of things, into negative spaces. If someone were to torture you into describing the poems in each book, what would you tell them?**

I'm influenced by mythology (the supernatural), interiors, and biology. Mythology and storytelling are interesting to me because their subjects often only exist as words or concepts in relation to other words/concepts. My life as an imported good from China has been sustained by a steady stream of media that has initiated me into a world of things and beings that I know, understand, and love without ever having touched or seen—including non-mythological (technically) animals and cosmic forces. For this reason, things like animals can exist inside of me as easily as outside. Borders of the body are suspended in a soup of noodles surrounded by fishballs.

I remember feeling a lot of hunger and emptiness while writing the poems in *Butcher's Tree* (*BT*). It follows that many of the poems are about hollowing things out, or coring them, like the identities of mythological figures and lovers. What gets mythologized? And what are the mythologies of science? When we think of ourselves and our bodies, we always talk very biologically about certain things. I feel like everyone has double consciousness because materialism is secular and the spiritual is contended but everyone wants purpose. I'm not sure they're that different. To me, they are not. What makes matter matter and something not matter? Why must we have purpose? Meaning-making is hard to understand from the inside. But when I'm actually writing, I don't think about anything.

So, I just feel like I'm on drugs all the time and can't think straight. The only thing I can say is that the poems are about feelings, mostly ugly ones, but dressed differently. *blud*, for example, is full of rage and pus because I was really sick at the time and had to get some freakishly painful surgery without anesthetic. I was obsessed with different things at the time, like fear of pregnancy and the movie *Antichrist*. With *BT*, I was obsessed with the monstrosity of desire and being a girl or woman, which is like trying to be a myth. I have a lot of rage that I cannot access, so I have to draw it.

**But the forms and voices are clearly distinct; how would you characterize the differences between the two projects? Does one predate the other?**

*blud* was written long after *BT*, and it was written much more quickly in a shorter span of time, mostly clustered around my sickness, which was one of the worst things to happen to me in my otherwise mediocly starchy life. Still, some of the themes are the same, like the sensation of unbearable hunger. *blud* was much more pained, obviously, and more dirty and malformed. The first poem there sets

up the body as place, as something that can be populated and can have weather. It's a little different than the slow dissection in *BT*. The two deal with entropy very differently. *blud* is held together by a sustained narrative, whereas the entropy in *BT* is tightly bound up by each poem so that they *seem* formal.

**Did you have in mind a title or unifying concept for either book as you were writing poems? Or did that come later?**

For *BT*, that came later. I had lots of trouble with the title, but the unifying concepts were always just whatever I swelled in at the time. My editors actually helped me come up with the title for that one. *blud* was different. I had the word blud, that came first, and my pus, and the world, and all leaking all the time, and so it was all about that. The rhythm reflected the qualities of the content.

**What is it that usually triggers the sprouting of an individual poem for you?**

Usually, the sounds of words and the texture of the line. I'm a feeler, so I feel around. I don't find language or meaning very stable, so if I don't have a narrative thing going on, the poem is going to be very texture oriented. Feelings are textural to me.

**In the final section of the poem "Concerning Nothing" from *Butcher's Tree*, the speaker says "I don't believe in what I mean" and, at the end of the poem, "I mean to believe. I miss." Is this how you feel about your poetry, or poetry at large, or am I reading too much into it? What, if anything, does your poetry believe in?**

I think that this is mostly about the dimness I feel in my mind, and the very privileged difficulty I have with being an optimist because I don't have the powers I would like in order to fix the world, which is on so much fire. And I do feel that way about poetry. I miss it, and I also have bad aim. I also feel like I have an autoimmune disorder in regards to the rhetoric of poetry... can't seem to accept what's inside.

**Say a few words about influence. Bands, books, characters? Fine cheeses, favorite national forests? What were some of the formative ingredients that got grated into the making of these poems?**

I like Fever Ray a lot. She has a deep rumbly feminine well of a soul and sees far without trying to. Other ingredients include my fragmented memories and relationships with Wukong, Beowulf & Grendel, Sylvia Plath, Kafka, etc. Gregor Samsa is probably my favorite character.

I'm a very isolated person, so I treat words like things and I wonder about the way we think about feelings like they are actual things, and how thoughts are feelings, a very bad map at least in my case (I'm not that smart) and how people want things or think they want things, wanting being a feeling, and being disappointed at the world, and how being alive is very mysterious and mind blowing. Less navel-gazingly, now I'm interested in ecology and video games as art form. I'd also like to read more about systems and computer science.

**When I read these poems, I occasionally imagine the writer being a female gnome squatting in a hollowed-out tree. Is this accurate? If not, can you dispel the myth by sharing something about when and how and where you write, and what form you take while doing it?**

Yes, I am a female gnome and I like to squat in trees or holes, but I have a computer and that is how I write. I like the feeling of tapping with my fingers, that each letter touches a finger.

**How did you find your publishers? Did it take long? For the sake of people who love stories of hard-won victory (like me), were there rejections along the way?**

I had tons of rejections. Everywhere I went, I was rejected, except for Black Ocean, which felt like a freak accident. Unfortunately I don't have a way of explaining it except that someone there felt something when they read my poems. I think it was just the right place at the right time. With chapbooks, I like to send to smaller or newer presses, particularly the ones that like unusual or experimental stuff.

**Both books have really gorgeous, striking covers. Did you draw the octopus for *blud* yourself? Where did Josh Wallis come from?**

Josh Wallis is a friend of Janaka Stucky's I think. I'm not sure, but he's a great designer, and so is Janaka himself. I feel so lucky! I did not draw the octopus. Drew Burk did. He is also awesome.

**Do you have any advice for poets currently working with publishers on a first book, or trying to get a book or chapbook published?**

When doing revisions for a publisher, be sure to track everything that changes, and make sure that the editors know that you are doing it. I had issues with making too many changes when I was working with BO. As far as publishing goes, like others say, it's important to look for presses that have a similar personality/style to yours, and to try to submit to many many places. Read widely and allow yourself to be influenced by different writers, including stuff outside your genre. I find that I learn best from the things I dislike, so it's important to contemplate why you dislike something without being dismissive. That was a digression. Finally, talk to other writers around you and online. Sometimes that's the way you discover new presses and journals and the ones that will support you. The world of poetry is vast and I have no doubt that there is a place for every writer to sprout.