

Wang Ping

A Poetry World without Miguel Algarín Is a Silent World



Miguel invited me to read at the Nuyorican Cafe. I was excited and terrified at the same time. I'd never met Miguel, but his name and his Cafe had been thundering in the poetry world. I stood on the stage, with the lights on my face and the poem in my hands. I was going to read "Of Flesh and Spirit," which had just been selected for the Best American Poetry by David Lehman and Louise Gluck. That helped me make the decision: give up my MBA at McGill University and break off the engagement, to stay in NYC as a starving poet. But I didn't even dare think of myself as a poet, just a poetry lover, as my pissed fiancé told me: good luck with your second grade English. My poem was about the sexual/dating culture in China when I grew up during the Cultural Revolution. Even though it was

included in anthologies already, I still felt queasy about it. So when I said "what I'm going to read is not autobiographical," people chuckled, as usual. I heard a voice from the audience: "Heck, all poetry is autobiographical!"

I was stunned! I couldn't say a word for a whole minute, which felt like an eternity. Then it hit me: it's true, it's true, and that's why I have this urge to write poetry and stories, and that's why I gave up being a professor's wife, being a business woman, being a mother in the beautiful city of Montreal. And if this is the path I have chosen for myself, then I should walk the path with my head held high. No more apologies!

I smiled into the dark audience, and performed *Of Flesh and Spirit*.

That heckler was Miguel Algarín. He was my poetry Zen Master. He whacked me on my head with his heckle, and pushed me onto the stage of the poetry world, with no apology.

And isn't it what poetry is for, a heckle into a dead silent world?

And who did this job better than Miguel Algarín, apart from Steve Cannon?

I miss you both!

Wang Ping was born in China and came to the U.S. in 1986. Her publications of poetry and prose include *American Visa*, *Foreign Devil*, *Of Flesh and Spirit*, *New Generation: Poetry from China Today*, *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China*, *The Magic Whip*, *The Dragon Emperor*, *The Last Communist Virgin*, *Flashcards: Poems by Yu Jian*, *Ten Thousand Waves*, and *Life of Miracles along the Yangtze and Mississippi* (AWP 2017 series for non fiction). She won the

Eugene Kayden Award for the Best Book in Humanities and is the recipient of NEA, the Bush Artist Fellowship for poetry, the McKnight Fellowship for non-fiction, and many others. She received her Distinct Immigrant Award in 2014, and the Venezuela International Poet of Honor in 2015. She's also a photographer, installation artist. Her multimedia exhibitions include *Behind the Gate: After the Flood of the Three Gorges, Kinship of Rivers* at schools, colleges, galleries, museums, lock and dams, and confluences along the Mississippi River. She is professor of English at Macalester College, founder and director of Kinship of Rivers project.

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