

[Review: Stopgap by Isaac Miller](#)

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Stopgap by Isaac Miller
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Winner of the 2018 Sow's Ear Chapbook Competition, Isaac Ginsberg Miller's new chapbook *Stopgap* forms a manifesto on temporality, rejecting concepts of 'progress' for the space of the in-between, the pause, the places where things emerge from and decay within—the "stopgap." The chapbook's opening poem "Cosmogony" forms such a stopgap, entrapping its reader firmly within the twists of a Gregorian apocalypse that can neither destroy nor regenerate: "In May I learned to breathe," the poet writes, "In August/I splintered into a thousand." Navigating the shambles of a present marred by historical violence—"In October another civil war,/always more civil dead"—at the end of the poem the speaker returns to January "shaking," nothing changed.

With poems that refrain from resolution, Miller refuses to relinquish the reader from the hold of the stopgap. Barring us from the bifurcations of hope or non-hope and progress or non-progress, Miller demands we sit with indecision—those expansive moments before action—to consider the thick discomfort of the present. Dwelling in the in-between, Miller is exacting and unrelenting on an ethic of anti-resolution within the multifarious zones of the personal, political, and mythic. In a later poem, he asks: "What of our ability to survive/without healing?"

The lessons of time offered in these lyrics, however, do not remain in the realm of calendars, history, or futurity. Rather, Miller shows how such distortions pervade language. From the fall of the tower of babel in the opening poem—"The tower/of language falling and its architects/scattered"—to gods, strangers, and family members named, unnamed, and renamed, Miller shows how strategies of naming can inflect time and structure space. In "Shadow Puppets," for example, where a child imagines escaping from "her/parents and their noise" into a mythical realm of "animal mouths danc[ing]/across wallpaper," Miller names the central character "the child." Typological in

its abstraction, “the child” belongs to the realm of myth-making that she participates in when she uses shadow puppets in her cave-like room to escape the restraints of her present. When so named, “the child” becomes both creator and subject of myth: through her name she can become form and type, joining the shadow puppets in the sketching out of some abstract universal truth. Elsewhere, as in “The Pattern,” naming delineates a context of intimacy. When the central character, a woman struggling with mental health, is known only as “my mother” the bonds of kinship form the space of the home and structure the temporality of intimate observation in which the poem takes place.

Elsewhere, Miller points out that practices of naming have consequences and politics. In “Works Cited,” for example, whiteness is outlined through the selectivity of its canon. For Miller, the failure to name is a choice to “avert [one’s] eyes”: “I chose Ellis Island/not La Frontera. I chose not to/cite Anzaldua, Lorde, Spillers, Fanon, Wynter,/Cesaire, LaDuke, Du Bois, Boggs,/Etcetera.” The poet addresses his own whiteness, restoring the teeming lists of names of writers of colour that he evaded in a gesture that itself names the politics of naming as one of powerful negligence. Here, the etcetera hangs on its own line, opening up its own temporal aporia: the insufficiency of the list, the host of named and unnamed teeming to be accounted for, the choice and the closure of the choice forming its own temporal tension, pointing out, as the poet soon does, that “Choice is fictive. It was/the slave ports/the lynch mobs/the red lines/that made us.” Naming always has a politics, but the accounting it offers is never sufficient.

And so Miller, poet-namer, brings us to the very edge of language’s time-keeping, where it splinters and rejoins, like some “distant stranger outlined/in the road: a towering demon/or an elk” a shape-shifter at the moment of pause. “Let us join him,” Miller asks, and “rejoic[e] in the end of time.” An end that, by now, is not simply apocalyptic but rather a complex attenuation of all that time means and all that time means us to be.



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