

Plop-Fizz:

When the threshold is crossed, acceleration begins.

By Michael Sunderlin

PROLOGUE

A plop is the moment a system gets pushed past a threshold.

Pressure builds, the balance holds, and then something forces a shift.

Once that threshold is crossed, the system accelerates.

That acceleration is the fizz.

The expansion, the cascade, the rapid change that follows the push.

Plop is the threshold event.

Fizz is the expansion that comes after.

I use these words because they're simple

and they don't carry extra meaning.

They just point to the two parts of the motion.

The chapters look at this motion

in different materials and different timescales.

Not as metaphors.

Just as the way things move.

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CHAPTER 1 — WEATHER

Weather always gives itself away early.

Not in a dramatic way.

Just a small shift you catch out of the corner of your attention.

The air feels different.

The light feels different.

You can't explain it, but you know it.

It's the kind of thing you notice
when you're not trying to notice anything.

There's a moment before anything happens
where the world feels like it's holding something.
Not tension exactly —
just a sense that the day is leaning forward a little.

You've felt that a thousand times
without ever naming it.

Then the break comes.

Sometimes it's a single drop.
Sometimes it's a gust that hits harder than it should.

Sometimes it's the sky going dark in a way that feels sudden
even though it wasn't.

And once it starts, it commits.

Rain doesn't half-decide.

Wind doesn't negotiate.

The sky just lets go.

There's something clean about that.

No hesitation.

No mixed signals.

Just release.

And while it's happening,
the world feels louder and simpler at the same time.
You don't think about anything else.
You just watch it move through.

Then, just as quickly, it eases.

The rain softens.

The wind backs off.

The air opens up again.

Everything feels washed, even if it isn't.

There's always that quiet afterward —

the kind that makes you notice small things
you ignored an hour ago.

A drip from a gutter.

A bird testing the air.

Your own breath settling.

And then the day goes on.

Like it didn't just break open and reset itself.

Like this is normal.

Because it is.

Weather doesn't explain itself.

It doesn't linger on what just happened.

It moves, and then it moves on.

A buildup.

A break.

A clearing.

A return.

You've known this rhythm your whole life.

You don't have to think about it.

You just recognize it

the way you recognize your own pulse

without ever checking for it.

CHAPTER 2 — FIRE

Fire doesn't bother with subtlety.

It doesn't ease in

or hint

or warm you up to the idea.

It gathers, sure,

but even the gathering feels like a warning.

A little heat where there wasn't any.

A dryness you notice without meaning to.

The sense that something is waiting

for the smallest excuse.

And that's all it ever needs—

an excuse.

A spark.

A slip.

A moment of contact

between something that can burn

and something hot enough to ask it to.

Once it catches,
it doesn't think.
It doesn't negotiate.
It just takes the invitation
and runs with it.

Flame moves fast
in a way that feels almost personal.
Like it's been planning this
longer than you've been watching.

It climbs.
It reaches.
It finds edges and corners
and anything dry enough to say yes.

There's a confidence to it—
not arrogance,
just certainty.
Fire knows exactly what it's doing.

And while it's burning,
everything else steps back.
The air changes.
The sound changes.
Your attention narrows

to the movement of heat and light
and the way it reshapes whatever it touches.

Fire doesn't pretend to be gentle.

It doesn't pretend to be fair.

It just follows its own logic:

take what can burn,

turn it into heat,

move on.

But even fire has a limit.

It burns through what it was given.

It reaches the end of what can feed it.

And then the certainty fades.

The flames shrink.

The heat drops.

The bright edges dull.

What was racing a moment ago

starts to settle.

Crackle becomes ember.

Ember becomes glow.

Glow becomes nothing but warmth

slowly letting go.

And then there's space.

The kind of space
that only exists after something intense
has finished being intense.

Ash where fuel used to be.
Smoke thinning into the air.
A quiet that feels earned
instead of accidental.

Fire leaves room behind it—
room for air,
room for new growth,
room for whatever comes next.

It's the fast version of the same rhythm:
a buildup,
a break,
a cooling,
a clearing.

Fire doesn't linger.
It does what it came to do
and steps aside.

And the world,
as always,
moves on.

CHAPTER 3 — GROWTH

Growth is quieter than people think.

It doesn't announce itself.

It doesn't make a scene.

Most of the time, it's happening
long before you realize anything has changed.

A stem thickening.

A leaf unfolding.

A root deciding which direction feels right.

None of it looks dramatic
while it's happening.

But it's constant.

Always moving.

Always leaning toward form.

There's a moment in early growth
where everything looks almost fragile—
thin, pale, soft—
but it's not weakness.

It's the beginning of strength
before strength knows its own name.

Living things swell toward themselves
in tiny increments.
A little more reach.
A little more shape.
A little more certainty
about what they're becoming.

You don't see the motion,
but you see the results.
One day it's small.
The next day it's not.
And you can't point to the moment
where the change actually happened.

That's how growth works.
It hides the work
and shows the outcome.

As things mature,
the pace shifts.
Not faster—
just fuller.
More sure of itself.
More rooted.
More here.

Branches thicken.

Colors deepen.

Forms settle into what they were always going to be.

There's a kind of calm in that stage—

a confidence that doesn't need to prove anything.

And then, eventually,

the energy changes again.

Not stopping.

Not reversing.

Just easing.

The push slows.

The edges soften.

The urgency fades.

Growth gives way to rest

the same way a long inhale

naturally leads into an exhale.

Nothing dramatic.

Nothing tragic.

Just the cycle completing itself

the way it always does.

Living things don't grow forever.
They grow until they've reached
the shape that fits them.
And then they hold.
And then they breathe.
And then they wait
for the next season
to ask something new of them.

Growth is the slow inhale
of the natural world—
steady, patient,
always moving,
rarely noticed.

But once you start paying attention,
you see it everywhere.
In plants.
In people.
In anything that's alive enough
to keep becoming itself.

CHAPTER 4 — ROT

Rot starts when something stops holding itself together.

Not in a dramatic way.

Not in a symbolic way.

Just in the plain, physical sense:

the structure that used to stay firm

doesn't anymore.

Moisture gets in.

Cells lose their shape.

Surfaces that were once solid

start to give under the slightest pressure.

It's straightforward.

It's mechanical.

It's the world doing cleanup.

You can see the early signs

if you look closely enough.

A patch that darkens.

A spot that softens.

A smell that wasn't there yesterday.

Nothing mysterious.

Just the beginning of breakdown.

Rot doesn't rush.

It works at the pace

the material allows.

A slow surrender of form

to everything waiting to take it apart.

Fungi move in.

Bacteria wake up.

Insects show up

because they know exactly

what stage this is.

It's not pretty.

It's not ugly.

It's just what happens

when something is done being itself.

The collapse isn't sudden.

It's incremental.

A little give here.

A tear there.

A section that caves in

because the inside is already gone.

And once the structure fails,
the rest follows easily.
What used to resist
now falls apart with almost no effort.

Rot is the slow exhale
after growth has finished its job.
Not a reversal—
just the next step.

Everything that breaks down
becomes material
for whatever comes next.
Soil.
Nutrients.
Fuel for the next round of growth
that won't happen for a while.

Rot isn't sentimental about any of this.
It doesn't care what the thing used to be.
It only cares about what it can turn into.

Softening.
Collapsing.
Breaking down.

Feeding the next cycle.

Nothing wasted.

Nothing preserved for nostalgia.

Just the world

reusing what's left.

CHAPTER 5 — LANDSCAPE

Landscape doesn't move on your schedule.

It shifts on timelines

that don't care about human attention.

Centuries, not seconds.

Whole lifetimes where nothing seems different
until one day it is.

A river doesn't cut a canyon in front of you.

It just keeps doing the same motion
long enough for the rock to give up.

A coastline doesn't redraw itself in an afternoon.

It erodes grain by grain,

storm by storm,

tide by tide,

until the map you remember

isn't the map that exists anymore.

Forests advance and retreat

in slow waves.

Not dramatic.

Not symbolic.

Just trees following conditions
the way they always have.

You can stand in the same place for years
and swear nothing is changing.
But the ground is shifting.
The water table is moving.
The soil is thickening or thinning.
The climate is nudging everything
in one direction or another.

Landscape is motion
spread thin over time.

Mountains rise
because plates push.
Mountains fall
because weather wins.
Neither process is fast enough
for you to watch directly,
but both are happening
every moment you're alive.

There's no urgency in it.
No rush.
Just steady pressure

applied for long enough
to make anything yield.

You see the results
long after the causes are gone.

A valley carved by a glacier
that melted ten thousand years ago.
A desert shaped by winds
that haven't changed direction in centuries.
A floodplain built
from a thousand quiet overflows
you never witnessed.

Landscape is the Earth
breathing at its natural pace—
slow, heavy, deliberate.

It doesn't care if you notice.
It doesn't care if you understand.
It just keeps shifting
because that's what the planet does
when you zoom out far enough.

Rivers move.
Forests move.

Coasts move.

Climates move.

Not quickly.

Not loudly.

But constantly.

And if you pay attention long enough,

you start to see the pattern:

nothing stays where it is,

not even the ground under your feet.

CHAPTER 6 — SOCIAL MOMENTS

Social moments shift fast.

Not because people are unpredictable,
but because attention is.

A group can be loose one second
and tight the next
without anyone deciding it.

You can feel it when it happens.

The air changes a little.

People lean in or lean back.

Someone says something
that pulls the room in one direction.

It's small,

but it's enough.

A group tightening isn't dramatic.

It's just everyone's focus
landing in the same place
at the same time.

A story.

A joke.

A comment that hits harder than expected.

You see shoulders angle.

You see eyes shift.

You see the room reorganize itself
around whatever just happened.

Then comes the spark.

It might be laughter.

It might be tension.

It might be a quick exchange
that bumps the energy up a level.

Sparks don't last long.

They don't need to.

They just change the temperature of the room
for a moment.

After that,
there's always a release.

A breath out.

A reset.

Someone changes the subject.

Someone steps away.

Someone breaks the moment

without even knowing they did.

And the group settles again.

Not back to where it started—
just to a new baseline
that makes sense for whatever just happened.

Social moments are tiny weather systems.

Pressure builds.

Pressure breaks.

The room clears.

The room resets.

You don't control it.

You just notice it.

A conversation that was scattered
suddenly lines up.

A group that was quiet
suddenly wakes up.

A moment that felt heavy
suddenly dissolves
because someone said something
at the right time
or the wrong time

or just a time.

None of it is planned.

None of it is symbolic.

It's just how people behave
when they share space.

Tighten.

Spark.

Release.

Settle.

Over and over
in every room
you've ever been in.

You don't have to analyze it.

You don't have to name it.

You just feel the shift
the same way you feel a change in weather—
a small signal
that tells you the room
is about to move.

CHAPTER 7 — THOUGHT

Thought doesn't start with a full idea.

It starts with pressure.

A nudge.

A friction point.

Something that doesn't line up
and won't leave you alone.

You feel it before you can name it.

A kind of internal weather shift.

Not emotional—

just directional.

Like your mind is leaning toward something
it hasn't said out loud yet.

The pressure builds quietly.

Not dramatic.

Not urgent.

Just steady enough
that you keep circling back to it
without meaning to.

Then comes the break.

A connection clicks.

A pattern shows itself.

A sentence forms that wasn't there a second ago.

It's small,

but it changes the whole shape of the thought.

This is the moment ideas open—

not with fanfare,

but with a clean, simple "oh."

A release of tension

you didn't realize you were holding.

Clarity doesn't arrive all at once.

It settles.

It spreads.

It organizes the pieces

that were scattered a moment earlier.

You can feel the shift

from pressure

to structure.

From noise

to something you can actually use.

And once the idea lands,

the mind doesn't stay still.

It moves again.

Not out of restlessness—

just momentum.

Curiosity wakes back up.

Not the frantic kind.

The steady kind.

The kind that asks,

“Alright, what else is connected to this?”

Thought is a pulse.

Build.

Break.

Settle.

Renew.

You've felt it a thousand times

without ever naming the steps.

The mind tightens around a question,

opens into an answer,

rests in the clarity,

and then starts looking for the next edge

to push on.

It's not mystical.

It's not symbolic.

It's just how thinking works

when you let it move

at its natural pace.

Pressure.

Opening.

Clarity.

Curiosity.

Over and over,

as long as you're awake enough

to notice the shift.

CHAPTER 8 — STYLE

Style doesn't change all at once.

It starts with an urge.

Not a plan.

Not a reinvention.

Just a small internal signal
that something you've been doing
doesn't fit as well as it used to.

You feel it before you act on it.

A haircut that suddenly feels wrong.

A color you're tired of.

A way of speaking
that doesn't match where your head is anymore.

It's subtle,
but it's enough to make you look around
for something different.

The shift begins quietly.

You try one new thing.

A different shirt.

A different tone.

A different way of carrying yourself
that feels slightly more accurate
than whatever you were doing before.

It's not about being bold.

It's about alignment.

Once the urge is there,
expression follows.

Not in a dramatic burst—
just in small choices
that add up.

People notice eventually,
but you notice first.
You feel the click
when something new fits better
than the old version.

And once it fits,
you settle into it.

There's a phase where the new style
stops feeling new
and starts feeling normal.
You don't think about it.

You don't check it.

You just move through the world
in a way that feels right for now.

This settling isn't stagnation.

It's consolidation.

You're living inside the shape
you just built.

But style doesn't stay still.

It never has.

Eventually the fit loosens.

Not in a dramatic way—
just in the quiet sense
that the version of you
that made these choices
isn't exactly the version of you
that exists now.

And the urge returns.

Not because something was wrong,
but because you've moved.

And style moves with you.

Change.

Expression.

Settling.

Movement again.

It's the same rhythm

as everything else in this book—

just happening on a human scale,

visible in the choices you make

without thinking too hard about them.

Style isn't a statement.

It's a pulse.

CHAPTER 9 — CULTURE

Culture moves in waves.

Not the dramatic kind.

Not the kind people write think-pieces about.

Just the steady rise and fall

of what a lot of people happen to care about

at the same time.

It starts small.

A sound.

A look.

A phrase.

A way of doing something

that feels fresh enough

for people to notice.

At first it's scattered—

a few early adopters,

a few experiments,

a few moments where something new

catches the light.

Then it rises.

Not because anyone planned it,
but because enough people
feel the same pull
at the same moment.

A collective “yeah, this”
that doesn’t need to be spoken.

You see it everywhere at once.

Clothes shift.

Music shifts.

Design shifts.

The tone of conversation shifts.

Not coordinated—
just aligned.

This is the crest.

The moment when a cultural wave
is fully visible.

When it feels like the whole world
is pointing in the same direction.

But nothing stays at the crest for long.

Eventually the energy cools.

Not because it failed,
but because people get used to it.
What was new becomes normal.
What was exciting becomes expected.
The wave loses height
because it's already done its job.

Cooling isn't decline.
It's absorption.
The culture takes what it wants,
keeps some pieces,
drops others,
and moves on.

And then, after enough time passes,
the old forms return—
but not as copies.
As variations.
As echoes.
As new shapes built
from familiar parts.

Culture doesn't loop.
It spirals.
It comes back around
with differences baked in.

Rise.

Crest.

Cool.

Return.

The shared rhythm
of many people at once.

You don't control it.

You don't predict it.

You just notice the shift
the same way you notice weather—
a change in the air
that tells you something new
is about to move through.

CHAPTER 10 — INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure doesn't move quickly.

It strains first.

A bridge takes on more weight than it was built for.

A road cracks in the same place every winter.

A power grid runs hotter than it should

because demand keeps climbing

and nothing upstream has caught up.

You can feel the stress

long before anything actually breaks.

A delay here.

A flicker there.

A system that used to feel invisible

suddenly makes itself known.

Cities reveal their limits

in small, practical ways.

A pipe bursts.

A train stalls.

A substation overheats.
Not dramatic—
just the physical reality
of machines and materials
pushed past their comfort zone.

And then something gives.

A blackout.
A closure.
A failure that forces everyone
to notice the system
they usually ignore.

Breaks aren't moral.
They're mechanical.
A part wore down.
A load shifted.
A design from fifty years ago
met a problem from today.

Once the break happens,
the repair begins.

Crews show up.
Temporary fixes go in.

Traffic reroutes.

People adjust.

The city keeps functioning

because it has to.

Repair is never clean.

It's patchwork.

It's compromise.

It's making something work again

even if it isn't perfect.

But repairs buy time—

time for renewal,

which is the slowest part of the cycle.

Renewal means replacement.

New lines.

New structures.

New systems built

to handle a world

that didn't exist

when the old ones were designed.

This is the long breath of infrastructure—

the inhale that takes decades,

the exhale that takes decades more.

You don't see the full arc
unless you stay in one place long enough.
A neighborhood shifts.
A highway expands.
A transit line appears
where there wasn't one before.

None of it is fast.
None of it is simple.
But all of it shapes
how people move,
how they live,
how a city feels
from the inside.

Strain.
Break.
Repair.
Renew.

The largest human rhythm.
The one that keeps the world running
whether you're paying attention
or not.

EPILOGUE

By now the motion should be familiar.

A system holds, pressure builds, something pushes it past its limit,
and the expansion takes over from there.

Different scales, different speeds, different materials,
but a recognizable shift when it happens.

Some systems reset quickly.

Some take years.

Some take lifetimes.

Some never return to the shape they had before the push.

That's part of how certain systems move,
not a rule for all of them.

Plop.

Fizz.

And whatever follows.