

Raging for the Exit

David Breeden and Steven Schroeder

1

thinking follows thing
thought—first
thought second—
best thought after the fact

the fact is no
thinking with no
thing to follow

the thing is one
thing follows another
without a second thought

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Time and History

One damn thing
After another
Damn thing, that's
History, Churchill,
As in Winston, said,

And time, one damn
Thing after another
Damn thing, all
In a queue
To be named—

Damned thing one,
Damned thing two,
And another, get
In line, damn
Things, queue up.

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but what do you do
about breaking the queue?

there's always someone (i
think it was Ward who

said this) who thinks he knows
the end, so he muscles in

to get there first, and when
the chickens come home

to roost, he gets all bent
out of shape about following

orders. That's the party line—
red flags everywhere, for us

or against us and one
damn thing after another

until all hell, American
as cherry pie, breaks loose

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And ain't it the flags
That turn to problems

Anachronisms of
Time and tribe

Abraham cooking up
Some calf with butter

Before the law
Said no, for strangers
Off to smite a city

For God knows why
Wrong flag, one assumes

And a god before he
Got fed up with milk
Mixed with his beef

A god who could say,
Go ahead, Sara, laugh
But you're knocked up

Bake your cake and let
Angels do the killing

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Even the people's flag
is a problem, even
when Billy Bragg

brings a tear to my eye
singing it. Deepest red is
the color of blood, and you

don't need Leviticus
to know that's an abomination,
even if it's the girl next door

who's shedding it. Sarah laughed
to keep from crying, and I
suppose that's why

Miguel said we have to learn
to spill out into the streets
and weep. Otherwise

we'll think ourselves angels
and die laughing.

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Fencing the land
The Diggers taught
And owning it came
By murder, plunder

The power of sword
And law is about
Passing on the evil
To children's children

Who have forgot
What it is they stole
The Diggers taught
Until that is

They got killed in
Their unfenced Eden

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The old, they said
cannot kill the young
forever, dig?

Dig, and diggers
are not dead.

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A friend sends me
My family tree, tracking
Exponential boxes
Back into old names,

Benjamin, Abraham,
Effie and Evangeline
Two boxes, four,
Back and back the

Dead line up to get me
Here, in their sweet
Obscure ways, the dead,
Illiterate, silent, a row

I tick off, reading back
Who are they, this
Line of quiet names
Gone to soil every one

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About the past,
I am at present
of two minds.

It is a heavy thing.

Every tenth cousin
weighs the wait
of the world.

While I am dying
to move it, it moves
as it has moved

as it will move
when it does
move, at its own pace.

But a cloud of witnesses is
in it, and they call
my name. I

name them one
by one and there is
a world I know

where the god who makes it
goes one story higher, sees
flowers in graveyards, sees

it is good, it is very good.

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In the year 2525
I sang, when it was
A hit, the song

Nineteen Sixty-Nine
The numbers growing
And human life

Disappearing as
The numbers grew
3535, 4545

“If man is still alive”
And that didn’t sound
So very likely, being

Around, with war
And space and drugs
My mind on the infinite

To a little pop ditty
In the year 2525
I did the math

It didn’t look good

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11

Not bad to a cockroach
with the soul of a poet
and a cat who was Cleopatra.

A poet with the soul of a cockroach
might get that song
out of his head

and land on his feet
playing the numbers. No man
is an island, and they say

cockroaches will survive us.
I keep an old Underwood
in the closet

so there will be free
verse when we are gone.

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12

Is that what I do?
Is that how I do it?
Why are the letters
All out of order?

I wondered nearly aloud,
Biting my lip
To the rhythm
The teacher made,
Flexing her wrists just so,

This is how to hold
Your wrists, she said;

Whack, whack,
Whack staccato
Of metal on paper.

Home row, home row,
She twittered
So cheery I wanted to slap her.

Boys don't need to type,
Not touch typing,
She'd said. But you can try.

And the words, words,
Quick brown foxes;
Return your carriage!
Letters and aching wrists.

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getting letters in order
is like herding cats
slow

but possible
if you learn to want them
to go where they are going

everybody needs touch
typing, every letter
needs the whole

weight of a body
to move it, every word
more than the sum of its parts

twittering quick brown foxes
staccato makes a whole
body ache

if you have something to say
and are no bigger than
the plane surface

of one key
in a word
machine

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On the train I tap out
Letters on my phone

As sensical as
Words on wires

Pink clouds at sunset
After a day of snow

Somewhere
In the plastic

We've wrapped
Round ourselves

There's blood still
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blood raging
in plastic language
makes words wireless

cloud computing
sunset, moon
not far

wine still
makes tipsy
poets reach for

it, drown atwitter
plucking blackberries
when they could be dancing

shoeless on holy ground

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16

Where's the tipping point
Privilege to right
Favor to expectation?

Job had his reasons
For bringing up some
Baggage he had. . .

Kohelet, though
Preacher, pedant
Isn't he beyond

The pale

Calling all the racing
On being
Nothing new

Same burned omelet
Different millennium
Nothing new

Under this sun

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Job had reason
on his side. That is why
his crazy god could do nothing

but shout non-sequiturs
when they stood
face to face.

Where were you when is
no answer to *now*
what is this

all about? Kohelet
has a point. Every river
flows into the sea, and the sea

does not overflow. Hard to see,
though, how that follows
from emptiness.

The softest thing in the universe
overcomes what is hard.
If everything is wrong,

it is because nothing makes it work.

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We are but filthy rags!
he shouts in the street,
poor beings who know
nothing. I want to say

Oh, that's Isaiah
something isn't it?
but he's not the sort
to be asking that

not his trope
the distinctions
no, i think it's our
righteousness that's

rags, I want to say
not us, whatever we
be. It's our superiority
in the street that's

filthy and raggy

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whatever it is
we're trying
to clean

gets worse
with every swipe
we take at it

if we knew nothing,
we'd have nothing
to say and sigh,

one step short of a song and a dance,
a poem where mind goes

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I missed the part—
I must have been
out of the room—
when someone said

don't think about it.

I missed the part—
was I staring out
some window?—
when someone said

That's no beezwax

of yours, you know.
I must have been
dreaming somehow
when the news came—

Don't bother

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Don't you worry your pretty little head

is a phrase I'd over
heard more times than I can count
by the time I strolled off more or less
at ease into the belly of the beast
for a higher education because
accidents of birth meant
it was never meant
for me.

I had seen the best minds of my generation
wasted by straightjackets woven as often as not
by snake oil salesmen in pulpits
repeating that bullshit from the whirlwind
as if they were in it, without a doubt
that they had the power
to make everything right.

The power behind them is hard
to deny, but I've known enough tornadoes
up close and personal to know anyone who is in one
is out of control. All that shouting is a sign
that the right is another matter,
and the wasted minds
set me to thinking
about thinking,

something it seemed
preachers and other politicians
didn't much think about.

Thinking about thinking makes you act
slow, stutterstep, gives you time
to see the poem where mind goes,
through word to sigh, through
sigh to song, through
song to dance.

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And when your body moves, you know
where mind begins. You turn
then, embrace a world
that has been dying to be born.

No question we think, I think. The question is
how to think like a poem set free on the world.

And don't that make you wanna dance?

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22

time and chance it seems
happened to them all
just as the preacher said
time and chance the cutting edge
time and chance the broken window

how make it say?
always the gauntlet
chance and time throws down
time and chance
how make it say?

the rest is vanity
always to the swift
time and chance
the rest is vexation
how make the poem say?

time and chance it seems
happeneth to the them all
just as the preacher said
the rest is—how make it
say?—vexation of spirit

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23

time and chance
dance poems
where mind goes,

sing. listen
for sadness in
cold wind, listen
for the music of a red
leaf breaking a cobblestone
line, listen to Spring shattering
barbaric glass, listen to the shadow
of every blackbird

time and chance
cut both ways
blood cries

out from the ground
it says, listen

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Snow piles in its silent way
While I read Jeremiah, angry
About cakes baked for the Queen of Heaven

What was it God did with his wife?
Why was it the prophet got so angry

Over cakes of crescents, cakes of stars
And a little wine on the side,
A few snacks baked for the Queen of Heaven?

What was it God did with his wife
So terrible it could not be spoken of,

Could not even be possible she had
Ever existed at all? What's so bad
About some Moon Pies for the Queen of Heaven?

The divorce must have been one lulu
To drive her all the way back to Egypt

The snow is up to the bottom of the chairs
A cold blanket over a few old words, the only
Crumbs left of cakes for the Queen of Heaven

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Snow's silence says
more than any jealous
god can know. This
is Bast's year.

Any prophet worth his salt
knows love divided is
not love

diminished, wine
makes *de* brighter,

and god knows we
need friends

who can see
in this darkness.

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The noises in the basement
May be rats, may be ghosts,
May be some friends I have
Forgotten about. Why check
Speculating? Perhaps they are
Hanging new curtains for
The show stopper, blockbuster
At the edge of the mind.

It's all one, from where I sit.

Later, there may be some
Things I have to do, like laundry,
Shopping, and dying. For now
I say to some other of myself,
Take a memo: All is well. Even
The noises in the basement.
May be friends, may be ghosts,
May be rats. May be curtains.

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They say when Luther— startled
by something rustling in a dark corner
out of sight while he worked late one
night— threw that inkwell at Satan,
he was not afraid, because it never
crossed his mind it might be a rat.

Ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy
beasties and things that go bump in the night,
a question, I suppose, of what plagues us
here, now, and what we have at hand
to fend it off. Friends, ghosts, rats

it may be now, but it will be curtains soon
enough. And I see no reason to ruin
Old Scratch's Armani over that.

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Astarte, Ishtar,
Aphrodite
Queen of Heaven
Gal in the Ground

Why was it your
Guy in the Sky
Got so out of hand?
First the demands

Then out for cigarettes
And you believing
For the longest time
He'd changed, changed

And at every noise
Astarte, Isis,
Venus, Mary
You thought

It was him getting
Over himself
Why was it your guy
Got so into sky

He filled the void
With only himself?

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For god's sake, Martin,
you've read Job.

Better to throw dice
than ink while you calculate
the odds of winning at craps
against card sharks like Lucifer
and his spaced out friend.

False shuffles, false cuts, culling,
stacking, a poker face all mean nothing
if you don't play poker with them. Take the odds
and the house advantage is not even
one percent. But you have to be
patient to win at a game

like this. Nothing changes,
and that is that.

You thought Kohelet
was depressed when
all he was doing
was writing

a memo re what happens
when the light comes on
and you see nothing.

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30

When the three sat down
Abraham, Martin, Job
The chips on the shoulder
Matched the chips at hand

And there were still hard feelings
About not asking that Mecca guy

Job brought the beer
Martin got the chips
Abraham was late because
He'd taken his son somewhere

When the three set down
The rules of the evening

There were chips on
Every shoulder, every hand
And in three bowls
Which meant nothing

I'm still feeling bad
About the Mecca guy

Father Abraham said
I smell a rat said Martin
That's justice for you Job said
To no one in particular

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31

I'm thinking the party
back home with

Astarte, Isis,
Ishtar, Venus,
Aphrodite, Mary,

and probably Katie
was the place
to be. No
dice,

better wine,
and the only whirlwind
a passing dust devil when

they clicked their tongues
over the absence of Khadijah.

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the patriarchs
and the mommies
the newly wed
and the nearly dead
gathered as they are
in the trailer parks
of memory and desire
where heavy snow
crushes the tin roofs
and everyone says
that's OK, as long
as a tornado don't hit
the matriarchs
and the daddies
gathered after work
to see what beer
is on sale this week
ten bucks for a twelve
can't beat that
Lot says but he
always says something

like that or don't look back
that's the other thing
he says to the daddies
and the mommies
newly wed and nearly
immortal. Don't turn
around for nothin

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Eurydice would be
the first to tell you
it's not the turning

the old man objects to,
else Orpheus would have been
a pillar of salt a long time ago.

I don't know how many times
Lot's wife tried to tell him
any man with a temper
like that is bad news.

And she had her doubts
about that Abraham,
slinking off tight-lipped
with his boy. And the look

in that child's eyes when they
came home from the mountains,
not a word between them.

*He never could remember
the first boy's name,
and that ain't right.*

*So what if something might
be gaining? It might be
someone you need
to say goodbye to.*

*And that old man's son, the one
he always said was the only—
didn't he come waltzing in
late shouting "turn"?*

*They really ought to make up their minds.
But I'm only human. I figure that means*

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*a hell of a lot of turning before
I get it right. And I'll be damned
if I'm going to traipse off without
so much as a fare-thee-well
when I leave my friends,
even the ones that get
a little carried away
when they're on the sauce.*

*Too much spirit and we all
get crazy. You can't
damn a man for that.*

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The radio said
You can find yourself
Without looking
For yourself which
May be true since

After all Oedipus
Went looking for self
Not knowing it was
Him he was looking
For, the guilty party

That had the plagues
Raining down but
This may not be true
Of cases other than
Oedipal, Orpheus

For example, who
Had a fine time
Strumming until
Other factors called
Him to the depths

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Was that at the low end of the dial,
where npr and the evangelicals
used to hover uncomfortably close
before they went commercial
and found themselves some lebensraum?

It seems so nearly Buddhist if not
for the assumption that there is
a self to be found. If there is,
rest assured you will find it
only when you are not looking.

Something will surprise you then,
perhaps a plump ripe lychee
in your lap, and you won't know
if you found it or it found you. Either way,
finding is the first act, so you might as well

go ahead and get ready for the second, loss.
And if you've promised to punish the culprit
the moment you find him,
you might just have to turn
and put your eyes out so you can see.

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I'm not sure why but
I met him sitting beside
his dead ostrich. Not

That I'm questioning
meeting him, nor
why he was sitting

It was just the dead
ostrich part I question
I've never mourned an

ostrich, but I don't
question that either
It's just the part about

Pointing to its wrung
neck I question
Why is it he thought

that a good idea?
Check your Christian
history—it's a symbol

of faith, symbol
of contemplation