

Machines for Freedom

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The drop is terrifying. You feel like you're falling face-first into the ocean. That is, when you can see the water on the other side. Most of the time it's pissing fog and you're not sure exactly where you're going. If you do a very strict cost-benefit analysis, you'd probably go back where you came from. Will your brake malfunction? Will your tire skid? Will a wild hare decide that the best moment to cross the road is when you're descending at 30 mph? Are you going to come out of this alive? I'll look at my crew, all of us decked in our ridiculous lycra costumes that make us look like rejected superheroes, and ask anyway "I'm doing the backside this morning, you coming?"

My relationship with cycling has been combative at best. I used to find nothing attractive about the sport. As a child I took longer than most to shed my training wheels. I have never felt any desire to physically move quickly for the sake of exercise. It's not in my nature to crave acceleration. I have, what I consider, a reasonable fear of moving objects or entities one could crash into. I also have, what others consider, an unreasonable ability to hurt myself and be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Overt competition makes my stomach churn, even if it is just competing against myself. I am that person who puts a towel over my machine at the gym, because I do not want to know. Exercise is one of the few areas of my life where I actively try to keep success metrics or key performance indicators out of sight and out of mind. Cycling seemed to me the perfect swirl of everything I like to avoid: the need for speed, lots of targets, crushing competition.

Opposition creates tension. It is precisely that mix of divergent forces that creates the forward motion of a bike. I am tempted by what repels me. The tensivity of antagonism drives my ambition. Cycling was no different.

During a stint out East, I wanted to mix in with all the cosmopolitan and intellectual inhabitants of Boston. I had not been in this country long and I craved to fit in. Look at those people unlike me: biking to places, saving the environment, and getting in shape. Temptation took hold. Designated bike lanes provide protection via infrastructure. Comforted by the safety parameters and enticed by the crowd, I bought a purple hybrid bike for an extremely reasonable price. I thought bikes were meant to be expensive, but here I am, breaking into that sophisticated crowd

with a measly student budget. Years later I realized the price was reasonable because it was a children's bike. I should've known I am not as clever as I think I am.

I christened my steed Purple Thunder, given its color and the thunderbolt sticker on its frame. Yet another sign I had missed that this vehicle was made for someone under 13. I was 19. I did not have the cosmopolitan nor intellectual aesthetic I aspired to when I rode Purple Thunder. I looked like a member of a clown collective, in a completely unbalanced configuration: all person, no bike. I have friends that still giggle at the image of me rolling up on my new ride. They did not have the heart to tell me I might as well have bought a tricycle. Regardless of how I looked, I felt more open to the world than I had in years, maybe ever. Purple Thunder and I rode along the Charles River, across the bridges that divide Boston from Cambridge, to and from the research lab I was working in that summer. I felt my breath like I never had: as space in motion. Air flowing in and out. All instinct, no thought. I floated in my headspace. Riding from childhood into that dream I had worked so hard to accomplish: graduate school, respect, and independence.

It would be best if you did not operate any machinery while daydreaming. Bikes especially. Early on a cool summer morning, high on the fumes of a future within my grasp, I got hit by a car making a left turn. The driver screamed into my face as I came to. I was propped up like a broken toy by strangers who had dragged me from the intersection and called an ambulance. I barely remember the hospital. With no close friends or family in the vicinity, I walked all the way back to my apartment with a broken arm. I was overwhelmed, scared, and completely alone. This felt too adult to have happened on a children's bike. It was my first experience dealing with the American insurance system. I was the one in my nuclear family who translated all things American to Venezuelan, from hotel reservations to pop culture references. I had no one to make that translation for me here. I did the best I could and found what money I had to make all the insurance and hospital phone calls go away. I had come to this city, like so many other students, to push myself and my field forward. I had to maneuver these American systems if I was to get the independence I craved. Alas, I needed to grow up. I could not carry any excess weight with me. I reasoned I had gotten distracted from the work of fulfilling my dreams. My broken arm and emptying bank account were the prices I paid for my juvenile endeavors. I could not let that happen again, I did not have any more blood or money to spare. What remained of Purple Thunder was left on a bike rack in Cambridge. Sacrificed to demonstrate I would do anything to walk the hallowed grounds of academia as a cosmopolitan and intellectual. To become an independent, respected adult, I would leave my childish ways behind.

If you're coming to the Marin Headlands from San Francisco, "The City" as we call it a little egocentrically, the ride involves swirling through parts of the Presidio. The Presidio Forest sits at the far edge of the Golden Gate, making it an ideal location for a military fort. After being taken from the Ohlones, it traded hands from the Spanish to the U.S. Army to become the wildlife sanctuary it is today. The old barracks have been repurposed for non-military purposes. Coyotes crisscross the roads early in the morning, looking like self-sufficient stray dogs that have long lost their need for an owner. Our invasive cycling behavior is shaded by a host of non-native trees: pine and eucalyptus, usually damp and drenched in fog. None of us are from here. The only warmth you find in an early morning comes from your breath and sweat. This is where the translocation begins.

As you exit the alien forest, you're at a crossroads. On your left, Baker Beach. The safety of the city. On your right, the Golden Gate Bridge, your only way across to the Headlands and Hawk Hill, hallowed cycling ground. No one can deny the bridge is an awe-inspiring feat that stands as a tribute to human ingenuity and force of will. Every time I cross, I look to my right and see my cool, foggy city and breathe in appreciation. My favorite times are these early mornings, when stumbling tourists are still asleep and the fast cyclists looking for a personal record have long overtaken me. I am still very much afraid of moving objects and potential crash scenarios, especially on a bridge over troubled water. I want to, need to, be as alone as possible for this prayer in motion.

Purple Thunder's blood sacrifice proved fruitful. I achieved my goal of becoming a graduate student. My academic institution of choice brought me out West, to the Golden Gate. A place with even more cycling and more cycling-focused infrastructure than Boston, but with what felt like a completely different culture. Out East cycling had seemed like a way for intellectuals to move about; it was a completely different beast out here. It was all lycra and clipless shoes (a confusing nomenclature because you are clipping and locking into your pedals like a mechanocentaur) and ridiculous distances. My colleagues would do a 40-mile ride before their workday like it was nothing. One mentioned casually that the ride to and from Petaluma had been beautiful this morning and I spit out my coffee. That was an 80-mile ride. I was never quite comfortable using the imperial system; maybe I had gotten something wrong? Riding that distance seemed like an impossible thing to do in the morning before work. Cycling is also an expensive hobby, especially the way they do it here in Silicon Valley. A hobby someone making a barely-above-poverty-line stipend could not afford. Biking became less of a cool pastime I could get into for sport and more like a party drug

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that cool kids do: I can see it makes them happy, but I am too shy, broke, and scared to try it myself.

Much like party drugs though, there was some curiosity. Those folks look like they're having fun. It can't be all bad. Succumbing to these thoughts, I bought an adult hybrid bike from a person desperate to get rid of it on Craigslist. I owned it for about 10 hours until the city swallowed it up. That began the bike lock arms race between San Francisco and me. I'd research bike locks and locking practices, buy a bike off Craigslist, and inevitably have some piece of it stolen. A front wheel. A back wheel. Everything but the wheels. One weekend I cycled to the lab and I locked my bike to a tree. Nature will protect me, I thought. When I left at night, the tree had been sawed down and the bike was gone. A sign: stop this juvenile nonsense and get back to work. And yet I persisted. My past dreams of childhood were now my pedestrian realities. I was an adult: stubborn and set in my ways.

I kept my bike habit going. Social pressure is a crucial factor in cycling. It is a sport of peacocking. If anyone denies this to you, they are lying. I was not going to be the proudest cock, but I needed to puff up my chest at least a little and join the conversation. I did this by accompanying fellow grad students on rides, even if I was the slowest of them all. I didn't know the very basics, like what gears were or that you could change them to make climbing easier. I was in need of a new machine when I decided to take this a little more seriously. I was tired of being the least fashionable in the bunch, and I knew it would require effort to remedy that situation. I found a cheap road bike online that one had to self-assemble and paid a friend in beer to put it together for me. With my new bike, I went from riding a generic hybrid to roadie with drop-down handlebars and a light frame. This could not be mistaken for a children's trike; this was the machine of a taxpaying, fashionable, independent adult who was not going to get swindled by ininsurance

companies. The transition was momentous. I named my new steed Antonio because of his Spanish origin. With my big red hunk, I could shake my tail feathers and show off. No more shame riding up to my friends on this vehicle.

Like most torrid affairs, my time with Antonio was brief but momentous. He was here to show me I could cycle in unchildish ways. Push me and support me. He accompanied me on my commutes to work, my aimless wandering around Golden Gate Park. We rode over the Golden Gate Bridge like we were the first to come up with that idea. It was puppy love. I became stronger and faster almost by accident. I was too focused on being free and feeling light. Antonio would change my world. But alas, the city still demanded sacrifices, and took what was hers. You're losing focus, life told me. Antonio was stolen out of his safe spot in the garage. When I visited the scene of the crime, my partner at the time held me like I was about to collapse. I was sad but not despondent: I had already resigned myself to this outcome. I knew all adult love ended with someone leaving and in this case, it had to be Antonio. My partner would reinforce that lesson later, even if he didn't know it then. Antonio and I had flown too close to the sun across that bridge. In honor of what we had shared, I didn't immediately replace him. I mourned our relationship by assuming a terrestrial life: an exercise routine of going to the gym and taking public transport. He took my wings, I was earth-bound for now.

Ascending to the top of Hawk Hill is a well-trodden right of passage for the many cyclists of the Bay Area. It is a club entry paid for in sweat. The road is a 525-foot ascent over almost two miles. On any given day, you will find the road dotted with cyclists asserting their humanity by going up this hill. To get stronger and faster. Just because they can. The clay-colored rock and shrubbery on your right cheer you on all the way. The precipice on the left sets the bounds of your trail. You reach the top out of breath. Sometimes, you are rewarded for climbing over the fog line by catching a glimpse of a pink lemonade sunrise over the Bridge and the City. An ephemeral prize.

When you're at the top, the only way out is down.

It feels both insulting and necessary to speak about the early COVID-19 pandemic days as we continue this journey. Insulting because in the grand scheme of things, I am but a freckle on the Möbius strip of eternity. My experiences are insignificant when put into this context. Still, I find the discussion necessary because it was a moment of transformation. Change and catalysis, however small, is worth discussion.

My future husband and I were stuck in our new apartment. Living together for the first time. We were forced to be at most 12 feet apart for the foreseeable future. We were OK with that. We had moved to this neighborhood because of my need to ground my anxious mind and body through my well-honed gym

routine that I had perfected for the last couple of years. A gym I have not gone to since COVID besieged the world and we moved into that apartment. Even if I could not be in a gym, I knew I needed to put myself in motion, especially during lockdown. I did some exercises in our living room/dining room/office, but I craved air and long-range motion, maybe precisely because it felt forbidden. I tried running, but it did nothing but terrify me. It was the opposite of a release. *Oh god, they're getting closer. They coughed. I'm dead.* Not a creature of speed, I could not swerve and sidestep the viral warfare out there. I needed to be faster than the germs. To do that, I needed a machine.

My now husband is a cyclist. I remember how proud he was when he showed me his new carbon-frame road bike some time into our dating. So light, so fast. Looks great, I said. I was happy for him even if I didn't fully get it. He'd wrap himself in spandex and, like a Harbor seal, take to the Bay Area elements. He was possessed by a need for speed and a craving for climbing. He is so fast when in his element. He'd come back two to five hours later strutting like a proud peacock, having satisfied his needs and cravings. While we align on many things, our athletic needs and cravings are opposite: him with a competitive itch, me with an anaphylactic reaction to competition. I need grounding and consistency; urges and semi-flexible schedules drive him. This dichotomy reinforced that cycling was not the sport for me. But in 2020, the grounding and consistent routines I had built my life around were nonexistent. Gone was my inflexible gym schedule and the community that came with it. I had to recreate practices that served me for the moment I found myself in: a taxpaying adult with a live-in partner going through an extinction-level event.

My husband's old steel-frame road bike sat unused in our living room. One day, it started flirting with me. *Let's go on a ride. Let's go zig-zag around those runners. We'll outpace those particles, and you'll feel that cool air enter your lungs once again. You know you miss that feeling. You know you miss being outside. You miss that space. Don't let Antonio's memory fade. I carry his legacy in my red frame.* My husband encouraged this affair. I fell for the bike's charm and ran off into the sunset with the Big Red Machine.

My time with Big Red started as a shameful dalliance. At first, I only went cycling by myself, mortified by my lack of grace, form, and fashionable spandex gear. Leaving the house able to outpace the germs gave me a freedom I had not experienced since the times of Antonio. The world became brighter, more vast, and so fresh. I was no longer stuffed in our everything room jumping up and down feeling this effort was all pointless. I was asserting my status as a live ahuman and claiming it loudly in the world. I am alive and outside, virus. Despite your reign of terror, I am over

here getting stronger every day. I purchased the clipping clipless shoes and pedals, becoming mechanically connected to Big Red. It felt quite intimate and a little claustrophobic. My fear of joining others diminished as I got faster and my fashionable spandex collection grew. I went with my husband and while, to this day, I am slower than him, I found I could complete his routes. He'll wait for me at the top. We both realized we could use cycling as a way of interacting with friends whose houses we could not visit. We started a cycling group with consistent meet-up days and times. Cycling became a grounding and consistent practice for me.

Big Red could only take me so far. I know, a good craftsman never blames his tools, but that mentality doesn't apply to cycling. Quality of equipment is essential. Your chainrings dictate how many gears you have at your disposal to tackle the hills. Heavy frames weigh one down. A malfunctioning brake is a mortal danger no amount of good form can save you from. By the end of 2020, my husband suggested it was time to retire the steel frame, end the affair, and upgrade to a lighter bike. It was the only way to start tackling higher hills and longer distances. I was no longer a student and I could afford myself some splurges. The Big Red Machine still lives in our everything room; the city would not claim it, I couldn't chain it to a bike rack and leave it to be mutilated. We had to be adults about this breakup and learn we could live with each other. Through extensive research of a limited inventory, I found my new love. Black Beauty, like the horse. An elegant aluminum-frame bike with strong breaks and a good gear ratio for higher hill climbing. One October she came home in a big box and I unwrapped her with glee. Biking would no longer be a love affair with men who would leave me; biking would be an adult friendship, tempered in the fog and hills of Northern California. Not torrid and puerile, but supportive, mature.

This 800-foot fall from the top of Hawk Hill to the Marin Headlands is an apt portal to a dislocated place. It feels like a videogame area entrance, where your character gets transported by a massive bird, liquid mirror, or cursed painting into some other place outside of reality, inaccessible through any physical movement. This 18 percent descent is my possessed mirror to a distant realm. A place untouched, suspended, in space-time. I feel myself unwind when I cross the threshold rolling down Conzelman Road into the Headlands.

Here, the Mission Blue Butterfly still finds safe haven, alien trees are being relocated to make way for what naturally erupts in these grounds, and old bunkers have been left to their own devices to be reclaimed by the native elements. The salt, water, wind, and sand. Lynxes, deer, hares, California quails, and coyotes care not for the man-made designation of road and land: it is all their domain. Not yours or mine. Everyone welcomes you to their land, but warns you to not overstay. They observe you as you go. Swerving to the road that leads to the

lighthouse at the edge of the West, climbing up to Battery Townsley and looking down to the dark sands of Rodeo Beach. Push and grind up to the saddle of Hawk Hill once more or traverse the Baker-Barry Tunnel as you leave. You have earned your visitation rights to this realm, but your ticket has a timed exit. You must, real life calls.

Many have felt the force field of this place. I am not the first or only one who calls this land sacred. They have known it before me, they will know it after me. That place we humans connected to by closing nature's gate with. The magic of this land chuckles at us, as a wise aunty chuckles at the latest childhood fad. Not with judgment, but with tenderness. They understand in their age and sapience, we must go through these motions ourselves. In their infinite experience they know that what is troubling us will pass. We will pass. They will not. How lucky I am to visit the eternal.

My loyal steeds, past and present, are guardian angels that have seen me since childhood and training wheels. They're joined by the souls of the places where I have practiced my meditation-in-motion. This gaggle of cycling spirits guides me to the next mountain, the next bridge. Steady the gait and soften the heart, they say. One day, my legs will give out, and I won't be able to create the opposing force necessary to move forward. This future doesn't scare me. I know my crew and I trust we will still have our friendship. We'll remember those anxious moments of yore, the steep drops, the endless climbs. My human desire to grow up and fit in. We'll chuckle at my spandex collection. I'll be thankful for every day we went down the backside.

Alexandra Clemente Perez, born and raised in Caracas, Venezuela, now lives and rides in San Francisco, California. She is working on an essay collection exploring her experience migrating from Venezuela to the United States. She thinks about writing a lot when she's on her bike. Next year, she will participate in the 2025 AIDS LifeCycle, a seven-day, 545-mile bike ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles, fundraising for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and the Los Angeles LGBT Center. Her work has been supported by the Tin House 2024 Winter Workshop. Find her on Instagram @aleclepe.