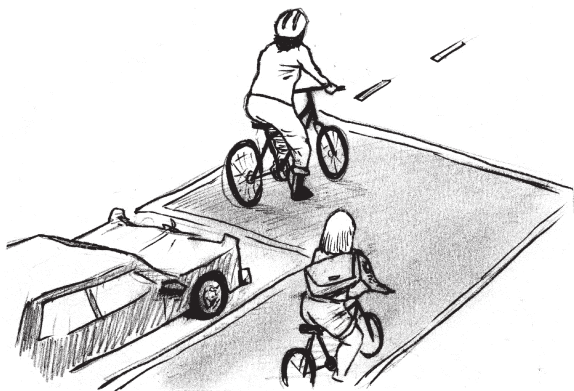


HOW TO RIDE SLOW

*Bicycling in the age of whatever topic is
trending on social media this minute*



JOE BIEL

A friend who worked a rote office job broke down in tears at her desk the other day. She had just purchased a new live record by the Replacements, a band that she had really enjoyed in the 1980s. Listening to the album immediately brought back everything special and exciting that she had given up and lost about her youth.¹ I empathize deeply with those feelings as I have long feared a similar fate, and what actions might be prompted in me if I were to experience a similar state of loss.

For better or worse, however, I have exactly the opposite problem. I'm an autistic person in my 40s, so I'm emotionally immature and hold onto doing things the same way that I've done them since the 1980s. Bicycle commuting connects my existence to everything that I've ever found exciting about life and is a way to hold onto the most magical feelings. Rather than holding onto bicycling because of nostalgic moments of my youth, I'm still living the life that felt so magical 30 years ago. Of course, most things outside of my control have changed.

More Than Getting There

Riding my bike home from work one day, I went down a hill and through an intersection just as the light turned green. I was traveling at my

¹ I bought *For Sale: Live at Maxwell's* 1986 immediately. Pain notwithstanding, any record capable of evoking those powerful feelings is obviously worth owning.

normal, consistent speed of twelve miles per hour when I passed a line of cyclists who had been waiting for the traffic light to change. I maintained a consistent pace through the intersection, slowing to ten miles per hour as I lost the momentum from the hill behind me.

Two blocks later a woman on a fast road bike pulled up next to me, shouting ***“DO NOT PASS ME! WHY DID YOU PASS ME IF YOU’RE GOING SLOW?!?! WHY DID YOU PASS ME IF YOU’RE GOING SLOW?!?!”*** I was completely in shock and could not respond.

As she continued to scream at me in this manner for the entire next block, I was beginning to become afraid. I just looked at her, wondering where all of this anger came from. And then, as fast as she appeared out of nowhere, she sped away, as if I was standing still. I was left to gather my thoughts and feelings. While there were dozens of other cyclists around us, not one of them said a word. They just proceeded on their way.

I thought about that encounter for months afterwards. It reminds me of a 2011 interview² that I conducted with former mayor Tom Potter. He explained that Portland will be a world-class bicycling city when the cyclists *slow down*. This confused me at the time. But, to be fair, I had never given it much thought.

² For the feature film *Aftermass: How Portland Became North America’s #1 Bicycle Capital* www.MicrocosmPublishing.com/Aftermass

Growing up in the sprawling mass of Cleveland, I rode my bike as fast as I could everywhere that I went from the time that I was a teenager. I traversed gigantic intersections and biked dozens of miles every day. Covering great distances seemed important to me so I went as fast as I could. I was often rushing to get to work, to band practice, to meet my friends at the beach, or to the next party. I knew the bicycle was a means to an end but I had forgotten what that goal was. A positive memory from this era was getting drenched in a freak thunderstorm while transporting (and intermittently drinking) a gallon of homemade malt liquor on my handlebars. When a friend saw my dripping clothes he offered me a ride home to get changed. I declined. I had rarely felt more alive, but it was not a sustainable or repeatable kind of joy.

For the most part, I was so caught up with chasing efficiency and not wasting time that I was forgetting to enjoy myself. I could not see what was happening around me, and I had not yet realized that if I always gave 100% I would arrive everywhere hating life, sweating and exhausted.

When I was twenty I moved to Portland in the late 90s, car-free and with a lightweight bike in tow. I rode my bike everywhere that I went and while there weren't as many miles to traverse, there were other cyclists and the routes were clearer. I didn't have to try to bicycle like a car anymore, but I could still go *fast*. I developed intense

muscle tone. Once, I was riding back from Kelley Point Park, on top of the city where the Willamette River meets the Columbia. I wasn't paying much attention, just maintaining a casual pace uninterrupted by traffic. Eventually I pulled off to drink some iced tea. A glistening man pulled up to me, exclaiming "*Your clip is amazing! Your calf muscles are really impressive! I've been trying to catch up with you for the past four miles!*" I hadn't even noticed that he was there.

Cycling was never a competition for me. I was just going where I was going. But there was a certain awkwardness about it all. In 2012, I was in Memphis and our tour guide was trying to showcase the features of the entire city. He picked up some bikes for our group and then immediately disappeared onto the horizon. He had either severely miscalculated our speed or never ridden his bike with other people before. He was a nice enough guy but his behavior felt inconsiderate. He kept urging us to go faster and faster. That wasn't our way and we weren't interested—much less capable—of matching his pace.

Of course, ten years prior, I had behaved much like he did. I would choose busy, direct thoroughfares to bike on and match the speed of traffic. I would be confused when my "companions" would end up blocks behind me, getting stuck at lights. Why didn't they just go *faster*? Couldn't they pace themselves to make the lights?

Damn This Mortal Body

As I reached my 30s I replaced my drop bars with upright handlebars. My back could no longer handle bending over like that. I think that I subconsciously started to slow down as well. Then my health fell apart. I became bloated and lethargic.³ During that time, a friend invited me to go on a bike ride together. He was race training. A little out of shape, I still figured that I would have no problem keeping up.

He told me that at 30 your body is primed for optimal bicycling speeds. For most people, that is their peak. Instead, I had watched my body go downhill from the time that I turned 30. The ride was painful. Literally and figuratively. He slowed to half of his intended speed so he didn't drop me. My bike, rusted over from being neglected next to the boiler in the basement, struggled to shift gears. It was the first time all year that I had gone further than down the street. He dropped me off at home and my legs cramped up so tight that I could not lie flat on my bed without someone else to physically stretch my muscles out.

I did start riding daily again. And a year later I found myself lying on the pavement of a busy street with some broken ribs. The cyclist in front of me had stopped suddenly without warning and following closely at 20 mph, I wasn't

³ To read this horror story in full, check out *Perfect Mix Tape Segue #5: Sickness & Health*

able to stop in time. I spent weeks recovering. Still, I couldn't see how easy it would have been to prevent this injury.

I realized that my life was changing and most of these shifts would involve adjusting my self-image. Back in my 20s I participated in large monthly group bike rides where hundreds of us would move through the city at a snail's pace. Invariably, at some point during each ride I would break down into tears of joy at the beauty of the whole thing. It was one of the rare times at that age that bicycling wasn't about moving quickly or getting from point A to B. It was about being in the moment, about taking over a city block and turning it into a safe space years before concepts like "safety in numbers" were popularized to demonstrate the scientific principle that more bicyclists on the street made each of us safer. I was merely enjoying being amongst people that I related to and felt like I shared common experiences with. I imagine it's what church or being a member of the Communist Party feels like for most people that do that sort of thing.

Remembering these moments of camaraderie during my times of worst health and inability to ride a bike reconnected me to my meaning and purpose. I had always thought of myself as a healthy and fit person, but in many ways this hasn't been true for most of my life. My joints didn't work right. I had trouble thinking straight. I could no

longer remember who I had met before, or their names. I experienced stabbing pains when I tried to digest anything. Eventually it got to the point where I simply lacked the strength to get out of bed.

Most doctors figured I was just depressed and gave me referrals to psychology. I withered. A friend's wife with the same symptoms passed away from them. I made my plans to leave the Earth.

But just as all things in my life seemed futile, a new doctor put me back on track, diagnosed the problem, and healed me. Well, she would tell you that I healed myself. I digress. Her diagnosis was a lifetime of mercury and lead poisoning that caused overgrown gut infections that took away my ability to digest food normally.

The solution to my problems involved starving out the bacteria, which also involved starving me. I lost 100 pounds. When I didn't think I could get any skinnier, I did. As I built up a little strength, I started taking the bus to work. Nearly 40 years old and I'd never been a bus commuter. The bus was supposed to take 45 minutes each way to work but there were nights where it took two hours and I'd fall asleep on the way home, or wait in the rain as the system claimed that a bus would have arrived ten minutes ago. To this day I have no idea how anyone can arrive anywhere on time if they rely on the bus.

Through a hazy head, I decided to get an electric assist for my bicycle so I could ride to work. I remembered how much that I had enjoyed bicycling, particularly with the perspective of having such a terrible time on the bus. If you think it's crummy to get rained on while you bike four miles, imagine the futility of spending the same amount of time standing still as the rain drenches you despite standing under an awning.

Years ago, one of our customers had let me ride his electric bike. He lives on the top of a mountain in the country so his bike has enough power to scale mountains and travel at 60 mph on flat land. Riding it horrified me. It was like a motorcycle. I never wanted to touch an electric bike again! I wasn't a purist; I just felt like that thing would get me into trouble faster than I already do to myself!

When I warmed up to the idea of an electric bike, I just wanted something that would make my puny pedaling 30% more effective. So that's what I got. When people see my electric bike they marvel at it. They want to know what the top speed is (maybe 30 mph on a downhill). They want to know how far the battery can transport me without pedaling (perhaps twenty miles at a walking speed—if I'm lucky). They are looking at this device all wrong. It's not about supercharging bicycling. It's about equity and accessibility. It's about putting me back on the road.

I realized that, for me, the important parts of bicycling were about community, simplicity, stress relief, accessibility, exercise, and the youthful joy and special feelings that come from it. By turning bicycling into a race, western culture perverted all of the joy from the bicycle and replaced it with a competitive emotional rollercoaster. If we're not racing with anyone else, then everyone is the winner and there are no losers. Riding without racing makes a compelling proposition to everyone who sees the joy on our faces, even if they relegate bicycling to a children's activity of their past. If your purpose is bicycle evangelism, ride slow and have a legitimately good time. If your purpose is for your own spirits and enjoyment of life, you'll face a lot less disappointment if you aren't banking on a dream of competing in the Tour de France.

An Influx of Useless Information

As my health took this tormenting downturn, so did the news. Starting around 2012, the blotter was overwhelmed with an emotional rollercoaster: scary legislation happening in government, grandma hugs squirrel, some celebrity from your childhood that you once held dear makes a morally abhorrent and horribly inadvisable public statement, somebody invented a weird new renewable fuel source that can function on Mars, every few days another rock star dies, abortion

could again become outlawed, political party uses current events news item to push political agenda, and, well, pretty much everything to do with Donald Trump. It wasn't that more scary things were happening in the world or that more of our precious celebrity population was dying faster. It was the way these events were being broadcast that was changing.

In 2007 when we had announced that we were moving the warehouse of our publishing company from Portland to Bloomington, IN, the *Oregonian* sent a reporter to cover it. He spent no less than ten hours interviewing me with relentless follow-up phone calls and questions about my opinions regarding culturally important institutions in Portland and how losing them to rising rents would reshape the city. By the end I just felt like he was a devil's advocate trying to cross-interview me about every line I tried to draw in the sand about gentrification. He interrogated myself and the staff about every angle. He talked to other business owners in the neighborhood. It was exhausting and I just wanted it to be over. Then the paper sent a two-man photography team to perfectly capture me in my element. The resulting cover story "Creatives Edged Out; Who Will Keep Portland Weird?" sat over a picture where my hair appears to add six inches to my height and my beard adds six more inches to my chin. I was championed as single-handedly keeping Portland weird. I didn't want to go out in public for a while.

A mere six years later the same paper did a follow-up story when we opened an office/retail location four blocks from our former warehouse. This time the photographer was the reporter and his camera was his cell phone. The “interview” was a series of leading questions such as “Who are all of these people hanging out here?” (the staff) and “Have you even had any real successes?” (we had at least two books in the top 25 of the largest bookstore in the world for over ten years). After about 30 minutes of staring at me skeptically, he left and wrote an article painting me as a hypocrite; claiming that I had crawled back to town with my tail between my legs after insulting the city that I loved. These two events in the same paper were the perfect encapsulation of the shift from “reporting” to “clickbait gotcha ‘journalism.’”

Obviously part of me wanted to respond angrily to him or post a comment explaining the misleading nature of his article. But who cares? Who would read it anyway? I would be doing nothing but directing more attention to the kind of “reporting” that I find so abhorrent. So I let it go. One of my weekly bike routes took me past where the paper was vacating its former printing warehouse and loading out decades worth of equipment. That helped me to understand the desperation of the second reporter.

I have a similar relationship to the series of misleading Facebook headlines whizzing by, claiming that kale may

be poisonous for pregnant women or Portland campaigned to kick out a Trader Joe's grocery store or Hitler had a micropenis or some woman in a mall in Toronto decided that her child is allowed to play with service dogs. It's packaged news preserved in the bubble of your social circles that perfectly prevents you from actually knowing what's going on outside of your network.

Getting emotionally invested in clickbait articles where nothing is actually happening and no new perspective is revealed is a distraction from the things that I care about. Yes, I do often marvel at the clever wordsmithing used to make a misleading statement true or to see how someone on the Amazon marketing staff duped a *New York Times* reporter. But I'm not getting upset about these things. I'm going right back to my life after telling my date about it with a laugh and a smile on my face.

I'm not sure how I did it, but somewhere in my 30s I figured out how not to let my emotions get the best of me and to choose how I react to them instead of the other way around. I'm not perfect at it and I screw up sometimes but I can keep most things under control by cataloging the inappropriate things that I watch others do in public every day, like the man this afternoon who was looking at his phone while his car was stopped at a stop sign. As my partner and I biked past he yelled "Don't git run over!"

almost like his passive verb would mean that if he ran us over, it wouldn't be his fault.

Cat 6, Strava, and Shoaling

Commuters bicycling fast is such a cartoonish phenomenon that the participants have their own language, apps, and culture. Mind you, most of it is borrowed from the actual racers that they hold in high esteem and perhaps aspire to be. But commuting is not racing. In fact, mistaking the two is, well, a mistake.

I live on a bicycle highway. I'm sure it's actually called something like a "neighborhood greenway" or "road diet" or whatever but let's face the reality: on weekends dozens of lycra-clad cyclists scorch by at their top speeds, shouting their conversations for the entire neighborhood to hear. Pedestrians beware, these cyclists don't always pay great attention to their surroundings. Once, a dog-walker stood positioned at a crosswalk, obviously waiting to cross the street. A Dutch-style cargo bike carrying a child and a loud sound system pulled up to the intersection and stopped suddenly so that the pedestrian could cross. Just then a track bike passed me on the left at high speed. Somehow—and I'm not even sure how the physics of this are possible unless someone is both biking too fast *and* not thinking straight—the track bike swerved all the way to the right and clipped the back of the cargo bike, with the cyclist

landing hard on the pavement. The dog walker just stared at them both from the curb in stunned silence as I slowly biked past.

On a different day, I watched as a cyclist passed me on a downhill at high speed and went around an icy traffic circle, only to fishtail, fall over, and for their body to slide across the pavement like a scouring pad. I've certainly taken my series of spills over the past 25 years but let's face it: since I slowed down I haven't experienced anything worse than cuts or bruises at ten miles per hour.

On my average commute to work, all of the other cyclists pass me like I'm standing still. This morning a cyclist aggressively passed me on the left in order to run a red light while a car was waiting and shouted "Oh! My bad!" as he disappeared into the distance. If I'm going a little faster than usual, traffic is dense, or my experienced skill at managing a consistent momentum means that I am matching another cyclist's pace for a block, I watch as they attempt to aggressively pass me. There is certainly a type: men in business casual with a single pannier bag; often with a cell phone mounted to their handlebars. Usually they succeed in passing, but sometimes they cannot, and I watch how this seems to frustrate them. I talked to my partner, who spent many years reporting on the bicycle industry, about this peculiar behavior. She explained that they have Strava, a cell phone application that measures

how long it takes them to get to work. So they are literally racing themselves. And perhaps in that mindset they may as well race me at the same time.

Even in my most aggressive and competitive cycling days, this mindset would not have made sense to me. I understand that for some people the fun of cycling is pushing their body to its utter limits. Pain is the display of this succeeding. Their t-shirts read “shut up legs” in a coded language spoken only to each other. And the ultimate joke, of course, is that they are in fact, their own class of racers. Eben Weiss, who writes as Bike Snob NYC, exposed the phenomenon in 2011 when readers sent him homemade videos of “Cat 6” or “commuter class racers.” As in they are literally commuters racing with other people...most of which aren’t racing. I get it that for some people the point of bicycling is their fetish with the Tour de France, and that Cat 6 racing becomes their weekend touch football game when they know they can never play in the NFL. But aside from the actual danger of someone putting everyone else’s in harm’s way without their consent, this is just yet another part of bicycling culture that will be embarrassing in five minutes for those participating in it now.

A near-daily occurrence on my way home from work is when a cyclist aggressively passes me with less than a foot between us. I maintain a consistent pace and within a few blocks we’re going uphill. His momentum suddenly

cuts in half as he presumably expires himself and then he is traveling slower than I am without room to pass at a safe distance. Passing someone and then slowing down is called “Shoaling,” a term coined by the Bike Snob. A comical variation on this behavior is when a cyclist pedals very hard to pass all of the other bikes in view and then immediately slows down, as if the whole thing was a matter of conquest. To be fair, part of me understands the childish pursuit of achieving first place, but the cognitive part of me wonders how many minutes before chasing something that is forever fleeting gets old.

These daily events are notable to me because they are so different from my first months in Portland. Once, I was riding my bike downtown and while passing through a quiet residential neighborhood, the bolts holding my front rack somehow came loose. My rack prevented my front wheel from turning, flipping me over my handlebars. I woke up dazed on the sidewalk where a stranger was offering me water. He had watched me fall, picked me up, and moved me out of harm’s way. Then he moved my bike onto the sidewalk as well, where he waited to make sure that I was okay before proceeding. This was the best possible first encounter with a stranger in Portland on the street. This experience demonstrated to me how Portlanders treat other people and instilled the importance in me of asking strangers if they are okay, if they need tools or a mechanic,

or if they just need a smile or positive chat to turn their day around.

Zen & The Art of Bicycling

In 2017 I saw a therapist who tricked me into meditating. He didn't tell me what we were doing, just started giving me instructions. He was a nice enough guy but meditating wasn't for me. He explained that the purpose of it was to become in touch with yourself, how you feel and what thoughts you are avoiding and how all of that stuff manifests in your physical body.

Perhaps I'm abnormal (Okay, I am) but bicycling has given me the space to be in touch with my thoughts and feelings in exactly the same way that meditating does for other people. As I sit at an intersection I can subconsciously judge the speed and trajectory of every moving object until I see my opening to pass through traffic. It jars me when cars and bicycles move unpredictably because it creates an unsafe environment but, in general, my heart has a very comfortable resting rate as I travel to work. That is, until a car stops without a stop sign, waves me through an intersection, and then proceeds to turn behind me and get frustrated when they cannot pass me.

On an average day 99% of my commute is processing my thoughts and feelings as I bike the 4.4 miles to work. For the

first year that distance felt a little too long to travel every day but as I embraced the commute, I began to savor it. By giving myself enough time and realizing that it would take twice as long on the bus or, heaven forbid, driving, I was able to happily plod along thinking about what I wanted to, unencumbered by the weight of the emotions around me. Full disclosure, I do tend to laugh inappropriately when someone behind the wheel is particularly stressed out and honking at nothing in particular.

One time I saw a car parked directly underneath a “no parking” sign in front of a bus stop. A tow truck was sent to retrieve it...during rush hour. The parked car blocking the bus lane meant that the bus had to use one of the lanes for cars getting off the freeway. The street was one way so the tow truck was in the middle of an intersection, blocking the light rail. As the traffic light changed, no traffic could move. Even on a “good” day cars in this intersection move at a miserable crawl and run the lights to prevent ten more minutes of compounding traffic delays. I imagined how infuriating it would be trapped inside one of those cars sitting in traffic as the actions of one inconsiderate person inconvenienced hundreds of commuters. With wide eyes, I took a mental picture of everything that was happening in front of me, picked up my bike onto the sidewalk and proceeded through the intersection as dozens of cars sat unable to move. It felt like the one perfect moment that made my entire life make sense.

The Summation of Life Choices

Now don't get me wrong. Even when I witness the worst of human misbehavior inconveniencing hundreds and not affecting me, I don't feel superior. I feel like I made the choices that are right for me. In my twenties, I thought there were wrong choices and one right way of doing everything that would apply to every single person on Earth. This is the same kind of thinking that led me to bicycle quickly and discard my friends behind me at red lights.

That's foolish thinking for a number of reasons. For one thing it's elitist and nobody likes people like that. For another we can't begin to know the gravity of other people's choices. We cannot begin to understand their life experiences and how those impact their choices and what's right for them. But perhaps most importantly, thinking that you know what's right for other people means that you don't listen. You don't hear their concerns; their hesitation; their questions; their pursuit of information that will help them to make the choices that are right for them. Which may be similar to your choices. Or may not. That's not your business. There's no need to be concerned about them.

Further, judging other people's choices does not create a big tent. It showcases what is different about each of you rather than what is the same. It tears you apart rather than building coalitions. Being smug and self-righteous doesn't

show others how much you enjoy your life. And if you don't enjoy your life, how could your choices be right for them; let alone for yourself?

Somewhere along the way I developed a habit of collecting scrap lumber and building bookshelves for our store. I accumulate pieces on the side of our house, draw up schematics, carry around a tape measure with me as I bike to my various appointments, and make sure that the pieces are large enough and in good enough condition. I strap them down to the bike rack or frame with bungee cords, and when there's enough wood I sand it all down and screw the shelf together. At times our yard will have four finished bookshelves waiting to be put on the bike trailer and brought to work.

One day my partner wasn't feeling very well and the shelf was too heavy for me to lift on my own so we asked the neighbors if they could help me put it on the trailer. They walked over and stared at my set of contraptions in stunned silence. Finally, the wife spoke "The series of choices that have led you to this moment..." she trailed off, gesturing to the homemade shelf and my method of transport. Then, perhaps not wanting to offend me, said "Our daughter would probably love one of these. What do you charge?"

I never think of myself as unique until I am in those social situations with someone who has a dramatically different

lifestyle. Sometimes people tell me that I'm lucky when they see my lifestyle but let's face it: it's the product of a lifetime of calculated risks. I see the opening in traffic and I take it. I don't move very quickly, so someone else could have taken that opportunity if they saw it and were remotely interested. They probably would arrive before I do. But the fact of the matter is that I'm living my own life, and few people would want it given the chance.

Your life may look nothing like mine. That isn't the point. The question is "Does your life look like what you want it to and are you getting there at the speed that serves you best?"

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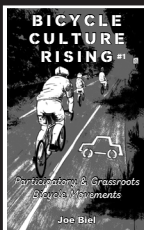


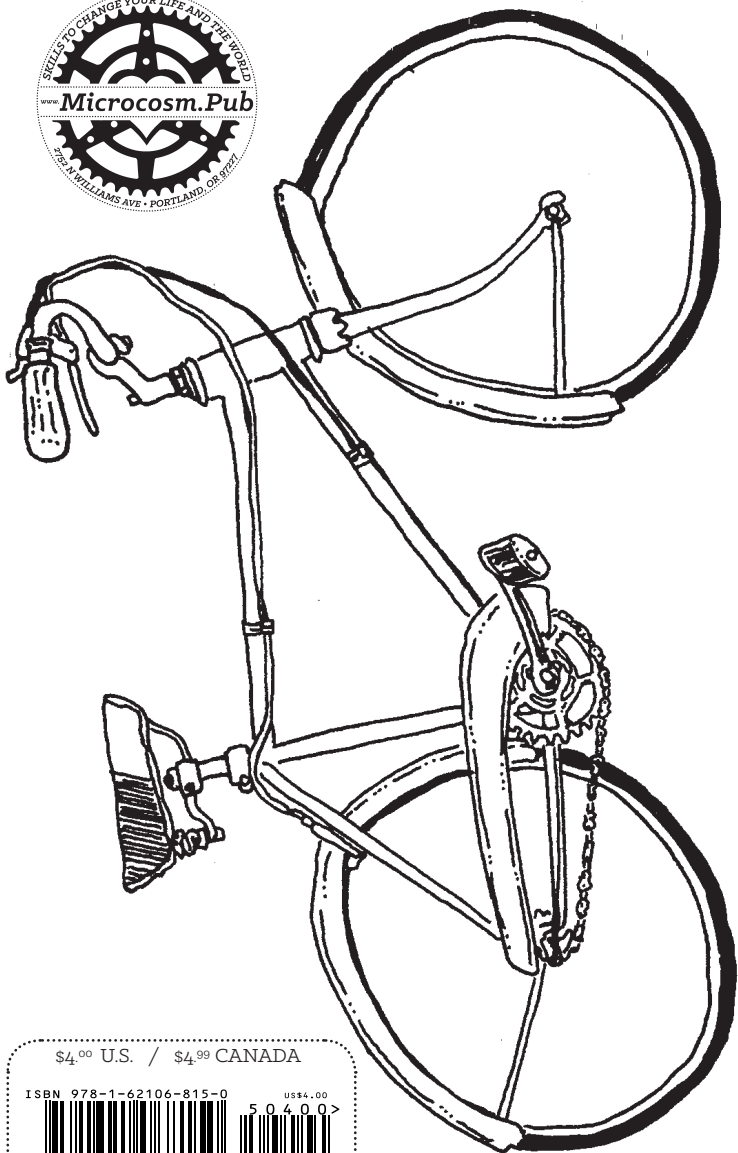
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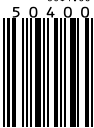


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