

Falling Weather

By Laura Madeline Wiseman

Late Summer

Near Dead Man's Run, a truck, huge and yellow, pulls from a hidden driveway. Unable to brake or bell, I yelp, then whimper, ricochet, then bump to a stop on the parking. I grip the brakes, then unclip one foot. The truck grumbles but doesn't rev. How am I not just a hail dent on that hood? I shut my eyes. My bicycle, Lexa, and I crash into the pavement. My helmet smacks. My hip slams. Fingertips grind as I untangle my legs. I jerk a clip

free, pull Lexa up, then step to go, but the chain slips. I crash into the top tube, then scramble off.

A truck door groans. "Are you okay?"

I lift a hand to signal something. Heat blooms. The driver disappears. I realign the chain, wipe my hands, spin the wheel. *Lexa, can we please go home?* When we get there, I sit on the



1 *Lincoln Trails Bike Sign*. Photo by Adam Wagler

sidewalk in the backyard. Echo rises from her nap to wag her tail. I'm scuffed, bruised, scraped. Her nose touches my shin, then Lexa's frame. Her ears lift and broaden as if to hone in on some distant sound. I pat her flank. Do falls have a sound that even old dogs can detect?



2 *Echo*. Photo by Adam Wagler

Leaning my back against the outside of the garage, I smell burn. Or at least I think I smell it. Last month when I traveled to Colorado, the wildfire smoke erased the Rockies. Even the vistas of Nebraska disappeared into a haze that gave me a nasty sinus headache and a heavy dose of allergies misery. Maybe there isn't a smell. Maybe it's that there's no sound. No grackles call, no robins trumpet then dash through the yard, and no doves coo from their perch along the silver maple. Nothing moves—not the trees, grass blades, or bushes. Then I realize what's missing—there's no wind. Cycling means developing a kinship with the weather. Today it holds its breath. Perhaps the stillness threw me to the ground. I reach for Lexa's saddle, then finger a dent in her seat stem. Will we be strong enough to bike across Iowa again next summer?

Fall

Sandbags, orange cones, and striped barrels stand between loops of caution tape. From the wet trail, I turn towards downtown, commuting to where I teach. Someone had posted that, after weeks of delay, the new protected bike lane would open today. On the hybrid, my bike for all-weather travel, I navigate around a cone. Why are cones still here? The humid air presses, but the lane paint sparkles. Bike icons glimmer, but the streetlights stay dark. Ahead, pedestrians or

cyclists ignore the debris, if in the street others ride with traffic. Gripping the handlebars, I dodge storm-shaken branches, twists of caution tape, barrier signs, and soggy sandbags. Why isn't this open?

I unclip one foot to half-walk and squeeze past a roadblock, but the barricade clips the bike mirror. With a jerk, the front wheel turns hard. The back fishtails. I hit cement. One leg smashes into the curb, the other jams into the frame. Crawling from the gutter, I draw my knees in a hug but feel hot road rash and blood oozing warm against my hands.

"Are you okay?" someone calls.

"I'm fine." Ache follows the heat. *Are you mad at me, Hybrid? Did I piss you off?*

"Do you want to get up?"

"Nope," I answer, opening my eyes, "I want to sit right here." The rain wicks into my clothes, as if it too will teach me a lesson—*don't ride on sidewalks, or don't take unopened lanes*. Or maybe it's something else. Like the weather, if I wait here long enough on the edge of this cold curb near my fallen bike, something new will blow across the Great Plains.

Early Winter



3 *Commuting Icebike*. Photo by Elipongo. In the public domain, Wikipedia images.

The sting of the falling sleet thrills. The hybrid's tires glide through a quarter inch slush on the trail. Sleet hisses as it strikes. Ice melts down my glasses while my tights grow damp. Cars work the roads with deliberate care. Still, they slide. Along the street, some pedestrians high-step through the gutters' mush. Others brush

windshields clear. Another cyclist pushes a bike, its saddle covered by a plastic bag. Near the food pantry, the typical crowd who gather outside the doors aren't there. The hybrid and I roll through each wet mile of the commute.

After class, what was sleet is now thick flakes. They muffle as they amass. Snowfall is a study of sound. Some noises amplify, while others vanish. The cacophony of the city is replaced with the sound of breath, the press of tires through snow, the shift of gears. Bike cleared of snow, and I consider possible routes home. *Which way should we go—the banned sidewalk, the unopened bike lane, or the streets?* If anything has been scooped, that work has already been blanketed again in snow.

I take the muck-slush of the streets. Where the sewers have absorbed the melt, the hybrid's tires hush, but where the gray sludge collects, they whisk. I wait for the lights, one after another, until I reach that place where the downtown merges with the university. Even here, the roads are traffic worn, rather than plowed. A city bus lumbers. Vehicles crawl. A driver leans over a truck's steering wheel to inch forward with control. No sidewalks shoveled, but people take them. Footprints fill up fast, then vanish. Clambering through what has fallen, a student presses a cell phone to his ear. Others wobble in sneakers with their hoodies pulled tight.

Then, the bridge that crosses the bike trail appears. Will the trails beneath the bridge remain unplowed as well? Can the hybrid ride five miles through such a wintery mix? Just beyond the bridge, a car fishtails into the gutter. It coughs and sputters, then rejoins the traffic.

When I get to the bridge, beneath it, a snow-made world of silence appears. Everything I know is there—Antelope Creek, the lifts and turns of the Billy Wolff Trail, the benches and

sculptures, the decorative words in concrete like *recreate*—is crystalline, blanketed, white. Two walkers tread in hooded coats. One cyclist carves lines that appear dark for a moment.

I rock the wheel. *You up for the challenge?* Then we cross the bridge to enter, following the creek trail into what snow makes of land and city. It's a pedal through solitude, sometimes only snow, other times weepy with slush. Where one trail connects to another, multiple tracks crisscross. Then for a mile, only one set of bicycle tracks intertwine, like a ballerina's dance leading onward. Snow hugs the chain. Ice embraces the brake pads. They reduce traction, forcing me to dismount to push the hybrid up hills. Then I remount and roll, grinning, picking up speed as if the hybrid is a sled and the commute home is an hour of play. When I leave the trail to find the streets again vehicles creep along, I shake my head and marvel. Why would anyone ride one of those, when they could ride a bicycle?

A half-mile from home, the hybrid fishtails to slide towards a snowdrift, then slips. I leap from the pedals to land on both feet, fingers only tapping the snow. *Nice work, Hybrid. We didn't fall at all.* I right the bike, chuckling as the traffic grumbles. When I get to the house, open the garage door, Echo bounds towards me. She leaps into the snowfall like a gazelle, rather than an aged dog. Prancing up the porch, she gives a good shake, dives back into it, grinning. Maybe winter, like bicycles, makes all of us young.

Winter

Eighteen degrees and I'm bundled in triple layers. In this overcast, no one rides the trails, no one fusses in driveways, no one walks dogs. Only vehicles speed, tailpipes smoking. On a friend's bike, hoary with winter grime, I pedal hard for warmth. If the streets, sidewalks, and

trails are half-clear, some segments fill with drift or frozen tracks—rough, jarring, slip-slide mess of snow-dust over solid ice. When I approach the first, I glide, gauging distance towards where it clears ahead. But then, the borrowed bike skids. I freeze in a hover, then feather the breaks. This bike is weird—fast, touchy at the handlebars, responsive to the slightest shift of my hips. *Are you going to make me fall?* The skid increases, then we tip, fishtail. The bike slides from between my legs as my hip bumps along the frozen tracks. I curse into the silence, and for fun, curse again. The ride is on.

Later, on the commute back, a group of middle schoolers calls, “Hey, hey, laaaaa-dy, nice bicycle.” White plumes of breath evaporate above them as they walk. Later still in the spring, one of them will call again, this time from the center of a pack of bicycles. I ignore them. Are a dozen boys moving in a group dangerous? Maybe. There’s something about kids on bicycles, a biker gang in the warmth of April—riding on seats set low, cruising the neighborhood, calling out feisty greetings to everyone outdoors—that makes me think, *Nah*.

Late Winter

During an ice storm, the borrowed bike remains locked to a tree in the backyard where even Echo won’t venture long or far. Whenever I let her out, she shuffles, squats, then returns, tail low, one lame paw dragging. For days, traffic moved toboggan-like through channels of white as the city shut down, even the university. When school returns to session, I brush snow-ice from the rack and frame, then bounce it free from the tires. If the main streets and bicycle trails have been plowed, salted, and sanded, many side streets remain sheathed in ice. Avoiding those, I ride sidewalks until I reach the trail, but when I try the brakes and gears, they freeze.

The bike can't be broken. Maybe it just needs to warm up? At intersections, I waddle over plowed humps of snow. On a bridge, I climb towards a refrozen melt, slick with what's slipped from the stays, marbling cement. I air brake, hover, my gloves quivering over the useless shifters. The bike rolls over several feet of ice-marbles, then the front tire hits a chunk. The bike jerks. I land on my hip, bike pinned between my legs, but so bundled in layers, I slide as if on a luge. I giggle. The ride goes on like this—cruising, air braking, and laughing wherever ice sends us skidding.

At work, some of my students seem perplexed, others amused. One says, "You biked here?" Another says, "You're always biking." One asks, "How do you get here with all the snow?"

"By pedaling," I say, stacking lobster gloves, coat, and balaclava. They seem unconvinced, so I add, "Who would drive through that? It would take forever. Did some of you drive?" They nod. "You're crazy—braver than I." I shake my head, begin class.

After, the sun, salt, and sand have restored the city. Plows have made enormous walls of snow that line major streets. Now everything is open. Now everyone is running errands—meetings, groceries, kibble for the pets. On residential roads that serve as bicycle routes, vehicles turn-take with bicycles, aiming our wheels towards any pavement that's managed to melt through. Some of our tires are thin, others huge. Everyone slides. I hover, giggling, then slip through tricks to remain upright.

At an intersection where the bicycle route leaves residential for a side path along a busy street, I consider the choices. On the side path ahead, two kids in backpacks stomp through refrozen street splash. Between them and the whizzing traffic stands a plowed wall of ice, so

speckled with spray, sand, and muck, it appears charcoal. *Which way is best—the street, the side path, or double-back for some other way?* If I ride the path like the kids, I'll have to walk most of it, unable to navigate the ice. If I take the road for a couple of blocks and if the path has been plowed ahead, I'll have to heave my bicycle over the snow wall. However, if I take the road, I'll have to share it with other vehicles. I choose the road but turn at the first chance that appears. This is why I ride my bike year-round. The weather makes it a challenge, a game, a problem to be fixed. And it's fun.

Later, after my errands are completed, ten miles of pedaling in the darkness stand between me and home. I unlock the borrowed bike, then tap the headlight. Why have the hybrid's gears refused my every tinker? How much will it cost when I walk him to the bike shop? When will my friend ask for this bike back? I tap the headlight again, but it refuses even to flicker. Why did I forget to charge the USB light last night? I check the backup—dead. The streetlights glow orange, but ahead they disappear. The roads are empty as if everyone hopes for another snow day. I ride into it, then stop at the first open store to jerry-rig something. I leave with a flashlight small enough to slide inside my helmet strap and balaclava. Positioned where a glasses' stem would align, its metal body wedges, inhumanly cold. I gasp, then ride the streets glimmering in the night. We slide here and there but never fall. Light pours through the open intersections as if someone might dance along to croon to the weather, *Singing in the rain*.

Spring

Mid-ride, friends talk previous tours, best routes biked, or swap road stories. We ride the tailwind that sparkles the fields with light. No one talks accidents, the darker worries we all carry, or the inevitable this or that of unexpected repair. When the group breaks up at the first SAG stop, I roll Lexa towards a tree to stretch in the luxuriousness of spring.

Mid-Summer



4 RAGBRAI 3. Photo by Adam Wagler.

After leaving Echo with my dad, in the morning, I repack my tent, then roll Lexa to join the others for the first day of RAGBRAI, the annual week-long bike ride across my home state. *We're here, Lexa.* Later today, a trooper will count 17,515 cyclists. Police wave us through town.

Residents hello. Some stand on porches calling, "Have a great ride!" The joy is contagious, like Christmas, a birthday, a bicycle parade, the event for which some of us have all-weather trained. The heat welcomes. But then, an orange line of traffic cones appears mid-road to direct our route through town. In some places, we have two lanes, but elsewhere we're crunched into one as cones follow the broken lines. Most riders squish together, keeping right, despite our numbers. Faster cyclists ride to the outside, sliding back when a gap emerges. Faster cyclists ride only in the other lane but weave among the slower riders whenever a vehicle approaches from behind. In another scenario, the weather might be the foe. Instead, the cones are the enemy to avoid. Their orange warning marches endlessly ahead.

Still, the festivity of the ride keeps the talk light. Someone teases a team's DJ for selecting "Crash into Me" as part of the opening set. I nod at friends as a police officer waves us through the next intersection. I dig to climb, but then, something drags—like a thump of a rain galosh. An orange blur tangles between Lexa's tires and frame. Against the flow of others, I veer in a half-circle away from the peloton, aiming for grass. I want us to crash into—cement, shoulder, or other cones—anything but someone else's wheel. Spinning too fast to release words, I try for eye contact with those around me. Turning while unclipping, I roll across my hips. Lexa remains easy between my legs. I press up with one hand and leap up to remount, then roll. It takes a moment to settle in—how did we not crash? There's no scramble, no lingering sit on the side of the road, not even a curse—I rolled, landed on Lexa, wheels rejoining the ride.

"Are you good?" someone asks. Adrenaline surges. I nod, unable to speak. "Nicely fallen," someone calls. There's not even a shadow of pain. "I'd give it a nine," another calls. "Graceful," someone says, then the ride is on, the wonder of the day, a week of wonders with Lexa, and so much sunshine warming the road.