

Fixing Time

By Laura Madeline Wiseman

Under the ash trees, I wait beside my dad's storage shed. His garage holds Schwinn's, bicycle parts, and antiques, like a 1900s bike bell adorned with an American flag. I strike it sometimes to sound its peal, like I touch other objects there—rotary phones, push mowers, Ball Mason jars lined-up like trophies on a shelf—transporting myself to the past for which he digs, scavenges curbs, or walks old city fills, his dog, Jimmy the Pup, at his heels. Why does time shift in my dad's presence? Breweries long demolished spring up along the Des Moines River again; interstate bypasses return to roads, and below a skyscraper's reach, the city's skyline shrinks to tranquil stories. It's the 1880's bicycle frenzy when my great-great-great-grandmother spoke before Iowa legislators on the educational necessities of handicrafts. It's the second war when my grandpa, too young to serve, salvaged parts from the city dump to build motorbikes from the frames of Hawthorns. It's 1973 when my dad commuted to his part-time job as a lifeguard on a Schwinn Collegiate, his curls glinting with sun. If his mustache has grown hoary, I still only see *dad*—one who finds what's old, to save it, mending what requires repair, even old bicycles.

Before driving over for a weekend ride, I called to tell him about Olympia, my girlhood ten-speed Huffy. After sitting in the garage for years, friends helped me make her rideable again. I asked, "Do you have another old bike I might try to fix?"



Olympia.
Photo by Adam Wagler.

"Well, I don't know, kiddo," he said. "I might."

My dad hands me dresser drawers to stack on the flagstone. He rolls out a Radio Flyer wagon to park on the sidewalk. He pulls out what he calls "the largest shovel in the world" to lean slant to the roof. "Have a look at that," he says.

At the shed's door, I lean towards the nubby tires of a 1980s BMX, then say, "I'm looking for a cruiser, something for errands." Olympia was a perfect commuter for the girl I was. Now she's great for rides to the gym, but I need what could carry groceries. Against

the garage rests a bicycle with balloon tires. It's a woman's bicycle from before the war. I climb the stones, then brush away leaves.

"Get down from there. They don't even make tires like that anymore."

I tilt the bike towards me. The cracked rubber flattens. Then I wait at the shed door. He hands out more objects to get to the bicycles. The air fills with the dust of what's obsolete or functional, scrap or antique. "Step in there and see if that's a bike for you."

Motes lift. Like an entrance from one era to another, an older set of things that matter, a belief system that came before, I cross the threshold. Wedged behind crates, planks of wood, and a rocking chair, a green Schwinn peeks—all fenders, cruiser bars, stem shifters. The light drifts with gold. "Can I try to fix this one?"

"You can have that Schwinn."

"*Have?*" I reach around, tracing the pattern on the leather seat. "It's so cool."

"Come on out of there. I've got to move a few more things."

Soon in the driveway, I wipe away cobwebs to reveal gilded detail on the frame, a Schwinn plate, and silver seat buttons, but spokes are missing or snapped. Split with cracks, the front tire fills. The back one lacks a valve. I step over to check bike fit. Through the grime one word hovers ghostlike in the green. I buff it until it glimmers. "Suburban," I say. My chow-mix, Echo, trots over, then nudges me with her patchy nose. Patting her flank, I say, "A Schwinn Suburban." My dad's dog, Jimmy, wiggles between us. I pet them in turn, then whisper "He's a Suburban."

In the shed, my dad returns the last of the objects, but beside the door I imagine he's kept out some project. Maybe it's something he'd been meaning to fix. Or maybe it's the thing he was really after, hidden behind this bicycle I get to take home. Or maybe it's something he'd forgotten he had, but finding it as he searched to give me what I sought, he'd discovered something he'd been seeking himself.

The workshop opens hanger-like, spilling bikes from the bay. On a bench a woman wrapped in a headscarf waits with three girls. A volunteer bike mechanic in a black apron spins a wheel, another aligns a seat, and a third holds a clipboard with forms for programs. Children's bikes stand sassy or tough under a maple. Inside more bikes drift on racks, float tethered on hooks, or line up on the loft. Classic rock bounces through the air. Welcoming all, places like

this exist everywhere, in Omaha and in my hometown of Des Moines, with a variation on the central theme: getting more people on bicycles. Accompanied by a parent or guardian, local kids can pick a donated bike for free. After ten hours of service, a volunteer can select a bike and refurbish it, while they learn bike maintenance skills. Bicycle tinkers or newbies, commuters or pleasure riders, can all enter this workshop, rolling or carrying what they seek to make road worthy. Bike mechanics answer questions, guide unskilled hands, explain which tools or how.

The Suburban's back tire flaps against the pavement as I push, then grinds as it threatens to topple. The new gumwall tire releases an odor as it jostles across my chest. Under my arm, the box corners of a new tube dig into my side. Several yards ahead, my friend moves quickly, seeking an unoccupied work station. I struggle up the driveway, then once inside, my friend hoists the bicycle onto a stand. "Can you get the back wheel off?"

I bite my lip. "I can try." My friend leaves to find a mechanic as I lift a finger to the rusted rim. For my summer project, I'd decided I wanted to know my bicycles, so I changed my first tire, then cleaned my first chain. I pulled Olympia from a dusty hook in the garage, called up my friend who took her to this bike workshop. I'd watched them disappear down the road—her frame on the rack, her parts in the backseat—but when she was returned I completed the final tasks—adding a taller seat post, reflectors, and lights. If repairing Olympia wasn't a fluke, do I belong in a space like this working on the Suburban? I struggle with the bolts by hand, then try a wrench, but the 1970s version of what has become the quick release remains frozen. I abandon the wrench to prepare a space for removed parts. Then with a rag, I look for dust.

Tailing a mechanic, my friend asks how to replace missing spokes. I lean towards their conversation that flows like surf, a tumble of what's incomprehensible mixed with words I know. My friend returns, then works the bolt free. The Suburban's parts amass—tire, tube, rim liner. Then my friend disappears, wheel in hand, for advice on removing the cassette. I sag. Other than mechanics assisting families or those with questions, everyone tends to their project. Their skilled hands move like dancers, like the hands of my grandpa, like the hands of my dad. The rag trembles in my own as the overhead lights buzz. Without the wheel, the bike appears off-kilter, over-heavy, and ready to tip, but when nudged, it holds. As a girl, I was always assigned a task. Would my dad tell me to do this now? Under the Suburban's fender, I swipe. A thick swag of dust falls.

Spare parts flow across the workshop like a kid's bedroom of toys. The rag works as I scan the space like a *Where's Waldo?* book to identify a piece, then try to decide which barrel, shelf, or hook to which it belongs. A blue barrel teems with handlebars. Others overflow with pedals, shifters, and cranks. Rims wash from truing stations in a cascade. Wheels sway on walls. A box fan whirls the scent of grease, metal, and sweat. Settling into the rhythm of work, the Suburban vibrates as if he's here to help.

Stopping in the nearby aisle, a mechanic holds a bicycle steady for a boy. His mother watches. "Can we look up there?" The boy points towards the loft, like it's a treehouse of bicycles begging to be climbed.

"I don't know of a 20-inch up there. Let's try this one." The boy sits, then squeezes the grips on a red bike as the mechanic checks fit. "I think you might need a 22-inch."

They walk towards the front, then the mother whispers to me, "His bike was stolen." She joins the pursuit. Another family passes. In a flow of brilliant fabric, the mother leads the search as the father tails, hands clasped behind his back. Between them, their daughters' voices lilt with melody, eyes luminous with the sparkle of so many bicycles. They hold chins, whispering. Their bobs lift, swinging to follow where one directs. I wonder what their bikes' purpose will be—a commuter for school, to twirl around the neighborhood in a biker gang of girls, or perhaps for the eldest, her commuter to her first part-time job. As they search, I find deeper places to clean. This goes on and on, families finding bicycles, me buffing the Suburban, my friend asking questions, the mechanic pointing to tools. My arms ache with the effort, but my shoulders relax.

When the shop closes at dusk, I wheel the Suburban into the street, tires full and wheels trued. He needs more work, but I pull him towards me anyway. The cruiser bars open wide. I hold them without hesitation, like joining hands with a forgotten friend. I push off. For a few seconds the buzz of the city vanishes into the timeless song of insects, crooning us back to 1973, a place without the demands I know but where my dad and grandpa once pedaled. As I head home, I wonder do objects teleport us to other times?

I take the Suburban out to ride my neighborhood, aglow with light. Streetlamps make yellow pools. House windows pulse blue. The brick and glass of an elementary school gleams. My own bike ride tee-shirt, made for such reflecting, illuminates in the ambience. Without bike lights, we keep to the lit path. I stand, climbing, but when I sit, the saddle tips forward. Pressing

my hips back, the saddle adjusts, but refuses horizontal. Coasting, I reach under the seat, fingers finding a belt looping the top tube and slide bars. I trace the leather's cracks, seeking the buckle. I tug, but nothing happens.

Back in the garage, I use a wrench on the bolts, but the soft metal strips. Echo trots in, tail half-wagging. Abandoning the wrench, I scrutinize the space. A gardening hose loops a hook. A shelf

holds the minutia of home and yard upkeep. A can keeps together an assortment of tools, while nails hold others. With my car parked in the driveway, the garage's real purpose has become the port for bicycles. They line up under the glow of a single bulb. Beside the door, cycling gear waits. It's a month into fall. Have I completed my summer project to know bicycles? I fold my arms. The Suburban's seat slopes like a mountain to climb.

In the house, I survey my bookshelves for anything cycling—history, DIY, memoir, maintenance, how-tos. A small stack assembles. I add to it bookends, a gooseneck lamp, a milk crate, and a rug. Along with a table and shelf, all these go into the garage. It doesn't take long. When Echo enters again, tail sweeping through the air, I say, "Welcome to the Bicycle Garage."

I sweat over my maintenance checklist. Echo pokes her nose into the dog door, sliding aside the flap. When my hands shake over some minor alignment, she ducks back out. When I hoot, she bounds through, wiggling orange fur to paws at the empty bowls.

With a pair of pliers and an empty bag, I push the Suburban into the driveway for a grocery run. Am I ready for this maiden journey? The front brakes still squeal with any pressure, bump, or turn. After climbing the first hill, the caliper tilts, then a brake pad groans along the rim. Without stopping, I reach over the handlebars. The caliper realigns under my fingertips, but a few revolutions later, the whining starts again, growing in volume. When the Suburban squeaks near a school, I try to readjust. When the bicycle purrs against the trail, I relax. After a speedbump in an apartment parking lot, the screaming begins anew. My legs burn. People glance towards our progress, then look away. One man stops, places fists on hips, then gapes. I tremble,



Suburban seat.

Photo by Adam Wagler.

gripping the bars. All quiet is short-lived. The bike just shrieks. Is this how parents feel with a raging toddler?



Suburban wheel.
Photo by Adam Wagler.

I lock the Suburban to the grocery's bicycle rack, then enter the cool air of the store. At the till, the dark-eyed cashier burbles as I fill my backpack. Echo's kibble takes up most of the bag's space, but the straps seem to accommodate the bulk. I ride. For two miles, people stare from every porch, sidewalk, or stoplight. I look straight ahead as the bag presses against me. It's a struggle to pedal with the weight, but I let the bike just yell.

After dinner, the pages of my books flutter through my fingers, highlighted like abstract art. I study my hands—boney, freckled, scuffed. Am I even strong enough? I drag the bike stand into the light. Adjusting the clasp arm, I shake, trying to hoist the Suburban up. The wheels refuse to clear the floor. Sweating, I turn to an original Schwinn catalogue online. If correct, the Suburban weighs more than Echo or Olympia.

My friend arrives. Echo joins us, dog-talking, then presses her flank into shins and hands. I explain what I want to do, then bring the bathroom scale out. “Step on the scale,” I say. “Now step on it again, but this time hold a bicycle.” I tried this once before, weighing only Olympia, but now, we weigh each bicycle, recording the figures. When we're finished, I subtract my friend's weight to find theirs—Lexa 25, the hybrid 33, Olympia 36, the Suburban 40. I report the findings.

“Forty pounds?” my friend says, then



Echo and Olympia.
Photo by Adam Wagler.

whistles, “That’s one heavy bike. You want to put a basket on that?”

“It’s a men’s bicycle,” I say, collapsing into a folding chair. “Is he too heavy to haul groceries?”

“Wait, didn’t you just go to the grocery store?” I nod, burying my face in my hands as I whimper out each detail. My friend keeps interrupting with *Stop*, *You’re kidding*, and *No*. So the heat begins to transform into a fit of giggles. Lifting the Suburban onto the stand, my friend collects the needed tools. For several minutes, I simply watch the shifters, brakes, and seat come into alignment, then the lubing of the jockey wheel, chain, and crank. I can’t be this useless with bicycles, right?

Tightening my ponytail, then pushing up my sleeves, I gather my own tools—degreaser, brushes, and sponges—to bring the Suburban to the polish he deserves. Dirt lifts from every crevice, each piece of chrome. Murk from the fenders melts. The shifter transforms from a yellow miasma to silver, nearly rivaling a mirror. It distorts my reflection, but I’m definitely there. Later when I ride, the Suburban seems to thrum. Wind sweeps around me. The cruiser’s line of chrome bars and green fenders send shadows across the road. I chase them until they too disappear. Not once do the brakes cry out.

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Echo bounces as I roll the Suburban into the driveway. She shakes her collar, then grins. “Watch the house, Echo,” I say. “I’ll be back with a bike basket and a bell.”

At first the chain catches, then finds its place as I experiment with the stem-shifters. Rolling through suburban streets, I rise from the saddle when the road is rough or settle in where the streets are smooth, newly paved, or repaired. But then, distracted by the traffic of a busy road, I hit a pothole hard. I brace for the saddle’s jolt, only, something curious happens. The impact doesn’t jar my limbs. I bounce as if on a trampoline. Under the original seat the massive silver coils cushion. I giggle, cruising like my grandad’s Cadillac.

At the big box, the bicycle rack is full—some chained, some not, some abandoned. I maneuver the Suburban among them. I touch the paint-flourished frame of an old ten-speed—tires flat, cables dangling, rusty. My dad might save this from the landfill. I leave it for someone like him to find.

With my purchases looped around me by the sling of my bike lock, I cruise the cool, leafy trail at a maximum speed of eight miles an hour. A fox glides ahead, the spot on her tail hovering. The purple dusk streaks with red. Above the red lights of a factory beyond the fields, a planet glows on the horizon. If this bike can take me to a place like the one inside Schwinn catalogues where I might leisure among those in tall athletic socks and with long feathering hair, maybe a bicycle isn't just an object that travels backwards through time. Maybe it's a link to every bicyclist who came before, all of us pedaling simultaneously, our wheels moving us onward.

"Ice cream?" my friend texts.

"Errands first?"

Soon, my friend is there. "You look cute in your polka dot skirt on that Suburban." All long-distance strong, my friend is ready to ride hard.

The suburban rocks in my hands. "You don't mind if we ride slow?"

My friend shrugs. "Doesn't matter as long as I get ice cream."

My friend lingers, disappears, then reappears waiting at a light. I practice shifting, until it feels almost automatic. The storefronts sparkle, reflecting bicycles. We pedal to the post office, the library, the bike shop, and then the grocery. At first the gears groan, but like a stick-shift in a car, if I wait for the approaching speed, then shift, the grumbles come out as purrs.

"How are you doing back there?" My friend slows.

"I'm learning," I say. "The Suburban is talking to me."

"What's he saying?"

"There are no hover-boards and tomorrow is the future."

"Tomorrow is *Back to the Future* day."

"I was counting on hover-boards. Imagine if there were hover-bikes?"

We roll. With the bouncy seat and upright bars, even fully loaded, the ride is buttery smooth. A dog walker moves to the side of the path. The dog's tail wiggles, the dog snuffles the base of a new tree. "Will you look at that good bike?" he says.

We cross an intersection, passing a Volkswagen van with orange trimmed curtains, then the one open storage unit among dozens of others padlocked shut. For weeks now on my commute to work, I've glimpsed a man there, often within his unit. Today, the soft span of a

couch appears. Against the center's gate, bikes lean beyond his unit—mountain, road, tricycle, kid carrier. Yesterday, he spun their wheels, tool in hand. Last week, he gazed into the distance, clutching a saddle. Light often illuminates a bar of gold from under his door after dark. No one has told him yet he can't live in storage. I hope he finishes his project, then finds home.

From the trail, we follow the paths of a university campus towards an emanating glow. "The Dairy Store," my friend whoops. I wait with the bikes among others who've gathered outside the brick building—college students sipping from straws, elderly couples who spoon from cups at picnic tables, and expectant mothers with children raising their waffle cones high between mouthfuls. The bikes' reflectors sparkle with the light of arriving vehicles. Trotting down the steps, ice cream in hand, my friend bounces, reminding me of the way I feel when I ride the Suburban.

My dad answers the door, "I'm in the middle of a project and I can't stop in the middle."

"Happy Thanksgiving, dad," I say, but he turns to what's spread out on the couch.

Bits of paper wing across a drawing board. Lifting glasses above his nose, he peers, then rearranges the bits. He murmurs, "Now where did I..."

The dogs follow me through the kitchen to the garage. I wipe down the Schwinn Collegiate. Beyond the flat tires and rusted chain, the kickstand is strong. I climb on. The grooved rollers of the pedals tumble like psychedelic waves from the 1970s.

"She's sitting on my bikes," he says, his voice traveling through the screen. "There's another Collegiate on the wall. See it there?"

Among several wheels, its blue frame hovers. "Is that the original?"

"The one I rode as a kid."

The rug softens his steps that flow back and forth across the hours. I'm grateful for this talk, a phrase or two at a time, and the familiar place to work. Dust falls from a rag I ease over a kid's Schwinn. It's single-speed with coaster brakes and painted the hue of orange sherbet. Another ten-speed with a generator light above the front wheel begins to sparkle. In the amber hue the word Continental glimmers. I climb on. Not an errand bike—what would be this bike's purpose? Too slim for a commuter, too heavy for long-distance and built with parts no longer made, he seems to want to glide through town towards movies, coffee, or ice cream. Perhaps to

know bikes involves more than mechanical skills, but encompasses the discoveries of learning among others who are in the process of learning as well.



At the museum.
Photo by Adam Wagler.

“It’s three dollars,” the young woman says inside the entrance to the bicycle museum. My friend and I produce the fee from our wallets. “There’s a short orientation video. Would you like me to start it for you?” We nod, then take our seat as the lights dim. The video is a recording of an exhibition that demonstrated old-fashioned machines pedaled by people in period clothing. The camera pans the audience watching the riders wheel across a plaza. An announcer explains the history that lead towards the invention of the bicycle, all types of human-powered wheeled-machines that came before, and many that came after.

Then with brochure in hand, I enter the museum’s first room. Like those in the video, the first exhibit of the draissine is from our past, a machine that moves by a rider’s feet, propelling from the ground. I’ve studied it in books, but now I reach for it, caressing the tires and seat. My friend looks away as the staff passes to turn off the video, but though she seems to glance towards my hands that hold the wooden handlebars, she goes about her task, then returns to her post by the museum door. I lean towards my friend, whispering, “Maybe it’s a discovery zone?”

“But,” my friend says, pointing towards the velvet rope that loops between each gold post, separating the aisles from the displays. I reach again for the draissine, then squeeze. My friend sighs, hands in pockets. My hands delight over each old-fashioned ride—handlebars, brake grips, spokes, grills over chain rings made to save a skirt. Tires astonish—cranks, gear ratios, design flourishes, frames of wood or metal. One set of rims features two inch studs to roll across ice. Under display lights, all manner of bike gear glints—lights, bells, medals, cups, hand warmers, even a squirt gun to aim at chasing dogs. After wending through two rooms, I grasp my friend’s arm, then point. A sign invites one to pedal a high-wheeler mounted on a platform. “You first.”

I hesitate as I overhear people entering the museum, then disappear to the film. Daylight filters through the storefront windows to the high-wheeler’s dark body. It towers on the platform. During the bicycle craze of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, cyclists raced them, completed century rides, and even, pedaled cross-country, documenting their travel tales in lectures, columns, and books. Months into the future—and I don’t even know this yet—on the annual week-long bike ride across Iowa, RAGBRAI, I will see a man ride one, pedaling among 20,000 other cyclists biking 400 miles from the Missouri to the Mississippi River.

“Okay, I will go first,” I say, as I step onto the platform, “but you *must* promise to go next.” My friend nods, lifting a camera to document my ascent. The wheels are slow to turn at first, but then they chuckle beneath me as if over boardwalk planks where such bikes were once ridden.

After my friend gives it a whirl, we take the stairs to the second floor, arriving finally in the room of Huffys and Schwinn’s. If my dad first gave me Olympia, then the Suburban, he’s also given me this quirky permission to find such kin wherever they’re found—inside books, at workshops, or in museums where they’re dusted regularly by reverent hands. The first bike in the final room is a Schwinn. It’s a woman’s bike. It’s called the World.

After exploring, I stop in the center of the room where two wheeled-machines wait. I flip the brochure, seeking them, but a listing isn’t there. I approach the first. It’s a big, green convertible with paddleboat-like pedals inside. I think of Fred Flintstone’s feet spinning dust, but then find a tag dangling from the driver’s side mirror. It says, *Try Me*. I giggle at this *Alice in Wonderland* invitation, then climb in to try. The gears rumble with the weight. My friend spins towards me, then gasps, as if my touching of bicycles has simply gone too far.

“It’s like a Big Wheel,” I say, laughing as I pedal a slow revolution towards my friend’s agog stance. “It says, *Try me*.” I show the tag, then step out, holding the door wide. “Your turn.”

My friend checks it. “You get in the other side.”

“Not a chance.” With my constant nudge that helps from behind, my friend lumbers forward. “I think the power-steering is out.” I stop beside the other machine. “What is this?” Like what the video called an Ingo-Bike, it’s scooter-like with an off-center rear hub. Nowhere is a *Try Me* tag, but my friend steps from the car and onto the scooter, then propels it by a rhythmic bounce around the room.

“You’ve got to time it just right.” Almost like Mickey Mouse or the Three Stooges, the wheels’ motion blur cartoon-like under the wide fender. They whirl across the polished floor. Holding the bike out with a slight pant, my friend says, “Your turn.” I push off, adjusting to the lift and drop of the hub. “Bounce on the drop.” As I pick up speed, bikes blur around me, those on the wall and floor, those way up in the air. I could be anywhere, in any time. I could be standing at my dad’s, dusty bikes lined up like a fleet, at the local bike workshop among so many trying to learn, or on my way home from a grocery run, basket full. But instead I’m here, exactly where I want to be. I’m breathless when I stop. As we leave, my friend asks, “Do you want me to take your picture outside the museum? We could send it to your dad.”

“Sure,” I say, posing below the museum’s lettering that arches across the glass, “but then I’ve got something new I want to try.”

Photography by Adam Wagler: Adam Wagler, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of advertising and public relations at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His professional background and research interests revolve around interaction design, owned media, emerging technology, user experience, and cognition. Six years of professional work has been supplemented by a number of grant projects at UNL building websites, mobile apps and other digital projects. Currently he teaches design, development, and strategy courses using interactive media.