



MY BICYCLE IS GETTING TALLER

Brooke Biaz (aka Graeme Harper)

1

My bicycle is getting taller. Yesterday it was just over four feet off the ground, but today it appears to be at least five. I don't see how this could happen, but I suspect it is a practical joke.

2

My bicycle is getting taller and Marcie tells me it is not a practical joke.

“How could it be a practical joke?” she asks. “Who would do that?”

I suspected at first that it might be Marcie herself, with her particular sense of humor and what appears to me to be her natural cunning, but she assures me it was not her and I cannot, therefore, ask further. Actually, the way she declares her innocence, in our bedroom, the look on her face—“perturbed”, I'd call it—I believe she is telling the truth. Marcie is probably not responsible. But my bicycle is getting taller and someone must be to blame.

3

Logic suggests, obviously, that there is an alternative explanation. So, I stand against the wall in our kitchen and measure myself against the door-jam beside the refrigerator. Or, to be entirely accurate, I stand and Marcie measures. At which point logic collapses, because there I am, as always, five feet eleven inches. Whereas logic could have helped out, it appears logic has decided to depart. I am not getting shorter, as they say people do as they age. Though I am ageing, as everyone must, and logic offers an alternative explanation, logic is wrong. The fact is my bicycle is getting taller.

“You know, Marcie,” I say, “sometimes I imagine a bicycle that could ride across anything. So maybe I could be to blame. But how crazy would that be?”

4

In all other ways my bicycle is entirely normal. I bought it online, and it was delivered in a truck—in a box with its own picture on the outside, quite an elegant line drawing I thought, as if done by a master who had fallen on hard times and had taken to drawing bicycles in his ancient masterly hand, or who had simply come to like bicycles more than expansive vistas or famous people seated stiffly on chairs. In the box its handlebars were folded back on itself, awaiting attention. There were also pedals in a plastic bag, along with instructions on how to assemble it. Its seat was covered in cardboard and bubble wrap, the tires smelled of fresh rubber, and the green paint was shiny and the bike had a name: Astrono.

Normal, that is, in every way. A normal bicycle for riding, to and from school. A normal bicycle to sit in the garage, on its own silvery kickstand, with its knobby tires pumped up hard and its handlebars tightened to firm. A normal bicycle that, on a sunny day in May, you might ride over to Marcie’s to ask her to move in with you and find that, as you ride, your bicycle

sings a little song that has words in it like ‘Marcie’ and ‘Moon’ and ‘you’ and ‘me’.

In every way, then, a normal bicycle with all the well-known wheeling attributes one would expect from cycling normalcy. Only, now my bicycle is getting taller and I have no idea what is going on.

5

“My younger brother grew taller once,” says Tom Wu, dismissively, “and that really freaked me out too.”

I work with Tom at the Book Depository, and here I am working with him again. Usually I enjoy our conversations—most recently about the possibilities in space travel, about young women who, while attractive, have longer arms than normal, about extinct creatures who are later found to not be extinct at all, and about families—but today I am not enjoying his company and he does not seem to realize this.

“Listen,” I say, trying to be friendly but trying also to be firm, “not today, okay Tom? I mean, you know. . . .”

“O,” he says, bending over one of the boxes of books that has recently arrived.

There seems to be a very long pause.

“Sorry,” he says, his head almost down in the big box.

I am angry now, a little angry at least, that my bicycle has seemingly caused this rift between us, between Tom and I, in a situation we now have to endure not enjoy, simply because my bicycle is getting taller and Tom tried to make light of this, and now we are in this crazy rift. I would give anything for this not to be the case. But here we are and . . . “Look,” I say, “don’t sweat it, okay? I mean, really, I didn’t mean anything by that. I . . .”

Tom pulls out half an armful of books and steps back behind the steel shelving where the books are stacked, thousands and thousands of them, from the front of the store, where we work, to the back of the store where there is just a steel wall.

And now Tom is a little back there, out of sight, out of hearing maybe, I don't know. All I do know is that this is my fault or, more accurately, in some mobilized way not my fault at all.

6

"You know," I say to no-one, because Marcie is out at her class and I am standing now in our kitchen again, talking into the air. Of course, education is always a gift. Marcie is taking a class on International Politics, while I am taking a class in History. "You know," I say, "I do sometimes find the world unfathomable."

Down in the basement, I visit my bicycle again. I have taken to keeping it inside the house, as such, because I am worried about leaving it in the garage, should someone drive in and find it there, should the door be open and it be there, larger, among the boxes left over when Marcie recently moved in. Already I can tell, looking straight at it, that it is now topping six feet.

"It's unacceptable," I say to my bicycle, "to behave this way. You do realize that?"

The thought occurs to me that had my bicycle replied then perhaps we could be getting somewhere. I feel that strongly now and, now further in the silence, I feel it even more strongly. In fact, for some moments already now I have considered that had my bicycle replied to me a moment ago when I first spoke to it, here in the basement of the house in which Marcie and I have been living together since May, and had it said something along the lines of "I do not accept I cannot continue to do what I please" or, more reasonably perhaps, "I understand your point of view and will see what I can do," then maybe everything would already be improving from here on, maybe the situation that appears now to be unfolding would not be unfolding. But instead - propped on its silver stand, with its bright shiny green frame and its knobbly tires and its seat that still appears new, though I ride it regularly to school and to work at the Book Depository and to the stores up

on Marshall Avenue and to the playing fields to play tennis with the guys with whom I have grown up, and to go see the birds that flock to the tiny lake nearby—instead, my bicycle is saying nothing.

7

Some might call what follows an interlude, but I feel it is more of a continuance. That is, I need to explain something about Tom Wu, something that matters I think. Tom is not Chinese. I realize this might come as a surprise to many people and, frankly, it came as a surprise to me. Tom Wu is not Chinese despite his last name. In fact, if he is anything, he is of Italian descent.

You might think this was impossible, given Tom's last name and given what you might think, or even know, about the name Wu. And you, of course, would be correct. However, in fact, this is not Tom's father's name but the name of his stepfather who moved in with his mother, Yvonne, some day or another around the time Tom was two or three and eventually, a few years later, married her. Tom's mother, being a traditional woman, or traditional in that way some might think of tradition I suppose, took Tom's new father's name, and Tom, having no choice, took it too.

I say, "Tom having no choice" to refer to the situation in which Tom was just three years old and did not therefore have the opportunity to protest. Tom's natural father was nowhere around, so expressed no opinion, and thus Tom (Casagrande, apparently) became Tom Wu, and he has stayed that way ever since. Later, of course, he had the chance to change his name to whatever he wanted, but I think he quite likes the confusion, or the complication, or the contextual unsettling, as it perhaps might be called. Tom's history seems to me very interesting.

8

“If this continues,” says Marcie, “I think you should go and see someone about it.’

Marcie has returned from her class, bright and lively and glowing with new knowledge, and I have explained my bicycle to her, and this is the answer she has now come up with.

“To what are you referring?” I reply, hearing a tone in Marcie’s voice that I have heard a little bit lately.

“This thing,” she says, and I know already that she is not referring to my bicycle that is getting taller but, rather, to my reaction to it.

I step out onto our porch, where The Moon has descended somewhat unexpectedly and is forming a collection of pointy gathering patterns through the pine trees. These patterns remind me of black birds flocking, blackbirds flocking on the long wooden front porch of our house.

Marcie’s tone accompanies me. It sounds like an orchestra of drums and trombones, were I to choose a description for this tone. A rumbling, buzzing orchestra.

“This *thing*?” I call back suddenly, into the house.

But everything is silent. Everything is without comment. There are just blackbirds and The Moon.

9

My bicycle is getting taller and riding along on it now, I am unsure how obvious this newfound height might be to others. I suspect it is very obvious. After all, my bicycle is now over eight feet tall. On my bicycle I am taller than all the cars that pass me on the road this morning. I am taller, on this growing bicycle of mine, than those who stand on the sidewalk, watching me pass as they too head towards work. I am tall enough to look into the cabins of trucks that come along beside me and to see there the drivers in their checkered lumberjack shirts and their t-shirts that say “If You Ain’t Rollin’, You Ain’t Bowlin’”

and their mesh hats. Those mesh hats tip ever so slightly in my direction, as if to acknowledge my predicament.

I am heading to the Book Depository to work. I will work there until lunch time when I will go to class, removing the books that come to the Depository in boxes and placing those books from those boxes onto the shelves. The shelves go to the very back of the building. They are made of steel. At the front of the building there is a counter, made of laminated wood. When the deliveries arrive they arrive at the counter, and either Tom Wu or I will greet the drivers and we will say:

“Hi there! So what have you got for us today?”

And the drivers, some in lumberjack shirts, some in t-shirts with slogans or commentary or advertisements on them, will say:

“You know what, I got some books?”

“Well sure,” I will say, or Tom will say. One or the other of us.

Then there will be boxes and we will open these boxes, Tom or I, and we will gather them in our arms, Tom’s arms or mine, as many of those books as we can, box by box, and we will take them back into the Book Depository, along the lines of shelving that start at the laminated counter at the front of the building and travel all the way to the steel wall at the back of the building.

10

But now at the Book Depository Tom is not here.

Tom is not here as I pull up on my bicycle that is getting taller. Tom is never not here when I am here but here I am and Tom, most certainly, is not.

I want to think differently. I want to say something other than what I am thinking. I want this something to make sense in another way than the way it is not beginning to make sense, no matter how much I don’t want this to happen. I do not want to think that Tom is not here because my bicycle is getting taller.

But no matter how much I tell myself that I do not want to think this thing, I can only come to this one terrible conclusion.

11

At my class, quite naturally, I'm distracted. It feels like there is nothing to be learnt. I have left behind the Book Depository locked and with a sign on the door. The sign on the door, which aims to address truckers who will be arriving expectantly in their checkered shirts and their brightly speaking t-shirts and their tipped meshed hats, says: "Due to Illness the Book Depository is Closed." But this is not due to illness. That is a lie. It is, in truth, due to the fact that Tom is not there and I had to go to my class. I cannot seem to raise Tom on his phone and I cannot seem to raise him at his home, which is not the home of a Chinese man but the home of an Italian one, which might surprise people.

I have ridden as best as I can to my class and I am here as if everything is normal and ordinary and as it should be, but the Book Depository is closed, and that is not normal, and I cannot learn anything, and that is not as it should be. I cannot learn anything about History, with its concentration on the past and its foundations not in the present or future. History seems to me to be irrelevant at this point. History seems to me too simple, too clear, too retrospective an idea to make any true sense. History is another country, some say, which might be a point. I imagine all knowledge now sitting in trucks, outside the Book Depository, unremoved, hidden away, unrecorded, wasting away.

12

As I ride home I am taller than the stores and taller than the tall fenced tennis courts. My bicycle is getting so tall that I can see above the houses along the road. I can see into gardens with children playing in the late afternoon, and families gath-

ering around decking, and talking and grinning. I can see open fields in the distance that I have never seen before, and long black highways heading one direction or another. I can see vistas that might well have once appealed to great masters who otherwise painted stiff portraits of otherwise real seated people.

I try to put my bicycle away in the basement, but it does not fit at all anymore. It does not even fit through the garage door. So I leave it out on the drive, propped on its silvery stand, beside a rose bush and pine trees that, at night in the moonlight, make shadows like blackbirds.

Marcie answers the door. She looks concerned, I think, in that perturbed way of expressing herself that she has. She says that Tom is here too, and they need to talk to me. She says this thing has grown larger, larger than it should have become, over such a short time, and beyond anything they might have imagined. I know what they mean, and I swing a look back at my bicycle so tall in the driveway, towering above the pines now, towering above the house itself, soon approaching The Moon, possibly, with its bright green frame and its knobbly tires. This cannot be normal, this cannot be right. Frankly, this all seems so unfathomable, like a practical joke gone wrong.

“Sometimes,” I say, stepping inside, “I have imagined a bicycle so tall that it can ride across anything.”

“Maybe I am to blame,” I say. “How crazy is that?”