

STILLNESS PURSUED

I had been cycling for a long time before I saw my first fixed-gear bike. It was as foreign and strange to me as my neighbors' fancy new 10 speeds, with their weird, curved handlebars and dark cluster of gears, had first appeared when I was a kid patrolling the streets of my Jersey suburb on my Rollfast coaster-brake bike. Shortly after college, a mechanic friend showed me this newest wonder. "See?" he said as he lifted up and spun the rear wheel of his fixed gear, the pedals and crank arms turning around by themselves, like a player piano. "It's a direct link. No freewheeling." "You can't stop pedaling?" I sputtered, unable to believe what turned out to be true.

An 80-dollar secondhand frame built up into the prettiest bike I have ever had, my first fixed gear. I put an old red suede saddle on it and took it around the city and learned to ride it. Paused at a stoplight on Fifth Avenue, I leapt out ahead of the buses and taxis when the light turned. Pedaling so fast my legs were burning a block later, I tried to coast. I was yanked up and forward out of the saddle and started bouncing around on the bike suddenly gone wild, but I hung on and regained control.

As if honed by the infinite loops traversed on the track, the fixed-gear bike is stripped down to the essential, an economy beautiful to behold. There are no loops of cable, no brakes, no hidden mechanisms, no multiple gears, only a streamlined housing, room for the engine and space for the pistons: a cockpit for the will to drive it.

A ride on the track, or velodrome—a steeply banked oval, the best ones built of wooden boards—is one of the best things you can do on a bicycle. The lines of the track bike, angled steep for agile handling, are echoed in the imposing, G-pulling swoop and thrilling head-on rush of the velodrome's banks and straightaways.

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Riding on the track is a lesson in physics. A downtrack roll from the outside rail gives the engine time to master the monster gear. Then you explode out of the saddle and drive! drive! drive! you enter the banked corner at top speed, leaned way over, and are pushed down into the boards as in a centrifuge and then, fighting to hang tight to the fastest line are slingshot out of the corner and down the straightaway, before being scooped up by the next curve. You played this game as a child, putting colored glass marbles in a jar and swirling them around, faster and faster, zipping around and climbing the sides in a game of follow-the-leader, a dazzling spectacle of speed, color, and blur.

You come full circle on a fixed gear. Having known flat-out speed, what remains is the mesmerizing art of moving slow, the penultimate step to perfect stillness. Standing on the pedals, you begin to rock gently backward and forward, like a fish moving to remain motionless in the pull of the current, your shoulders and hips dipping in counterpoint: bars right, body left, then the opposite way, as if walking, footsteps without landfall, back and forth, searching for the center, weaving hypnotically like a charmed snake, brushing closer and closer with each pass over the point of an invisible fulcrum, swaying less and then less until the mirror images begin to fuse, and the idea comes forward, the possibility of your remaining upright, frozen forever, like a photograph, the childhood lesson perfected, a picture of you on a bicycle, perfectly balanced.

Joshua P. Rechnitz is an independent animator living in New York City. He races bicycles on both the road and track and rides his fixed gear to get around town.