Along the town’s main street, there were no more than 400 meters from his home to the fledgling Velocipedist Social Club and Mr. Garcia walked them with his head held high and his eyes set forward, guiding his brand new velocipede beside him by its impeccable, polished handlebars, like someone proudly leading angelic, clean and well-dressed offspring to mass by the hand. But Garcia was a bachelor by inertia and his immediate plans, which had him completely absorbed, did not contemplate marriage but instead other more daring and novel ambitions. With each step he was aware that, behind the lace curtains of every kitchen window, the eyes of housewives were on him until he disappeared from their field of vision: out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the poorly concealed movements in the curtain folds, and even an incredulous face now and then suddenly veiling itself behind lace trimmings and embroidery. He knew that their curiosity wasn’t stirred by his person, despite the tight, flashy orange velocipedist outfit he wore, which was strikingly audacious in and of itself, but rather by the surprising object of his devotion, the true protagonist of that peaceful gray morning: the velocipede. Almost as tall as he was, with a front wheel measuring 1.2 meters in diameter; seen through its spokes, the scenery, the houses and the few people heading to the bakery for a hot loaf of bread at that hour, looked like images in a kinetoscope. That morning, as in previous days, the sky was overcast, but it frequently happened that the threatening clouds failed to deliver the expected rains. There were long spells without a single drop falling from the sky, and that was why Garcia, sure there would be no precipitation, hadn’t bothered to cover up the velocipede with the checkered oilcloth as he led it by the handlebars to the club. Besides, it was not his intent to keep it hidden under an oilcloth from prying eyes, but rather to exhibit it proudly so as to provoke curiosity and arouse interest.

The velocipede had arrived a couple of weeks before, meticulously packed in a wooden crate reinforced with metallic supports that had been shipped by cargo train from the city, where he had acquired it via catalog from the renowned and recently established Michaux Company, which, a year earlier, had
introduced its invention at the Paris World Fair; and since Garcia lived from rents and was free of family obligations and the financial commitments such entail, he dedicated his considerable free time to keeping up-to-date on the latest scientific and technological advances through magazine subscriptions and brochures from Europe and the United States. The cost hadn’t been miniscule, by no means, but for a man like himself, austere and free of vices, it didn’t require financial sacrifice or the assumption of debt; he merely used the sum he had set aside for that purpose, an amount that wouldn’t take him long to recover if his plans, as commercial as they were altruistic, came to fruition. He concluded his disbursements with the purchase of an old and spacious barn located on the edge of town, on which, once he had cleaned, readied and stocked it with the basic essentials, he hung a sign that read “The Velocipedist Social Club,” of which he was president and member number one, as indicated on the membership card he had issued himself the night before in an intimate and modest, yet solemn act at his home in front of his wardrobe mirror. As for the official inauguration, it would take place once he had learned to ride the velocipede and after he had given a simple but convincing demonstration.

No one was around for leagues, but Mr. Garcia was certain that in no time, when people realized the advantages and charm of this revolutionary means of locomotion, none would hesitate to buy one, if not two or more, according to the number of adult members in the family. He figured, for example, that his neighbor, Mr. Bustos, wouldn’t have any second thoughts about purchasing at least four, because beside his wife, who was fit, young and fond of strolling, he had raised two now fully-grown sons who were as clever and spirited as their parents. His own brother, without looking any further, had always been a man inclined to educate himself and one who admired all sorts of scientific and technological advances, having gone so far as to have subjected his two daughters to various rounds of a treatment that relied on electricity to eradicate certain dubious illnesses; the results turned out to be unexpectedly adverse and the girls had to be interned in a mental ward from which they had yet to be released. With the velocipede, however, the risk would be no more than a bump here and there of no major consequence.

And his dream—all men have the right to dream—was to lead this association or club and grow it until it became the biggest tourist attraction in the region. To this end, he would, first, set modest monthly dues payments, and as the number of members increased, he’d collect a modest income, an income he would reinvest in the association to expand its facilities and services to members and their respective families. Mr. Garcia was convinced that his generous idea would bring tourists to town and, with them, imminent progress. Perhaps other towns would even follow their example. What’s more, he had no doubt that history would reserve a special place for him due to his creative talent, brilliance and persistence. In all likelihood, in the not too distant future the municipal authorities would propose to name a plaza after him, and maybe even an avenue. Although the town didn’t presently have one, he was sure one would have to be built due to the imminent proliferation of velocipedes that was bound to commence once he opened the doors to the club and, before a gathering of the townspeople, delivered the inaugural speech he had been preparing for months and painstakingly practicing before the same wardrobe mirror that had witnessed his ascension to the club presidency. But in the remotest recesses of his heart hid a desire for a wish that made him blush: to see himself immortalized in bronze, atop a velocipede, in the fashion of heroes mounted on their horses.
Mr. Garcia had not taken into account that he had never ridden or even attempted to mount a velocipede, but he was sure that, following the instructions in the manual to the letter, he would become a perfected velocipedist in a couple of days. For his training grounds he chose a spacious and level area in the valley, an almost treeless and extensive field with only one inconvenience that he deemed of little importance: he would have to keep his distance from the bluff known as the Barranca of the Spirits, its eerie epithet derived from the legend that specters lived in the small but dark lake at the bottom, so dark and dense that it was really more of a bog than a lake, but that the townspeople mercifully took to calling a lake. The specters, it was said, were the souls of victims of chance accidents, unwitting hunters, passers-by and lovers who got too close to the edges of the bog, or ancient casualties of dubious and forgotten wars; it was said that their yellow skeletons wandered along the bog’s perimeter, shaking their long hair. The only thing Mr. Garcia had to do was stay away from the barranca as he practiced and learned. Also, despite being a meticulous and well-organized man with good foresight, he had failed to consider his own body. Mr. Garcia was obese, very obese. And the velocipede, as the manual explained, required the ability to achieve balance, the key to maintaining a vertical position, and that then, and only then, should one attempt to move forward on the different-sized wheels. He was sure that it must feel like flying, that riding a velocipede must generate, as the catalog put it, the thrill of flying like a seagull, although Garcia had never seen a seagull.

Having arrived at the barn shed, he leaned the velocipede lovingly against its side to display it, opened its doors, retrieved a chair and placed it on the broad sidewalk. Then he sat down to wait for the arrival of the first visitors to show interest in this new means of locomotion, of which, from then on out, he was the district’s exclusive representative. The public, dazzled by the velocipede’s novelty and convinced of its benefits, would buy the contraption without reservations and, consequently, join the Club. His face, reddened by the walk and the grandeur of his plan, looked as fresh as an apple, and under his blonde moustache, its ends arched up to the sky, a wide smile of satisfaction appeared. Every now and again, eager to race off speedily, he glanced at his velocipede with a possessive and dumbstruck look to make sure it was still there, splendid like a jewel.

This, Mr. Garcia thought, was the happiest day of his life. He was convinced that his enterprise would meet with success and that he had begun his definitive realization as a man. He sighed, marveling that he sat before his Club, the name of which, just thinking of it, filled him with satisfaction. Ah, if my father could only see me now, he thought, he’d be the happiest man on Earth! He’d say: “That’s my boy, yes sir, the family’s pride and joy, a man who sees the future.”

He entered the shed and wrote the day of the inauguration in large letters on the blackboard—he gave himself a week to learn to ride—and then he carried the board out onto the street and placed it next to the velocipede.

A few hours passed and no one came by; his hopes began to fade. What if no one had any interest in the velocipede? What if people didn’t even know it existed? He hadn’t thought of that; he hadn’t factored it into his plans. He hadn’t anticipated the need for a marketing campaign, so effective and necessary to the success of any business. Except for the handful of neighbors who had seen him walk past their windows, no one knew of the existence of the velocipede or the Social Club he had just founded. And,
truth be told, he had also completely forgotten about the town’s casino, where surely the neighbors were gathered at this hour for a charity fair, this being that time of year and people being in the habit of partaking in such insipid entertainment instead of taking a chance on a novel invention … their loss.

Unexpectedly, the overcast sky, typically harmless, began to dissolve in a fine drizzle. The rain was welcomed, but his velocipede was still there, leaning up against the shed, the eaves too short to offer shelter. He quickly left his chair and hurried to protect it from the intensifying rainfall. He got it inside just in time, as roaring thunder triggered a downpour unlike any the town had seen in years. Now he was sure no one would come to his newly found club, at least not until the storm let up, and he reasoned that all was not lost if he attributed the absence of curious and interested onlookers to his lack of perspicacity; they had sensed rain in the morning air, whereas he, wrapped up in his enthusiasm, had failed to do so. It took a while for the sky to clear; by the time it stopped raining, night had fallen. Mr. Garcia lit the kerosene lamps he had purchased, for the town’s electrical lighting did not extend as far as the Club, and sat down again to admire his velocipede, doubly beautiful now and transformed into an exoticism under the glimmering lamps. As he contemplated this miracle, his doubts dissipated, his optimism returned and his appetite stirred as he realized he hadn’t eaten a bite all day. He left the velocipede in the shed, taking special care to lock the doors, and returned to his house.

The next morning there was barely a trace of the storm left, except for a puddle here and there along the way, which, with the warm rays of the sun, emanated an almost pleasant sense of stupor. Because it was Sunday, he only opened the doors of the club to retrieve the velocipede and the instruction manual. He would take advantage of the day of rest to commence his training. Leading the velocipede beside him with a firm grip and dodging puddles that were becoming increasingly scarce, he headed to the level field he had chosen for his training grounds. He leaned the velocipede up against the only tree in the area and performed a dozen leg-stretching and waist-bending exercises, always sticking to the manual’s recommendations. Once finished, slightly out of breath and sweaty, he took the velocipede firmly by the handlebars, placed a foot on a pedal and swung his opposite leg and body over the machine. But he didn’t make it as high as the leather seat, lost his balance and fell flat on the ground, dragging the invention down with him. Mr. Garcia was not the sort of man that was easily daunted; despite finding his clothes soiled with mud, he attempted it a second time, and a third, and a fourth, and many, many more times afterwards. Quietly, sweating and muddied like a pig, he leaned the velocipede once more against the tree and took various deep breaths before setting his mind to the discernment of the problem.

I’m too fat, he said to himself, and the instruction manual didn’t make any mention of this condition, nor did the magazine advertisements or the brochures warn of it. Two tears of impotence and rage dropped from his eyes as he was overcome with a sense of abandonment similar to that of a little boy lost in the crowd at an amusement fair. He looked around until he found a rock he could sit on in order to recover his strength and lift his dashed spirits. He consulted the manual again, going over the instructions step by step, as if they were the Via Crucis, and wondering where he had gone wrong. How was he going to convince potential clients of the superior qualities of the velocipede if he couldn’t ride it? How could he attract new members to the club if he couldn’t provide a demonstration? Fortunately, he was alone in
that wasteland and no one had witnessed his failure. There was nothing left to do but to keep trying, persevere day after day until he managed to master the velocipede.

Every morning, as the sun rose promising ever warmer weather with the approach of summer, Mr. Garcia arrived at the meadow with his virgin velocipede, performed his elaborate stretching and warm-up ritual, left the manual open on the same rock he had used to rest, meticulously went over it page by page, and took to the challenging task at hand, always making sure he kept a prudent distance from the Barranca of the Spirits. His concentration and resolve were so intense that he did not become immediately aware of a group of children who had appeared on a neighboring hilltop, their little eyes watching his exercises and training with great interest initially until their interest turned into amusement and then outright mockery every time his obese anatomy ended up on the ground next to or on top of the velocipede. His first reaction was to ignore them, pretend they didn’t exist, but when a pair of adults joined the children, and then the following day half the town appeared on the hilltop, cackling with laughter and egging him on, half in earnest and half in jest, he felt humiliated, his sense of self-worth deeply offended; he was brought to the very verge of tears. But far from losing heart and enthusiasm, and maybe to show them his determination even if his life depended on it, he kept at it, day after day, falling, muddying himself again and again, bruising himself, hurting and holding back tears of rage. Finally, one afternoon, when the townspeople, tired and bored with the repetitive spectacle, had opted to stay home, the miraculous happened: he felt himself lifted up into the sky as he got a leg over the iron crossbar and his enormous rear end landed softly in the leather seat, causing the velocipede to vibrate; he wavered for a moment, and it almost cost him his balance and the verticality he had longed for, but then he put his pudgy feet on the pedals attached to the axel of the big front wheel. The world seemed to tremble all around him, but there he was, yes, mounted on the velocipede, and it was like riding a cloud in the sky. Without thinking about it, he executed the next step, just as indicated in figure number four, which was to apply gentle and rhythmic pressure on the pedals while holding on firmly to the handlebars. Yes, God had worked a miracle and he was rolling forward, zigzagging a bit, like a teetering child, but he was moving without losing his balance. He advanced several meters, with his confidence and faith restored. Any fears of renewed failure evaporated and his enthusiasm gave way to blind faith. He let out a shout of joy, closed his eyes and applied greater pressure to the pedals, increasing his steadiness and stability as he gained speed. Now he did indeed experience exactly what a seagull felt as it glided over the surface of the ocean: the wind in his face, the thrilling sensation of floating a meter above the hard ground. He let out another shout of joy and opened his eyes to look at the ground below him and watch it disappear, vanquished, behind him. Then, in an act of bravado, he turned his head over his shoulder, expecting to see his malicious neighbors on the hill behind him so that he could now laugh at them. But instead he discovered that there was not a soul there, and turning his head back in the direction in which he was moving, he was surprised to see the Barranca of the Spirits directly before him. He applied the brakes, following the procedure as indicated in step number 7 of the instruction manual, but he was going so fast that he went over the bank before he could even voice dismay; he rolled a few meters into the muddy sludge until the velocipede got stuck at the bottom of the bog. In the next few seconds, which seemed eternal, Garcia was able to feel the velocipede, which remained upright, sink until he was submerged up to his chest. Disconcerted, his mind was capable of
only one reaction, to repeat, as if it provided some consolation, the inaugural address he had committed to memory:

“Ladies and gentlemen, admirers and aficionados of the velocipede ...”

With great effort he was able to lift himself off the seat, make his way through the bog (which tried to suck him down into its depths), push his way to its edge and, clawing at the rocky slope, climb up to safety. But the velocipede had been gulped down, greedily devoured by the muddy bog, submerged below half a meter of dark, foul-smelling water; the bog released a bubbling belch to the surface, satisfied with the feast. Out of danger, Garcia began walking, and with every step he moved more and more like an automaton as the sludge he was covered in hardened into a shell around him. Because it was dinner time, he had the good fortune of making it home without anyone seeing him.

Garcia stayed out of sight and kept quiet about what had transpired. What’s more, none of the townspeople asked why he was melancholy, or inquired about the numerous bruises that still adorned his forehead and cheeks, or about the fate of the velocipede and the club, where they had on rare occasions gone to have a look around in a gesture of incredulity and pity. Garcia became a somber and spiritless man who was typically seen lingering by the shed, where, after a few months, a neighbor had set up a pig farm, but had also kept the sign on which one could still read the words: “The Velocipedist Social Club.” The pig farmer hadn’t even bothered to take the sign down when he purchased the property from Mr. Garcia at a bargain price, including the barn shed and its contents: twelve folding chairs, two tables, a chest to store books and file folders, a box with several dozen blank membership cards and a lovely blackboard that preserved the written vestiges of Garcia’s failure.

Years passed, and when the velocipede had become but a distant memory (and even that only in the minds of a very few) an especially dry summer with extremely high temperatures was visited on the town. The bog at the bottom of the Barranca of the Spirits saw its waters retreat, and concentric circles of mud served as recorded testimony of its shrinking, until its very bottom was transformed into a great big plate of cracked porcelain. Little by little, the townspeople, with a mix of curiosity and compassion, approached the bog and lowered themselves onto the brittle surface to get a closer look at a rusted skeleton with shriveled lichen for hair. It was as if evidence of the legendary specters had been revealed and only one person did not go to see it.

Translated by Dario Bard from an unpublished manuscript titled “Club Social de Velocipedistas” provided by the author.
Norberto Luis Romero is a short story writer and novelist, and also a director and professor of cinema. He was born in Lanus, a suburb of the City of Buenos Aires, and was raised in the Province of Cordoba. In 1975 he relocated to Spain where he lived until 2013, when he moved to Germany.

Norberto Luis Romero’s short stories have received critical acclaim and have been published in periodicals, anthologies and literary magazines in several languages throughout the Americas and Europe. His published stories have been translated into English by H.E. Francis. Two short story collections featuring H.E. Francis’ translations are available from Amazon: The Last Night of Carnival & Other Stories and The Arrival of Autumn in Constantinople and Other Stories. Since 2010, Norberto Luis Romero has dedicated himself to creating graphic art with photographic collages.

More information is available at his website.

At the launch of Norberto Luis Romero’s most recent novel, El lado oculto de la noche (2012), the Spanish poet Jesús Urceloy spoke of and with the author. See video (in Spanish):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr4ilYcswg0