



# Ride 3

*short fiction  
about bicycles*

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Ride 3: Short Fiction About Bicycles

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Always listen  
for the second car engine.



# City Cyclist

ANNE WHITEHOUSE



*O*n my bike, I am leaving the park, down shuttered side streets, across the avenues' uneven intersections. I listen to the bump and whir of my wheels against the asphalt. I pass blunt-topped towers between shafts of darkness.

My shirt flares behind me, and I am straddling the narrow seat, pedaling fast as the street inclines gently down. The buildings grow smaller, older; fire escapes criss-cross their faces. Figures blur past me as if in a dream: a man on a grey concrete stoop drinks from a flask, a woman leans from a window, two boys jump towards an orange ball poised in a ring. Their shouts meet me like a hot wind, and I travel through them.

Past patterns of scaling walls, doorways that open to darkness, I lean, and the bike turns; the street reflects

fish-eyed in a pool at the base of an opened hydrant. A cloud shifts in that black liquid. Behind me, the sun is lowering; its warm streaks caress my back. Again the street has changed; its surface is a smooth black glass, obsidian. I see that I am approaching the shores of a river of sorrow. Every morning the sun flees from it. Down there a man plays an accordion; a dancing monkey is waving his cup. Rats sleep in the splintering wharves; the benches are bolted into place.

But all moves away from me, all disappears in the bicycle's receding wake. I turn away from the shadowy river. An elderly man points his cane at my spokes. "So the silver spiral unwinds," he says, "into its valley at last." And the street opens.

A street of single houses from a century ago: brown sea stone cut in blocks, black gates of wrought iron, and window boxes where the velvet petals of geraniums bloom in utter stillness. The hooks of questions prick me: I am slowed; I stop and walk the bicycle, a finger laid across the handlebars. At first it seems the only living thing on the block is the light that slides across the windows. It catches each afire, burns, and leaves a crystal. Depths open in the glass. I am looking into a room: a study, a library. Ever so slowly, I slide past in the windows, while the light from across the sky turns the brown stones pink. The heart of a rose smokes in them, a stain of ash on the sidewalk. The spokes of my wheels are dulled to the lustre of old pewter.

Here I am unknown; no one misses me in the glistening windows. A breath of mist on a table: wiped away, does the street exist? I have stopped; I am sitting on a step, drinking water from a plastic bottle. My bicycle leans on an iron gate.

Even when I close my eyes, I cannot hear the breeze lifting the hair from my neck. And when I open them, the light is deeper and the shadows of clipped hedges wave across the stones. In the room above me, a pen scrapes over paper and someone hums a lullaby from long ago.

And yet the song is not from the room after all. A little girl is singing it, and she is coming down the street towards me, balancing a large metal hoop with a stick. She beats it lightly to her rhythm — tap, tap, tap. Then gravity accelerates it, and she hurries, it slants an oval down the street; her thin legs make shadows like the bicycle's spokes. Her hair is dark silk, waving like a fringe, hiding her face, as she looks only at her hoop. In the world only her hoop exists, and the song she is humming. It passes me in snatches like thoughts said aloud. In spite of her running, she is a long time coming to me: her feet clatter on the walk like rain on the roof of a country house; her hoop is a swish of wind.

And when she reaches me, she looks up and her eyes meet mine. Blue-grey, immeasurable distance. I gaze steadily back, not blinking. I am rooted to the stoop like the geranium to its box. She is so close to me that her features dissolve, and only her eyes, a child's clear eyes, fill my vision. Neither of us speaks. I feel the air touching my eyes, I feel naked. I know without looking that the hoop is perfectly poised; with only the top of her stick touching it, it balances on an infinitesimal point like a world stilled.

Her eye is like a pearl washed by changing light yet itself changeless. It is then, when I am almost lost in her look, that she speaks. Her voice catches as it surfaces; it is as ragged as the grass trampled in the park, as the torn

streets I have travelled. "Do you know me?" she says, and waits, and her mouth crumples. I am afraid she will cry.

"No," I say, "I have never seen you," but she has not lingered: mirrored in the windows of silent pink-brown houses, she runs with the whirling hoop down to the end of the street, towards the river, where it is already dark.



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*Anne Whitehouse is the author of five poetry collections, The Surveyor's Hand, Blessings and Curses, Bear in Mind, One Sunday Morning, and The Refrain, as well as a novel, Fall Love, soon to be published in Spanish as Amigos y Amantes. You can hear her reading "City Cyclist" on [www.theotherstories.org](http://www.theotherstories.org), as well as being interviewed about the story. She was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, and lives in New York City.*