‘With a poet’s precision and compassion, he has got to the heart of the same compulsion I have shared, to jump on a bike, and just go cycling off …’ Ned Boulting, from the introduction

‘If the bike has ever touched you, Fournel’s prose poem to two wheels is essential reading. For initiates to the Sunday *gruppetto*, it is an education; for ageing *rouleurs*, it is a lens on everything you hold dear about the beautiful machine.’ Robert Penn

‘A beautiful and lucid evocation of all that is best – and worst – about riding a bicycle, by a writer for whom cycling and life are simply inseparable.’ Michael Hutchinson

‘This classic collection is as great a book as has ever been written about cycling. Fournel’s witty, insightful and affectionate prose has the kind of class that mesmerises the reader, whether they be a lover of bikes or simply an admirer of thoroughbred writing. Watching this French poet and author shifting effortlessly through the gears is like watching Anquetil pedal – and thanks to this fluent translation, readers in English can finally enjoy the lightness and precision of these essays. By several bike lengths, the cycling publication of the year.’ Chris Cleave

NEED FOR THE BIKE

PAUL FOURNEL is a French writer, poet, publisher, and cultural ambassador. He was awarded the Prix Goncourt for short fiction for *Les Athlètes dans leur tête*. His *Anquetil, Alone* was published in English by Pursuit.

NEED FOR THE BIKE

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‘There is a faster man.’
Maurice Leblanc, *Voici des ailes*

For my friend Louis, riding in the blue.

For the Baron, Chacha and Mado, Rémy, Sébastien, Rino, Jean-Noël, Plaine, Jacques, Jean-Loup, Jean, Titch, Furnon, Madel, Philippe, for Jean-Louis, for Daniel, for Marc, for Denis, for Ernest, for Harry, for Claire, for Jean-Emmanuel, for Christian …

And for all those who set out before
and whom I’ve forgotten.

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Introduction

This is remarkable.

My experience of cycling has been captured within the pages of a book written by a man born a generation before me, in another country, whom I have never met. As I said, remarkable.

It's as if he knows me. With a poet's precision and compassion, he has got to the heart of the same compulsion I have shared to jump on a bike, and just go cycling off; a need that has been expressed differently throughout my life as I have grown older. With a philosopher's reasoning, he has unpicked and articulated my unspoken thoughts. Now he's telling me what I was thinking all along.

Paul Fournel's evocative writing impresses itself upon the reader, just as gradually, and just as completely, as the bicycle captures the soul of its rider. Anyone for whom the act of pedalling continues to fascinate and infuriate will hear his elegiac words accompanying their rides long after this book has been consumed, letter for letter, kilometre for kilometre.

Through these pages, which flow like the mysteriously forming and reforming thoughts of a ride in the Loire Valley, Fournel invites the reader to join him through a lifetime of dedication to the pursuit of an obsession for two wheels. From that miraculous moment, when, at the age of five, he 'no longer heard the noise of running behind' nor the sound of 'rhythmic breathing' on his back, Fournel's love affair with the bicycle began. It has continued unabated well into the twenty-first century. A spell of work in Cairo (where he was posted as the French cultural attaché until 2003) left him temporarily unable to cycle, and almost asphyxiated as a result. But he has recovered. He rides still.

Born in 1947 into the furnace of French cycling, Saint-Étienne, just before the golden age of the national sport bathed France in its mythical aura, Fournel grew up steeped in the classic cycling culture that many a modern reader yearns for. Such readers will wistfully inhale from these pages. His is a world of handmade steel, neither too rigid, nor too flexible, leather saddles imported from England and mispronounced, and, of course Campagnolo gears. What a time to be alive! This is first-hand testimony, forged from the same steel that made his home city of Saint-Étienne famous throughout the cycling world: elegant, durable, something to covet.

He remembers, at the age of ten, embarking on a long ride over the famous cols that surround Saint-Étienne and have seen so many battles in the Tour de France. That day his father, at the end of his reserves of strength, could ride no longer and waved his young son

forward. So, alone, the young Paul angled that narrow wheel towards a future that had already been defined by the love of riding fast. A lonely baptism, a difficult rite of passage, perhaps. But one which cements a bond. Fournel also recalls sitting in the stands in the velodrome, watching the greats of French racing ripping through the still, hot air; men like Saint-Étienne's most ill-fated cycling son Roger Rivière. Some education, that.

A lifetime of publications of poetry and philosophy have always been accompanied by Fournel's strong attraction to the sport of cycling; in his blood from the very start, if that observation is not too risqué (and yes, there's a forthright chapter on doping, which may shock today's sensibilities, but speaks from the heart of a certain generation, and will still find favour with many).

On these pages Fournel inhabits, through a fusion of experience and imagination, the animus of every conceivable form of road cyclist, pushing through the levels, gaining in ambition and scope before eventually, startlingly, inhabiting the mind of the professional rider. He becomes, in words, the sprinter, the baroudeur, the rouleur, the climber. He takes up residence in the thoughts and feelings of the legendary Abdel-Kader Zaaf, who famously fell asleep under a tree when in the lead of a Tour de France stage. Through sheer force of his writer's will, Fournel calls into existence the myths and legends of a sport steeped in folklore and mystery. At one point, he even transposes himself into the body of an automaton, Jacques Anquetil, and lets the great Frenchman speak to us across acres of time. Maitre Jacques, talking

to us, the generation of carbon fibre, sweat-wicking lycra and Strava.

But it is the everyday experiences of cycling that Fournel calls to life on the printed page that speak every bit as clearly and as lyrically to the reader as his writing about the races he has witnessed. Whether it's inhaling great lungfuls of summery air, breathing in deeply the 'moss and mushroom' smell of wooded glades, judging or misjudging a wet descent, or battling a limitless wind battering the west coast of Ireland, these are the shared wonders and impositions of anyone who has flown away from the rest of the world on a bicycle. Fournel finds a way of taking a complex set of impressions and contradictory impulses, and reducing them down to one very clear, perfectly formed idea.

There is talk of the quotidian violence of the bike, the pratfalls, the face-plants, the car-doorings. There is talk of familiar hunger knocks, or collapses in morale, of clicking knees and fading lights; the everyday horrors whose very survivability provides the tension and release, that tugging at the heart that a lifetime of riding a bike draws out. Whether he's battling rush hour on a Parisian hire bike or finding himself forced off the road by a Californian SUV, there is never a sense that the time will come when the bike will no longer be central to Fournel's understanding of the world and his cohabitation with the very act of being human. Get knocked down, get up again.

Yet, amid the talk of gear ratios, of tubeless tyres, of boundless hunger and great thirst, there is an

acknowledgement that time cannot stay still. Your position in the grand order shifts as you accelerate over a lifetime to take your place at the front, at the peak of your powers and at the sharp point of your form. Then you drop back, gradually, almost unnoticed, holding onto those previous, dwindling reserves, but wiser and more mellow for the experience. You'd expect such good sense from an eminent philosopher. That is exactly what you get when Fournel tries to justify, or at least explain, the absurdity of the cyclist.

Why, he asks, would you want to ride like an elastic-shorted Sisyphus up Mont Ventoux, only to ride down it again and do it all again? On the face of it, this is a bit of a sucker punch. Until, that is, Fournel equates the silliness of the question with asking why you'd ever want to peel vegetables, given that you'll have to peel some more, eventually, and some more after that, just to fill your belly and fill your days.

Why, for that matter, breathe? Why live?

Ned Boulting
February 2019

Foreword

If I am to believe my computer, I have hired more than 400 Vélibs in recent months. Four hundred of Paris' public bicycles left there on the streets just for me! Never in my life would I have imagined having so many bikes; all similar, all inconvenient, all of them 20 kilos' worth of weight, all poorly designed yet all different in their ways of falling apart: bent pedal, jammed derailleur, unadjustable saddle, flat tyres, twisted wheels, nonchalant brakes, misaligned handlebars …

It is a feast for the sampler of bikes that I am – my ear always alert to the slightest grinding, my muscles attentive to the slightest suspect movement of an axle or of a bearing. I am all the more attentive and all the more entertained because I know that the liaison with this machine will be brief and that I won't have to get out my spanners and my tyre levers. At most, if the bike's condition is serious, I take care to turn the saddle around to signify to my fellow users and to the workers of the house of Vélib' that the machine is no longer of use.

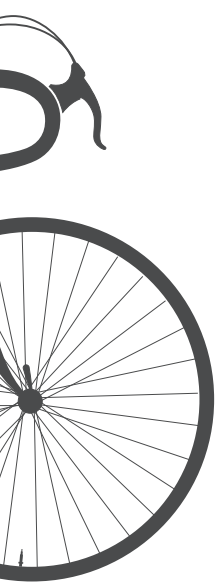
As well as exquisitely moving me through the streets of Paris – which I never cease to reread at low

speed – the Vélib' has the enormous advantage of making me love and rediscover, each week and each holiday, my beautiful Sunday bike. On it everything once again becomes light, silent, properly inflated and gentle; everything becomes titanium, aluminium, leather and carbon; everything becomes sharp and quick (at least until the first hill). What happiness.

For as long as I can remember, I have always ridden. My first memories are cycling memories. I entered the field of consciousness while riding and I have never stopped doing it. To ride is, for me, an enchantment – in the true sense of the term. I ride to rest and to tire myself out; I ride to dream; I ride to do myself good and to do myself harm. I ride to be alone and to share the road with friends; most often I ride for the sake of riding.

This book tries to account for this delightful and humble passion.

Violent Bike



Longchamp

I remember the dog very well. It was a golden dog of the boxer breed. I well remember that I was the last to see him alive because I was the one who hit him.

At the same moment, I felt my front wheel fold and my handlebars lever my left arm up. I felt the breeze from the peloton, which split up while yelling around me, and then I woke up, sitting on the Longchamp pavement, trying to write my phone number in the sand in case I passed out again.

There was the first hospital, where they found my arm too messed up for them; there was the ambulance with poor suspension that made me groan; there was Boucicaut hospital and the specialist emergency services for hands.

It was already 3pm, and my Sunday morning ride was taking a big bite out of the afternoon.

My arm was now calm in its cast.

The surgeon had told me: 'You've lost some bone; we're going to have to screw plates on and take some bone from your hip to do a graft,' and he went for lunch. Before going down to the operating theatre, I finished digesting the cereal bar swallowed during my race.

At exactly this point there were five of them riding at the front, and I had the sense that the great Demeyer was hiding. On the cobbles he showed himself to be cautious; he was riding strongly, as was his habit, but at the back. Moser and De Vlaeminck weren't at their best. Hinault, for his part, was pulling the train with the clenched teeth of bad days. Paris–Roubaix isn't a race where you joke around; his world champion's jersey was filthy, the kind of filth you frame under glass. The close-ups on TV showed him uncommunicative, concentrated. He wasn't trying to break away, and nothing was more exasperating than watching him carrying everybody in his panniers towards Roubaix.

They were ten Ks from the finish when the surgeon came back:

'Let's go – the theatre's ready.'

'Five minutes … I want to see the end of the race.'

'We'll tell you about it later.'

'I'll have trouble sleeping if I don't know.'

'With what we're going to give you that would surprise me!'

He made the mistake of turning his face towards the TV, and had to sit down on the edge of my bed. The race was so tense that he didn't say another word.

Kuiper entered the velodrome first, with De Vlaeminck, pallid, on his wheel. Four hundred metres from the line, the Badger took the lead and put the pressure on. Demeyer tried to inch past but could only remain level with him. Nobody else had the strength to try.

The Badger picked up his bouquet and publicly

restated that this race was bullshit. He now knew exactly what he was talking about.

Then there was the first injection, the trolley, the green gown, the second injection. Lying on the operating table, in a contented haze, I took an inventory of the gleaming tools at my bedside: nails, screws, casts, pliers, a saw …

Among them there was a Black & Decker drill, and I went under sorry that it wasn't a Peugeot … Great team, Peugeot.

Saint-Julien

I wasn't new to this game. Every cyclist, even a beginner, knows that at one time or another he will have an encounter with a car door. It could open in front of him at any time – from the right, the left, at the moment when he least expects it, at a bend in the street, at a junction, right in the middle of a straight and clear road.

As an urban cyclist, I have a complete collection to present: right door, left door, the high door of a lorry, the low door of a convertible, all accompanied by a range of reactions, from the extremely rare 'I'm sorry' to 'You should have been more careful' and the colourful 'You've scratched my paint'. At a reasonable speed this encounter ends in a broken finger, an injured shoulder, a persistent headache, a wide and dangerous swerve onto a busy pavement.

I had the honour of being initiated into this discipline at a very early age, and was awarded my first car door right at the start of my career. I was coming back from a little outing with my cousins and was riding carefully on the right, as I had been taught to do. We were coming back at a good clip because it was almost dinner time.

The door opened in front of me without the slightest scruple. My bike stayed on one side of the door, and I went flying over it, in one big lump – I wasn't yet using toe-clips at the time. I landed heavily on the other side, head first into the gravel. Half my face was pitted with dirty little pebbles. I could feel my lips and my brow swelling. I was one-eyed and mute. Would my own mother be able to recognise me?

The lady who had given me this surprise was highly embarrassed, given my tender years. She took me in her arms and carried me to her garden, while trying to come up with every imaginable way of erasing this ugly moment from our two lives. First and foremost she wanted to make sure that I hadn't broken anything and seemed to want to count my bones one by one. 'I didn't do it on purpose,' she assured me, of which I was perfectly convinced because I already knew a thousand other more efficient methods to kill your young neighbour. I thought she was a bit crazy and started to wait for my mum with some impatience.

That's when the lady had the brilliant idea of bringing me a big glass of Martini to bring me around. I downed it in one and, immediately after I got my first door, I got plastered for the first time. The lady leaned over my swollen head and, as her cheeks were fat, I felt like slapping her. I was perfectly drunk, perfectly messed up, perfectly raging, and my sole desire was to get back on my bike.

The Back Road

With the end of the Tour de France, summer had reached its sad point: long, infernally hot afternoons with nothing glorious to get your teeth into any more.

Fortunately there was still the prospect of our village's next cycling Grand Prix, when we would pass spare wheels to the riders and give them bidons in front of our house.

I was ten, I had a green bike, and I prepared for the event as if I were riding it myself. My physical training consisted of a series of frenzied sprints on the road that went from our house to the village. In those days the road was deserted, and I could sweep from left to right without any risk to André Darrigade, my major sprinting rival, with whom I jostled for first place in the last 300 metres while the courageous and powerful Roger Hassenforder, with tongue out, chased us ten lengths behind. As a general rule I crossed the line – which was right in front of our door – with my arms up, the victor. Sometimes, when the battle was too hard, I had to rock the bike back and forth right up until the final centimetre to win by a tyre length; other times I lost by a hair's

breadth and pounded the top of my bars with my fists, demanding a rematch.

That afternoon the confrontation was terrible. It was intolerably hot, and we were sprinting hard in the dust of the sun. My throat was burning and my muscles tight. I have to admit that, since I was rather chubby, my quadriceps found themselves sorely tested. So I had to do this final sprint in a blind rush, back bent, head down between my shoulders, in an all-out effort.

When, with a final grunt, I raised my head to make sure I had really won, I saw the enormous lady right in front of me, a few centimetres away. It was too late to try anything, too late even to brake, and we crashed into each other in an explosion of fruits and vegetables.

My front wheel had managed to ram right into hers, tyre against tyre, and we bounced off each other. The crates that she was transporting, the bread and wine she was lugging in the shopping bag hanging from her handlebars – all of it was scattered on the road. She was planted there on her bum, her black dress hitched up around her thighs, bun drooping over her ear. I blew very hard on my burning knee; I blew very hard on my raw elbow. She simply asked me what I was doing on this side of the road, which was her side. Head lowered, I insisted on picking up absolutely every aubergine and courgette, on reattaching every luggage strap, before limping back home to cry, finally.