

# THE COMMUTE

*Between home and office there's a world known only to the most devoted cyclist*

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ORION READERS

I WOULD LIKE TO PUT IN A GOOD WORD for commuting—not commuting encased in the shell of a car or a train, but cutting the air under one's own power on a bike. I have been commuting in this fashion for several years, through sun, wind, rain, cold, and darkness. On my way to the office amidst the rush of wind, I'll catch the call of a jay or glimpse a solo scull, its oars spread like wings, slicing the glimmering river.

Becoming attached to anything outside the norm, you run the risk of being ostracized, labeled a flake, for not fitting the social mold. If you are a lawyer in his fifties, as I am, you are expected to commute by car—to be another polluter commuter, as I call them. Driving is considered the most efficient use of time (although not of energy) and if you tolerate wasted time, the general opinion is you are not committed to your career. You become the perfect target for a critical boss or ambitious colleague.

"My coworkers think I'm strange," a fellow rider commented one morning. Another, pedaling a fine machine, explained that, when applying for a new job, he had to negotiate for use of the freight elevator since bikes are banned from office tower lobbies. Bikes are undignified and offensive, as are we Lycra-clad, helmeted pedal warriors.

Still, I wouldn't exchange my commute for another.

## SPRING

I ride from my suburban home to Center City, Philadelphia. No matter the route I choose, I cross from one physiographic region to another, from Pennsylvania's rolling piedmont to the narrow strip of coastal plain that cuts across the lower Delaware and Schuylkill River valleys. The local roads down to the Schuylkill, laid over old Indian trails and wagon routes, conform to the natural contours of the land. They follow streams or "runs," as Pennsylvanians once called them, that descend steep valleys. You can glimpse one, now and then, still running over bedrock.

I usually descend to a rusty iron bridge over a hundred years old, which I use to

cross the Schuylkill. It is part of a retired industrial complex, once the Pencoyd Iron Works, founded in 1852. The company name is embedded in the facade of the old brick office building and bolted to the bridge. Privately owned, the bridge is closed to traffic, but a pedestrian span remains accessible through a generous slit in the chain-link fence. Here the only sound is the spill of a run over rocks as it emerges from an old stone culvert to join the Schuylkill's flow.

While crossing the bridge on my way home on a late spring evening, I notice a drifting whirlpool that seems unnatural, not part of an upwelling current. Perhaps it was formed by the mallards that nest nearby. But between the iron beams, I catch only interrupted glimpses of water. Then I hear a muffled swish, and out from the opposite side of the bridge, a long, sleek dragon boat emerges. It carries about ten women along each side. They stroke and stroke in perfect rhythm. A woman standing in the stern steers with a tiller. The boat glides silently across the water, graceful and stunning, like a flushed heron escaping upstream. Suddenly, in unison, the women stop paddling. But the boat keeps floating at the same speed without a stroke along the channel between green foliage—a solitary ghost.

## SUMMER

A team of three riders in uniform, returning from early training, hauls ahead of me. I pick up speed with the idea of coasting in their slipstream. They slow for a red light, and I shorten the gap. As they resume pedaling, I work hard and close more space. My speedometer hits twenty-four, but this is a speed I cannot sustain. So I hunker down to forge ahead alone.

We cyclists crave the air we push against. Our bodies demand its oxygen. We are fuel cells, converting chemical energy to physical work. On a bike, we are incredibly efficient. On the calories of combustible energy packed into a gallon of gasoline, a cyclist pedaling 20 miles an hour could travel 1,350 miles. That's 1,350 miles a gallon. What's more, unlike a combustion engine, we do not run down. We run up, getting fitter with use.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

1. Boulder, Colorado  
(David Tegart)
2. Missoula, Montana  
(Jane Solie)
3. Berkeley, California  
(Aaron French)



1.



2.



3.

A cyclist's most hazardous obstacles are the polluter commuters fully armored in unwieldy craft. I observe them as I wait to cross the street at the Falls Creek Bridge. In a long row, one after another, they make a right turn onto the bridge. They are hurried and anxious. They are invariably alone, each sealed in a thermostatically, stereophonically controlled can. It would cost nothing for one to pause for me to cross; the lost ground would be regained at the traffic congestion visible ahead. But while most are probably decent enough—surely, they'd hold open an elevator door—they are entrapped by circumstance.

On another morning, I stop at a red light on Belmont Avenue beside a cyclist in his early twenties, maybe even in college, wearing sunglasses and a backpack and riding a rundown mountain bike. He is nervous on this new venture of riding into town. His name is Matt, and he asks whether I am headed for the path along the river. I explain something of the route. When the light changes, he follows. I caution him about crossing the entrance to the expressway, which he negotiates successfully. The next light, at the intersection that meets the Schuylkill River, turns yellow as I go through.

Suddenly, I hear a shout and a screech of brakes. Matt is on the ground when a high-strung driver thrusts his head out the window and asks if he is okay. I cannot hear the answer, but the guy drives away, almost hitting me, as well, on the escape. Matt gets up and starts to walk. On the grass beside the river, I do what I can to help. He is lucky—he has only a scraped knee.

I check his bike. One of the stays on the rear rack is bent. I use a Swiss Army knife to remove a screw so that it no longer rubs the tire. Cars race along the road beside us, and rowers pull steadily down the river.

## FALL

An October ride home begins in the shade of the urban canyon but returns to bright sunlight on the river, a painter's light of intense color and long shadows. The green grass glows. A splash of autumn auburn marks a tree.

Everyone is out to enjoy the end of a day and a season—joggers, bikers, walkers, moms with strollers. I weave in and out. To my left, on the western horizon, is the bright face of the sun. It is hard to imagine it will vanish in a matter of minutes and I will reach home only at dusk. The day lingers like an Indian summer, warm with remembrance but suddenly snapping cold.

Later, while climbing the hill rising from the Schuylkill, I think I hear an owl. I stop to listen. Just beyond the run beside the road is an inadvertent preserve—a

graveyard, infrequently visited and thick with trees. Yes, there it is for sure, though faint and distant, a great horned owl: "Who are you? Whooo? Whooo?" A polluter commuter guns his Lexus up the hill. Then silence, finally broken again by the question, nearly lost: "Who are you? Whooo? Whooo?"

Overnight, the weather turns. Storms come out of season. After days of unrelenting rain, the Schuylkill is a brown, turbid, roiling mass, carrying trees and trash. It whirls around the bridges' supporting piers, threatening to overtop their upstream prow. The path along the east bank is flooded. I ride the west side, which is on higher ground. But even so, the river has deposited a pond or two across the way.

This is one of the rare days I have a flat—a chip of glass in a tire, the remnant of yet another bottle casually tossed aside. As I sit in the wet grass replacing the tube, half a dozen bike commuters ask if I need anything. The offers are genuine. There is nothing condescending about them. But they are made in clear view of the fact that I am accomplishing the job myself. Their gesture, superfluous on one level, is meant to hold at bay what threatens to engulf us—the urban undercurrent of every man for himself.

## WINTER

In winter, after a cold spell, sudden warmth and dampness sometimes bring heavy fog. As I head home in the dark amidst the buildings, the morning fog seems to have dissipated. But on the river, its thick blanket remains. The air is palpable. The beam of my headlamp is visible in floating water droplets. The street lamps along the path glow in luminous moisture.

Lights outline the underside of the old stone railroad bridge. Under the influence of the lights and fog, the heavy arches seem to step across the water with a grace unnoticeable by day or even on a clear night. Water drips from my glasses. I am riding through a rain cloud.

But the fog-bearing warmth is merely an interlude. Within a week, arctic air freezes the world again. On my way home along the river, I stay alert to patches of ice. Only one or two cyclists brave the cold. Polluter commuters stream heedlessly around the hazardous curves determined by the course of the river.

Finally, my last hill rising away from the water, West Rock Hill Road, is solitary and quiet. On either side are open fields. Above, stars blink and flash in the darkened sky. It's still cold. But by the end of the day, even the coldest day, I have warmed to a good pedaling rhythm. ☺

Post your bicycle commuting photos at [orionmagazine.org](http://orionmagazine.org).

### FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

4. Calgary, Alberta, Canada

(Grady Semmens)

5. Minneapolis, Minnesota

(Amproad)

6. Hinesburg, Vermont

(Martha Keenan)

7. Baltimore, Maryland

(Eric Leshimsky)

8. Boulder, Colorado

(Go Boulder)



4.



5.



6.



7.



8.