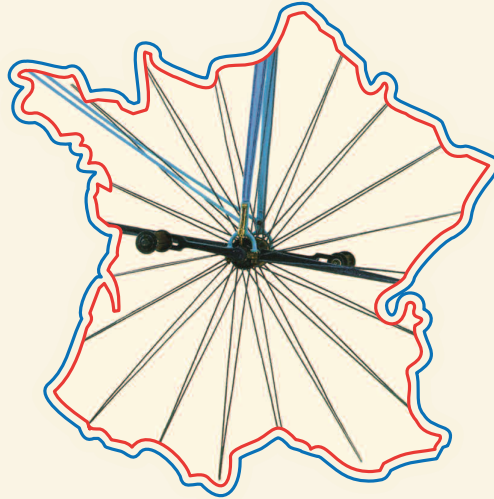


Lina Prosa



A Cell  
on the Tour de France

## **Lina Prosa**

lives and works in Palermo.

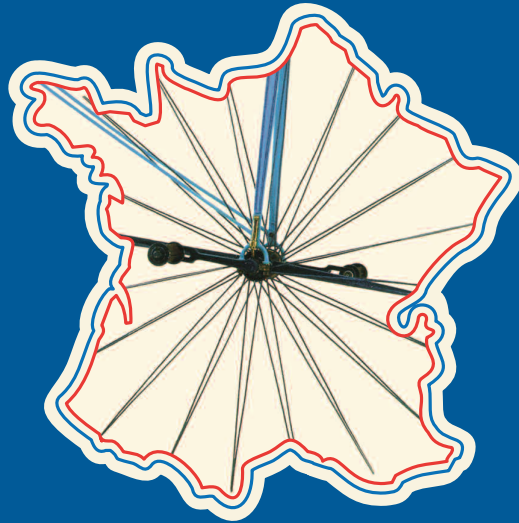
She is a playwright who combines her work in the theatre with the promotion and organisation of cultural projects that bear witness to her deep involvement in human and social issues.

Since 1996 she has been engaged in organising the Amazon Project, which she set up together with Anna Barbera.

This initiative brings together Myth, Theatre and Science in order to foster recovery through the use of human resources in the experience of breast cancer.

Together with Anna Barbera she directs the Amazon Centre, where the ideas of the Amazon Project are put into practice. In the centre she is engaged throughout the year in the activities of the theatre workshop.

Lina Prosa



A Cell  
on the Tour de France







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1<sup>st</sup> edition

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Lina Prosa

A Cell  
on the Tour de France

*Translated by Neville Greenup*



**Paper Cells**

2





In the month of July 2000, Anna Barbera and myself, who are jointly responsible for the Amazon Project, received an invitation from Bristol-Myers Squibb: to go to the *Tour de France*, as part of a group of eight patients of different nationalities, who were to accompany Lance Armstrong, the great American cyclist, a real-life champion in the struggle against cancer as well as a champion in sport. At the end of the Tour we were to join him in signing the *Charter of Paris against Cancer*, an important result of the *First World Summit against Cancer*, which was held in Paris on 4 February 2000. It was an extraordinary proposal. It came like an echo from my childhood, from the dawn of my struggles in life. I saw once more my first bicycle, bought second-hand for three thousand lire, the tyre always getting punctured and having to be patched up again every time I completed the circuit round my house, with needle and string, a primitive form of surgery to heal the continuous clash between dream and reality. I saw once more the whole of my life in that patient act of reconstruction. Our journey began on 19 July. Lance had set off on his modern bicycle at the beginning of the month. Once more, on 23 July he was the winner in the Champs Elysées. The group of patients joined him in signing the *Charter of Paris* in a public meeting at the Hôtel De Crillon. There were great celebrations at the Musée d'Orsay. For me there was more to come — the writing of this poem.

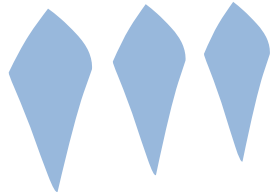
L. P.





When chemotherapy thrust the last cell  
beyond the confines of the flesh,  
the cell surprisingly went and buried itself  
in a bicycle-shed.

Local folk, people we have yet to understand,  
claimed that the cell had sensed that it could  
return to its origins,  
to the storehouse of memory,  
because a cell that can multiply itself,  
as a cancer cell can,  
when it retires,  
does not extinguish its nature,  
but travels back, multiplying the past,  
its memory,  
so, if you as a child wished for a bicycle,  
now you become a cyclist by acclamation,  
and a host of bicycles to show solidarity  
issue forth so fast from the bicycle-shed  
that it seems like a *Tour de France*.



if ... if you

as a child  
wished for a bicycle

Outside there was snow.  
Not Christmas yet, but the world was  
A forest of cotton-wool.  
So many children to vaccinate.  
So many baby bottoms to disinfect.  
No. That is not true.  
It was a mine of clouds.  
The inverted image of heavy matter with light matter.  
Is it yours, people of the world? Is it something to fear?  
The bicycle shed rose up beyond the confines.  
It marked the boundary of another nation,  
combining perception of what lies on this side  
with what lies on the other.  
The frontier of sensibility.  
No accident then if after the chemotherapy  
people should mix like members of an unlikely democracy,  
and those who are militant by nature  
should go to transform themselves in an alien land.  
Bald and swollen. Pale and weary.  
Sewn up again and again  
with flesh that starts growing all over again.  
A piece of lace!





The frontier  
of  
sensitivity.

In short, the cyclist, the vanguard of a race,  
different and oblivious.  
A neon-lighted creature.  
If he was a woman you would think he was an Arab  
with a turban on his head.  
Both morning and evening.  
Uncommonly smart.  
Suddenly *chic*, even if he has always been  
a leader of protests.  
Our Arab Madonna, protector of female baldness,  
in case of chemical aggression.  
But *he* is a man, an American man.  
On the edge of fear you feel protected  
if you are an American.  
Just a sensation. *Just mine.*  
They've got their arms and they've got their science, too.  
And now he challenges himself in the land of the French.  
He's got his bicycle back into working order.  
After the puncture.  
A patch over the inner tube and he's off, on the first stage,  
the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth.  
The *Tour*.





*After  
the  
Puncture*

Who is his team-mate?  
That's a good question to ask.  
It will surely be a son of yours.  
But he, too, the champion, is your son.  
Taken to the airport by a doctor on horseback.  
To depart. To arrive in time for the *Tour de France*.  
A splendid cowboy, straight out of the book.  
Trot, trot, trotting along!  
The pace of the treatment.  
The sound of the grief. The truth.  
On track with the list of everyone undergoing treatment.  
What is the time?  
A race against time.



But today the runner is the patient.  
Gaunt.  
Warrior.  
Between oppression and the right to revolt.  
War.



*Lance upon lance, lance against lance,  
a lance clashes, lances clash,  
hiss, hurtle, and whirl,  
intersecting, birth-throes of the air,  
hurling lances,  
the Amazons too,  
interweaving their lances,  
on all sides,  
until the world rests  
on a close-meshed net,  
the trajectories of lances.  
The world is safe.  
Long live Lance!*



Some of us like Armstrong have remained alive.  
Wounded.  
Yet able to breathe.  
To try our luck.  
Even if in the great vial there was not only  
a physiological solution.  
What comings and goings of foreigners on the edge of fear!  
There are migrations in the middle of one's life.  
Foreseen neither by those who are born  
nor yet by those who bear us.  
Did you remember, people of the world, to bring your rucksacks?  
The important stage.  
The temperature below zero.  
Must the race really be run in these conditions?  
A mountain. A little higher up, the peak.  
How many starters? Is there a favourite?  
Are they definitely going towards the goal?  
Hang on a moment. There is a trial run. Warming up.  
Look, they are ready! There they are!  
The pregnant bicycles.  
Two-wheeled mothers, whose thoughts before birth,  
Are already turned towards victory.

Some of us  
like Armstrong  
have remained alive.

Wounded

The *Nikes* of another Samothrace.  
The mothers of the sports industry.  
They're off! They're off!  
If a god has granted them to us it means that this  
really is the *Tour de France*.



There's no denying, there's always a sporting spirit  
in the folds of pain.  
At first you feel lured  
to a sea challenge.  
But you see at once that sailors we have never been,  
only cyclists with the spirit of Ulysses.  
Always ready to repair our bicycles.  
Always plagued by shipwrecks of tyres.  
Forever competing.  
Hard to believe it but the people applaud  
this never-ending toil.  
People want the *Odyssey*.  
But why?





Always ready

to repair  
our  
bicycles

And now the long-awaited sprint.  
He overtakes, he takes the lead, descends.  
Excitement grows in the bicycle shed.  
Like a wood swiftly traversed by a stag.  
If only Coppi and Bartali were here!  
But it is only the nostalgia  
which cycling feeds us on.  
There is no Coppi and there is no Bartali.  
Here one cannot count on the old champions.  
We must create a champion who is entirely new.  
People understand.  
Prepare the flags and bottles of water.  
Wait behind the grand gate  
that looks like the *Arc de Triomphe*.  
People are excited, people shout,  
swell their lungs to gigantic proportions,  
like a giant bicycle tube.

To multiply a man's dream is not hard.  
You only need to count on two wheels.  
One wheel alone turns on itself, works for itself alone,  
but two wheels work for a man's desire.

If only

Goppi

and

Bartali

were here!

Number one.

At the start this is the number of the shirt.

A single shirt, in the multi-spoked platoon.

Children certainly show they have understood  
when they draw the sun with numberless rays.

The largest wheel at the centre  
of the largest square

conveys the idea of a universe  
that cannot be

touched or completely known.

That is why the cell, if it wanders  
outside the system,

re-enters via

the system of cycling.

There is a solution, you know.

There is a solution

that's quite extraordinary —  
go to the *Tour de France!*



1

Mountains, once again mountains.  
Before your eyes, the remains of eternal glaciers.  
An eternity filthy with smog.  
Can this be?  
Yet people have come as far as this  
because no one,  
even if bodies have billions of cells,  
has ever looked one of these cells in the face.  
But is a man on a bicycle needed  
to barter for a microscope?  
Yes, of course, if both the fan and the champion  
were children once.  
Beneath the gaze of heaven  
the champion is being built.  
The bicycle shed, or the biological hut,  
seems far away, at the half-way stage.



... if both  
the fan  
and the champion  
were children once

Children

Children

Certainly, it is not tiring to massage  
one man alone  
in the great international meeting.  
But who is the man that massages Lance?  
The muscles act in conjunction with the air,  
thought acts in conjunction with life,  
and if it rains and the cold arrives,  
there is nothing to cover, nothing to dry.  
Champions have a reversible body.  
That is why we are here in France,  
and in particular here at Hautacam,  
and then at Mont Ventoux.  
And after that...

A mannequin cell!  
A model amid the secrets of life.  
She was young when she left for Paris,  
homeland of her dreams.  
Attention, please! Let no one be distracted!  
This is no time for frivolity!  
Watching a champion cycling past  
is like watching the fleeting moment.





Watching  
a champion  
cycling past

The image features two stylized silhouettes of cyclists on a blue background. The cyclist on the left is rendered in a light blue color, while the cyclist on the right is in a darker blue. Both are shown in a dynamic, forward-leaning posture, typical of a road cyclist. The text is overlaid on the image, with the top part in white and the bottom part in yellow.

is like watching  
the fleeting moment.

*Side A of the cyclist's body.*

Tanned, like a peasant on a bicycle,  
hard to tell how old he is, though still very young.

A climber. An alpinist of the bicycle.

Profoundly silent.

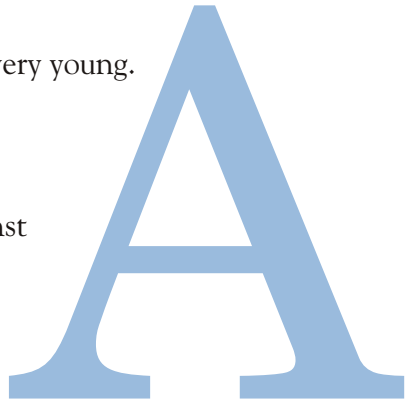
The root side.

A network of muscles, rainproof against  
the sudden assault of winter.

Thermal skin.

A covering for the intestines.

An appearance of solidity.



*Side B of the cyclist's body.*

The sprinter.

The flower side.

That which the fan sees  
and sprinkles with water,  
that flies away as he passes by,  
like a wave seized by the wind.

A fresh physique, all ready for  
the sudden assault of summer.

A happy man in the midst of his team.

The  
flower  
side



At every start, side A and side B are together.  
No one can foresee  
when the side will have to be changed.  
Once again the signal for the start.  
Platoon, forward march!  
Another stage. As if it were the Rosary.  
Some pray that he may be the winner,  
but it won't be easy,  
while others pray for someone else to win.  
And really that's only as it ought to be.  
But you, Saint Michael, whose side are *you* on?  
People are waiting at the second grand gate.  
The way out, from nation and from thought.  
They redouble their desire to refresh the champion.  
Tanks of water from every part of the world  
are stationed where they cycle past.  
As if they had to extinguish a fire.  
Water, quick!  
Can the cell swim? Will it drown?  
The taps are turned on, a miracle!  
The cyclist proves to be a seafaring man,  
carrying his bicycle like a boat — the city runs no risk.



The water flows under the bridge as if it were the *Arc de Triomphe*;  
a slight diversion of the Seine,  
to bring the melancholy of poets  
to the generation of cyclists.  
Who sponsors the new era?  
There is the US Postal Service.  
But what is that?  
What's that to do with a bicycle?  
And then there's VISA.  
But isn't that something to do with credit cards?  
Then there is Bristol-Myers Squibb,  
but isn't that something to do with medicines?  
There's Trek, the very idea of a bicycle.  
There is also Yahoo!  
Its portal like the *Arc de Triomphe*?



He's the winner!  
The radio says so too.  
Even Radio AUT, the smallest radio  
of the farthestmost outskirts.



Who

sponsors

the new era?

From Cinisi. In Sicily.  
The radio reporter has never had cancer  
but he knows the social form of cancer,  
which, if once recognised, would turn  
the whole planet into one great hospital.  
Radio AUT talks like a child,  
it wants to touch the champion,  
it wants him all for itself,  
just as the ideal remains all for itself,  
when to foretell the onset of cancer  
is Cassandra-like presumption,  
empty science of the word,  
the wheel of politics without the philosophy  
of the bicycle.  
Who is for us the winner  
of the *Tour de France*?  
Yet again the Avenging Angel?  
The American is tenacious.  
He overtakes our thoughts.  
He opens up a path in a foreign land.  
He is the first.  
He wears the *Yellow Jersey*.



The image features a solid blue background with several concentric white circles centered in the middle. The text "Radio AUT" is positioned in the center. "Radio" is in a white serif font, and "AUT" is in a large, bold, yellow sans-serif font with a slight 3D effect and a shadow.

Radio **AUT**

talks like a child.

He shoots like lightning down the great avenue to the finishing-line.  
Already the Champs-Élysées?  
Meanwhile he rides where the smallest of spaces  
opens up the way.  
He rides through a row of bicycles propped against trees.  
It is night — men have already stopped.  
But the champion cannot stop.  
At last! He changes. He switches his body to side B.  
Speed drives him on, or perhaps it is instinct,  
but he accelerates, straining over the crossbar.  
No flesh of the body but clings to it,  
as if the wager were not to 'make the best time',  
but to prevent the body from falling from the top  
of a painful thought.  
Here comes the army to light up with powerful torches  
the streets that were plunged into darkness.  
If we did not know for certain why we are here,  
we might think we were in a concentration camp,  
from which a deported prisoner is trying to escape.  
Away flees Armstrong! Armstrong flees away!  
The goal is not necessarily the one you were thinking of.  
The people too are in doubt. They shout, they beseech you.

Away flees  
**Armstrong!**



They want you to be free.  
Flee, there has been a war. This is true.  
Someone dares to push you. That's not allowed, but it's an act of love.  
Someone speaks to you in words you cannot hear.  
Any disconnected words are vibrant with encouragement.  
If you are tired, who is not willing to hold you in their arms?  
Men are willing to become women.  
The bicycle mothers long to embrace you.  
Just a moment. History is forcing its way in.  
In the swollen memory, like a frog  
infused with chemotherapy,  
some lose their hair, but not their skin.  
A woman raises the flag  
as it were the symbol of revolution.  
In the centre of the field she urges on  
the small band of survivors:  
Jeff, Colin, Doris, Waltraud, Lina, Anna, Judy, Deidre,  
led on by John.  
Have they perhaps come out of the painting by Delacroix?  
A photo! A photo!  
Charlotte photographs lovingly. May it live in our memory!  
If there is to be a party, it can only be in the Musée d'Orsay!



At dawn the Tour has already passed.  
The concentration camp no longer exists.  
Baldness does not make history.  
It means something else.  
It marks the passage from genesis  
to the universal deluge.  
By drip-feed. By intravenous injection.  
For the retroactive behaviour of the cell  
deciphers ancient scripture and makes you feel the efforts of Noah  
in the bones of a man who by now  
has gone beyond the twentieth century.  
I thought as much.  
Noah is the watchman of the bicycle-shed.  
Only Noah, the first navigator,  
could be in charge of somewhere  
connected at once with speed and with salvation.  
Seated before the door, he grows old,  
counting those who go out and those who come back in.  
Unwearingly.  
Only one goes out and only one comes in.  
Considering how exceptional the circumstances are,  
the old man has abolished every formality.

Tour

At dawn

the Tour

has already passed.



Enough for him to watch with one eye alone.  
He raises an eyelid and at once there is  
a vision of the centuries.  
If into his great lap there falls a foreign cell,  
he pretends to ignore it, letting it do as it wants,  
like a curious pupil.  
Rather he checks to make sure that this time too  
the network of the lance trajectories will hold.  
But those who have followed the Tour  
have another question to ask.  
Who was the winner?  
The TV reporters rush to Noah's feet.  
They question him.  
They badger him  
with the same question.  
Who was the winner?  
Silence throughout the world.  
The bicycles rest in the bicycle shed.  
The champion sleeps by their side,  
and the cell outside  
watches the stars —  
its ancestors.







Who  
was  
the winner?





Paris, Place Vendôme, 23 July 2000

*In the photograph from left to right:  
John, Lina, Doris, Waltraud, Anna, Jeff, Colin, Judy and Deidre.*

*Illustrations:*

Pictures of bicycles taken  
from the *The Bicycle*  
by Pryor Dodge,  
Flammarion, 1996.

p. 15  
Cosmé Tura,  
*Group of Horsemen*

p. 17  
Pieter Paul Rubens  
*Battle of Anghiari* (1600-1608 circa)  
Paris, Musée du Louvre.

p. 33  
Bartolomé Bermejo (1460-1498)  
*Saint Michael triumphant  
over the Devil with the Donor Antonio Juan.*  
London, the National Gallery.

p. 41  
Delacroix,  
*Liberty Leading the People* (1830), (detail)  
Paris, Musée du Louvre.

p. 47  
Photograph by Charlotte Raymond

*Graphics:*

Pietro Lupo - [www.quicksicily.com](http://www.quicksicily.com)

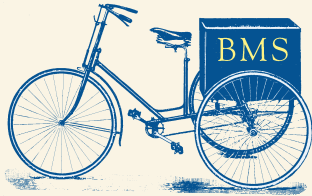
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*When events  
create words  
that are out of the ordinary,  
we would remain silent  
without the aid  
of Literature,  
and Paper itself  
might not possess  
any power to heal  
without the aid  
of a Pharmaceutical Publisher.*

**Thank you,  
Bristol-Myers Squibb!**





*Quicksicily.com*

Studio grafico Pietro Lupo - Palermo

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