

Kathryn Scanlan

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Arts and Letters

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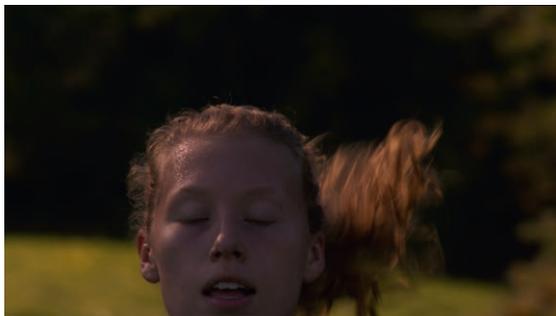
for Sam Contis
Phases

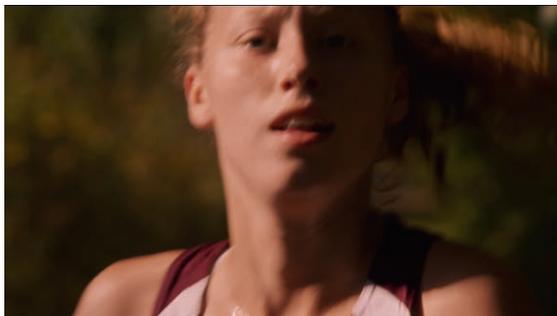
Arts and Letters

Sam Contis's *Phases* is on view at the American Academy of Arts and Letters from September 27, 2025, to February 8, 2026.

This reader is part of a series of interdisciplinary texts commissioned by Arts and Letters to accompany its gallery program. "Your Time Is Your Time" is a fictional text composed from interviews Kathryn Scanlan recently conducted with runners Contis collaborated with over the last seven years.











Your Time Is Your Time

Kathryn Scanlan



It's so simple to start. Get a pair of shoes and you're good. Obviously there're people buying three-hundred-dollar racing shoes, but for the first few years I ran, I used the same cheap pair of spikes. It doesn't really matter. You can't cheat your way through. You have to run the race.

My first season—it was very difficult. The fastest girl on the team—she was my first experience of a fast runner, and I said, *I want to be like her*. So I worked my butt off. I went from barely being able to finish a run that season to—I was our alternate at States. I was really buying into running and I was liking it a lot more and I was so driven by the fact that I wanted to be the fastest. *She's that fast, I want to be that fast. I want to be as good as she is. I want to beat all these people.*

Growing up, whenever family life and school would get stressful, I would go on a run and try to sprint it all out. I still have that mentality—whenever things get too hard or too complicated, or if I just



need some time to think, I'll run. That's what I use running for and that's what I love about it.

My first year I was really anxious every time I would race. I'd have anxiety attacks during each race. Sometimes I didn't make it through.

I remember thinking, *There's no way I'm going to be able to do six-mile repeats at a six-minute pace on a Saturday morning—that sounds impossible.* You learn how to push against what your mind sets up. At that young age, you don't think you can do all these amazing things.

We always used to say, *What's the glaze looking like?* At the end of a run, you'd wipe the bottom of your chin with your pointer finger, and if your finger looked like it'd gone through a Krispy Kreme glazer because you are so sweaty, then you'd have really good glaze.

You'd start out with big crowds of people, a lot of noise, a lot of stress and heart-pounding, and then you'd slowly move into a quieter space. Other than the girls around you running, and the girls around you breathing, it is silent. It's a really interesting place to be. Sometimes you'd say, *Keep it up* to the girl next to you, or, *Good job.*

If it's a great race, it's a classic feeling of flow. You feel locked in. You feel like nothing really matters. Time's going by fast. Hopefully you can get some competitive spirit going—you think, *What can I do?* or, *Hold on a little longer.* With a long-distance race, it's a slow churn—you slowly start to hurt more, but as you're hurting more, your competitive senses increase.

You'd go off—the gun would go off—and that's a hard sprint where it counts to get somewhere decent in the pack. But as soon as I got out of that—the crowds of people cheering you on, the crowds of runners around you—that's when I would slow down, lock in, focus on myself. Throughout the rest of the race I would keep an eye on the girls ahead of me. I had a lot of pride in my ability to keep an eye on the person ahead of me and to slowly pass them. I may not have started out in front, but I could always make my way up a decent bit.

Everybody's there for the same reason. You push each other even though you're racing against each other. During meets, if a girl would come up to me, or if I would come up to a teammate, I would say, *Keep up with me*, or, *You got this.* It's very encouraging. Having someone witness your hardest moments is very meaningful and my best friend to this day I met on the cross-country team. You're running with a group of girls who see you at your worst, and you're not ashamed about it.

It's one plus one equals three. It's magical. In cross country, you're almost forgotten as an individual. You get into a pack and you're in a big race and there's craziness but there's quietness too, and then you look around and see your best friends and your heart feels full. You think, *I will go through so much pain, for as long as I can, for these people.* It's something that's very hard to replicate in other parts of life. It's the true meaning of being part of a team.

The most fun I've ever had in a race, I was leaping over water, thigh-deep in water, because it'd rained the day before and suddenly there was a stream where normally there wasn't one. My coach was running along with me and he said, *You've got to leap over the water and stay out of it as much as you can*—because it slows you down. After two long jumps I got out of the stream. It felt like a steeplechase.

One of my coaches was yelling so loud I genuinely thought his head was going to pop off, and I thought, *If he can yell that loud, I can go a little harder*. It was one of those races when time went by so fast—except for the last K, and that's when I hit him, my coach. I remember holding on for dear life—but it was holding on to the spirit he had, and holding on to my two teammates, right there next to me.

In a race or workout you might have an asthma attack, or—a lot of people throw up. Some people, every run—they have a weak stomach. Physical barriers like that—deep down you know you can get past them, so are you willing to? Especially during a race. Unless you're on the ground, then usually you can run faster.

You keep running. You tell yourself you can't quit, because as soon as you stop running, you're done. The last mile of a race—it was amazing every time—you'd pair up with someone and you'd race them. It's nothing competitive, no ill will toward the other person—you're just thinking, *If I can keep up with them, if they can keep up with me, we're gonna cross*

the finish line together. Crossing the finish line is an unreal experience—you're that high—and sometimes you collapse to the ground because your legs finally give out because you finally stopped running.

The best races I've had are the ones where there's almost nothing going through my mind at all. The world stops spinning while you're running. You have so much time to spend thinking about the finish line, and then you get there and it really is the sun above the horizon—euphoria I guess. It's a feeling I had to grow into. I would not say my first two races felt like that—they were fueled on competitive atmosphere: It's fun to win, it's fun to pass people. But later, I would create my own world and block out most of the people and—I don't know, I bet it's what a horse feels like.











Injuries are significantly more common in newer runners. Everyone has to learn that the hard way. I ended up with a stress fracture my first season—that was largely from not understanding the importance of taking care of myself. The adrenaline was so high that I finished the race—it was a personal best for me at the time. I didn't realize what was happening. I went to cool down, and then I just about fell over. I couldn't move.

Any racing shoe in cross country or track should have spikes on it, which help you go faster. If you get too close to a competitor in a race, then the back of their foot—when they're going through their running stride—it can hit you. It's a rite of passage. You get spiked and you get a scar for the rest of your life—that's how you know you're a real runner. My dad is very into that—*Oh, the battle scars!* I'm looking down at my shins. I'm happy that the scar I see now—I remember it as a good race.

Most of us have a pretty high pain tolerance, so we'll run through anything. We're all very in tune with our bodies—especially me, because of all my injuries. You know when you can run through something and you know when you need to stop. But then sometimes it's as simple as: Maybe I do think I have a serious injury, but I'm at the end of my season—I don't want them to tell me I have to stop before the season's over. Something hurts, but we only have two races left. I'd rather run the two races in pain than not run them at all.

You gaslight yourself every day: Is this real, or is this part of the healing process? Is this a serious thing, or is this something I can run through? A lot of the time you can run through. And sometimes when you run it feels better. You get caught up in your addiction to running—it's hard to say no.

I find it very impressive when people can push through high levels of pain in a race, but I think that's different than expecting it from every run you ever do.

If you got a blood blister and it burst while you were running, your shoes would be marked with it—it would permanently stain them. If you had blood on your shoes that was a cool thing.

I broke my sacrum. That one was a classic: ran too much, kept running too much, and kept running too much. But I'm really glad that injury happened, because it pushed me to take a step back from running, and to think: *Why do I run?*

It was tough on my mental state. I don't think I fully realized it at the time. Sometimes I wish I could go back to my high school self and give her a lecture on a lot of things. I would've done a lot better if I could've gotten out of my head. Sometimes even little things would affect a race. You'd say, *This is so silly, you shouldn't think twice about this, this is all supposed to be for fun.*

I have to do fitness tests in the military now, and I always get nervous. My friends say, *You're in amazing shape, why are you getting nervous for a mile and a half run?* It's the same feeling I would get before

meets. I know I'm prepared for it, but at the same time there's pressure, because you can't lie when you run. Your time is your time. You can't say, *I'm better than this person or that person* if they beat you on time. The vulnerability and the nakedness that comes from competing in running—it's very stressful, so I stopped senior year after cross country. I thought: I don't want this stress anymore. It's making me not like the sport.

Eating disorders among young women are already common, but that number increases when you're looking solely at distance runners, because everyone is so caught up in eating only healthy foods, eating whole foods, not eating sweets, cutting out sugar, all of this stuff, and it can spiral. I've had teammates who had to be sent to inpatient facilities for treatment. I've had teammates who had to step away for a while. When I got injured, I was eating well and healthy, but I wasn't eating enough. I was running sixty miles a week but eating the same amount of food as I was when I was not running at all. My body wasn't producing enough energy, and I wasn't recovering at all, because I was having a smoothie bowl for lunch.

I cried after every race because I wanted to break 4:30 in the mile. I was so in my own head, in my thoughts. No one was putting pressure on me to perform well—I was putting pressure on myself. I had a lot of self-doubt. I was thinking, *This is my last collegiate indoor season, I have to make it really good because*

I want to be a professional runner at the end of college; I have to make sure people know my name, my stats. I was putting so much pressure on myself to perform well that I was underperforming because of the stress I was putting myself under. Every time I raced, the gun would go off and I would be so out of it. Then in the last four hundred meters, I'd wake up: Oh yeah, I'm racing. It's time to go.

I think it's hard to detach your personal self-worth from your speed. It's an objective call: This person is fast, they deserve a spot; this person is slower, maybe they don't. Your self-worth starts to get tied into those times, because innately, coaches treat faster individuals a little better, and those who are not as fast, not as good. Or maybe "good" and "bad" aren't the right terms, but attention-wise, it's different. In college, after I went through so many different injuries, I realized I had to build myself up on other characteristics. What does it mean to be me? What does it mean to be a good person? What does it mean to be a good friend, a good teammate?

Everyone has their own relationship with pain. It's hard to take a step back and say, *This is too much, I need to stop*. It's something you learn, but there's also a balance. How do you get better if you don't push yourself? Some girls on my team were able to run through it more than others. After I got injured, I was no longer willing to put my health at risk like I was in the past.

I like to think of a bad race as a learning experience—*Ok, what went wrong, what can I do better?*—and then you forget it ever happened. There's no need to dwell. Take two days and then it's in the past. It doesn't matter anymore.

Once you can overcome the self-doubt and really trust yourself, you're able to listen to your body better than you could before. Every run helps you do that. I think it's one of the greatest gifts running has given me—a sense of who I am, externally and internally. The hard part about high school running is you don't know yourself well enough yet. My best friends from my team—we look back on those years fondly, but we also recognize that some of what we did and what we thought was straight-up not healthy. It's part of growing up: Maybe I don't want to turn into my past self, but I had to be my past self to get to where I am today.

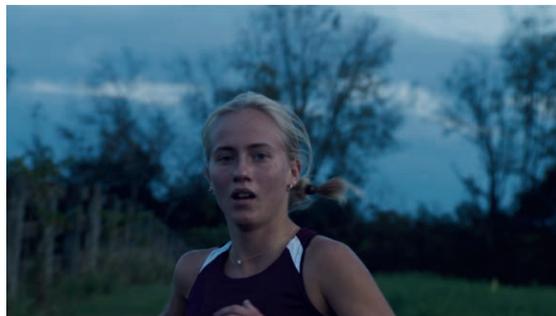
Running was part of my schedule my whole life. It was not something I could negotiate with or say, *Oh, I don't want to run today*—no no no, running's on the schedule, you must. And now I have to modify my schedule as much as I can to run. I crave to be outdoors, in the landscape, and to feel like I'm one with nature—but also just *one*. I think it's too easy in the modern world to lose yourself and to lose what it means to be alive. When I do run I feel more alive again, more connected.

You fall in and out of love with running. When I first started running competitively as a freshman

in high school, I didn't understand the people who talked about "mental toughness"—*It's a mental sport*, they said. I was a little naive about it. I didn't understand how a race could be mentally hard, but the more you run the more that becomes apparent. As soon as I dealt with the first few big injuries, running became this miserable chore. It's similar to relationships with people, where you think, *I don't know, I used to love this so much and now I don't really know how I feel*. You take a step back, reanalyze, give yourself a physical and mental break. Then you let yourself slowly fall in love again. You don't expect something sudden.











Kathryn Scanlan is a writer. Her fiction has appeared in *Granta*, *NOON*, and *The Paris Review*, among other publications. She is the author of *Aug 9—Fog* (2019), *The Dominant Animal* (2020), and *Kick the Latch* (2022).

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