

Pop Song



ADVENTURES IN
ART AND INTIMACY

Larissa Pham



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This is a work of creative non-fiction. The events are portrayed to the best of the author's memory. While all the stories in this book are true, some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

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If you've ever sung along to a song on the radio,
this is for you.

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Pop Song



On Running

October in Connecticut. I'm nineteen, tightly lacing up my running shoes. Foot propped against the wall, my face skimming close enough to my knee to kiss the dry skin there. I yank at the laces until they leave white marks on my fingers, then swipe at my phone screen to check the time: just past midnight. It's taken all evening to let the tension build, pacing around the common room I share with two roommates who have filled the place with incense and pillar candles. Shoes tied, I stretch, tapping my toes. One exhale in place, then two, the anxiety settling low in my stomach with the dinner I put away hours ago. Before long, I know, I'll feel physically sick if I don't start running, if I don't leave, if I don't go. Then I'm loping down my dorm's five flights of stairs, and then I'm out the door.

I never knew where I was going on those late night runs, only that I couldn't *not* go. It was a version of the same impulse I'd recognize in you years later, in the way you silently got out of bed one winter morning. From within the nest of your sheets I imagined your neighbors seeing your naked form in the window—your lean body in the cool light. You dressed without saying anything:

running shorts, the thermal long-sleeve I'd bought for you at Uniqlo, a black hoodie you pulled over it all. You would have left without a word if I hadn't asked if you were going for a run. Yes, you said. But I wasn't asking because I didn't know the answer; I was asking to hear you speak to me.

In New Haven, I'd start out down one of the main roads that ran through campus—Elm Street, maybe, looping around the silent, tree-lined quadrangle of Old Campus, then cutting through Cross Campus, past the library, where at night the fountain of the Women's Table still shone. I liked dragging a finger across its smooth granite surface, watching the water ripple in my wake. But staying close to home—close to the dorms, where people slept and dreamed all stacked up on top of one another in their rooms like terrariums—felt claustrophobic, and after doing a lap I'd head north on College Street, up the hill, my heart pounding high in my chest. Past the cemetery, with its inscription over the gate—*The dead shall rise again*. Past the science buildings, where I'd already dropped out of first chemistry, then genetics, abandoning meticulously typed-up lab reports for paintbrushes and glass palettes in the studio on Chapel. Up in the quiet on the hill I ran clenching the flat brick of my phone in one hand, a Phantogram album playing tinny through my earbuds, knotted white wires knocking against my chest.

Today I don't even remember what I was so upset about. What pining had led to the evening spent pacing around. But maybe

that's not important anymore; what I recall is the impulse, the way I reacted and what I reached for: dark pavement, empty streets, an album thudding in stereo. The lift of the music like a wind at my feet, taking me away from the ordinary, making me feel as though I were a spectator of my own life, or a protagonist in a film somewhere.

I wasn't really an athlete. I'd participated in track lackadaisically in high school, but in college I acquired a set of unruly bangs that had to be pinned back and a pair of heavy acrylic-framed glasses that slipped down my nose and were impossible for sports. My gear was cobbled together: old sneakers, nylon running shorts splattered with gesso and acrylics, T-shirts from 5Ks I'd done in Portland—all the same clothes I wore in the painting studio. It wasn't about training, or speed, or strength, the ways a better person might have tried to better themselves. Running was halfway between ritual and impulse for me, a call I felt compelled to answer no matter how unprepared I was. Alone, keeping a jagged pace up College Street, the traffic lights blurred ahead of me in bright, primary colors, as if I were seeing them through tears. Or maybe it was just because I didn't have glasses on.

None of it felt good, but after a while, it started to feel like nothing. It was this nothing I was after—the moment where the noise of my brain cut out and I crested onto that smooth, high plane of emptiness, empty of feeling, empty of thought, my body churning out its own high. It was a beautiful place to be, however briefly

the feeling lasted—ten minutes, maybe fifteen. Once I reached that mark, I kept running, until my legs burned, until something inside me told me it was time to go home.

The next day I'd be sore, my calves and thighs aching. I never seemed to run quite far enough for my body to get used to it—the beating of the pavement. But I relished the discomfort in a secret, perverse way, the way I relished the hickeys and bruises that came from hookups and one-night stands. The pain was a way of knowing something had happened, that some kind of alchemy had been performed and left me, I liked to imagine, changed. Coming home from a late night run, I'd immediately feel better—like the tangles in me had been untangled, like my whole spirit had been smoothed out. After showering, I'd sit placidly on my lofted bed, hair dripping on my comforter, and retrace my route on Google Maps to learn the night's mileage, working backward to figure out my pace, comforted to learn the distance I'd come.

Looking back, I see all those numbers were mere window dressing, stats for me to chew on with the personal competitiveness with which I attacked my academics. My night runs weren't about improving my pace or endurance; they weren't even about athletics. I didn't care about fitness—when I thought about the shape of my body too much, it tipped me into a self-hating spiral. When I ran, I didn't have to learn to love the soreness in my legs. I loved it already, as a sign of what I had done to myself. And I loved having the fierce pride in pushing myself. I never asked where,

or for whom. I never asked what I was running from, or what I hoped to find.



I suspect no runner really loves the act of running, but they all do say they love it. Nothing about running is fun—not in the way I’ve ever understood fun. There’s the health advantage offered by most exercise, but running is predominantly punishing: it ruins your knees, wrecks your ankles, and causes shin splints. Running a marathon seems impossible to me: I can’t imagine running for more than an hour, let alone three or four. But maybe that’s why running has its adherents: there are those who are drawn to its simplicity, who find beauty in its pure, egalitarian punishment. Who even find joy in it.

For a while I thought that was the kind of runner I wanted to be: the happy ascetic. I’ve always harbored a fantasy of ditching my ordinary life and becoming a Buddhist nun. Wishing I could be as true and neat as an arrow. What if, I wondered, I could stop reacting so much to the world, striking out for miles in the dark at the slightest provocation, and instead find peace within it? Become the kind of healthy, well-adjusted person who puts away a 5K before breakfast. Become the kind of healthy, well-adjusted person who eats breakfast. The novelist Haruki Murakami might be this type of long-distance runner’s most idealized form—seemingly zen about having completed multiple

marathons. “You don’t have to go to any particular place to do it,” he wrote in *The New Yorker*, in 2008. “As long as you have a pair of running shoes and a good road you can run to your heart’s content.” He’s the kind of runner that runners like me aspire to be, and so chill about it, as though he’s just washed up on the shores of the isle of inner peace.

If all it could take to satisfy me were a pair of shoes and a good road! Reading Murakami on running makes me feel entirely too needy—too volatile, too susceptible. In a 2005 interview, when asked about his long runs, he answered: “I try not to think about anything special while running. As a matter of fact, I usually run with my mind empty.” That’s the part about Murakami’s relationship to running that I can connect with, that doesn’t feel just aspirational. That emptiness—the running makes the nothing possible, taking one away from one’s self. But I wonder which comes first: the empty head or the sole striking pavement? When I ran, I ran frenetically, panicky, as if trying to lose my mind; I wonder if Murakami runs the way he does because he’s already learned how to clear his.

So, appealing as it is, something about Murakami’s affable stride doesn’t quite resonate. I’m not sure anything ever comes that easy. It’s too neat, too pat, when I think about the way that even a good road will wear away at the cartilage in a runner’s knees, how miles of pounding away at pavement inevitably causes stress fractures and shin splints. Instead, as if switching polarities, I’ve been pulled to tales of extremity—stories about ultramarathoners, runners who cover hundreds of miles on foot, through rain, mud,

snow, and extreme heat, with each new race seeking a challenge that tops the last. This makes more sense to me as a bodily practice: that desire to push one's physical limits well beyond their natural bounds. Morbidly, I love reading about the grime, the gore, the toenails falling off, the way these runners keep trudging forward, driven by some internal force more powerful than any I've ever known.

There's the Barkley Marathons, a grueling, hundred-mile course through saw briars, mud, an old prison tunnel, and several bombastically named hills: Rat Jaw, Little Hell, Big Hell, Bird Mountain, Coffin Springs. Runners rarely finish the entire race: the point is to have attempted even a single, marathon-length lap, let alone five. Or the Iditarod Trail Invitational, a thousand-mile race across Alaskan wilderness—the runners each pulling a heavy, supply-laden sled behind them. No one's died on that trail yet, but in 2016, the runner Pete Ripmaster nearly did, falling into freezing water, and men have lost fingers and toes to frostbite in similar races. Why, I wonder, as I pore through magazine archives to read each odyssey, settling into the details of dehydration, exhaustion, and men losing their minds, would anyone do this? But maybe I'm being presumptuous, thinking that I could understand, reading articles from *Outside* online while cozily ensconced in my apartment in a pair of sweatpants that have never seen the outdoors. Imagining that the instinct to run this way might stem from something simpler than the mess. Maybe it's about moving past feeling nothing to feeling something—perhaps so much something that it feels like nothing again.

Now that seems right: how often in my life have I wanted to crest on the edge of pure sensation, seeking out the shape of something so big it could obliterate me? In my adolescence in Portland I got into the live-music scene. An early curfew kept me from catching headliners at shows, but I didn't care what band I heard. At first, I wanted to make friends; then I learned I just wanted to be in the room with the big sound. It didn't matter where or what kind: a house show in North Portland full of squealing static; the otherworldly post-rock of Explosions in the Sky at the Crystal Ballroom; or, later, a punk show in Connecticut, my glasses tucked in the pocket of my hoodie as I slid into the mosh pit. What I craved was the swaying, oceanic feeling of being totally surrounded in music, a small part of something large, and that thing so large that my own small part didn't seem to matter at all. Yes, I understood that kind of disappearance: being slammed speechless by a wall of sound, in a packed room full of roiling bodies, everything surging into an incoherence so ecstatic the bounds of myself seemed to fade away. If I could find it in music, it made sense that it lived elsewhere in the world, hovering at the outer edges of extremity. I knew I ran just enough to feel that little bit of nothingness, but I could imagine that running farther, running harder, could push a person even closer to a sense of total surrender.

The ultra of ultras must be the Self-Transcendence 3100 Mile Race, a race conducted around one single block in Queens, New York. It's an event so poetic it seems made for metaphor. Runners have fifty-two days to finish the race's thirty-one hundred miles, which means running more than two marathons a day, every day, for several weeks. There are no rolling hills in this race,

no historic bridges to traipse across. Nor is there the inelegant obstacle of a muddy trail, or a thicket of brambles, or icy water. All there is—and what little it is—is the sidewalk upon which the runners pound, darting around pedestrians who are still going about their days. The philosophy of the race, which is organized by the Sri Chinmoy Marathon Team, founded by the spiritual leader of the same name, seems to be a meditative one. Practically speaking, by keeping the course to a single block, the runners' support teams can attend to each participant's needs, no matter how many hundreds of miles they're ahead or behind. But really, the race is a challenge for the mind of the most banal kind: faced with looping around a single block 5,649 times, in all weathers, from 6 a.m. to midnight, while all of life in Queens passes one by, or actively gets in one's way, how does an individual endure?

I like that the aim of the race is in its name: self-transcendence. Run thirty-one hundred miles and leave that same block transformed. When I first learned of it I thought no one must have ever finished it, that its lessons laid in the inevitability of failure, but as I write this at least forty runners have—maybe that level of endurance isn't so otherworldly. When I hear the word *self-transcendence*, I picture a cosmic vent in the top of my head, and my soul spiraling up and out of it. I tend to leave my body, neck-down, out of this visualization: that's the goal, isn't it, to escape it? We all have ways to get there: for some it's running; for others it's drugs, or music, or sex. I've tried so many—and I keep trying.

When I ran in college, and when I run now, I think of this hazy, escapist feeling, the feeling I think I'm always trying to reach. I've

tried to find it in so many places, and now, as I write this in the middle of a global pandemic, when the small circle of the world accessible to me feels claustrophobic and close, I wonder where I'll find it next. For that's been my perpetual problem, as it was then and as it remains: I'm always trying to get somewhere else. It doesn't matter where I'm going, only that I'm going, and that, eventually, I hope to be gone—winked out of my troubles, my responsibilities, my everyday existence.



In Connecticut I felt fatalistic about my late night runs. I'd text a friend before I set out, telling them if they didn't hear from me in an hour to call, or track me down. But nothing ever happened, and I wonder if, back then, I'd wished something did. Something that could be used to point to a change. Something that might create in me a rupture or a break.

One night, I ran up past the observatory. There, my freshman year, I'd learned how to take photographs of stars and distant galaxies. The telescope, which was in the observatory on the hill that overlooked the lights of New Haven, was connected to a camera, which captured light through separate filters: red, green, and blue. By combining three exposures of a celestial object, a false color image could be made: composite the layers to clarify the signifiers from the noise, dark from light, and a nebula appears, shrouded in its cloud of cosmic dust. On clear nights, my class met up at the observatory, and we'd take turns looking through the telescope,

centering heavenly bodies in the frame. While we waited for our turn with the big lens inside the dome, we peered through the smaller, freestanding telescopes outside, angled at the nearest visible planet. Some nights, Venus, Mercury, Mars. Once, Jupiter. Shivering in our fall layers, we counted its stripes—if I strained my eyes hard enough, I thought I could even make out the red spot of its endless storm.

The building sat on a grassy slope of its own, set back from the road, the lawn spotted with small trees. It was dark up on the hill; to see the stars, it had to be. I kept running, up through the neighborhoods on East Rock, the silent houses, their faces impassive. It was quiet, and I was the only person around—awake, I mean, as far as I knew. It was strange to be surrounded by that much silence. As I looped back down the darkened streets, heading back toward campus, I heard a rustle that frightened me. It was probably a mouse, or a raccoon, but I didn't know that, and I bolted down the hill.

I'd come up to the edge of something, then. Not in the world, but in myself. It was time to go home. I ran down Prospect, down to where it turned back into College, turned right on Elm, cutting through the dark quad, the dry grass a deep blue-green in the moonlight. It was quiet.

You told me once that when you lived in New Haven—a year after I left; two years before I'd meet you—you had run at night the same way I had. I should have asked you why you ran then. I wonder if it was for the same reasons I ran, too.

On our observation nights, in the warmth of the dome, our instructor told us that the big telescope the university owned was only so powerful, and only so sensitive. If we wanted to photograph one of the closer galaxies, which some of us did, it would read only as a blur of blank white—an excess of light, all detail blotted out. We were told that to see anything bright, and clearly, we had to look at it at indirectly, at angles, out of the corners of our eyes, and composite an image out of fragments. Otherwise, there was too much light. The photograph overexposed. You couldn't see the whole thing for its burning fire, that enduring flame.

Blue

When I was very young I was told that the blue of the sky is the hardest color to mix with paints. It made sense to me that there must be something humans are always chasing. I, earthbound, assumed it would have to be the heavens.

Some years later, in my first painting class in high school, we learned how to paint with oils and turpentine in a room with huge windows that looked out over a bell tower and a cherry tree. At the long table, mixing oily cobalt blue straight from the tube with a little titanium white, I wondered what all the fuss was about. I'd made sky blue: I held my palette knife up to the window to compare, and yes, it was sky. I could add buttery strokes of more titanium white, for clouds, and dapple on a warmer white, if I wanted to light them, and then there was a whole spectrum of pinks and peaches and oranges for sunset or sunrise. It was that easy. There is even a commercially produced shade, I discovered, called cerulean. Its name derives from the Latin word for the heavens.

Years later yet, when I realized I wasn't very good at painting, I considered that perhaps what I had first heard about blue was

more about expression than replication. That perhaps what was difficult about sky blue was trying to capture the size and depth of the sky: the distance that stretches between us and the rest of the universe. By that point, I'd studied painting long enough to know that there were many ways to make a flat surface look like something of the world—there were ways to paint oranges or glass bottles or slices of cake like Thiebaud—but that was only half the problem of art making. You could paint all sorts of things, but it was harder to convey the feelings you had about them. When I tried to paint landscapes, I couldn't capture that vast distance that *was* the sky, the blue that Rebecca Solnit describes, in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, as “the light that got lost”:

The world is blue at its edges and in its depths.
This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us . . . This light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue.

Painting a canvas blue wasn't enough. It was like dropping a curtain. All along I knew the world went on and on beyond the surface of the thing.

It's not only the sky that is blue in this specific way. Solnit's “light that gets lost” is the light that comes to us from afar, so places very high and very far appear to us as blue, too: places like distant

cities or mountains or even the flat lip of a foggy horizon at sea. But that blue—that blue isn't stored in those distant locations. It's not like what painters call local color, the way an apple is red or an orange is orange. And that blue isn't stored close to us, either; we can't carry it around with us, even if we buy thousands of tubes of cerulean. That hazy, achy, atmospheric blue is the product of the distance between us and the places we observe, and that gives it its particular poignancy, I think: closing that distance precludes ever meeting it.



By the spring of 2017, I felt entirely burnt out. I was working at an anti-violence nonprofit, at a job that I loved but which required me, among other duties, to monitor the news for violent incidents motivated by homophobic and transphobic hate and bias. Following Trump's inauguration, the mood in the office was grim: his election had bolstered the confidence of hate groups and white supremacists, who appeared to feel that their views were being recognized as legitimate. From news reports we learned that hate crimes had already gone up in the days after the election, and that rise in violence was confirmed by an increase in concerned callers on our hotline, many of whom feared for their physical safety, or worried about being deported, or both. The mood outside the office was grim, too—if also grimly activated, with people marching through the streets and streaming into the city's airports to protest the travel ban. There was a constant presence of police barricades surrounding the reality-TV president's high-rise,