

1986

# Running

Perdita Schaffner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Schaffner, Perdita. "Running." *The Iowa Review* 16.3 (1986): 7-13. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3417>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## Running · *Perdita Schaffner*

THEY WERE ALWAYS together, those two; the one tall and dreamy, the other short and purposeful, austere with close-cropped hair and tailored suits. *Ces Dames*, the Swiss neighbors called them. *Des écrivaines*, it was rumored, which accounted for a lot. Often, skipping along the lake front or sitting solemnly in Zurcher's tea room, there was a chunky little girl. *La Petite*—nobody quite knew whose. The eccentric ladies were clearly devoted to her. Mrs. Aldington and Mrs. McAlmon. No husbands. Mr. McAlmon lived in Paris. He put in sporadic appearances, stumbling bleary-eyed from the Orient Express, leaving abruptly a few days later. Another *écrivain*. Mr. Aldington was never seen at all.

I wish my memories went further back. I would love to have a mental tape of our first trip to America. The long train journey to California. H.D., Bryher, a thrashing one year old, and Scottish nurse, all cooped up in a Pullman. It was too much for the nurse. She disappeared as soon as we got to Los Angeles, leaving a note pinned to my blanket. Then, the return voyage from New York. Mr. and Mrs. McAlmon, my mother and I, occupying the bridal suite on a White Star liner. Alas, those tapes are blank. They begin with our cocoon on the shores of Lake Geneva.

My literary background was a fact of life and therefore totally unremarkable to me, as was the family structure. I just assumed fathers were absentee figures. I had two mothers: the real one whom I called Mama; and the other one, Bryher. Mama worked—had to work, as she put it. I often peeked in on the preliminary rituals; sharpening yellow pencils and standing them up in a Greek vase; stacking notes and notebooks, everything very precise and orderly. Then the door was closed and I was banished. Later, the sacred hush gave way to a barrage of typing as she transcribed her pencilled notes. Then that stopped at eleven o'clock on the dot—she was very rigidly scheduled—and gave way to bustle; drawers opening, shoes tumbling from cupboards, footsteps. I always came running like a puppy at the rattle of a leash. And we set forth, the three of us, down to the little port of Territet with a bag of crusts and crumbs for the lake birds, and along the promenade to the Chateau de Chillon and back.

“Why are they called seagulls when it's a lake? Look, look, they're fighting! Why is the swan standing on one leg?”

My mother would toss them a tidbit, not answering, not really listening. It took her a while to return to earth. Sometimes she never made it back. She remained in the clouds, high over Mount Olympus, writing notes in her head. I didn't understand the creative process. I tugged and champed. "Run ahead, run ahead," she would then say.

Off I went, stopping at selected landmarks—the flat rock, the big willow tree; waiting for my two custodians, running off again.

Bryher worked too, but she was far more matter of fact; no mystique, no routine. She just typed, anywhere, any which way with the door open, maids mopping, and me under the table if I so wished. She was blessed with the kind of concentration that tuned everything out.

Suddenly the cocoon burst wide open. We had to go to London, according to Bryher; something to do with her parents, whom she referred to as Family.

We parted at Victoria Station and went off in separate taxis, she to the Victorian mansion where Family lived in opulent style. For the next few months she tried to conform to the role of dutiful daughter—dolled up, dressed up. In fact they called her Dolly, a deplorable misnomer, indicative of their attitude. She accompanied them on their stately rounds, was cosseted by an obsequious staff—and, of course, hated every minute of it. She couldn't be her own person, Bryher; nor could she play Dolly with any conviction. At least she was a married woman; that gave her some leverage and a measure of independence. It was Robert McAlmon's *raison d'être*. So he was summoned, dragged away from the cafés and literary cronies. The token husband. He did his best, and subsequently wrote about it, most entertainingly and fairly, in *Being Geniuses Together*.

My mother was not welcome there. That Woman they called her. It was she who had snatched Dolly away and led her astray. She wasn't even supposed to be in London—which led to endless subterfuge. Whenever Bryher came to see us she had to invent a new story. She looked haunted and hunted, and miserably ill at ease in her Dolly clothes.

We two hid out in a small service flat, sharing a bedroom which I had to vacate during the early morning hours. I hung around the living room, trying to play quietly. I was never quiet enough. We reconstructed the old routine—off to the Serpentine with breakfast leftovers, and on into Kensington Gardens.

"Run ahead, run ahead!"

Sometimes a sad little figure would step out from behind a tree.

“I told Mama I was going to the dentist. I just have ten minutes, I’m to meet her at Harrods.”

The three of us together, briefly.

“Run ahead, run ahead!”

So it continued through the years, with variations of locale. I began to resent it. I longed to be part of something—or else a person in my own right, running or not, or running sideways—not just an appendage, a puppy chasing through hoops.

And so it was. The puppy grew, and became too cumbersome for such tricks.

I finally grew up, and they acknowledged me as a legitimate member of their group and granted me access to their minds. Now, it seemed, they were running ahead, out of sight. And I was tagging on behind, and off at tangents. Like the Anstat Das song from *Dreigroschen Oper*—they’d brought the record back from Berlin and played it constantly. I still hear that hurdy-gurdy melody and the quirky line: “*Alle rennen nach dem Glück, das Glück rennt hinterher.*” Running, running in pursuit of the abstraction chasing after us.

They were very busy, those three—H.D., Bryher, and a recent member of the family, Kenneth Macpherson. Typewriters clacked from early morning on. Everything stopped for tea. Then, according to the season, Bryher gardened or read. My mother retreated to her room, to read, or stitch petit point canvases—an occupation which both rested her mind and stimulated it. Kenneth played his wind-up gramophone. His tastes ran to first rate light fare—Noel Coward, Harlem Blues, Cole Porter. And, over and over again, the *Dreigroschen Oper*. To me, Mack the Knife is always Macky Messer of the Morität’s haunting strains.

Their books were published as fast as they were written. They had formed their own company; a fine incentive—no rejection slips, no obstructive editors. The manuscripts were mailed direct to Darantière of Dijon, he who originally printed *Ulysses*.

They branched out into film, and founded the magazine *Close Up*. And they travelled, meeting all the leading figures in variegated fields.

And I was running ahead of the intellectual ferment, searching for my own person—whoever that might be—and behind, trying to understand, respond, cope. It was a chaotic scene, fraught with personality clashes.

Everything revolved around H.D. Kenneth and Bryher deferred to her mercurial temperament, worried about her well-being. Little jealousies crept in as they vied for her attention. It worked both ways—three ways in fact. She was in an uneasy position. She knew perfectly well why Bryher had insisted on marrying Kenneth—the Robert McAlmon story again. Nonetheless, he was the new man in her life, her great love. Intramural stress aside, she was definitely the star. She'd arrived, artistically speaking. Her poems were in anthologies.

Yet, at that time, she was by no means well known. She had a coterie, a worshipful following from long ago. She was a cult figure of a very esoteric kind. Who, in the average classroom, would ever have heard of H.D.? Her true acclaim was generated within our tight little circle.

Ironically, the poet's daughter was not really "into" poetry unless it had rip-roaring rhythm and a tale to tell—such as "The Ancient Mariner"—or thought I could identify with, action and conflict. H.D. was altogether too elusive for me. I puzzled over her mystique. She was always writing, yet she hadn't really written anything recently, apart from those slim privately printed novels. What had become of the "work" that used to close me out of her room and her thoughts? All those notebooks and stacks of erratic typescript. Had she decided they were no good? Or were they drafts of drafts of drafts of the brief novels? If so, what a lengthy labor. Or maybe they were in a bottom drawer or a cupboard, to be continued, to be revised.

The last guess was correct. But that was later. It took a long time, and required a special push. Norman Holmes Pearson of Yale provided it. Arriving in the midst of the war as an O.S.S. official, he renewed an old friendship, became confidant and catalyst.

We were then back in London. The family unit had broken up. Kenneth had emigrated to America. Bryher moved into H.D.'s apartment. I lived on my own and went to work in the real world—unreal as it now seems in retrospect; driving a truck around bombed areas, then unscrambling codes for British Intelligence. And making friends, discovering life and love. The whole balance had shifted. I felt liberated. H.D. and Bryher felt trapped, frustrated. They were thrown together, day in day out, in close quarters.

Wartime conditions alternated between dark and dreary humdrum and noisy terror. H.D.'s high-strung hypersensitive spirit was hardly suited to

bombardment. She neither cracked, nor did she flee to the countryside. She stayed where she belonged—in her own home, with her books and friends. She was subjected to crashes, bangs, the roar of collapsing buildings, and the nonstop anti-aircraft gunfire night after night. It all acted as a catharsis. She turned it around, into poetry. “*The Walls Do Not Fall.*” And she filled up more notebooks. Bryher, more stoical in temperament, started work on a novel. And that’s where Norman came along. They became evermore involved, those three. He gave them focus. They had someone to write for, rather than an anonymous unresponsive public.

Norman had imagination, and tremendous energy. He was dynamic. After returning to Yale he sent for the manuscripts, the entire backlog. He made suggestions, set H.D. to work on revisions, saw to their publication. He put Bryher on course. She wrote one historical novel after another, all reviewed with praise by leading critics. She became an established writer with a following similar to Mary Renault’s.

H.D.’s momentum kept up. Something old one year, something new the next. Poetry. Memoirs of Pound, and of Freud. The autobiographical novel, *Bid Me to Live*. Norman took care of business, and the turbulent psyches too. They visited each other constantly, back and forth across the Atlantic. When they were parted they wrote long letters every single day, sometimes twice a day.

I stopped running. The pressure was off. I too was established, if in a totally different way. I married a literary agent in New York City, raised a family of four. I rejoiced over the new books, but more as a fan, an enthusiastic member of a growing public.

Bryher was an intrepid traveller, unperturbed by jet lag, strange routines, chaotic households. She enjoyed being a quasi-grandmother. She pitched right in, reading to the little ones, conversing with older siblings as if they were adults. She walked dogs, nursed cats, rounded up escapee turtles.

H.D. travelled nervously, reluctantly. She clung to her own environment. Her trips were few and far between—and fraught. She adored her grandchildren, but, inevitably, they were bouncy and shrill. It worked out better when I visited her, bringing photographs and anecdotes. A “mother’s vacation” for me. We had many good times together, talking and laughing, old tensions forgotten.

She spent the last years of her life in a clinic near Zurich, where, as she

emphasized, she was not a patient. She had privacy, and all the time in the world to write. Services—medical and domestic—were all laid on. She had broken her hip, and adapted to the traumatic situation in a most admirable and humorous way—swinging her crutches, making them part of her act. Psychologically, she was in beautiful shape, at peace with herself, and working steadily.

She came to New York just once more, to receive her medal from the Academy of Arts and Letters. A very public occasion. We wondered how she could ever stand up to it. We watched her anxiously down there on the platform among tightly packed rows of celebrities, with all eyes upon her. The ceremony seemed to go on forever. She remained still, perfectly composed in her new gown, corsage pinned to her shoulder, crutches at her side. She was the final recipient; she had the royal slot as it were. She rose and made an acceptance speech, distorted by the unfamiliar microphone. But the gist was clear. It was a moment of triumph and culmination. The applause was the loudest of the afternoon. She held court at the party afterwards and was besieged. Definitely not her scene—and she thoroughly enjoyed it. The greatest day of her life, the accolade for the years of scribbling and typing; the manuscripts in cupboards and trunks, and those in print.

*Bid Me to Live* was published that same year. She also made the acquaintance of her fourth grandchild, Timothy. Past, present, and future came together full circle, in the mystical way she often explored in her own writing. Nineteen sixty was a good year. We celebrated it as such—not as an elegy.

Nineteen sixty-one brought the completion of two more circles, the publication of *Helen in Egypt* and H.D.'s death.

Norman kept her name and spirit very much alive. He died in 1975. Bryher lived on alone for a long while—too long, it might be said. She fell into a mental decline. They call it Alzheimer's now. Her last years were spent in a nightmare world.

The triumvirate broke up and left me alone—running again. H.D. is still in ascendancy, discovered by a new wave of scholars, rediscovered by earlier generations. They all seek me out. I sit at my desk, surrounded by cats, answering queries, granting permissions. I lie out under the trees, with cats on my lap, reading essays, biographies, dissertations. It's been

this way for some years; no sign of a slowdown. The H.D. fans seem to think I hold the key to a box of magic clues. I really don't. I'm learning from them.

Running, running.