

Running Away

by Jean-Philippe Toussaint (Translated by Matthew B. Smith)

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By Sean Ferrell

In the spirit of Camus and Beckett, Jean-Philippe Toussaint has provided a slice of a character's life so uncanny and deep that to try to boil it down to its essence is nearly impossible: it already has been boiled down. *Running Away* shaves off just a few days from the unnamed narrator's life, yet it cuts to the root of him, and what is peeled away is pressed to the window where dirty light filters through and we get to see how the colors of it sparkle on the room around us. Toussaint, a brilliant and prize-winning French author, dives deep into how we stretch ourselves thin between places in our attempt to be with one another in this stunning novel.

It is hard to read *Running Away* without getting a bit impatient with the narrator. This is not a bad thing. Impatience is a bottling of energy, and that energy runs like a current beneath the quiet, emotionless prose. The narrator, running a mysterious errand for his lover, Marie, finds himself in Shanghai where he delivers a cash-filled package to an man, Zhang Xiangzhi. Drug dealer, business associate, loan shark, his profession is unclear, but Zhang takes not only the cash but the narrator under his wing. He proves to be guide, chauffeur, dining companion. He also proves menacing, protective, curious, knowing, detached. The cipher of a guide takes him into Shanghai and disappears and reappears with the impact and predictability of storm clouds.

Thinking himself alone one evening, the narrator attends an art gallery opening and meets Li Qi, a mysterious woman. Their mutual attraction is immediate and obvious. Li Qi invites him to Beijing. He accepts, expecting an amorous adventure, and is shocked when Li arrives at the train station chaperoned by Zhang. The trio make their way to Beijing. Zhang, though passive and silent, doesn't allow any private time between the two younger and clearly interested parties, and in fact may be involved in some way with Li. Rooms are shared, kisses exchanged in train car corridors, and nearly consummated intercourse is interrupted by a phone call from Marie to let the narrator know that her father has died.

His need to get back to Marie, his final hours with Zhang and Li, his combative desire to best Zhang and win Li even while ignoring her interest, all play out in a timeless blur of travel. Trains make way for motorcycles, which speed away into airplanes. He loses his way in an airport, desperate for a connecting flight (or desperate to connect to another person?). Airports lead to ferries. The ferry to a Mediterranean island where Marie is burying her father. The narrator, claiming sadness, claiming mourning, claiming emotion he really never exhibits, wanders the streets instead of attending the funeral. It is scenes such as this that Matthew B. Smith's exemplary translation matches the flow of the novel.

Unable to exist in the place where he is, the narrator fills in his time imagining what Marie is doing. While on the train with Li Qi, a woman expecting nothing more than his presence, his passion, his interest, he loses himself in the phone call informing him of Marie's father. He practically falls through the phone, casting himself about the streets with Marie as he envisions her wandering, lost in mourning, witnessing a bus accident. When with Marie, a woman who needs his support, his compassion, his presence, he pulls himself away in order to idealize her arrival at the funeral, imagining her majestic entrance into the town instead of standing by her to witness the sadness of her current moment.

Much is made of the narrator's travel. In fact, this would be perhaps the worst novel for a frequent traveler to read as it might shock them into their own lack of presence. That I read it mostly on my daily commutes, head down on a subway, unsure who stood or sat near me, injected into its reality instead of my own has me slightly dizzy. Toussaint has proved his point: travel is akin to delusion. We convince ourselves that we are "active"; we are, after all, traveling hundreds of miles, to do something (work, play, splashing on a beach), what could be more energetic than travel? Yet modern travel, large sections of it, are sitting, and waiting, and, despite passive appearances, exhausting.

Toussaint's narrator goes half-way round the world to deliver a wad of cash, travels by train, then airplane, then boat. He never really "sees" Beijing, because he's too busy being lost in it. He visits a bowling alley, as anonymous an interior as one might find anywhere since the size and function of the lanes, the purpose of the place, are identical no matter where one is. Bowl in Beijing? Bowl in New York, or Chicago, or Capetown. Do it in one, you've done it in all. This travel for no one's sake, the question of place and our relationship to it, exhausts the narrator.

Jet-lag is his lens on the world, but not just because of the travel. Toussaint makes clear that this man was dislocated from life well before getting onto his first plane. He is guilty of having been a traveler before he set one foot on a plane, train or boat. He is so out of place, so not present, that he can't even be present enough for the sexual intimacy both women in the book offer. To do so would be too in the moment, requiring actually being "here" for the sex to occur. Instead he puts himself into pursuits of other places, imagining someone is mentally elsewhere even while they hold him, driving Marie to finally assault him with, and during, sex in an attempt to get him to focus.

As I said, there's an impatience with the narrator, and not only from the reader. Other characters, Marie especially, want for him to just, finally, be present. That *Running Away* arrives, at last, tired, dirty and broken, to such a beautiful and satisfying conclusion is a testament to Toussaint's talent. In the end, our narrator is there, he's finally present. But does he get it? Has he learned? Have we?