

The Quarterly Conversation

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Running Away by Jean-Philippe Toussaint

Review by Josh Maday

[Running Away](#), Jean Philippe Toussaint (trans. Matthew B. Smith). Dalkey Archive Press. 120pp, \$12.95.

The narrators of [Toussaint's](#) early novels *The Bathroom* and *Camera* seek a state of inertia as a place where the noise of modern life falls away, letting them most clearly experience their own thoughts. By contrast, in Toussaint's latest novel, *Running Away*, the main character does not [long for isolation and inertia](#). Rather, he flows in the current of experience without asking questions or demanding answers.

From the start, the unnamed narrator is subject to events: his Parisian girlfriend, Marie, sets him on a mission to deliver an envelope full of cash to a man named Zhang Xiangzhi somewhere in Asia. She further instructs him that he might as well hang around for a vacation, too. Thus he goes to an opening at an art gallery with Xiangzhi and meets an attractive young woman at a bar. Before long, he agrees to go to Beijing the next day with her, thinking he is ditching Xiangzhi, only to find him at the train station the following day with the young woman. This is only the beginning of the tangled world Toussaint's narrator has entered.

Running Away is constant motion, nothing remains fixed or still, and yet the book never arrives at a final destination. In addition to a land far from the narrator's home, the novel takes place in a series of "indistinct zones," like airports, train stations, hotel rooms, city streets, a train, a motorcycle. The narrator is always either waiting to go somewhere or on the way there, "stuck in the temporary in between-ness of the journey." Despite all the in-betweenness, there are some knowns: the opening lines of the novel declare that the narrator's relationship with Marie will end (and in fact already has, since the novel is narrated in reflection). But almost everything in between is foggy and open to (mis)interpretation:

I was perceiving the world as if in a state of perpetual jetlag, causing a slight distortion in the fabric of reality, a shift, a misalignment, giving rise to a miniscule yet fundamental incompatibility between the familiar world around me and the removed way, distant and hazy, in which I perceived it.

Toussaint's description and exposition aid this effect, stringing colors and objects so that the eyes eventually tend to skim, not catching every detail but getting "the gist of it." The city becomes every city, as when the narrator wanders alone, looking at buildings and people, "indifferent to the noise and constant activity." The sense is one of a mind sliding

out of focus from fatigue, that “perpetual jetlag” warping its perception: “*Understand?* [Xiangzhi] asked. I said yes, more or less (maybe not all the details, but I got the gist of it).” In the heat and fatigue he resigns to the flow of events: “I no longer tried to understand what was happening, so many things had seemed obscure to me since my arrival in China.”

To help him better befoe his text, Toussaint employs the language barrier in contribution to the jetlag atmosphere: the narrator repeatedly misunderstands or misinterprets body language and broken English (another “indistinct zone,” as neither the narrator nor his hosts are native speakers). For instance, when Xiangzhi tells him *Don't forget*, meaning his train ticket, the narrator thinks it sounds like *Don't fuck it*, referring to the narrator's romantic interest, Li Qi, of course. At another point Xiangzhi gives the narrator a phone as a present, imparting it with the words “*Present for you.*” Although Toussaint is writing in French, he specifies that the phrase “present for you” is in English, even if broken. Xiangzhi of course means “present” in the sense of a gift, but the phrase comes to work in many senses as it morphs through different meanings as the novel progresses.

The narrative cuts and jumps back and forth in time and space, although more often by means of technology than flashback. On the night train to Beijing from Shanghai, the narrator and Li Qi lock themselves in a tiny bathroom where their passion flares. The narrator's cell phone rings in his bag outside, where Xiangzhi may be waiting for them to emerge. As the phone rings, “insisting that [he] take action, move, react,” the narrator feels an “uncontestable confirmation that there is some secret alchemy connecting phones to death.” The call is from Marie, and she tells him that her father has died. The phone becomes both a tether connected to death as well as a lifeline to Marie in her time of need.

As the narrator listens to the “frail and sensuous texture” of her voice, he accompanies Marie through the Louvre via cell phone.

Eyes closed and standing still, I was listening to Marie's voice coming from thousands of kilometers away, her voice which I could hear despite the countless lands that separated us, despite the steppes and immeasurable other plains, despite the expanse of the night and its gradation of colors spread across the surface of the earth. . . . I was listening to Marie speaking faintly in the early evening sunlight of Paris, her frail voice reaching me . . . in the late night of the train, literally transporting me, as thoughts, dreams, and books can do, when, releasing the mind from the body, the body remains still and the mind travels . . . and we feel ourselves shaken, as if a fissure had cracked the sea of tears frozen in each of us.

Right after this phone call the narrator embraces Li Qi, and she becomes a surrogate for Marie, but then the very next section finds the narrator still on the phone with Marie. The book's “distortion in the fabric of reality” fuses in these moments. As the narrator says, “I had closed my eyes again and everything was mixed together in my mind, life and death, day and night, pleasure and tears, I continued to hear Marie's voice in my head and I was gently squeezing Li Qi in my arms in an embrace both of mourning and compassion that wasn't meant for her.” The foggy jetlag reality becomes the atmosphere in which Toussaint warps not only the narrator's perception of time and space but also his presence, the two being inextricable. He is both present and absent: physically present in

Asia, but mentally and emotionally with Marie. But this absence is far from passivity; as the narrator notes, travel is a “state of suspension . . . in which the body, in motion, seems to be making steady progress from one geographical location toward another.”

Eventually, the narrator leaves Beijing to attend Marie’s father’s funeral in Italy, and as he stands in the back of the church, he realizes (or imagines) the impact of his absence on Marie during her time of grief:

It probably didn’t occur to her immediately, but the unassuageable pain . . . all her passiveness and dejection . . . began to transform into a diffuse fear provoked by my absence . . . I became the person responsible for her suffering, I was the one who was tormenting her, without my even doing anything—my presence alone was making her suffer, and my absence even more so.

Even when he is present, Toussaint’s narrator inhabits what he imagines to be the specter of his own absence. This sensation, which Toussaint continually explores and renders throughout *Running Away*, is the mind-splitting, schizophrenic condition of living in the age of globalization, an age that has shrunk and connected the world, making it possible to be everywhere and nowhere at once. The book becomes like a fusion of the 20th century’s existential crises with the 21st century crises of place and constant flux. The title itself carries in it this conflict of presence, of escape, of being neither here nor there, the *-ing* of simply being. The only way out, Toussaint’s narrator implies, is death:

It was as though this trip were the quintessence of all the trips I’d ever taken in my life, the hundreds of hours spent in planes and trains, in cars and boats, moving from one piece of land to another, from one country to another . . . during which my body, motionless, moved through space, but also—inconspicuously, in an imperceptible and insidious manner, furtively, gradually, with distorting, destructive effects—through time . . . time, ample and fluid, carrying me along in spite of my immobility, with death . . . the measure of its dark progression.

Running Away is Jean-Philippe Toussaint at his most mature, tender, and complex. It is a book that, like most of Toussaint’s other novels, is philosophically rich, but it is first and foremost entertaining as fiction, and it makes for a quick read, free from jargon and otherwise dense abstractions. Instead of those the book is full of mystery, the conflict of human desire, and even a motorcycle chase. I have admired all of Toussaint’s work thus far, but *Running Away* is by far the most emotionally and intellectually complex and intriguing. We are fortunate to be able to enjoy it in English.

Josh Maday lives in Michigan. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New York Tyrant*, *Action Yes*, *Apostrophe Cast*, *Barrelhouse*, *elimae*, *Keyhole Magazine*, *Lamination Colony*, *Word Riot*, and elsewhere. He is a member of the National Book Critics Circle and keeps a blog.