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## Shanghai Express

By CHRISTOPHER BYRD

Jean-Philippe Toussaint's wonderfully stylized new novel, "Running Away," begins with a question: "Would it ever end with Marie?" That's only fitting for a book that leaves so much unanswered — we never learn the narrator's name or occupation or, indeed, why his relationship with Marie, his Parisian girlfriend, is tanking. Those aren't the only riddles, either. From the outset, the narrator fails to divulge why Marie has asked him to deliver \$25,000 to a Shanghai associate, Zhang Xiangzhi.

### RUNNING AWAY

By Jean-Philippe Toussaint

Translated by Matthew B. Smith

156 pp. Dalkey Archive Press. Paper, \$12.95

Not that it matters much. Like an interior decorator who ignores a party to finger the drapes, "Running Away" is more engrossed in its backdrops than in its characters. Shuttling among Shanghai, Paris, Beijing and Elba, the book broods over how the trappings of globalization — cellphones, mass transit, the use of English as the lingua franca — have done little to further intimacy. To advance this garden-variety claim, the story makes selective use of noir elements: it forsakes femmes fatales, double-crosses and murder investigations but retains chase scenes, ambiguous relationships and bountiful mood lighting. The result is a sort of existential mystery.

When the narrator arrives in China, Marie's colleague Zhang presents him with a cellphone. Is it a gift, or a way to keep tabs? A few days later, Zhang invites him to a gallery opening, where a fetching woman entices the narrator to travel to Beijing with her. At the train station, though, he's dismayed to find Zhang already there and seizing control — buying their tickets, seeing to their refreshments. The questions multiply: Is Zhang helpful or sinister, an avuncular guide or a criminal and a romantic rival?

At a glance, "Running Away" appears to be quite a departure for the Belgian-born Toussaint, who built his reputation on subtly comic novels like "The Bathroom" and "Television." Here, the language is more atmospheric, the humor all but gone. Yet the book shares with its predecessors an interest in breaches of etiquette. In "The Bathroom" a man insults his host's style of dress; in "Television" a man neglects his vacationing neighbors' plants. In "Running Away" the narrator skips out halfway through the funeral for Marie's father. Underpinning each of these faux pas is a malaise resting on "the despair of being," as an earlier Toussaint character put it.

“Running Away” isn’t completely without revelations: the narrator, it turns out, has misjudged Zhang. Though he’s involved in some shady dealings, his behavior toward the narrator is unimpeachable. Toussaint orchestrates this disclosure superbly. But elsewhere the book’s brooding atmosphere can be disorienting. The narrator grows addled when he learns that Marie’s father has died — then leaves the funeral after going to tremendous lengths to get there. Why? Toussaint doesn’t explain.

There is also the strange manner in which Marie’s grief is aestheticized. In the [Louvre](#) when she learns of her father’s death, she telephones the narrator in China and tells him: “It’s light outside . . . it’s horribly light out.” She races to find an exit, but stops to lie on a bench and describes “the shapes and arrangements of the little clouds in the blue sky” depicted on the ceiling above her. Later, she rides a horse to the funeral.

While such contrivances may irk readers who look to novels for believable characters, they shouldn’t bother those who place a premium on elegance and artistry. Indeed, one might find in Toussaint’s truncations an admirable rebellion against a world that’s submerged in too much information and too little beauty.

*Christopher Byrd’s reviews have appeared in The Guardian of London, The Believer and other publications.*

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