



# THE INDEPENDENT

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## Running Away, By Jean-Philippe Toussaint trans Matthew B Smith

By Reviewed by Lee Rourke

Jean-Philippe Toussaint, a recent Prix Decembre recipient in France, has carved out a niche in pared down, slapstick literary fiction, within which a serious philosophical undertone lurks. In *Running Away* - the second in Toussaint's "Maria" series to be translated into English - much of the humour has been discarded to reveal a dark novel about relationships, distance and misunderstandings. *Running Away* begins with an unnamed narrator travelling to China for a mix of business and pleasure, a "sort of mission" or a "pleasure junket". The narrative hangs on an errand he has to run for his girlfriend, Maria.

The errand is something to do with \$25,000 in cash and a man called Zhang Xiangzhi in Shanghai. Zhang is a business associate of Maria's, although it is not revealed why, or how. At an exhibition the narrator meets a Chinese woman, Li Qi, and agrees to travel to Beijing with her. A strange ménage à trois is completed when Zhang offers to travel with them. It soon becomes apparent that Zhang and Li Qi are acquaintances, either lovers or business partners (he isn't quite sure).

A novel of dizzying movement ensues. Ostensibly set in the summer, much of this takes place at night, where everyone seems to be in a state of "perpetual jetlag". Characters are constantly travelling from one person and place to another, or just about to set off to yet another destination. There is a constant blurring of perspective and reality is always shifting as if through the lens of a rotating prism.

There is only one real moment of clarity and stasis, on the night train to Beijing, where the narrator and Li Qi lock themselves in the cramped confines of a bathroom and kiss passionately. It is at this precise moment the narrator receives a call from Maria announcing the death of her father and again, only this time with a dramatic weight, the narrative slides further into an alternate dimension with the voice on the phone, "thousands of kilometres away... despite the expanse of night". Again, things move on.

The narrator cuts the trip short to travel to Elba for her father's funeral (which he doesn't attend). He begins to feel terrible guilt, believing himself the "person responsible for her suffering". This is Toussaint's darkest novel yet, one in which everything seems to be heading towards the blackest night imaginable. Yet even this looming presence of death is made to feel somehow exhilarating. It is further testament to Toussaint's standing as a master craftsman of the contemporary novel that he can give such shifting insouciance its weight.

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