

Many of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's novels share a certain structure: a nameless narrator drifts through minimalist plots that are almost completely lacking in drama but pervaded by a sense of lightness and quiet humor. This lightness and humor is a hallmark of his previous work, including his novels *The Bathroom* and *Television*, works that critic Warren Motte has described as "epics of the trivial." With *Running Away*, his latest novel to appear in English translation, readers familiar with those novels will find less humor, less lightness. In its place is an almost oppressive sense of displacement and despair. In this regard, it bears closer resemblance to Toussaint's previous novel *Making Love*.

Running Away starts with the arrival of a nameless narrator in Shanghai. Although his trip is ostensibly a "pleasure junket", he is also on a "sort of mission" for Marie—possibly a wife or girlfriend, although we are never sure. He is greeted by an associate of Marie's named Zhang Xiangzhi, who escorts him to a hotel. The narrator spends some days in Shanghai, by his own account mostly walking and eating. He meets a woman named Li Qi who invites him to accompany her for a few days in Beijing; Zhang shows up to join them just as the train is leaving. Once aboard, just as the narrator and Li are kissing in a bathroom, Marie calls from Paris to say her father has died. In Beijing, Zhang shows the narrator around and involves him, obliquely, in some kind of transaction involving a mysterious package. They bowl. They ride a motorbike through the city as if being chased. The narrator returns to France and on to the isle of Elba where Marie's father lived. The narrator misses most of the funeral, and when he and Marie are reunited, they swim out to sea.

This brief summary leaves out the feelings that form the real unity of the book; a dramatic plot is clearly not the main organizing principal of this novel. Toussaint makes use of the devices of a plot-based narrative, yet he consistently leaves mysteries unresolved and continuously deflates any dramatic tension that may have built up. From the beginning, the generic elements of a thriller are put into play, but here they fizzle and fade out. The narrator's "sort of mission" for Marie involves giving a manila envelope of cash to Zhang, whose dealings are possibly "dishonest and illicit" though the narrator "hadn't heard anything about [him] being involved in organized crime." At one point Zhang receives a phone call and drags the narrator and Li away from their bowling game (a scene not without some of Toussaint's characteristically dry humor) and onto a motorbike for what is perhaps a furious chase scene. Or maybe it's not, as nothing comes of it. The events of the plot point to pursuit and danger; Zhang drags Li and the narrator to the motorbike and they rush off, accompanied by the scream of sirens, taking a shortcut through a construction site. Yet, in the end, no one appears. Zhang delivers his package to a bar, and the narrator is left to return to his hotel.

Toussaint introduces these thriller elements, yet no danger is ever made explicit, no crime is clearly committed, no pursuit is evident. He retains only the feelings of the genre: paranoia, the sense of the world working against you, the chance that death could happen at any moment. The narrator is like a spectator to scenes in a thriller. He sees events that could signify intrigue, but that intrigue could be solely in his own mind. He returns to France without ever explicitly questioning his experiences, without returning to them. And, in this book, we only know what the narrator deigns to tell us. While in previous novels like *Television*, Toussaint allowed the reader to see behind the narrator, to gauge the distance between his words and actions, in *Running Away* the narration is considerably more opaque.

Like most of Toussaint's narrators, the narrator of *Running Away* is quite reticent—not coincidentally, one of his previous novels is called *The Reticence*. He can spend pages describing objects or landscapes or musing on his own thoughts—elements which are characteristic of Toussaint—yet we learn almost nothing about the narrator, not his name, occupation, nor even, really, his reason for being in China. From the beginning the reader is warned: "Marie had given me a sort of mission (but I don't feel like going into details)." The mission is not mentioned again, and the only clear sign of it is the envelope of cash handed to Zhang.

These elisions are carefully constructed. Part of the pleasure in Toussaint's novels is in trying to read around the narrator, fill in the gaps, and question the silences. While we do not learn much directly from the narrator, Toussaint tells us much about him through the style of the narration itself, which becomes a parallel puzzle alongside the ostensible plot. The many gaps in the narrator's discourse include looming, unanswered questions, the largest of which begins the novel itself. "Would it ever end with Marie? The summer before we broke up I spent a few week in Shanghai . . ." Pages later amongst long paragraphs of narration, a very short paragraph jumps out to remind us of that beginning: "Was it already a lost cause with Marie? And what could I have known about it then?" Yet the novel never comes back around to the story of their breakup; we are left, to a certain extent, in the dark.

Appropriately, much of *Running Away* takes place in the dark, at night, but it is also a summer novel. The first chapter is preceded by a page with the simple heading "summer." The novel is summery, reflecting not beachy relaxation but humidity and heaviness. If Toussaint's narrator is reticent about himself, he is voluble on the subjects of weather, nature, and the physical, elements which oppress and obscure. The characters seem to sweat their way through the heat, and the dirt and dust of the city contaminate them, setting the mood. This heat-induced haze is deepened by the narrator's ongoing displacement. He is constantly traveling by plane, train, motorbike, boat, car, or foot. His sleep is limited or disturbed, his mind and body jet-lagged. "During the whole course of my trip, then," he muses, "I was still in Beijing, but already in Elba at the same time, my mind unable to move from one place to another as easily as my body, to forget one place so as to focus on the other...."

This transitory state is not only a physical and mental state but also the metaphorical state of the narrator's relationship with Marie. Although their break-up is forecast in the second sentence of the novel, it continues in a state of suspension throughout. The ending leaves ambiguity, as if forcing us to return to the beginning and re-visit that opening question. The despair and despondency lurking in the narrator's thoughts, partnered at first with the paranoia of the thriller-esque elements, continues on past those tropes into the narrator's reunion with Marie. For, although the thriller never finds any crimes or danger, death is present from the moment the narrator hears about Marie's father, and his existential dread recurs at the most unlikely times. At one point, he experiences a Sartrean nausea when, looking at a plate of duck tongues in a restaurant, he is reminded of Li Qi's tongue in his mouth as he kissed her on the night train. At another point, standing at the ready in a bowling alley, the narrator is overcome with "languor and despondency" and unable to move.

I first read *Running Away* in the original French, and reading and rereading Matthew B. Smith's translation felt familiar. In comparing a few passages, the English version is faithful to the original. Smith is quite successful at maintaining the narrator's voice, and he retains Toussaint's use of extremely long sentences. Perhaps the best I can say about the translation is that I didn't notice it at all.

I tend to read Toussaint in bunches, picking up two of his novels in a row. When I first read *Running Away*, I followed it up with a reread of *Making Love*, and the connections between the two seemed more than coincidence. Both feature a nameless protagonist in a relationship with a fashion designer named Marie. His latest novel, out in September in France, is called *La Vérité sur Marie*, or *The Truth about Marie*. The connection among these novels is explicit, each casting the same couple at different stages in their relationship. The unanswered question that opens *Running Away* is not unanswered at all; it has already been answered in *Making Love*, which recounts how Marie and the narrator break up. Toussaint seems to be building a cycle of novels, separate yet connected. You don't have to read *Running Away* as a sequel to *Making Love* (I did not the first time I read it); you won't learn more about the narrator. But, through an accumulation of episodes, the novels resonate with each other, forming a more complete whole. Read them both. Read all Toussaint's work; there is a distinct pleasure in the variations and evolutions of his style.

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