

To market, to market

On Oct. 17, the winner of the Toronto Book Awards will be announced. Established in 1974, the prize honours authors who have written books that are evocative of Toronto. Over the next five weeks, we will run excerpts from the books short-listed for the award. Today, a chicken crossed a road and a girl fell in love in David Chariandy's *Soucouyant*.

They met in a city that doesn't exist any more. A city that perhaps never really existed, though you'll sometimes hear people talking about it. A city where people were always good and children could play outside unattended. A city before the new dark-skinned troubles and the new dark-skinned excitements. A city where rice and pasta were still considered "ethnic foods," and one of the few places where a newcomer might have a chance of getting her hands on breadfruit or fresh coconut or the sunny heft of a mango was at the Kensington Market.

It was early one morning at the height of summer. Adele was walking through the congested lanes of the market, and she had passed vendors calling out to her from behind arrangements of plantain or dried shrimp or okra. She had glimpsed under a rude canvas tent three live chickens and a goat, their freshness unchallengeable. She felt alive in this place, attuned at once to dozens of different voices and smells, but she didn't notice him at first, the dark young man in short pants, on a bicycle and carrying a massive satchel of flyers and newspapers across his back. He peddled recklessly near, a blur of khaki and pumping knees, a waft of something discomfotingly familiar. She wheeled to look back at the young man cycling away down the congested street, his satchel swaying with each near avoidance of crates and small children, his calf muscles black-brown and pulsing with liquid energy.

"Coolie fool!" she shouted. "You almost run me down!"

He stopped and turned around. They didn't know each other, but



ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH LAZAROVIC

there was history between them all the same. There were mildewed explanations for why they shouldn't ever get along. An African and South Asian, both born in the Caribbean and the descendants of slaves and indentured workers, they had each been raised to believe that only the other had ruined the great fortune that they should have enjoyed in the New World. They had been raised to detect, from a nervous distance, the smell that accompanied the other. Something oily that saturated their skins, something sweet-rotten and dreaded that arose from past

labours and traumas and couldn't ever seem to be washed away.

"Sorry, sister," answered the man on the bike.

"Who the hell you calling sister!?"

Adele watches now as the young man begins his dismount by swinging a leg over the seat of his still moving bicycle. He sails on one foot for a couple dozen feet before stepping off, parking, and walking to a stall in one fluid gesture. She watches him tug a paper from his satchel without looking and pass it to a vendor with an enormous

brown moustache. The vendor immediately rolls the paper into a tight stick and uses it to conduct his banter. How long has it been? the vendor asks, gesturing about with mock seriousness. What kind of trash is this and why isn't it ever on time? If it's trash, it should at least be on time. He says the word "trash" in a pleased way, as if he has just learned the word, and the young man laughs along with the whole performance. He moves to another stall and then another, handing out more papers, and she sees, now, that they are in many

different languages. One vendor, an old Asian woman, unsmilingly receives a paper in what looks to be Chinese characters and then carefully counts out four Scotch bonnet peppers into the man's hand, which he slips into his pocket.

Scotch bonnet peppers! How on Earth, she thinks, burning with jealousy.

The young man notices that she's still looking at him. He seems to think that she's admiring him. He seems, quite foolishly, to think that this could ever be the case. He finishes handing papers to vendors on this block, and steps back on to his bike, balancing smartly on two wheels as he swings his leg over. He does a tight circle in the congested street, narrowly missing a box of okras before heading back her way. A world of news in his satchel, the burnt chocolate darkness of his shins. It's been so long since she's seen anyone with such skin. Like wet earth. Like molasses.

About 20 yards in front of her and nearing fast, he raises a hand to be sure of her attention. He then lifts both hands off the handlebars and stands up on the pedals. His arms stretch outward for balance, waver for a couple of moments, then become perfectly still. He glides like this for seconds down the congested street, his eyes long-focused in concentration, past a dozen transactions in almost as many languages and dialects. A tightrope act in the worlds around him.

This seduction might not have worked at all, but fate intervenes. A self-liberated chicken darts unexpectedly in front of him. There's a tussle of feathers and a fall as spectacular as any Charlie Chaplin could ever attempt. The man bounces up to reassure everyone on the street.

"Is only a pothole," he says. "Is nothing. I alright."

There is no pothole. Nobody on the street seems to notice or care. There's a chicken feather plastered upon his wet forehead. She falls in love precisely then.

■ Excerpt from *Soucouyant* by David Chariandy. © 2007 by David Chariandy. Published by Arsenal Pulp Press.