Uncharted Heart
by Cyril Dabydeen

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Born in 1945 in Canje, Guyana, Cyril Dabydeen came to Canada in 1970 in order to attend university. He was already an award-winning writer by the time he emigrated, and to date has published over 17 books of poetry, short stories and novels. He was Ottawa’s poet laureate from 1984 to 1987. In addition to teaching English at the University of Ottawa, he has been involved for many years in human rights and race relations in Canada, serving both the federal and municipal governments. It is this latter interest that has informed much of his writing.

In “The Visitors have Come,” Dabydeen explores Canada’s mosaic – a term that doesn’t see much usage these days but is still apt:

Time out, and there’s laughter
with voices that talk back without
remonstration, as we declare
who we are without a fanfare;
and the clothes we wear
in a forgotten style –
being natives only. (3)

Most of the poems are quite strong. Dabydeen often discovers unusual poetic resources, as, for example, in “Canadian Ways,” which examines what happens when an oral and a written culture clash. It is written in a narrative style:

From Ghana he has come to Ottawa
to learn about “Canadian ways” –
being trained on how
to become a bureaucrat,
aiming to foster rural
development in Africa.
At the Federation of Canadian Municipalities,
the Director, born in England,
who wears a tweed jacket and tie, says
“Kwaku doesn’t write things down;
not the way our Dan does!” (15)

One assumes that Guyana has an oral culture, and that that is why Dabydeen has adopted this narrative, story-telling style, evident also in “Border Crossing”:

The man who comes unexpectedly
and knocks on my door,
a Dutch-born or Danish – after
so many years it’s hard to tell

Who shoves a book of poems
before me – the thinlineafed one I’d given him –
a stranger’s parting ways . . .
more than ten years ago. (21)

This poem tells the story of a priest who has come for a visit to Canada and looks up the narrator, who had inscribed a book of poems to him ten years before. This action demonstrates the value
an oral culture places on poetry, one lamentably lost in North American and European cultures.
“Canadian Identity” returns the reader to the Canadian mosaic. It features a New Zealand, a Pole and a Spaniard, all “true Canadians,” in a microcosm of the world:

After the swim in the men’s
shower in Ottawa worlds come
together as everyone all bare –
look around with a keen sense
of identity (52)
One of Dabydeen’s favourite genres is travel poetry. This collection contains poems set in Ireland, India, Africa, and elsewhere. “The Ha’Penny Bridge, Dublin” is part of a series on Ireland:

White crown-like arches mark the bridge  
across the Liffey, this famous river –  
echoes of Joyce’s Ulysses, as I’m here now  
sitting next to the sculpture of two women  
who seem pensive-looking or just poised,  
handbags by their sides. Others hurry by  
over the bridge as I watch and wait. (33)

while “Burnt Offering” is set in India:

My first morning in Delhi,  
you make breakfast,  
eager to do your best—  
then suddenly  
threw the toast away, saying  
it’s burnt, which I might  
have preferred anyway. (41)

These are vignettes of places seen, places to be remembered, wrought through the use of evocative images.

Uncharted Heart is an enjoyable book. A more cohesive style might have improved it, however. As it is, one style interrupts another before the first has been fully absorbed. Overall, Dabydeen writes in a clear, engaging way that does not demand overly much of the reader.

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for Malahat Review, Arc, Antigonish Review, Fiddlehead and The Danforth Review, in the U.S. for Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge and Galatea Revisits, and in Australia for Jacket.