FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Three-Legged Dog
Donald Caswell
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The pose Caswell strikes most often is that of a maimed but tough survivor, like his three-legged dog. Rarely pretty, often slightly warped and quirkily funny, these poems manage to sing in their own edgy way, to lament and to celebrate what Frost called "a diminished thing." In "Forty Four Quarters" the poet remembers having to give back the coins spilled from a broken coke machine when the cops arrive, but also his tiny triumph: "[I] reached deep into my pocket / for a single coin / placed it in the appropriate slot / and bought a coke."

More than nostalgia, however, energizes these poems. Caswell traces the others who share his beat-up but oddly comfortable world with a wry, firm, unsparing compassion. There are bar-room denizens, past and present lovers, a vivid, lucidly distant sketch of a rebellious daughter, "her thumb the only scythe she needed to reap / what we had sown / a hook …/ cutting the cord, cutting / out." With himself he is even less sparing: "The cruelty of children," he tells us, "knows no bounds. Especially mine." The poem describes this cruelty, but its real subject is not tormenting small animals, but the larger cruelty of a world where mothers as well as chameleons turn mud-colored as they die, where a boy must visit his sisters in the county home because his parents can't afford to feed them. "The ride back home was long enough / I could find ways to forget / their crying," Caswell writes, but clearly he has not forgotten.

Much of the language of these poems is conversational, even plain, as these quotes show. At times one yearns for more flash and color, but the later poems in the book find ways into deep and mysterious waters even within their plain speech. The unsettling “Stories That We Promised Not to Tell” invokes and echoes James Wright, that modern master of the plain but resonant style. “The Sick Man’s Daughter” is a risky, fascinating effort to take us within the awareness of a girl with an abusive father. This girl believes that her father comes to her with “a love she’ll never understand but love / all the same, she is sure.” Her plight, “not quite a girl, / not quite a woman, not quite a living thing, / actually” is explored in images of painful, hollow beauty: “A point of light, a wisp of wind / a fragment of cloth lying in a field / gazing forever at the far horizon.”

This is Caswell’s first full-length collection, after four chapbooks, and some of these poems were written over twenty years ago. At times the book has the somewhat uneven style and tone that one expects in such collections, but the vigor, humor and clarity of Caswell’s writing remain consistent. A good three-legged dog can cover a lot of ground and bark just as well as anybody’s hound.

Jeff Gundy