FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Temporary Help
John Engman
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With this book John Engman joins the long, sad, wild tradition of the poete maudit. From Villon to Frank O'Hara to Charles Bukowski, these poor souls seem condemned to extravagant suffering, equally extravagant verse, and early death. Engman died unexpectedly at 47, but the poems he left behind are now published in Temporary Help. Whatever the reality, these poems seem to be written very close to the lived details of the poet's life, and their style is conversational, even loose. But what lively conversations! Engman's loving ambivalence toward his people (and himself) emerges in one-liners like this: "All I ever wanted was an ice-cold beer and a booth with a view of the local scene, that, and the adulation of multitudes."

Fast-moving, sometimes verging on breeziness, the poems time and again escape from being mere coy imitations of Frank O'Hara—though sometimes by the slimmest of margins. Engman knows how to listen and record, and to convey the real feeling in lines that might go flat if put into his own voice, as in this bar-room moment in "Beer": "'Bullshit,' he tells me. "Government can't buy poetry, / no such thing. I mean rivers of darkness, mountains / of feeling. So much aching happens in true poems."

The music of these poems is a ready-made, rough one. I can imagine in the "Terrible Weather Conditions" that Engman is settling on a stool behind a coffeehouse microphone, very late, strumming a few chords on a guitar with the high E string just a little flat, telling a long, complicated, funny story about the song's origin. Then he starts to sing, and the place gets very quiet. Something like this: "Loud sky, red rain, white crow, moon flying away. / How can I love you in autumn when everything goes wrong? Last night, I burned three hundred calories dreaming about your hair. / I thought I felt animal earth lurch forward // And fell into the dark ages between now and now."

Jeff Gundy