

***Diary of a Mosquito Abatement Man*, by John Porcellino
La Mano, 106 Pages.**

John Porcellino famously applied the aesthetic of punk to comics, shrugging off superficial technical virtuosity and working out within his limitations a purer, more direct conduit for pain and rage and joy. *Perfect Example* (2000) is among the best novels ever written about adolescence, period, up there with *Catcher in the Rye*. One hates to describe it to friends as a book about a depressed teenager, because even though it is very specifically about being a depressed teenager in the suburban Midwest circa 1985, it transcends those incidentals; it's a story about figuring out how to be a person in the world, and how to love other people. Porcellino's new book, *Diary of a Mosquito Abatement Man*, is a less unified work than even that episodic novel--as the title suggests, it's a collection of journal entries rather than a novel--but it continues his thoughtful record of the same ongoing struggle, this time in relation to the problem of earning a living. It asks you to think seriously about a question too often ignored: what "earning your living" literally means in this world.

The initial impression of the book's structure as somewhat desultory comes, in part, from the disparity of styles on display. "Some of the early strips are pretty crude, both in terms of execution and content," Porcellino apologizes in his introduction. "In the process of putting this book together, I was really tempted to go back in and start redrawing/revising." He was wise to resist the temptation—not only for the sake of his own sanity, but for the sake of his readers, for whom the book serves as a document of his artistic development. Sometime between the stories "Fuck," drawn in October of

1994, and “Mountain Song,” drawn only one year later, there is a sudden and profound transformation in Porcellino’s art: “Fuck,” though it has some of the crude, exuberant fun of comics you drew in grade school, is drawn by someone trying to draw better than he knows how; “Mountain Song,” though it’s still deceptively childlike in its execution, clearly looks exactly as the artist intends it to. He’s quit trying, inadequately, for naturalistic representation and instead found the spare, minimal, almost schematic style that is now unmistakably his. It’s one of those breakthroughs when it seems as though the noise or snow has cleared, and the reception is suddenly perfect. The lines are exquisitely restrained and lucid, each person or object rendered as a symbol that goes straight to the brain as instantly as a STOP sign: truck, cow, mountain, John P. himself. The increasingly abstract drawings of a truck dwindling and gradually engulfed in a visual labyrinth of pipes, scaffolding, ladders, catwalks, and power lines in “Chemical Plant” recall the intricate, doodly compositions of Claude Dubuffet or Keith Haring. It’s impossible now to imagine Porcellino’s stories illustrated in any other style, any more than we can imagine Hemingway’s stories told in another voice. The simplicity of his line is inseparable from the clarity of his vision. The reductive, universalizing effect of cartooning serves to turn his workday anecdotes into something like parables.

My use of the word “parable” is considered; although it’s never allegorical, there is an overtly spiritual dimension to Porcellino’s work. His stories are reminiscent of Denis Johnson’s in *Jesus’ Son*, their subjects often mundane or tawdry--eating wild asparagus, watching a muskrat dive beneath the surface of a pond, seeing an unglamorous couple fucking in the front seat of a Country Squire--but always pointing beyond themselves to

something ineffable. To summarize their plots would do them a disservice; they are more akin to poetry than the short story. Unrelated incidents—a crippled squirrel hanging from a branch, a girl sobbing in a passing car—seem somehow connected and charged with meaning, the world glimmering with hints and glimpses of an elusive whole. The illustrated prose story “Waukegan” ends with the exhilarating passage: “A couple drunk guys were out on the rocks shouting, but the wind took their voices away. I can still see them there, long hair blowing, shirts unbuttoned and billowing behind them, beers clenched in cold fists. They were leaning into the wind, defying gravity and just frozen in the waves, in the wind, smashing them and all around.” Your ears practically pop as you vault, in the space of a single sentence, from the profane to the sacred. Even in “Channahon,” one of the rare occasions when Porcellino’s naive prose gets too fulsome (“it seemed the human spirit, corrupted and horrible, rose stinking, ghastly, from the dreary, foggy, and terribly black waters”), the synergistic effect of words and imagery still conspires to evoke genuine dread. In “Untitled Drunk Comic” he pulls off the minor miracle of a comic strip without pictures—brusquely sketched blank boxes with captions scrawled beneath them, a visual analogy to a blackout. Somehow, in this format, the lines, “I question why my life is seen through these eyes/ Why I am like this/ Is it good or bad,” sound less like sloppy maundering than a text for meditation. The collection’s masterpiece, “Mountain Song,” is too perfect to risk sully with clumsy synopsis; I will say only that it makes the hair on your arms rise and the air around you come to a standstill.

The artist Porcellino reminds me of more than any other is Van Gogh, with his tortured personal life, his religious awe of nature, and his yearning for spiritual purity. Ultimately this book is about Porcellino's deepening wonder at the natural world and his increasingly uneasy cognizance of his own chosen place in it, as an agent of death. The very first story reproduced in the collection is titled "Hellhole," in which Porcellino regards nature the way so many of us do, as a pain in the ass: he includes thorns, vines, ticks, and mosquitoes in his list of "things that should not be" and exults, "I've come to kill your children!" like a god of destruction as he approaches the mosquitoes' habitat. In another early strip, "Inhuman Monsters of the Deep: A Whole World in a Drop of Water," he presents a whimsical rogues' gallery of microscopic characters like "little see-through bug," "water whirlies," and the larval and pupal stages of his professional nemesis, the mosquito, some with little smiley faces. Years later, in "Mountain Song," he takes a *Mark Trail*-style aside to illustrate the larvae of the Caddis Fly, which construct tiny shelters of sand and twigs in which they live and locomote underwater. "I was astounded by the complexity and craftsmanship of their little homes," he admits. His attitude toward his quarry has grown over time from callous annoyance to bemused interest and finally into disquiet, humility, and respect. This change in tone is analogous to the distillation of his drawing style; just as he was trying to imitate a sleeker, more realistic technique than he was capable of in earlier stories like "Hellhole," he was also, like most novices, trying his hand at the formulae of alternative comics—parody, slice-of-life, etc. As his attitude changed, he found his true voice. John Porcellino, although he certainly has a sense of humor, is not an ironist. He is aiming for something higher and cleaner than humor.

The most expository and didactic section of the book is “Death of a Mosquito Abatement Man,” in which Porcellino recounts how he decides to quit his job. As has happened to more than one thinker, a chronic illness imposes upon him the time and seriousness of mind for prolonged reflection. Inspired by a book of comparative religion, he re-reads the New Testament and begins to study Buddhism and meditate. His epiphany that “all the world’s religions are saying the same basic thing” is debatable, and his quick remedial in the Four Noble Truths is worth skimming unless this is the first you’ve heard of them. What makes for interesting reading here is the real change his religious study and practice brings on in Porcellino’s life. Although he gives fair-minded consideration to arguments for exterminating disease-bearing insects, he finally decides that he can no longer live in dissonance with the ethical implications of his work—it is not, in Buddhist terms, “right livelihood.” His own conundrum is only an especially blatant example of what American Cultural History professor Leo Marx calls “the contradiction at the heart of culture that would deify the Nature it is engaged in plundering.” In the end, John becomes acutely conscious of his hypocrisy, and it embarrasses him. In an epilogue, “The Owl,” John remembers a night when he was driving his mosquito fogger truck down a dark, forested country road and watched, entranced, as an owl glided directly ahead of him in the headlight beams, flying from branch to branch. In this haunting coda Porcellino renounces the Kochalkan pose of wide-eyed-wonder-at-the-magic-of-the-world as so much self-deluding bullshit: “At the time I thought it was mysterious and beautiful—an omen of some sort—but now I see that I was just poisoning him.” In other words, it isn’t enough to pat yourself on the back for being so sensitive and appreciating the beauty of

the natural world; you might actually have to change your life. Perception carries responsibilities. This book, whose dedication to “mosquitoes, men, women, and all beings; grasses, rocks, fence, and sky,” might at first glance seem a little, well, woo woo, can be seen in retrospect as an act of penance, and an offering of atonement.