

*DIANA & NIKON:  
Essays on Photography.*

By Janet Malcolm. Aperture. 212 pp.  
\$29.95

The adage has it that a picture is worth a thousand words, but the essayist Janet Malcolm manages deftly to reverse that assertion—indeed, to make the reader in some instances quite wary of a given photographer's intentions and work. For many years in the pages of the *New Yorker*, Malcolm has displayed a talent for getting to the bare bones of the matter, and, not rarely, a brusque impatience with the received pieties that go unexamined. In a sense, photography itself has become one of those pieties, its supposed "truths" an easy bromide, gladly accepted as a means of avoiding life's complexities, not to mention our own inclination to protect ourselves from recognizing those complexities by seeing only what suits our (psychological, social, economic) convenience. As in our dreams (those nightly visual productions that hint at meaning rather than directly express it), the photographer has intentions, assumptions, that inform his or her work, but they are not necessarily out on the table—hence an indirection that can be misleading, if beguiling, in a medium popularly regarded as not only a place of artistry but a repository of the real.

It is that tension between the aesthetic and the documentary that preoccupies Malcolm. She moves knowingly from one photographer to another, so that we meet, through her eyes, at once appreciative and skeptical, the work of well-known masters such as Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen, Robert Frank and Walker Evans. She asks us to look at others, more controversial—Diane Arbus, inevitably, as well as Richard Avedon, William Eggleston, and Sally Mann. She does so with language, naturally, but she also presents picture after picture so that we can follow her line of reasoning against the evidence of what William Carlos Williams called "the thing itself." That phrase, a statement of a poet's hard search for a rock-bottom truth, gets at what Malcolm is trying to indicate and illustrate—the ambiguous nature of photographs, with their claim of objectivity pulling against the photographer's desire to summon metaphors and assert ideas, propositions, ideologies.

Like Susan Sontag, Malcolm emphasizes

this appropriative or manipulative side of photography, even as she, like Sontag, fails to acknowledge a similar aspect of her own kind of work. Perhaps she assumes that the reader knows of such an inevitability in writing, whereas she worries that in the case of the photograph many of us are unwittingly seduced by the easy availability of an image that seemingly begs only for a nod of recognition. We enjoy all those "tricks" momentarily (photographers are everywhere in this modern bourgeois life), but our hearts are untouched, and we are lonelier for the nature of the experience. Finally, a callousness comes with exposure to endless passing fancies.

The best part of this book—ironically, revealingly—is Malcolm's writing about literature. When she analyzes Henry James's story "The Real Thing" (1893), she tells us more about illusions and our constant reliance on them than she does in her many earnest, serious-minded efforts to figure out what particular photographic images intend for us to feel, notice, or think. In that regard, she keeps reminding us that photography itself is hard to describe, or define, no matter its singular reliance on a technological gadget with picture-making properties. More so perhaps than a novel or a work of demanding criticism such as this book, the meaning of a photograph varies with the viewer, confirming Nietzsche's observation that "it takes two to make a truth."

—Robert Coles

*ANY DAY.*

By Henry Mitchell. Indiana Univ. Press.  
272 pp. \$24.95

Newspaper columns tend to take on a musty air soon after reaching hardcover. The *Washington Post* columns of the late Henry Mitchell are a rare exception. Mitchell's gardening pieces have already appeared in book form—*The Essential Earthman* (1981) and *One Man's Garden* (1992)—and now, five years after his death, comes a collection of musings from his weekly column, "Any Day."

The author emerges as a reflective and altogether decent man, clear eyed but uncynical, drawn over and over to such seemingly archaic topics as honor, virtue, and integrity. "Nothing infuriates some people more than the concept that one is too good to cheat," he observes. "They think

everybody is born a bastard and that nobody should give himself airs about being better than the average run of folk." Elsewhere he muses on our innate tendency toward self-deception in matters of righteousness: "We'll all go to our graves as irrational as the day we were born, and the best we can do is watch out whenever our personal interest seems to coincide with celestial virtue." Of the essayist E. B. White, Mitchell reflects, "His work was civil and polite; he either had no gift of vitriol or else never felt any." The same could be said of Mitchell, a graceful and gracious observer of the human condition.

—Brian Gross

### **THE WORK OF POETRY.**

By John Hollander. Columbia Univ. Press. 318 pp. \$29.95

In his postcard from Parnassus, *Their Ancient Glittering Eyes* (1992), the poet Donald Hall recounts a Harvard tribute to T. S. Eliot. Asked afterward if he had sat next to the guest of honor, a Junior Fellow told Hall: "I couldn't. John Hollander was sitting on both sides of him." In the 23 essays contained in *The Work of Poetry*, Hollander sits alongside, around, on, and over the great poets and their compositions.

Hollander's vigilant approach can be seen in the essay "Of Of: The Poetics of a Preposition," in which he writes that "the immense variety of ad hoc uses of *of* in idiomatic English helps destabilize its precise operation in certain phrases." Taking Hollander at his word, one can interpret "the work of poetry" as meaning not only the toil that informs composition but the work *belonging* to poetry, as if it were an autonomous enterprise. This second, self-reflective stance is borne by Hollander's insistence on poetry as a metaphor for reali-

ty, particularly in his essay "Dreaming Poetry." He discusses the infinite capacity of poets to editorialize on the work of past practitioners. "We cannot talk about our feelings," he contends, "without talking about talking about them, without pointing out the peculiar ways in which we must use language to tell the truth."

Hollander's several essays on poetic origin seem merely an extension of Harold Bloom's doctrine of misreadings, whereby a poet misconstrues the poem of a predecessor, then pens a rebuttal. Reflecting a critical stance common to the period in which these essays were written (1977–97), Hollander imports jargon from the uncertainty-principle school of literary theory, with ruinous consequences for his clarity. "Poetry is the soul of indirection," he writes. But indirection kills an essay. When Hollander performs a close reading on a specific text, the results are more fruitful, as in his fine essays on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses*, the obscure American poet Trumbull Stickney, and the Victorian poets George Meredith and D. G. Rossetti.

"I've always been something of a moralist," Hollander acknowledges, and these essays convey several lessons and lamentations. One is that memorization, once an essential poetic discipline, has become a lost art. Another is that graduate writing workshops neglect rigorous analysis of the poetic form: "There is no useful conventional terminology for the description, taxonomy, and analysis of different modes of free verse." The reader is likely to profit from such concrete observations a good deal more than from Hollander's murky musings on indeterminacy. For the latter, consult a French linguist.

—Sunil Iyengar

## *Contemporary Affairs*

### **THE LAST BARBARIANS: The Discovery of the Source of the Mekong in Tibet.**

By Michel Peissel. Henry Holt. 320 pages. \$27.50

Michel Peissel would have been world famous in an earlier century, but he is an explorer at a time when, as he writes, "most people think explorers are old-fashioned or

completely obsolete." In *The Last Barbarians*, his 15th book, he makes a triumphant case for the explorer, weaving history, geology, and politics with candid revelations of the yearnings and ambitions that have carried him to some of the remotest places on the planet.

A fluent Tibetan-speaker with more than 37 trips to the Himalayas behind him,