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