

## Choice Specimens

Max Nelson

*Nobody's Looking at You: Essays* by Janet Malcolm. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019, \$26.00 cloth.

IN THE summer of 1939, when she was about to turn five, Janet Malcolm fled Prague with her sister and parents. They sailed to New York. "We were among the small number of Jews who escaped the fate of the rest by sheer dumb luck," she wrote in a recent essay, "as a few random insects escape a poison spray." In Prague her parents had "belonged to a community of secular, nationalistic, Czech-speaking Jews," and now they found themselves in a new country where not only their professional life but also the fabric of their cultural identity—"how to represent themselves"—had to be reimagined. They settled first in Brooklyn, then in Yorkville, where Malcolm's father, a psychiatrist and neurologist, set up a medical practice.

In this "ordinary middle-class, middlebrow" household, Malcolm's taste swung early to stray unassuming things. To make dollhouses, she used "orange crates furnished with chairs and tables and beds contrived out of this and that piece of wood or metal or cloth scavenged from around the house." Her eye for discarded and scavenged objects emerged alongside an acute sense of which ones were false or misleading. An early memory preoccupies her:

I am in the country on a fine day in early summer and there is a village festival. Little girls in white dresses are walking in a procession, strewing white rose petals from small baskets. I want to join the procession but have no basket of petals. A kind aunt comes to my aid. She hastily plucks white petals from a bush in her garden and hands me a basket filled with them. I immediately see that the petals are not rose petals but peony petals. I am unhappy. I feel cheated. I feel that I have been given not the real thing but something counterfeit.

"The real thing" has been an ongoing object of fixation for Malcolm, glittering for more than forty years across her essays, pieces of criticism, and books of reportage. A reflection on the photographer E.J. Bellocq, from 1997, takes its central metaphor from a devious Henry James story about a portrait painter who hires a broke, desperate society couple—"the real thing," they insist—as models for a set of popular illustrations of the rich. When they can't give him the poses he needs, they settle for doing work around the painter's house, but the pathetic effort of their "intense dumb appeal" so unnerves him that he loses track of his work and sends them on their way. For Malcolm, the artist's refusal to watch this sad couple doing his dishes—and to register their humiliation in a picture—suggests his

unwillingness to do the very thing he claimed they were keeping him from doing: "become great by engaging with the real." What "they helplessly display to him is their terror," Malcolm argues. "But he does not want to see it, and when a momentary glimpse of it is forced on him, his fear that it will blind and paralyze him is confirmed... He steps back from the edge and remains in the comfortable world of mediocrity grounded in shallow illusion."

Malcolm resolved early in her career not to make the same mistake. "The comfortable world of mediocrity" appalls her. Her prose, she seemed to decide when she emerged as *The New Yorker's* design critic in the early 1970s, had to resist "shallow illusion" with vigilance. She worked over her sentences until they became precision instruments, sensitive enough to measure the faintest shifts in atmosphere and pressure. They have the lightness and delicacy *The New Yorker* required—her first pieces for the magazine were Christmastime round-ups of children's books—but none of the belletristic mushiness in which some of her colleagues indulged. No fault of her own writing, no preciousness or hedging or affectation, could be permitted to distract from the matter at hand. Gore Vidal called her "the inexorable Janet Malcolm."

SHE CARRIED that style into places where "the real thing" shimmered in the distance but shrank from touch. In the essays on photography that became her first book, *Diana and Nikon*, she argued that the camera's strict dependence on "the usually ambiguous, and sometimes outright deceitful, surface of reality" made it ill-suited, on its own, to deliver the honest reports its customers told themselves it ought to give. It magnified flaws, picked at its subjects' scabs. Clever photographers had to smooth their pictures out to make them resemble the flattering documents they'd been under pressure to come up with, "to bridge the abyss between the viewer's innocent expectations—aroused by his belief in the authority and authenticity of what a photograph shows—and the camera's stubborn refusal to fulfill them."

So it went across any practice—psychoanalysis, journalism, biography, art-making, the monstrous American criminal justice system—which people were innocent enough to trust. As Malcolm moved through these worlds, she lingered on points of special soreness or pressure, dramas of deception and mistrust, moments when professionals failed to keep up the shows of competence and transparency they'd been expected to maintain. She was drawn to sacrificial figures like a journalist pilloried for admitting duplicities the rest of the field sanctioned in

silence (*The Journalist and the Murderer*), or literary disputes like the one over the legacy of Sylvia Plath's life and death (*The Silent Woman*), or contested savior figures like a family therapist whose sessions—advertised for their "visibility and openness"—devolved into intricate, violent struggles ("The One-Way Mirror"), or people who couldn't hide anything, like the inarticulate, tediously truthful criminal defendant at the center of *The Crime of Sheila McGough*. Her own presence in these narrations pulses and recedes. In her interview with *The Paris Review*, she described the care with which she let herself accumulate "flaws and vanities and, perhaps most significantly, strong opinions" on the page.

"I was influenced," she said, "by this thing that was in the air called deconstruction." When Edward Said's *Orientalism* was reissued, she praised the way it exposed "the writers who, professing objectivity and sympathy, could not suppress their condescension and dislike or hide their political agendas." But the drama of her pieces came, too, from the way she showed herself seizing on hard instances of authenticity amid those misleading signals. She honed her eye for fraudulence and dishonesty even as she insisted that there could never be a neutral point from which to pick dishonesty out. In "A Girl of the Zeitgeist"—her long essay about the New York art world's response to Ingrid Sischy's editorship at *Artforum*—she breaks her studied remove to balk at the "tiresome, calculated" banter of the Russian-Jewish satirical painting duo Komar and Melamid. "You got that from Chekhov," she thinks as one of them tells a mawkish story.

Judgments proliferate. Domestic spaces, in Malcolm, can be pleasant, inviting, and warm, or they can be forbidding and pretentious. ("Dark, forceful, willful," in the case of Rosalind Krauss's Soho loft.) People can be real or phony. The scholar Jacqueline Rose steps into a duel-like interview in *The Silent Woman* "surrounded by a kind of nimbus of self-possession." Malcolm lingers over the one point she scores in the conversation precisely because Rose's confident integrity seems so "powerful and plausible." In the beguiling travelogue *Reading Chekhov*, the "simple, nicely prepared food" at a seaside restaurant near Yalta makes Malcolm "feel something friendly and generous wafting toward me." These verdicts have the kind of hard confidence Malcolm spends the rest of these pieces loosening or melting down. She scatters them across her essays like pebbles in a stream.

What this technique gives Malcolm is an intricate way to study the business of navigating terrain from which expected signposts—of authenticity, veracity, community, or identity—seem to have vanished. She associates that sense of indirection, in much of her writing, with the mass forced migration and catastrophic disruption that shaped the postwar world in which she came of age. She takes an interest in people who lived through that dislocation, or have a share in it. Salvador Minuchin, the family therapist at the center of "The One-Way Mirror," was born into the Jewish émigré communi-

ty that emerged in Argentina around the turn of the century; in 1947, he "got on a boat with a group of forty other Zionist volunteers" and enlisted as an Israeli army doctor. Ingrid Sischy "was twice uprooted" as a child, Malcolm notes; her parents left South Africa after the Sharpeville massacre and moved first to Scotland, then to New York. In Malcolm's essays, characters like these become strange and isolated figures, drawn in fine detail while a few swift and ambiguous background strokes stand in for the violent, convulsive circumstances that shaped them. Sischy, for instance, strikes Malcolm as one of the sort of "heroes and heroines" that remained plausible after "two world wars and a holocaust"—"quiet, serious, obsessively hard-working people whose cumbersome abstentions from wrongdoing and sober avoidances of personal display have a seamlessness that is like the wearing of drab colors to a funeral."

Then, on the other hand, there are the people who negotiate, or even suppress, their shame over having stayed put. In his encounter with Malcolm, the photographer Thomas Struth emphasizes "the culture of guilt" he absorbed as the son of a mother who joined the Hitler Youth and a father who fought for the Nazis; she dwells on the discrepancy between those candid disclosures and the "lightness of spirit" his pictures project. *Two Lives*—Malcolm's study of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas—turns on Stein's choice to conceal her Jewishness in the years around the Second World War, during which she and Toklas stayed in France under the protection of the anti-Semitic collaboratorist Bernard Faÿ. Even in her postwar memoir, "she just can't seem to bring herself to say that she and Toklas are Jewish." Thornton Wilder, Malcolm points out, had noted that refusal as early as 1933. "It's possible to make books of a certain fascination if you scrupulously leave out the essential," he wrote.

BY THE time she wrote most of the essays in her new collection, *Nobody's Looking at You*, Malcolm had long emphasized the distortions with which most memoirs made peace, and on which stories of migration and nationhood seemed to rely with special desperation. She resisted straight autobiography. Could she manage, she asked in a short essay from 2010, to write about herself not as an opinionated observer but as a person with a past and a range of feeling? "Autobiography is an exercise in self-forgiveness," she wrote; it required a level of "tenderness and pity" she rebuffed. "I see that my journalist's habits have inhibited my self-love. Not only have I failed to make my young self as interesting as the strangers I have written about, but I have withheld my affection."

More than half of the pieces in *Nobody's Looking at You* appeared after that essay, and they show Malcolm relaxing into something like a mellow late style. They tend not to become the dances of suspicion and betrayal that have until now defined her attitude towards her subjects. Four of the recent profiles that make up the first half of the book—on the classical

pianist Yuja Wang, the radio host George Jellinek, the TV news personality Rachel Maddow, and the three sisters who preside over Manhattan's Argosy bookstore—waft along on currents of comfort, relaxation, and bonhomie. The fifth, a simmering, quietly tense encounter with the fashion designer Eileen Fisher, gives the book its title:

I turned to Eileen. "When you say 'It's not about me' and that you're not interesting, that's a very modest way of talking about yourself."

"I grew up Catholic," she said. "You know, the 'Nobody's looking at you' thing."

"That's part of Catholicism?"

"That's what my mother said all the time. 'Nobody's looking at you.' So for me—in Catholic school, around my mother—it was just safer to be invisible."

The incisive shorter critical essays that fill the rest of the collection—they deal with, among other subjects, the translation of Russian literature, Sarah Palin's reality show, and a blundering book about sexual harassment by the Australian journalist Helen Garner—depend on the scrutiny Malcolm seems in these profiles to have deliberately suspended. Don't worry, she seems to say, you won't be judged. Nobody's looking too closely. This is precisely the sort of reassurance Malcolm's earlier work insists can't be trusted. In these profiles, however, the promise is for the most part kept. Minor-key cruelties drift around their edges and occasionally snap into view—Fisher making her third cat, "the bad cat," live in the cold outside her house; Wang "abruptly" leaving her doting longtime manager—but few feelings are hurt. When Wang and her new manager squirm at Malcolm's "unseemly interest in money," the matter is allowed to drop.

Instead Malcolm's eye drifts to the specks and details in the corners of her subjects' lives. More so than ever, it peers into their family histories. "Six Glimpses of the Past," Malcolm's recent essay for *The New Yorker* about her own early family life, doesn't appear in *Nobody's Looking at You*, but it floats over the pieces that do. Many of them turn on scenes of immigration or displacement and trace the tortuous, sometimes contorting adaptations the immigrants' children make. Louis Cohen, whose daughters own Argosy, "was the seventh child of a Lower East Side immigrant family." Rachel Maddow's last name originated with "a nineteenth-century Ellis Island official who bestowed it on a family of Russian Jewish immigrants named Medvedov." The gruesome right-wing commentator Norman Podhoretz, whose memoir *Making It* occasions a perversely admiring close-reading in this collection's last essay, was living with his Yiddish-speaking immigrant parents in Brownsville when Malcolm's family came to Brooklyn.

The stories amble along, making room for digressions and asides. We learn that Rachel Maddow's distant relative Ben Maddow, a blacklisted screenwriter and critic whose Edward Weston biography had occasioned the first essay in *Diana and Nikon*, "chose David Wolff as his pen name because he thought *medved*" (the family's original surname) "meant 'wolf.'" (In

fact, it means "bear.") We spend a page studying the annotations in a batch of books Argosy acquired from the library of the novelist and lawyer Louis Auchincloss, hovering over his notes about authorial point of view in *The Wings of the Dove*. We dwell on a dead-end elevator ride the *New Yorker* reporter Joseph Mitchell takes, in his essay "Up in the Old Hotel," to the abandoned third floor of a South Street seafood restaurant. He finds a "pitch-dark, dust-laden" place, in Malcolm's summary, where a bare bed-frame gathers dust under a placard warning about the wages of sin.

These odd digressions accumulate with unhurried nonchalance. In her piece on Jellinek, however, Malcolm makes one of those sudden disarming maneuvers that have become her specialty. She has been reporting that when he was nineteen, in 1939, Jellinek sailed from Hamburg to Havana. He arrived, she says, two weeks before the Cuban government—and subsequently the U.S.—refused another such ship. And then she breaks the wall:

I come from a refugee family myself, and some of what has always drawn me to *The Vocal Scene* is my association of Jellinek with the New York émigré community to which my parents belonged during and after the Second World War. One of the striking characteristics of this community was its achievement—you could even say its overachievement—of mastering English. These émigrés made it their business to speak and write English that was not only grammatically correct but idiomatic beyond the requirements of ordinary usage. The pride that my father and his fellow émigrés took in their ability to stroll through the language as if it were a field of wildflowers from which they could gather choice specimens—of stale standard expressions and faded slang—is touchingly evoked by Jellinek's radio commentaries.

In "Six Glimpses of the Past," her *New Yorker* piece, the flowers are no longer metaphors. They have become the real thing. The essay swerves in its last lines from a rumbling meditation on posthumous fame—"the lives of the obscure can be likened to extinct species of beetles"—to a memory of Malcolm's father collecting "certain small, frail, white wildflowers that it never occurred to me to notice, and that he never forced on my attention." The business of picking out such fragile things becomes an emblem for the sensitivity of language and tone—the overachievement of English—Malcolm needed in order to capture it on the page.

ONE OF Malcolm's most intimate essays, from 1990, is called "The Window-Washer." It centers on a prickly former dissident making a new life for himself in Prague just after the Velvet Revolution, but its most piercing moments show Malcolm alone, wandering through the city she left many decades before, trying to tug and push on associations "that would," she hopes, "reconnect me to my early childhood." The taste of a particular sort of ice cream cone doesn't work. Nor does a visit to her family's old apartment, now an office building with a guarded safe-room. "The safes of childhood memory are similarly protected," Malcolm thinks. "One cannot pick

their locks."

Then, one day, the safe swings open. The name of a small town, found in a guidebook, spurs a memory of a song Malcolm's parents once sung. More follow it. "Songs, stories, legends, jokes, anecdotes, reminiscences, poems, images came to me in a nostalgic rush," Malcolm remembers. "The Czech part of my identity, which had always lain below the surface of my 'real life' as an American child and an American adult, and had affected it in subtle but palpable ways, now appeared to me with moving vividness."

Even now, however, something is missing. "My Jewishness," she goes on, "was something else—a different order of influence, occupying a darker, less accessible region of my psyche." The horror of the genocide Malcolm's parents had only narrowly escaped has been forcing her "to keep the beguiling Czechs at a certain distance." As that distance recedes, she realizes, the other region—the catastrophe she fled, the cover-ups and adaptations her parents made as they rebuilt their lives—keeps glittering darkly and inaccessibly. It is the thing that lies over the edge from which Gertrude Stein decisively drew back, threatening to blind and paralyze the writer who looks over it.

Malcolm hugs that edge, studying

whatever she finds lying or growing on its fringe. Not all of it ends up in prose. Every summer between 2005 and 2008 she took large color photographs of burdock leaves she found in the Berkshires; she was drawn to these "aged and diseased" specimens of a plant that has itself been easy to overlook, "a rank weed that grows along roadsides and in waste places and around derelict buildings." And for decades she has been making collages, including a 2013 series drawn from transcriptions by the scholar Martha Werner of Emily Dickinson's late manuscript fragments. She paired those jagged, typewritten strings of text with astronomical images of planets and stars.

One of these collages includes a handwritten transcript, in Czech, from a New York psychoanalytic session that recalls the kind her father once conducted in Prague. It runs in a tight scrawl across one side of an index card, hovering against a grey background above a tattered square of fabric and a Dickinson transcript that opens with an ominous, tentative confession: "I sometimes have / almost feared / Language was / done between / us." No caption marks out the transcript for the revealing document it is. It lies there mutely, not forcing itself on anyone's attention. □