

No Man's Land

Rob Stone

Does he dream of Rosebud, this itinerant adoptee that Mitch Kern is gently introducing to the urbs of a prairie city? Or, is the provisional anthropology this ageless spirit is being asked to patiently piece together one that is shaped by questions? What is this beautiful house? Where does this highway go to?

His biography unfolds, snap by snap, with each intellectual encounter, publicly, on Instagram. Suddenly modern in this way, he seems to approach some proper understanding, vast and enigmatic. Dwelling, for instance, on the barbered verdancy of a high school athletics field, does he immediately recognize the prize of physical fluency? Can he see its role in the acquisition of knowledge, social standing, language even? Does he know to throw flowers in celebration, or understand the grinding melancholy of defeat? As he pauses to be pictured, taking-in the settler social milestones depicted by the churches and gun shops, libraries and pools, cinemas, cafés and suburban shrubbery, does he also acquire ambition? Will he grasp if he succeeds in school or falls later into addiction or poverty, succumbs to illness or injury? If not, what metre does he have against which all of these places, these carefully-staged civic monuments, may emerge significantly?

This seems to be one (of several) profound questions caught by Mitch Kern's portraits of coming to terms with meaning. The gaze, the look, the glance, the glimpse, the stare and leer and squint, all these many terms that we have for an act of regard or apprehension, seem to allow only an insufficient access to the temper and peculiar sensibility of this figure. Are there embers of remorse or resentment in those ancient, constant eyes? Or, is he simply not distracted by reflection and anticipation. Is he not moved by knowledge of class conflict, national histories, ecological calamity, displacement? Unlike Bambi, he is not of and does not explain western passages towards maturity. Is he comfortable in his skin, his horns and hoody? Is his masculinity, like his unimpeachable health, not yet even a question for him? And, when contemplating the strange and meaningful ecology of all these exemplary sites where common-all-garden suburban social history is made and repeatedly repeated, has he the capacity to wonder "do they mean me?" And, in that one question, is he then free?