

Nicole Rubin

***Robert Strong-bear breathes in the
bruised air and sweeps one thick hand***

Collins Literary Prize for Poetry, Honorable Mention

across his forehead—palms like crumpled paper;
like a gas station receipt, a thank you note,
 a birth announcement, a reason
 to live—cradled and huddled
in his pocket. the canyons of his face
run wet, and he thinks it a waste—he does not own
 his sweat,
 or skin or rusted tendons.
there is nothing here but tumbleweeds and decades
of gravel in his throat, shattered

promises long since gargled smooth. sixteen years
ago he bought a dusty blue '73 Gremlin
 for 350—salvation
 wrapped in sheet metal—it pattered
“Hallelujah” as he crossed the reservation line
to find work. in Santa Fe he saw his mother’s hands
 in cured tobacco leaves
 —the leather flesh like a fever—
each leaf a nicotine lullaby. he lost
that job for picking too slow. drove west and held the old lie

tight to his chest like a blanket desperate with disease
and he crashed his hands into the earth of Arizona—
 to pull flesh and fortune
 from the dirt, every tomato
another dream—mottled and sour, and soon to spoil.
by accident he crushed one scarlet fruit and it bled
 sharp into his cracked
 fingerprints, but could only feel
the death of every Indian child soak into his hands - thin
juiced blood seeping through the soft skin. he left

that field without his week’s pay. he drove
and picked pistachios, grapes, watermelons, anything
 he could rip from the earth;

traced the patchwork of the Southwest
in endless seasons of summer. in a few years
the car would not start—he smashed his hands into
the shrapnel of the engine
until he could not tell his flesh
—congealed in grease and the no star night—
from machine. he lay down on the side of the freeway

and tried to remember—if the black pavement wheezing
heat into the night felt warm like his wife's body,
ripe and full in his arms.

he slept the long night alone.
in the morning he woke to the hung-over wind heaving
hot and stale against his neck and the road
snagged into his back.

he wiped his blackened
hands along his jeans—the crumpled motor oil
like gangrenous flesh—and realized just how much

of him was dead. his hands gloved in his own
hardened skin—so thick it silenced the false

pulse of thumb and numbed
his fingertips—
it took him three months to hitchhike
from the dust outside El Paso to South Dakota.

few would stop
to pick up a Native man scarred
by the American Dream, propped against the tepid air,
standing empty like a refugee in his own skin.

he walks the hundred miles east from Rapid City to
Pine Ridge and stops to feel the wind blow heavy and wet
on the reservation line,

it hushes past his cheeks—like a midnight
goodbye, the lips of a broken man nestled hard against
his son's forehead soft in sleep—leaving

the air sharp and barren, an old memory carved
into the badlands. he breathes in
the airlikebruised redemption—his hometucked near into the hillside
he turns and takes Route 18 toward where he knows
the sun has not yet faded.

Robert Strong-bear is drunk tonight.
as he stares out and watches
the sun smear a desperate kiss along the skyline,
the horizon desperately pretending to be asleep.