

ANCESTRAL, HISTORICAL & LIVING ART by INDIGENOUS PEOPLES of the AMERICAS

First American Art

MAGAZINE



NO. 41, WINTER 2024

\$9.99US \$13.00CAN



DISPLAY UNTIL MAR. 31, 2024

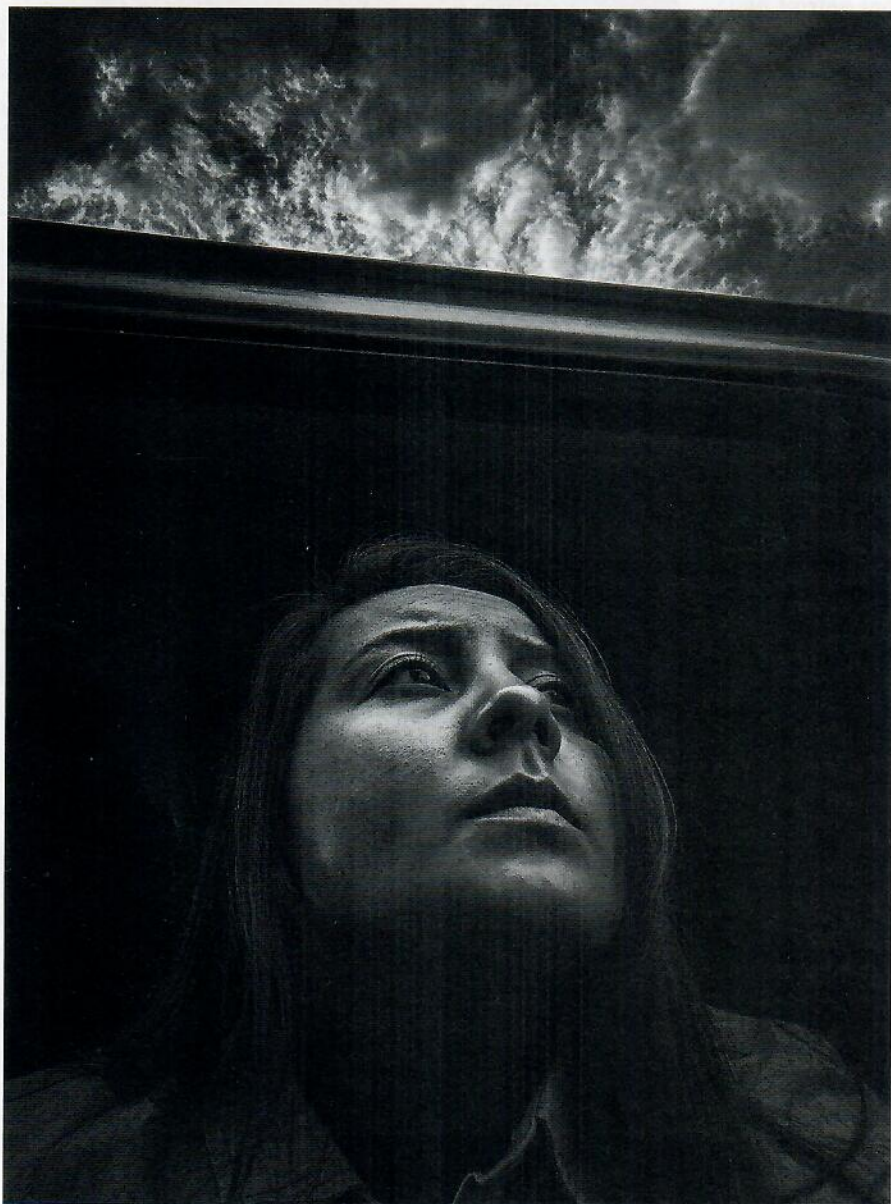
HOPI OVERLAY SILVERWORK
CULTURAL CROSSROADS
MARCO TEMPORAL IN BRAZIL
SPIRIT OF THE CORN

JAMES FENDENHEIM
DAVID MARTIN
RAINY NAHA
AMBER WEBB

Diné Poet, Journalist & Photographer

BODERRA JOE

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD



ABOVE Boderra Joe (Diné), *Self-Portrait*, 2023, digital photograph, Twin Lakes, Arizona. All images courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE *Desert Teeth* (Abalone Mountain Press, 2022).

Author of the poetry collection *Desert Teeth* (Abalone Mountain Press, 2022), Boderra Joe is a Diné poet, journalist, and photographer. She is Bit'ahnii (Folded Arms clan), born for Tábaqáhá (Water's Edge clan), and hails from Bááhazt'ah (Twin Lakes), New Mexico, in the Navajo Nation. Willapa Bay AiR and Bosque

Redondo Memorial selected her as an artist-in-residence. Indigenous Nations Poet (In-Na-Po) named her a 2022 fellow. Joe holds an MFA and BFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts.

Her poetry has appeared in the *New Mexico Poetry Anthology 2023*, *Green Linden Press: Indigenous Ecopoetry*, *Academy of American Poets*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Mass Poetry*, among other publications. She is a reporter and photojournalist for the *Navajo Times*. Her art photography is represented by Gallery Hózhó in Albuquerque.

What is the story behind your interest in poetry?

My interest in poetry has various curves. The interest has always been there, but it wasn't awakened until I started college majoring in creative writing. Poetry is its own language, and what I love about it is I can write freely, meaning there is no right or wrong way to approach an idea. What is important is the thought process behind it. As I've learned of many poets and their work, I thought, *Ah, what a line, what an image, or I never looked at it that way*. Having those intonational moments, I became aware and listened thoughtfully to my surroundings. From there, poetry became natural to me, and the interest became a passion. When you read poetry, there are different levels of emotion, tone, and values, and you take in all that by words. Being creative with letters, sounds, and images.¹

What can poetry teach us about the world and ourselves that other forms of literature cannot?

Poetry has its way of pulling apart language to recreate or reshape it to where we, as writers, understand it best. It's allowing ourselves to be thinkers and outlookers all in one. The world doesn't

1. Responses have been edited for brevity and clarity.—Ed.

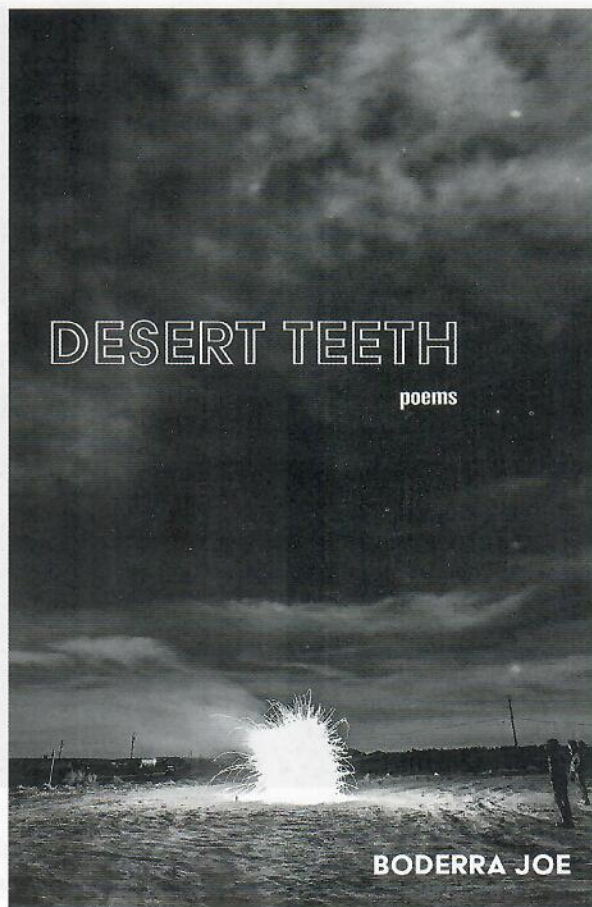
see poetry as a game winner, but it is a game winner with words and how they are woven together. Poets are attached to their words. We are attached to a point. We try to move on, but we always come back to restore or rebuild literature because our words mean more than a phrase. There's a reason behind every poet's approach and why they chose specific words, punctuation, form, image, sound, and so forth. It all comes from within and how we cradle a thought that eventually turns into a poem. Poetry has its way of teaching us to be creators, thinkers, and fearful human beings because all we have are our words, knowledge, and inspiration to write about what it is that calls us. All forms of literature teach us to acknowledge those interactions, and it's up to us to recognize that.

Can you walk me through how *Desert Teeth* came to be?

Desert Teeth was truly a hard collection. I was unsure of every poem due to the fact each was profoundly personal. Every revision became heavy because the poems were hard conversations I was having with myself. The poems talk about grief, heartbreak, and identity ... utterly vulnerable. A few of the poems were part of my thesis for grad school at the Institute of American Indian Arts. Going back to my thesis [*Paper Tongue*, 2018], I handpicked a few that I thought were decent enough to revise. Through that process, I also explored other realms, like form. The form sets the tone or emotion, so I made sure each poem had some sort of placement. The approach allowed some space to step back and breathe.

I spent so many years with those words and images that I soon became lost in what the purpose was anymore—until I met Layli Long Soldier through a collaborative project. I always admired her work, thought process, and head-on approach to topics. It was an honor to work with her for the first time, and thereafter we stayed in touch. I asked her if she could read my manuscript because I felt that we write about similar things and that she would have more wisdom and experience of how to approach topics. I'll never forget the conversation I had with her, and from there, I revised, revised, and out came *Desert Teeth*.

The synopsis for the collection reads, "Landscape and perspective flood Boderra Joe's *Desert Teeth*, a collection



"... we cradle a thought that eventually turns into a poem."

of poetry that unfolds the wakening shift of scarred violence affecting Native people and land for centuries, where alcohol and uranium, two of many elements, continue to take the lives of our relatives." How is the synopsis reflected by your accompanying poems?

When a handful of tough topics are written about, no one cares because it's redundant, right? But not for those who have experienced the same ordeal even to this day. As Indigenous writers and artists, we cannot avoid our past because it's our story. [We need to] share what we see, what we hear, what we were taught, what we experienced, what our family, people, and nation have experienced. People cannot erase Native history, what has been done to us, and what continues. The poems in *Desert Teeth* are conversations that no one wants to talk about. There's mention of alcoholism, uranium, racism, and identity because those all affected not only me but every single family in the Diné nation.

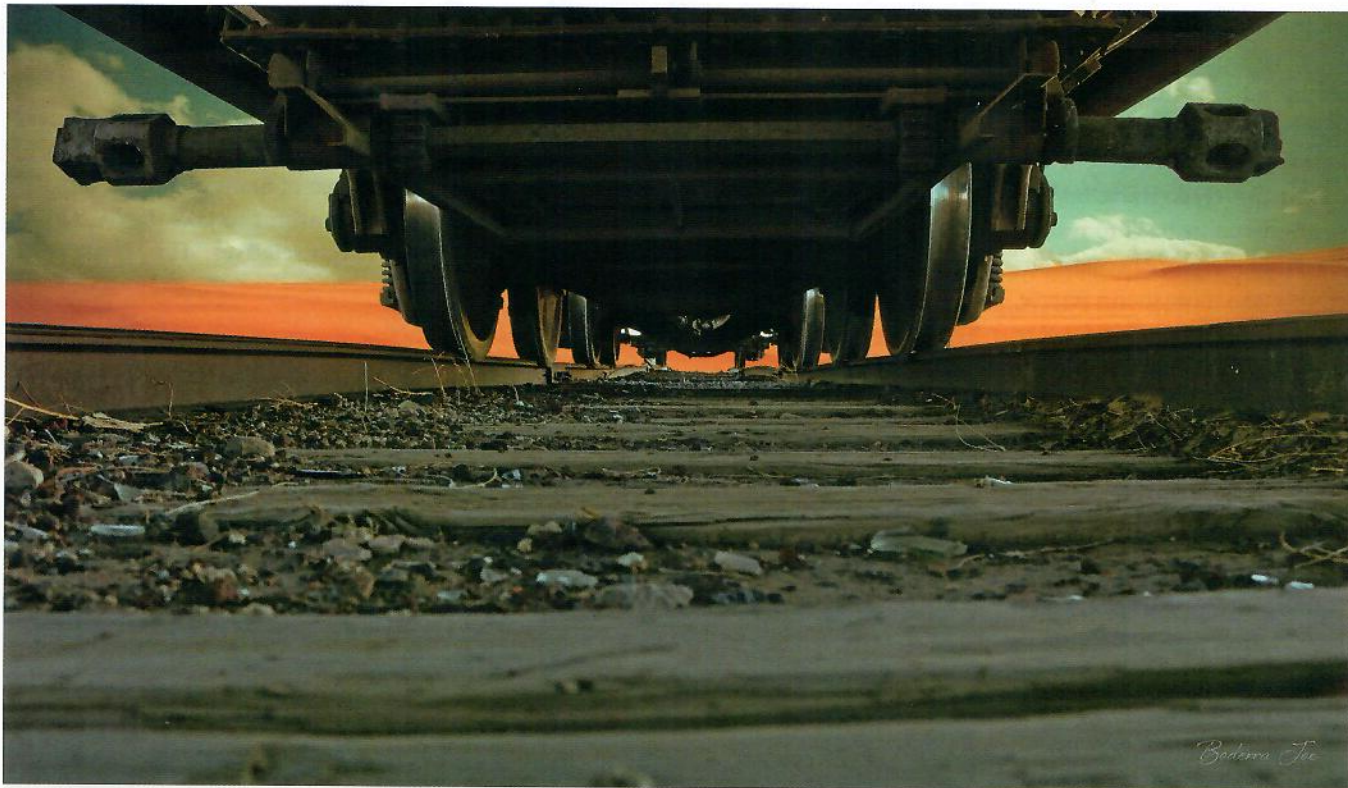
We have stories of these experiences, and it ultimately comes down to asking ourselves, *Well, how do we heal?* We see the problem, but how are we coping with it as Indigenous people? I feel the synopsis is confronting and facing our existence because most people don't even know we still exist. And in one poem, I mentioned people still think we, as Natives, are "dumb, drunks, stupid," when we are more than that. We are now sharing our stories, and we are exhausted from people mangling our existence.

The collection is now a year old. How do you view its release now?

Desert Teeth is still making its way to bookstores, bookshelves, or personal collections. I'm thankful for the currents it's making across the nation. It's always a beautiful moment when people reach out and share their thoughts and support for the book. The book changed how I view the writing world. The book is still on its historical journey, and I cannot wait to see where it goes and how far it travels.

How important is editing in the process of writing poetry? Is it the same as writing, say, nonfiction?

I try not to edit so much when writing poetry. I freewrite and take notes and write down lines that describe what I am feeling or seeing. It's not the same as writing any other genre because



ABOVE Boderra Joe (Diné), *Desert Train*, 2023, digital photograph, Gallup, Arizona.

OPPOSITE Boderra Joe (Diné), *Bones in the Desert*, 2023, typograph.

BELOW Boderra Joe (Diné), *Tumbleweed*, 2023, digital photograph, Twin Lakes, Arizona.

poetry is its own language. You need to be bold and willing to bend the rules and spend a lot of time arranging words, listening to them, and acknowledging them.

What do you consistently struggle with when writing?

The challenge is not spending enough time on writing or even reading, so I'm

definitely going to create a routine to get in rhythm.

Whose books are you reading?

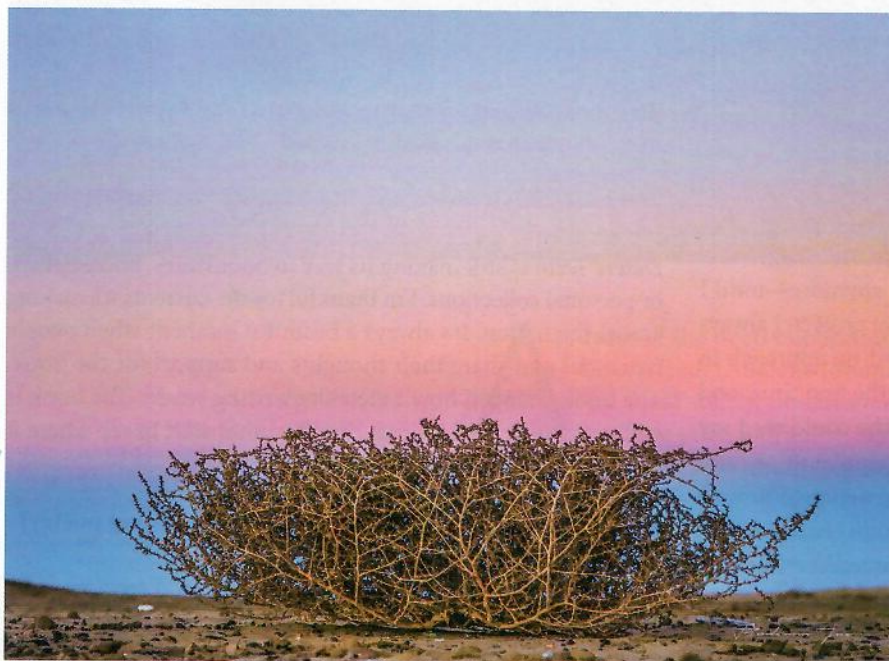
I've been alternating between books, but currently I'm reading *Burying the Mountain* by Shangyang Fang, *Obit* by Victoria Chang, and *Lighthouse* by Terrance Hayes.

What does the near future hold? Are you working on another collection?

Yes, I am beginning my second collection, however, I am not sure where it will take me. I'm also seeking more opportunities in artist-in-residencies to grow and expand my writing and experiences.

Thank you for speaking with me, Boderra.

Thank you so much, Matthew, for allowing me to share some insight with you regarding my artistic background. Writing and creating are what keep me sane and motivated to change the literary landscape in small fragments. This is a start by talking about it.



**INSTAGRAM
@BOETHEPOET**

bones in
the desert

Bones in the
desert
split into
some on a casual
night

These words hang like
carcass
like weary leaves wandering
to ankle-joints

You refuse to slender
kneecaps to a ground
so tender
tucking tobacco
beneath your
tongue

A dust of
nicotine
peddles past
cemeteries

So many lives
gone
and their
hairs
becoming red
spines

like a fire
barrel cactus
their teeth
becoming opals

And bones
becoming milk
and water
I am alive,
breathing

Drinking from
palms
in a rutted
desert

Where many roads
carry a prayer
like a cup
carrying coffee

And you stand there
gloat at the sheet of my skin

Because, No Trespassing. Private
Property.
My mother sewed my brown skin

For nine months and thereafter
When I leave this place

Let my remains
Become the red
spines, the
opals and
milk and
water