Sweatlodge in the Apocalypse: An Interview with Smokii Sumac

JAMES MACKAY

*****Please view the html version of this piece in order to watch the recording of the original interview.

James Mackay: I wanted to start by asking about the images on the front cover of your book, *you are enough*. They're very striking, and seem to say a lot about you and your relationship to the land. How did you come to the design and how did you come to choose those particular images?

Smokii Sumac: I love this question! I don't get to talk about it a lot.

I was really lucky to be working with an Indigenous press, Kegedonce (https://kegedonce.com), who gave me the freedom to choose. And when I started thinking about what I wanted to share, I was thinking about first of all, where I'm from. The lands there in those photos are my many different homes, places that I'm connected to. A lot of the book is about finding home. So there's Peterborough, Ontario, where I was living. One of them is just the moon. There are the mountains from home where I live in Ktunaxa territory. And there's also Blackfeet territory where I do ceremony.

Then I put *myself* out there. I think there's sort of this insecurity around selfies sometimes that can happen because there's sort of a stigma around them – at least, the Kim Kardashian kind of selfie mode. And yet it means something else for our Indigenous women specifically. I think of an artist Nancy King, who is known as Chief Lady Bird (https://chiefladybirdart.tumblr.com), or of Tenille Campbell

(www.tenillecampbell.com) who is another poet and photographer and she's got a book, *Indian Love Poems* (www.signature-editions.com/index.php/books/single_title/indianlovepoems). You look at their Instagrams and they have thousands, tens of thousands of followers. And they've talked about this idea of revolutionizing the selfie, which is important for me because of the transition. Not just because I medically transitioned, but also because of being in transition in my life, deciding to change genders and moving *between*. What does that presentation look like? There was kind of a really neat time in my life, the two years of when these poems were written, where I was playing with different things, whether that was being feminine-presenting and using earrings and lipstick, or male-presenting and wearing my hats. I think when we say gender is performative, sometimes it is what you're wearing. So I did have quite a few photos that I sent and said "These are options," and we went from there.

It's revolutionary for Indigenous people to represent ourselves. I think about Tik Tok (https://www.tiktok.com/tag/firstnations?lang=en), I think about Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/firstnations/), I think about our youth being able to just sort of make a movie in a way that's so much more accessible compared to the years of the only representation of ourselves being through lenses like Western movies. It's changing for now. When I talk to my students, I ask "Do you know who John Wayne is?" And they don't now, but they know Pocahontas, so that's the next stereotypical imagery to overcome. It's different when we get to represent ourselves. When it comes to my book, I also thought about the people who are the young people who are in transition and what it would mean to see that sort of spectrum on the cover.

My four year old niece, when she was showing it to someone, was really proud. But she also went, "This is Smokii's book, but he's not a lady!" She was very confused

on that front, although we've been talking to her about gender, because it's only in the last two years that she's sort of adopted me.

JM: I love what you're saying about the digital self-representation for First Nations artists. Isn't it also true for most trans people that they haven't been self-represented?

SS: Definitely. When I started looking for trans representation, all I found was young white men - young white *boys* even. There weren't a lot of people that look like me or were my age even. And then it's often a before and after photo. It just becomes like weight loss photos: these sort of problematic things that show this instantaneous "before and after" this moment. I wanted to show the range. I wanted to show the movement. We're not all of this stuff. It's not a binary line. For my story, I can't say there was a before and after - there were years of change and of understanding myself, and that movement continues. So I like the idea of thinking of it as a spectrum rather than the binary.

JM: I don't think I see a single capital letter in the entire book outside the copyright pages. What does lowercase mean for you?

SS: I've been taught that in our languages we don't use the same kind of grammar, although we have adopted some punctuation marks to make it user-friendly, for example the question mark. I'm not a fluent speaker, but I'm learning right now. We have a grammar app, and I'm learning from that. We've been debating whether to use question marks or not, or whether we use periods or not, because in our language it doesn't work that way. Our grammar actually is added in through suffixes and prefixes and these kinds of things. So that was part of it.

Another part is just aesthetic. At one point my editor said, "I don't know why you have a period in some places and why in some you don't." And I said, "Well, because they were all written on Facebook!" I was not thinking of them as a collection at the time - it was just basically an unconscious choice. But I think part of it was just the social media aesthetic. It also honors what, what Joy Harjo calls (https://poets.org/text/ancestors-mapping-indigenous-poetry-and-poets) our "poetry ancestors." bell hooks (https://www.berea.edu/appalachian-center/appalachian-center-home/faculty-and-staff/bell-hooks), for instance, has that idea of not capitalizing the "i." It means not putting myself above anything, and that we're all on the same level.

I also at the time was moving from using my previous name, which I usually used in lowercase. (Now actually I do capitalize my name, I think because it means a lot to me.)

JM: The other thing I'd ask about is poem titles. Because a lot of the pieces are untitled and it's really unclear in some places if it's one long poem or if it should be considered as lots of short poems.

SS: Most of these poems are curated from two years of work under the hashtag #haikuaday, which I was posting on Facebook daily, or almost daily, for two years. The original working title for the collection was actually *#haikuaday*, though we scrapped that at some point, and when I was in the editing stages, I had a really long table of contents at one point, where I had titled each poem as the date they were written. As the work evolved, as it became the book, when I started organizing them by topic, it became a completely different thing. Do they need titles? How do you title a haiku? It was quite funny because the academic in me was saying "People are going to write about this! It's going to be impossible! How are they going to cite?" And my editor

had to say, “You're the poet - you're not the academic right now.” And so we scrapped the table of contents because it was confusing and just got in the way.

Now they feel like a longer poem, even though the breaks are where they were as when they were written as haiku, certainly for any of the ones that follow that the 5-7-5 syllable haiku pattern. The longer poems are a little bit different, of course, and those are signified in different ways.

JM: As you say, these poems appeared on social media originally, which makes for a very particular audience, especially on Facebook where the audience is closed off. Is there a difference, either in what you're prepared to share or in what you do with form? How does the medium affect the poems?

SS: When I started sharing on Facebook, the nice thing about it was that it gets lost. Like you read it and then it's gone. It's a moment in time. And because not only is there a closed audience, but also because of the algorithms, people don't necessarily see your posts all the time. So I was getting interactions of maybe 15-20 likes on a post, and in my mind people weren't really reading them. So when I started it as a practice, it was very casual. A writing coach told me to try to write a poem a day. I thought “Haiku are short - I can do 13 syllables a day!” though they ended up being longer. I did it for about two months then kind of stopped. But in Peterborough I ran into someone on the street and they asked me “What have you been doing? I really missed your poems!” I didn't realize until then that there's a big audience on Facebook that doesn't interact with posts. They read them, but they don't necessarily like, or react or comment. So I realised “Oh, I have a bigger audience than I know,” and I thought, “OK, I'll just keep going with it.”

I was lucky enough to be approached by a publisher because the editor knew that I had this body of work and was interested in it. That was when I started to ask, how does audience change? How does this work with people not knowing me? Even now there's still some really specific details that people are not going necessarily to know, but I caught a lot of that journaling stuff. Originally there were many more what you could call inside moments, for instance if I was at a conference, if I was out with friends, or at a show, and I would write about this specific thing and name people all the time. I realized that that's not going to speak to people in a book form. Or there was the time my cat had fleas for weeks and there was a whole series about that – that didn't end up making the book, even though people loved it at the time, because it didn't fit with the book.

That was when themes started to come out, recognizing these sections that I have. On Facebook, I wouldn't do a land acknowledgment every day, but in putting together the book I saw most of these poems were written in Nogojiwanong, which is the Anishinaabe name for Peterborough, so I start there to acknowledge that place.

What's surprising with social media is the reach. You get emails from everywhere from people who have read the book. Some of my friends have been traveling and then there's pictures. So my book's been to Iceland. I'm starting to grow my online presence now, though as you said it was very closed for a while.

JM: You've got six sections in the collection - #nogoseries, #courting, #theworld, #recovery, #ceremony, and #forandafter. Did those sections come fairly naturally?

SS: They actually came very naturally. I sat down with the collection and color-coded it, poem by poem. I think there might've been eight or nine sections originally, maybe even 10. And then it was easy to delete the most journal-y bits, or say "That isn't going

to fit with these themes." I already had a good idea of what would be there. For example, I knew there was a lot on colonialism and grief - I didn't want to call it "colonialism," so I called it "the world." Or there was the land acknowledgement that I just mentioned. #forandafter came about because it was really, really important to me to honour some of those people that I'm inspired by – artists, people in my personal life, and some who have gone on.

What surprises me was that #courting became the largest section. It comes partly from looking at the work that's happening from a lot of the young Indigenous poets, queer Indigenous poets, 2SQ to sq poets, like Billy Ray Belcourt (https://billy-raybelcourt.com), Tenille Campbell, Joshua Whitehead (https://www.joshuawhitehead.ca/about), Arielle Twist (https://arielletwist.com). They are talking about our interpersonal relationships in really important ways. And also those poems were often the most popular - the "consent series," as an example, was one that took off on Facebook - so that was another way to gauge what was resonating with people the most.

JM: How did you come to the order of the sections?

SS: Honestly, it was quite rushed. I submitted the manuscript in August and the book was out December 31st, so it was a whirlwind. I've already mentioned starting with the land acknowledgment, and I knew I wanted to finish with the poems about individuals. I wanted #courting to be in there early because those are the pieces that are going to resonate, that are funny, that are starting in that good place. A lot of Native lit has been stuck in trauma narratives, and so "#theworld: a constant state of grief" was natural. The "#recovery: on depression and addiction and 'not good enough'" section was there, with a lot of darker poems, harder poems, and I wanted #ceremony as

healing to come out of it. And so for me, it was sandwiching the hard bits with love and ceremony. Because that's how we take care of each other.

JM: I wanted to think a little about form, starting with haiku. Do you read haiku as well, and if so, who do you read?

SS: To be honest, I haven't read haiku much lately. I did go through a period. In the first reiteration of the book, when I was calling it *#haikuaday*, I had a note to readers to acknowledge the fact that not only is this a cultural appropriation, but also that what I do is not haiku – because haiku in its original cultural context is different and beautiful. I don't mean my poems are not reflective – many of them could be haiku because of the nature element. When I learned more about haiku I was very excited to know that there was a history of collaboration, for instance haikai no renga (俳諧の連歌) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renku), which were haiku parties. I like to think that those poets of Japan from hundreds of years ago would be excited that I'm using it, but I always make that disclaimer. I really only use the 5-7-5 syllable structure, which is what you're taught in Canadian grade 6 classes as an easy way to introduce poetry. There was a time where I did a haiku radio show on Trent Radio with a friend of mine, Sarah McNeely, where we only spoke in 5-7-5 syllables, and it was just a really fun creative time. I believe there's still some archives that get played. We used to bring in the old poets and read original haikus by Bashō (https://www/poetryfoundation.org/poets/basho).

JM: Again on form, something that I noticed is that you often use a form where there's a poem that's torn in half, so the top part is left, aligned at the bottom is right aligned

and there's this sort of gap through the middle of the page. What do you like about that particular shape?

SS: In reading, that form creates separation and movement. As much as I can lead the reader, I try to create that space for them. That goes back to the question of whether these are long poems or not, which is a very big change from Facebook where they were just short pieces. But yeah, I really think it's about movement for me, giving the space to the reader to take the time with poetry. It's tough to take the time sometimes in our lives to reflect.

JM: The first section of the book is dedicated to Nogojiwanong. It's a traditional Anishinaabe territory, but you begin talking about it as "a place where / when I walk home / many friends appear." What does home mean to you?

SS: There has always been a space where I've been thinking, "where is home"? I'm finding there are many different versions of home. I'm an adoptee, fourth generation removed – each of those generations were raised away from our biological family. I'm actually the oldest of cousins, and all of my cousins are in my uncles' and aunties' homes, which is super exciting. That's restoring us into our biological family after four generations of that loss. I was actually born in Anishinaabe territory, in Toronto, even though I am from where I live now, Ktunaxa territory, Invermere in British Columbia. I came out here when I was very young, which makes me one of the people privileged to have grown up in my nation.

I spent a lot of years searching for home. And what I didn't realize until later in life, around the time these homes were coming, was that part of it is that I didn't feel at home in my own body. So that was part of my learning: learning about transitioning,

deciding to do it, and understanding more about what it means to feel at home in your body.

But, going back, I am privileged to work with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson who is Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe. I talked to her about being born there, and she said, "What is your responsibility to us then?" What that means is, when I came to university, I was both returning to my home and also coming to someone else's homelands. I spent a lot of time considering that responsibility and building those relationships wherever I could: spending time getting to know the land, helping their elders. One of the elders there, Doug Williams, has a maple sugar bush, so I learned about making maple sugar by boiling down the sap.

A funny thing is that I was eventually named this way. Sumac is a tree that is mostly Eastern. People in my home territory go, "What, what, like, what is it? Oh, it's a tree. Right." And so that's kind of funny in itself.

Peterborough became home even at the level of minutiae: I know the grocery store when I walk around it, I know the people on the street. It's a town of about 80,000, but in the downtown core there are some places where even now I think I could walk in and know everyone.

There are so many layers to seeking out home. There is also a spiritual home. To me that is family. The last poem is for Carol Edelman Warrior, who became a mom to me. She taught me how to find home in our relations through building and caring and love.

JM: What are you writing about in your dissertation?

SS: I'm looking at narratives by people who have come home, and thinking about Two-Spiritedness and coming home in our bodies. I'm thinking about naming as a practice that allows us to understand who we are: as Indigenous people, as Ktunaxa people, as

adoptees, as Two-Spirit people, that kind of stuff. I'm talking about umbilical cord practices and birth practices as things that reconnect us.

JM: You write, "for the love of all / that is queer and brown," and then a little later "learning to love / ourselves our bodies / each of our naked / burning hearts our lipstick and / our binders our canes." How does someone find a voice as a Two-Spirit writer?

SS: By spending time with other Two-Spirit writers, just reading and spending time with them. One gift, even before finding my voice, was just the knowledge that I wasn't alone. I'm just now working with Beth Brant's (https://www.poetryfoundation/.or/poets/beth-brant) books *Writing is Witness* and *Food and Spirits*. I was just amazed. The preface to *Food and Spirits* is this incredible poem about resistance that's talking about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women - she talks about being a writer, how to sit with all these feelings. How do you speak about it? How do you honor them? There are great writers around now – Billy-Ray Belcourt, Tenille Campbell, Joshua Whitehead – and we are a family. Even though we live in different cities, we're able to spend time with each other and really think about what we're doing and talk. "Have you read this?" "Oh, have you read that?"

That specific poem that you quoted was actually written about a night at the Naked Heart (https://nakedheart.ca) festival in Toronto, which is I believe the largest and oldest queer writers' festival in Canada. The main site is Glad Day Bookshop (https://www.gladdaybookshop.com), which is the oldest queer bookstore in Canada. I grew up in a small town. There was one out gay man that I knew growing up, and he actually died of AIDS. That's how that narrative was built for me. It's funny now, because of all of my best friends in high school, I'm not the only one on testosterone.

We're actually very queer. And we were then, but we didn't know how to talk about it because we didn't have any representation. It wasn't safe to be that person. And so for me to go into in Toronto and be in this space where everyone has the hair and the colors and the glitter and all of that still makes me think "Wow, this is exciting." It feels good to witness other people stepping into their voices.

One thing that really helped me and pushed me was Tenille Campbell's book *Indian Love Poems*. Teaching some of her sexy poems, sometimes even I get uncomfortable, which is funny because now I'm somebody who has sexy poems out there. Poems that are talking about all sorts of stuff that I never thought I would talk about! The "Cadillac of dicks"! When I'm writing those songs, I ask, "Does this need to go out in the world?" And then I think about what it felt like to hear somebody else read a poem like that. What it did for me, how it freed me.

JM: There seems to be a surge of young Two-Spirit writers, particularly in Canada. Does that say good things about Canada as a space for finding that voice?

SS: I think so. The violence still exists, but I think our communities are strong. It's down to population. The difference between America and Canada is that in Canada we're 5-6% of the population, whereas it's something like 0.2% in America. So that allows for more things to happen. Much as I critique reconciliation as a concept, I think if you look right now at conversations, for instance around the Wet'suwet'en (https://twitter.com/iy4wetsuweten?lang=en), you can find many more comments in support of Indigenous people now than you ever could. The racism is still there and the hatred is still there, but I think in the community there has been a shift. And then on a spiritual level, I was taught Two-Spirits are here to challenge and to push back, to help create balance. And so, yes, Canada's a good place, but also the fact that we're all

here doing this means that there are major problems and there is a major balancing that needs to happen. That's one of my teachings as a Two-Spirit person, from one of my Two-Spirit elders. I know that there's hundreds of definitions and understandings of Two-Spirit – mine is not the only one – but the way that I've been taught is that we are here to challenge and speak up and do those things.

Reconciliation also, in Native lit, allowed for publishing. People are reading, people are excited, and people want to know more. One of the best sellers for almost two years now is Cherie Dimaline (https://cheriedimaline.com). Publishers now see that our literature sells. So it's a very good time to be a Two Spirit writer because people want to read us. When we look at Maria Campbell, at Beth Brant, at many of these poetry ancestors, many of them passed before they could make a living off writing. Daniel Justice talks about this a lot – that you have to be able to afford to be a writer. If you're working all the time to put food on the table, it's hard to do.

JM: Kegedonce has played a big part in it as well.

SS: Yes. They've been amazing. They just put out Tunchai Redvers' book *Fireweed* (https://kegedonce.com/bookstore/item/129-fireweed.html) and she's another Two-Spirit writer, a really brilliant young person. Native presses have been super important because they were publishing us before anybody else was as well, so I was very excited to support them and to have that connection, rather than try and go to a bigger press.

JM: What did it mean to you to win the Indigenous Voices Award?

SS: I'll get emotional again! That award is hosted by the Indigenous Literary Studies Association (http://www.indigenousliterarystudies.com), and at the time the board

members included Deanna Reder, who was my first Indigenous literature professor and supported me in going into a Master's degree. She introduced me to poetry! Jeanette Armstrong, too, one of my aunties of literature, was one of the judges in that category and she got up and read from my work too. We've become a family, and to be able to be there with them and celebrate my work, to honour those voices, to build on those voices, to make space for new voices to come, was really important.

All literary awards are great, because they help writers do what they do. But that award, out of any awarded in Canada, is the only one judged by Indigenous people for Indigenous people. It was crowdfunded through speaking back against cultural appropriation. It's about us having our own voices. It was just a huge celebration.

In that award ceremony, I loved that every single person who was shortlisted got to read. It wasn't about the winner, it was about all of us sharing our work. There are some incredible people in the Unpublished category that year that I cannot wait for their work to come out.

So, yeah, for me, it was really beautiful – and then I would just look around and think "I'm sitting here with Joshua Whitehead!" As much as I'm like their family, I'm still always floored by their work. And Tanya Tagaq was on that list and these other big names, and it's becoming more and more real that I'm part of this community, when until then I'd been growing up in it. I'm becoming that next generation – the literary baby.

JM: In another poem, you say "self love is a revolution for an indian." Why was it important to include intimate details about both sex and about transition in your poetry? Did you have to push back against any inhibitions?

SS: Writing poetry first comes pretty quickly to me: I'm not immediately thinking about audience. The hesitation comes later, before posting on Facebook, and then very much so at the readings. I have in the past tried not to read some of the sexy poems, and then at the Q&A people just ask for them anyway!

I often make a link between Indigeneity and being trans, as there's a similarity in the phobias you're up against. In both cases so much of the representation is "Victim Being Killed." And that is real. We need to know that. You need to know that black trans women are dying at these incredibly disproportionate rates to everyone else. But I also think it's super important that we say – both for trans and Indigenous people – that we aren't just victims. We aren't just trauma. We also are in love. And we also have sex. We have sexualities.

In my own community reading was hard to do, but I also think that often our communities are really ravaged by sexual abuse and intergenerational trauma with residential schools, and so, for a long time, we haven't talked about sex. Being able to talk about healthy sexualities and making people laugh is important in our languages. We have all sorts of dirty jokes and we have all sorts of those kinds of things. Bringing laughter back in that different context of sexuality is really important.

But like Leanne Simpson always says she writes for Anishinaabe at first, so I really wrote for Indigenous trans youth. I didn't know that there were trans men until I was 27. Could you imagine if I had had access to this information when I was 17? Maybe my life would have gone differently. And so I really want that space to be opened for them. What was surprising was a settler auntie of mine, an older white woman and a lovely person who I'm not going to name here, who came up to me after I read the "Cadillac" poems. She said, "You know, there's some questions you just don't ask. Thank you for teaching me things that I would never have known." That's part of it too, to educate people. I personally think that more cis-gender hetero

couples need to be talking about sex, because we have so many issues with sexuality and, and in those relationships, it's sort of treated as “This is what sex is.” And, no, I think everyone needs to talk about it.

I really tapped into Tenille Campbell and I always when reading just think “She would be laughing at this,” and that makes me feel good. So if I think of Tenille and the audience, I can sort of tap into like, you know, OK, I can do this. And I have had the odd difficult one. One time that poem was called “boorish”! But when I read that specific poem about the Cadillac of dicks, I think that if that's all you get from it that, you aren't listening or reading, it's the transformation that is the important part. The audience recognizing that is important. I often hear, especially in Indigenous communities, people saying that we don't cut off parts of our body, describing top surgery as - I don't want to use this word, but it does get used - as mutilations, or thinking about us as freaks. And so I want to really normalize it and be like, “This is my reality.”

I share that feeling of being transformed when I've read that poem in front of my family members and all sorts of other people. I'm so nervous to read this in front of elders and they go, “What, do you think we've never had sex before? Look, we have grandkids.” I feel that strength. You know, sometimes I still feel that fear of violence, but I'm pretty privileged to be able to step up and say, “OK, I feel strong enough to do this.” There's going to be someone in the audience who doesn't feel strong enough to do that. Seeing me will help with that. That’s what people I saw and witnessed did for me. Richard van Camp talks about sex and hickeys all the time! I remember the first time I was there, bright red and laughing and horrified by the things that he was saying in front of audiences - and now I get to tap in and make people feel that sort of discomfort, but also laugh and go home and maybe talk about something they wouldn't.

JM: Water imagery is really noticeable throughout the poems. I that the truck, the poems in all sections of the books, whereas I think imagery shifts for a lot of other things. What does water signify for you do you think?

SS: To rip off Standing Rock - no, I'm just kidding! But I mean, water is life, right? That's the deal. Water is life. We hear it all the time.

It's funny how in Western culture the idea of a cliché is so apparent, and that you hear something enough that it becomes meaningless. But for us, repetition is deeply important. So I am going to own that. Water is life to me. I've been taught that we need to honor water as much as we can.

I actually do this exercise with students where I'd get them to go and sit by a body of water, and then reflect on it and write about that. And so many of them never do that. They don't find time to do it. They don't do it. I live in the most beautiful blue mountains and lakes and rivers, and it's incredible. When they do it, many of them go, "I haven't done this in a long time. I need to make more time to do this. I don't know what it is. It just makes me feel better." Yes, it does. And this is why.

First of all, it's part of us - I mean, not just our bodies. One of the teachings I love says that "Water comes before every one of us is born." That's how we come into the world. That's what we live in. That's what we are part of. For me, it's sacred - everything is sacred, of course, but without water where would we be? I've been in communities where they have "boil water" advisories. I've been in communities where our old people say the water wars are coming. To honor that and to try and give people that different thought, if they've never thought about it in that way before, is important to me.

Also, it's just so deeply part of my life. Wherever and whenever I travel, I find the water. I try to go there. There's one poem where I talk about traveling to Standing Rock – when we did that, we stopped at Flint to pray for the waters, because of what's happening there.

In Anishinaabe territory, women are water carriers or water keepers. I think of Grandmother Josephine Mandamin (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephine_Mandamin), who's one of the water walkers (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Earth_Water_Walk), one of the people who walked around the Great Lakes to pray for the waters. These are pieces of honoring the women that taught me this in the lands that I came from.

JM: "#theworld" begins with grief, and then it shades into resistance. Do you feel hopeful for the outcome of resistance to Canadian/American governments, oil companies, ecocide, online bigots, mass shooters and everything else that you take on there? That's the weight of the world on your shoulders.

SS: It's all in there! Jesse Wente had a piece recently where he said "It will all come back." If, big picture, I think about the fact that we've been here 14,000 years, I can be hopeful. I can remember that it will all come back, that those songs are coming back. I look at the Indigenous youth who are shouting things like "Reconciliation is dead" right now, if I think of those who as the police are arresting them are yelling "Your spirits will never recover from this," and they've got these ancient teachings in them that are coming back. I can be hopeful.

The war's coming, and it's going to get worse. I have to remember that. And it has been worse before, in different ways. I have to remember that as well. "a love poem to your great great grandmother" in the collection is about recognizing that

there were times that people saw the genocide up close, times where we were starving. And so, generationally, I can see that big picture as hopeful.
But I also get really worried when I see liberal hope. Liberals say "Things are changing and reconciliation is good and we just need education." Those people have blinders on and they're not seeing the things that we are consistently facing, or the fact that, as we get stronger, the resistance, the attacks, the violence against us gets stronger as well. We are putting our lives on the line. How many of us are going have to actually lose our lives? We are warriors, we will stand, we will do that to the end, and then beyond the end.

I do believe it will all fall. I don't think in my lifetime, but I'm trying to do whatever I can to prepare as many young people as I can to be ready for those things. And that sounds pretty heavy and dark, but sometimes just a case of going to the gym now and thinking, "OK, you're getting ready for the apocalypse." It helps me. It's a silly thing, and I'm not a doomsday prepper, but I do ask, "When it comes down to it, what what do you need to be doing? And what is the most important thing to help young people?" I often just say to people when I have audiences, "What are you doing to get us our land back? And what are you doing to help our youth survive?" Because those are the really big questions.

I am hopeful because we have grief practices, and we know how to help people. Those things are coming back as well. We know how to take care of each other. As long as those things are happening and renewing themselves and continuing, then I think we'll be OK.

JM: Would you talk a little bit about ceremony, and your relationship to ceremony?

SS: Ceremony saved my life. I often tell the story of how I spent a lot of years looking for things as a young person. A friend of mine was very Christian, so I went to Bible camp. I really liked that, and I tried to find meaning there. I think I was trying to make meaning for a long time. For a long time, the medicine, the spirit that helped me was "alcohol and drugs." They helped me get through the very hardest parts, and then it stopped helping because, as I've been taught, that spirit only knows how to take. I was taught, "If you don't like your job and you drink about your job, it'll take your job. It'll take your family if you're drinking about your family." These kind of things, it continuously was taking. For a long time, I was trying to find my way out of the addiction. What was going to help me through that? I did spend a lot of time in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous and these kind of programs, which also have a spiritual element to them. I was always searching, asking "What is that higher power? What is that?" And then I started to get invited to ceremony. When I say ceremony, my teachers say that it's part of life. It's how we walk in the world in general. It's not always just an event, but at first it's going to a sweat lodge, or it's going to a sunrise ceremony, or at one point I was invited to a Sundance. I don't lead, I am very much a baby in this. But reconnecting with those things became something that I could hold onto in a way that I hadn't been able to find before.

There are all sorts of pieces to this. I know that yoga is helpful for me. It's not my culture, it's not my spiritual or cultural practice, but stretching is helpful. One of my teachers says we can take a bite out of that stuff. That prayer is real.

And I have seen things. I have seen people be cured of illnesses, things that people would call miracles or would maybe question. I don't. I don't question, I don't care what anybody else believes. I know what I've seen and witnessed and done. I know what it feels like now to be able to do something and to care, and that the ways

that we learn how to be together in ceremony are really important. Because we all have to work together and learn how to listen in a different way.

I want to mention that not all Indigenous people do this. My path is very unique. Not all of them believe, and that's OK, too. I had a very close friend who is Indigenous say to me, "I just don't understand why they're trying to do sweat lodges in the apocalypse." And I was like, "What do you mean? That's exactly what we would be doing!" I should say she comes from people that are not sweat lodge people, so her ceremonies would be different, and so I also understand that too.

What I'm seeing, you know, is our youth picking up those teachings. I think about the *Marrow Thieves*, a book that came to me at the right time, a lot. That book tells it all – what we're trying to save, why we grieve – and also reminds us we have very specific instructions. I can talk about it as "out there," because I know sometimes it sounds like we romanticize this spiritual thing that we have, but the lessons are specific. One was "Don't cry at night." Some people will think, "OK, so there's probably some spiritual reason," but we just figured out that that at night you're alone. That's a really hard space to be in, you could cry all night and not sleep. So if you've got that rule, you try and make space for it in the daytime when it's easier. Somebody asked, "Why do we use a match to light the smudge?" I said, "Because you need to hold a lighter a long time and it burns my thumb!" There are typically practical reasons for the things that we say, and those practical reasons aren't always told. Because of that "mystical Indian" myth out there, some of these stories get going and those practical reasons get taken out.

JM: Thank you very much for giving your time to this. It's been very much appreciated.

SS: Thank you for the questions and for honoring my work, that means a lot to me.