

America, I Sing You Back

By Allison Adelle Hedge Coke

for Phil Young and my father Robert Hedge Coke;
for Whitman and Hughes

America, I sing back. Sing back what sung you in.
Sing back the moment you cherished breath.
Sing you home into yourself and back to reason.

Before America began to sing, I sung her to sleep,
held her cradleboard, wept her into day.
My song gave her creation, prepared her delivery,
held her severed cord beautifully beaded.

My song helped her stand, held her hand for first steps,
nourished her very being, fed her, placed her three sisters strong.
My song comforted her as she battled my reason
broke my long-held footing sure, as any child might do.

As she pushed herself away, forced me to remove myself,
as I cried this country, my song grew roses in each tear's fall.

My blood-veined rivers, painted pipestone quarries
circled canyons, while she made herself maiden fine.

But here I am, here I am, here I remain high on each and every peak,
carefully rumbling her great underbelly, prepared to pour forth singing—

and sing again I will, as I have always done.
Never silenced unless in the company of strangers, singing
the stoic face, polite repose, polite while dancing deep inside, polite
Mother of her world. Sister of myself.

When my song sings aloud again. When I call her back to cradle.
Call her to peer into waters, to behold herself in dark and light,
day and night, call her to sing along, call her to mature, to envision—
then, she will quake herself over. My song will make it so.

When she grows far past her self-considered purpose,
I will sing her back, sing her back. I will sing. Oh I will—I do.
America, I sing back. Sing back what sung you in.

Notes:

The epigraph of this poem was originally omitted in the changeover to the new website. Because of this, reciting the epigraph is optional for the 2019-2020 Poetry Out Loud season.

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Allison Adelle Hedge Coke grew up in North Carolina, Texas, Canada, and the Great Plains region and is of Huron, Metis, French Canadian, Portuguese, English, Irish, Scot and mixed Southeastern Native heritage. Hedge Coke has worked as a mentor and teacher with Native Americans and several other at-risk youth communities. She founded and directed a Y-Writers Voice in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where she created youth and labor outreach programs, and has worked as an artist in residence for numerous programs in the state and nationwide. She currently teaches for the Red Earth MFA in Oklahoma City.

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