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Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer: A Story of Survival. By Allison Adelle Hedge Coke. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. xiv + 198 pp. Photographs. $24.95.

Allison Hedge Coke's intimate narrative details her journey through suffering to wholeness. Her story will inspire anyone who has faced adversity. Hedge Coke was the "extra girl" whom her schizophrenic mother said she had "hated since the day she was born." The author suffered depression and suicide attempts, drug and alcohol addiction, rape and physical assaults, discrimination and poverty.

At the same time, Hedge Coke's insight is luminous: "congenital memory, that of belonging by nature to landscapes, runs the deepest of all the rivers of the earth." Her book remembers many landscapes—from North Carolina, the Tsalagi (Cherokee) homeland, to Texas, to Oklahoma, to California, to Georgia, and finally to South Dakota.

Hedge Coke barely survived the sixties and seventies as a teenager living on her own without protection or guidance. Again and again, it was the stories her father told her of their Tsalagi traditions and values that helped her survive. The Cherokee, her father told her, are "relatives of deer." He provided a stable source of love and respect for her and always trusted that his wife's mind would heal. Hedge Coke first moved out of her parents' home at the age of nine.

At sixteen Hedge Coke married a Vietnam veteran who dared her to quit using heroin. She quit, and the two were sharecroppers in North Carolina. Their marriage ended after his violence and infidelity. Afterwards she had a turbulent relationship with a Tsalagi man who fathered her two sons. She began publishing her writing in Tennessee and was sustained by her father, who told her he never wanted her "to be a rock," but "to learn from the willow—to bend with bad winds but retain" herself.

Finally, after moving to South Dakota, Hedge Coke found a supportive community, a loving—though brief—relationship with a man who died from leukemia, and peace for herself and her sons. She entered school at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe in 1991. Reflecting upon her life seven years later after returning to South Dakota, she describes a young deer "allowing me to finally distinguish her white tail and black eyes from bark and leaves and watch her fall to sleep, knowing I am nearby; allowing me to be invisible as a human being, knowing I am a carnivore without a weapon, maybe even knowing I'm at peace this particular moment after all these years."

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