

Welcome, Stranger

Whether you come from Little Rock or Pittsburgh,
Nashville or Menomonie, the dogs of our town
greet you just the same. The widow opens her window,
calls them off, and they resume their idleness
again. They know we all came strangers to this land
we call The Island for lack of a better name,
that cottonwoods drift seed on rich and poor alike,
and in the fall spiders balloon strands of silk
across the lawn it takes a slanted sun to see.

It takes a slanted sun to see our furrows,
straight as our minds, the plow polished like a mirror
when we get through. We came by this land hard.
It was dog eat dog—get rid of the dog-eaters
before they get to you. We snaked sage a long time
to get the taproots out before we could afford
to shut a door or window, so if the river's high
enough to irrigate but not too high to fish,
we don't have time to cotton to the likes of you.

We keep our guard up. We don't have time.
It was dog eat dog when someone like you left
our town, published our sins—didn't the world
have troubles of its own? When he came back
a stranger, we turned our backs, told him
to move on. He moved on, all right, ran off
with that wild girl who brushed her hair with sage,
but you won't find anyone who reads his novels
here. We put our trash in dumpsters, white or black.

White or black, we choose our friends. Our enemies
will find us out no matter what we do.

We open our doors to let the cat out, put screens
on windows against flies, lock them tight unless,
of course, the river's low, the fishing poor, and then

we might consider it's okay to talk to you.
But don't expect no scandal. We put our best foot
in our mouth, keep silent about the worst—
it was some other woman that happened to,

some other woman, wild with sagebrush in her hair.
What happened here was justice—a stranger hanged
for stealing stock, for calling us bad names.
He deserved it, coming here high-saddled just like that.
Who burnt the schoolhouse down, you ask?
I think it burnt itself, spontaneous, all that trash
about which tree we came from, the counter-evolution
smoldering in his desk. Any fool could see
the smoke pour out the window from a mile away.

Smoke poured out the window every time he taught
that stuff he learned back east. We could name a dozen
other towns, just like us who did the same. Ask them.
Their dogs bark too, and if the river's too muddy
to fish, they might take time to talk to you.
You want law and order? That's the price.
What happened here was justice. Get the dog-eaters,
hoist your ladder to the window of the girl
you love and let her father shoot the dog

for running off. Let her father shoot his mouth off
to the neighbors. They know his own life's not that good—
he had it coming—they'll sympathize with you.
Unless, of course, you take up writing or the girl
puts sagebrush in her hair. Then you best keep running.
We spent too long snaking scruffy sage to get this
good land clear. We'll throw our white trash
and our black in dumpsters, tell the widow lock
her windows, sic the dogs on you.

Like I said, it was dog eat dog. Let her father
shoot his mouth off—he had it coming. Smoke poured
out the window. It takes a slanted sun to see
how we snaked scruffy sage, how black or white
we choose our friends. But if you stay here
long enough and let your children marry right,
we'll drop our guard, forget you came a stranger.
The river will clear up. The irrigating will be done,
and we'll take time to fish with you.

—Donnell Hunter