

# 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