

EBRIS

We know
books

STARLING HOUSE

ALIX E. HARROW



ONE

I dream sometimes about a house I've never seen.

I mean, pretty much nobody has. Logan Caldwell claims he ding-dong-ditched the place last summer break, but he's an even bigger liar than me. The truth is you can't really see the house from the road. Just the iron teeth of the front gate and the long red lick of the drive, maybe a glimpse of limestone walls crosshatched by honeysuckle and greenbriers. Even the historical plaque out front is half-swallowed by ivy, the letters so slurred with moss and neglect that only the title is still legible:

STARLING HOUSE

But sometimes in the early dark of winter you can see a single lit window shining through the sycamores.

It's a funny kind of light: a rich amber that shudders with the wind, nothing like the drone of a streetlight or the sickly blue of a fluorescent.¹ I figure that window is the only light I've ever seen that doesn't come from the coal plant on the riverbank.

In my dream, the light is for me.

I follow it through the gates, up the drive, across the threshold. I should be scared—there are stories about Starling House, the kind people only tell at night, half-whispered under the hum of the porch light—but in the dream I don't hesitate.

In the dream, I'm home.

Apparently that's too far-fetched even for my subconscious, because that's usually when I wake up. I surface in the half-dark of the motel room with a hungry, empty ache in my chest that I think must be homesickness, although I guess I wouldn't know.

I stare at the ceiling until the parking lot lights flick off at dawn.

I used to think they meant something, those dreams. They started abruptly when I was twelve or thirteen, just when all the characters in my books started manifesting magic powers or receiving coded messages or whatever; of course I was obsessed with them.

I asked everybody in town about the Starling place, but received only narrow, slantwise looks and sucked teeth. People in this town had never liked me much—their eyes slide right off me like I'm a street-corner panhandler or a piece of roadkill, a problem they would be obliged to address if they looked straight at it—but they liked the Starlings even less.

They're considered eccentrics and misanthropes, a family of dubious origin that has refused for generations to participate in the most basic elements of Eden's civil society (church, public school, bake sales for the volunteer fire department), choosing instead to stay holed up in that grand house that nobody except the coroner has ever seen in person. They have money—which generally excuses everything short of homicide—but it doesn't come from either coal or tobacco, and nobody seems able to marry into it. The Starling

1. According to Lyle Reynolds, the Gravelly Power meter man from 1987–2017, Starling House was never connected to the electric grid or the municipal water system. The telephone company sued for the right to place poles on Starling land in 1947, but the project was abandoned after a series of ugly accidents that left three employees hospitalized.

family tree is a maddening sprawl of grafted limbs and new shoots, full of out-of-towners and strangers who turned up at the front gates and claimed the Starling name without ever setting foot in Eden itself.

It's generally hoped that both they and their house will fall into a sinkhole and rot at the bottom, neither mourned nor remembered, and—perhaps—release the town from its century-long curse.

(I don't believe in curses, but if there were such a thing as an accursed town it would look an awful lot like Eden, Kentucky. It used to be the number one coal county in the nation, but now it's just a strip-mined stretch of riverbank containing a power plant, a fly ash pond, and two Dollar Generals. It's the kind of place where the only people who stay are the ones who can't afford to leave, where the water tastes like rust and the mist rises cold off the river even in summertime, lingering in the low places well past noon.)

Since nobody would tell me the story of Starling House, I made up my own. There isn't a lot to do in a town like Eden, and I didn't have many friends my own age. You're never going to be very popular when you wear clothes from the First Christian donation box and shoplift your school supplies, no matter how slick your smile is; the other kids sensed the hunger behind the smile and avoided me out of an animal certainty that, if we were all shipwrecked together, I'd be found six weeks later picking my teeth with their bones.

So I spent a lot of weekends sitting cross-legged on the motel mattress with my little brother, making up haunted house stories until both of us were so thoroughly spooked we'd scream at the sound of a doorknob turning three rooms down. I used to type up the best ones, in the secret hours after midnight, when Jasper was asleep and Mom was out, but I never sent them anywhere.² I quit all that years ago, anyway.

I told Mom about the dreams once. She laughed. "If I'd read that damn book as many times as you, I'd have nightmares, too."

For my fourth or fifth birthday Mom got me a copy of *The Underland*—one of the old nineteenth-century editions, the cover bound in cloth the color of cobwebs, the title sewn in silver. It was secondhand, probably stolen,

2. This is false. Between 2006 and 2009, Opal used the staff printer at the public library to print several pieces of short fiction. In '08, she received a personal rejection from a literary magazine which said that, regrettably, they did not publish fantasy, horror, or "whatever this is supposed to be."

and somebody else's initials were written on the inside cover, but I'd read it so many times the pages were coming unsewn.

The story is pretty paint-by-numbers: a little girl (Nora Lee) discovers another world (Underland) and hallucinatory adventures ensue. The illustrations aren't great, either—they're a series of stark lithographs that fall somewhere between eerie and nightmarish. But I remember staring at them until their afterimages lingered on the insides of my eyelids: black landscapes stalked by spectral Beasts, pale figures lost among the tangled trees, little girls falling down into the secret places under the earth. Looking at them felt like stepping into someone else's skull, someone who knew the same things I knew: that there were sharp teeth behind every smile, and bare bones waiting beneath the pretty skin of the world.

I used to trace the author's name with my fingertip, draw it idly in the margins of my C+ schoolwork: E. Starling.

She never published another book. She never gave a single interview. The only thing she left behind other than *The Underland* was that house, hidden in the trees. Maybe that's the real reason I was so obsessed with it. I wanted to see where she came from, prove to myself that she was real. I wanted to walk through her secret architecture, run my fingers over her wallpaper, see her curtains flutter in the breeze and believe, for a moment, that it was her ghost.

It's been eleven years and forty-four days since I last opened that book. I came straight home from Mom's funeral, dumped it into a doubled-up grocery bag along with half a pack of Newports, a moldy dream catcher, and a tube of lipstick, and shoved it all deep under my bed.

I bet the pages are all swollen and mildewed by now; everything in Eden goes to rot, given time.

I still dream about the Starling place sometimes, but I no longer think it means anything. And even if it did—I'm a high-school dropout with a part-time job at Tractor Supply, bad teeth, and a brother who deserves better than this dead-end bad-luck bullshit town.

Dreams aren't for people like me.

People like me have to make two lists: what they need and what they want. You keep the first list short, if you're smart, and you burn the second one. Mom never got the trick of it—she was always wanting and striving, longing and lusting and craving right up until she wasn't—but I'm a quick learner. I have one list, with one thing on it, and it keeps me plenty busy.

There are double shifts to work and pockets to pick; social workers to

mislead and frozen pizzas to snap in half so they fit in the microwave; cheap inhalers to buy from sketchy websites and long nights to lie listening to the rattle and hiss of Jasper's breathing.

Then, too, there's the cream-colored envelope that came from a fancy school up north after Jasper took the PSAT, and the savings account I opened the day after it arrived, which I've managed to grow using the many and considerable skills my mother left me—wiles, theft, fraud, charm, a defiant and wholly misplaced optimism—but which still isn't enough to get him out of this place.

I figure dreams are like stray cats, which will go away if I quit feeding them.

So I don't make up stories about Starling House or ask anyone else for theirs. I don't linger when I pass by the iron front gates, or look up with my heart riding high in my chest, hoping to catch a glimpse of that lonely amber light that seems to shine from some grander, stranger world, just for me. I never pull the grocery bag out from under the bed.

But sometimes, right before I fall asleep, I see the black shadows of trees rising up the motel walls, though there's nothing but asphalt and weeds out the window. I feel the hot breath of Beasts around me, and I follow them down, and down, to Underland.

TWO

It's a gray Tuesday evening in February and I'm on my way back to the motel after a pretty shitty day.

I don't know what made it so shitty; it was more or less exactly the same as the days that preceded it and the days likely to follow it, a featureless expanse of hours interrupted by two long walks in the cold, from the motel to work and back. It's just that I had to work eight entire hours with Lacey Matthews, the human equivalent of unsalted butter, and when the drawer came up short at the end of our shift the manager gave me an I've-got-my-eye-on-you glare, as if he thought the discrepancy was my fault, which it was. It's just that it snowed yesterday and the dismal remains are rotting in the gutters, soaking through the holes in my tennis shoes, and I made Jasper take the good coat this morning. It's just that I'm twenty-six years old and I can't afford a goddamn car.

I could've gotten a ride from Lacey or her cousin Lance, who works nights at the call center. But Lacey would proselytize at me and Lance would pull over on Cemetery Road and reach for the top button of my jeans, and I would probably let him, because it would feel pretty good and the motel was pretty far out of his way, but later I would catch the scent of him on my hoodie—a generic, acidic smell, like the yellow cakes of soap in gas station bathrooms—and feel an apathy so profound, so perfectly flat, that I would be tempted to pull out that grocery bag beneath the bed just to make sure I could still feel anything at all.

So: I'm walking.

It's four miles from Tractor Supply to the motel—three and a half if I cut behind the public library and cross the river on the old railroad bridge, which always puts me in a strange, sour mood.

I pass the flea market and the RV park, the second Dollar General and the Mexican place that took over the old Hardee's building, before I cut off the road and follow the railroad tracks onto Gravelly land. At night the power plant is almost pretty, a great golden city lit up so bright it turns the sky yellow and throws a long shadow behind you.

The streetlights are humming. The starlings are murmuring. The river is singing to itself.

They paved the old railroad bridge years ago, but I like to walk on the very edge, where the ties stick out. If you look down you can see the Mud River rushing in the gaps, a black oblivion, so I look up instead. In summer the banks are so knotted with honeysuckle and kudzu you can't see anything but green, but now you can see the rise and fall of the land, the indentation of an old mine shaft.

I remember it as a wide-open mouth, black and gaping, but the city boarded it up after some kids dared each other past the DANGER signs. People had done it plenty of times before, but the mist rose high that night—the mist in Eden comes dense and fast, so heavy you can almost hear it padding along beside you—and one of them must have gotten lost. They never did find the body.³

The river sings loud now, siren sweet, and I find myself humming along with it. I'm not truly tempted by the cold black of the water below—suicide is a folded hand and I'm no quitter—but I can remember how it felt down

3. Willy Floyd, 13, went missing on April 13, 1989; the old mine shaft was boarded up four years before Opal was born. Perhaps she merely dreamed of it, and mistook the dream for a memory.

there among the bones and bottom-feeders: so quiet, so far beyond the scabbling, striving, grinding work of survival.

It's just that I'm tired.

I'm pretty sure this is what Mr. Cole, the high school guidance counselor, might call a "crisis point" when I ought to "reach out to my support network," but I don't have a support network. I have Bev, owner and manager of the Garden of Eden Motel, who is obligated to let us live in room 12 rent-free because of some shady deal she cut with Mom, but isn't obligated to like it. I have Charlotte, local librarian and founder of the Muhlenberg County Historical Society, who was nice enough not to ban me after I faked a street address to get a library card and sold a stack of DVDs online. Instead she merely asked me to please not do it again and gave me a cup of coffee so sweet it made my cavities ache. Other than them it's just the hellcat—a vicious calico who lives under the motel dumpster—and my brother.

I wish I could talk to Mom. She gave terrible advice, but I'm almost as old now as she was when she died; I imagine it would be like talking to a friend.

I could tell her about Stonewood Academy. How I transferred Jasper's transcripts and filled out all the forms, and then sweet-talked them into saving him a spot next term so long as I pay the tuition by the end of May. How I assured them it wouldn't be a problem, talking bright and easy like she taught me. How I have to quadruple my life savings in the next three months, on the kind of minimum-wage job that carefully keeps you under thirty hours a week so they don't have to give you health insurance.

But I'll find a way, because I need to, and I'll walk barefoot through hell for what I need.

My hands are cold and blue in the light of my phone. hey punk how's the book report going

great, Jasper writes back, followed by a frankly suspicious number of exclamation points.

oh yeah? what's your thesis statement? I'm not really worried—my little brother has an earnest, determined brilliance that's won over every teacher in the public school system, despite their expectations about boys with brown skin and curls—but hassling him makes me feel better. Already the river sings softer in my skull.

my thesis is that I can fit fourteen marshmallows in my mouth at once
and everyone in this book needs a long sitdown with mr cole

I picture Heathcliff hunched in one of the counselor's undersized plastic

chairs, an anger-management brochure crumpled in his hands, and feel a weird twist of sympathy. Mr. Cole is a nice man, but he doesn't know what to do with people raised on the underside of the rules, where the world turns dark and lawless, where only the canny and cruel survive.

Jasper isn't canny or cruel, which is only one of the several hundred reasons I have to get him out of here. It ranks right below the air quality and the Confederate flags and the bad luck that slinks behind us like a mean dog, nipping at our heels. (I don't believe in curses, but if there was such a thing as a cursed family, it would look a lot like us.)

that's not a thesis. My fingers snag on the cracks that spiderweb across my screen.

I'm sorry what did you get in 10th grade english again??

My laugh hangs in the air, ghostly white. i graduated with a 4.0 from the School of Fuck You

A tiny pause. chill. it's job fair tomorrow, nobody's collecting essays

I despised the job fair when I was at school. There aren't really any jobs around here except breathing particulates at the power plant, so it's just an AmeriCorps booth and somebody from the Baptist mission group handing out flyers. The main excitement comes at the end, when Don Gravely, CEO of Gravely Power, takes the stage and gives an excruciating speech about hard work and the American spirit, as if he didn't inherit every cent of his money from his big brother. We all had to shake his hand as we filed out of the gym, and when he got to me he flinched, as if he thought poverty might be contagious. His palm had felt like a fresh-peeled boiled egg.

Imagining Jasper shaking that clammy-ass hand makes my skin feel hot and prickly. Jasper doesn't need to listen to any bullshit speeches or take home any applications, because Jasper isn't getting stuck in Eden.

i'll call miss hudson and say you have a fever, screw the job fair

But he replies: nah I'm good

There's a lull in our conversation while I leave the river behind and wind uphill. The electric lines swoop overhead and the trees crowd close, blotting out the stars. There are no streetlights in this part of town.

where are you now? im hungry

A wall runs beside the road now, the bricks pocked and sagging with age, the mortar crumbling beneath the wheedling fingers of Virginia creeper and poison ivy. just passing the starling place

Jasper replies with a smiley face shedding a single tear and the letters RIP.