

A BURNING QUESTION

by Brock Clarke

EDITOR'S NOTE: *What it is that Brock Clarke has created in An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England is an amazing thing to read—this sad, moving, outrageously funny story of a young man who (acci-*



dentally) burned down Emily Dickinson's house (and killed two people). Here Brock Clarke tells us about the first time he visited the house of a famous dead writer, a momentous event that eventually led to the creation of this novel.

Brock Clarke,
author of

An Arsonist's Guide
to Writers' Homes in
New England



I went to my first writer's house—the Emily Dickinson House, in Amherst, Massachusetts—in November 1989. I was in college; my senior seminar was on Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, and as part of

that class we were to take a field trip to Dickinson's house. I don't know why we didn't go to Whitman's house instead. Maybe because it was in Camden, New Jersey, where, according to the newspapers, people only went to get shot. Or maybe because I went to Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and our common name was too much to resist. Maybe if I'd gone to Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, my life—and the book I wrote—would have been totally different.

It should be said here that I loved Dickinson's poetry, loved it in the urgent, spastic, and confused way I'd loved the many

women who wanted nothing to do with me, which is to say that I loved Dickinson's poetry even though, or because, I understood nothing about it except that it was too good for me. But since there is a special place in

hell reserved for sensitive young men who rhapsodize about Women and Verse, let me quickly add that I was a terrible student and person, that I spent the seven-hour drive from Carlisle to Amherst drinking National Bohemian beer and counting the dead deer on the side of the road. I wasn't thinking about *why* we were going to the Emily Dickinson House in the first place, nor was I wondering what we'd see once we got there. And I sure wasn't thinking about what we might get out of seeing the poet's house that we couldn't get out of the poetry itself. I wasn't really thinking at all. When you've just turned twenty-one

**AN ARSONIST'S GUIDE TO
WRITERS' HOMES IN NEW
ENGLAND**

by Brock Clarke

ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-551-3
Hardcover

Publication: September 2007

years old and someone tells you to get in a van and ride for seven hours and drink beer, you don't ask *why*. You don't *think*. You settle into your seat and surreptitiously (you think) pour beer into the coffee travel mug that isn't fooling anyone and count the dead deer lying on the side of the road and let yourself be happy.

I was happy, and even more so when I got to the Emily Dickinson House. What can be said about it? It was old and seemed lived in and comfortable, a slightly worn cardigan sweater of a house. It was staffed by grandmotherly tour guides who spoke kindly and trod softly as they showed you Emily Dickinson's bed and Emily Dickinson's favorite pen and Emily Dickinson's flannel nightgown and told you the story about Emily Dickinson being so shy that when her doctor came to call, she made him sit in a room and limit his examination to watching her walk, naked, past the open door. And how did I feel, seeing and hearing these things? I felt sleepy. Maybe it was the beer making me feel this way. Or maybe it was the tour guides, who were the best kind of grandmothers, the kind who would gently scold you for putting your feet on the furniture and then ask if you wouldn't like some nice hot chocolate. Or maybe it was the house itself, the heat turned up so high that it made you think not so much about Art as about Nap. And so I said my good-byes to the tour guides and the house and retreated to my motel room and took one—a nap, that is—and only upon waking did I won-

der what any of my very pleasant trip and tour had to do with the poems that had supposedly led me to come there. What did the house, the bed, the pen, the nightgown have

*"When you've just turned
twenty-one years old and
someone tells you to get in
a van and ride for seven
hours and drink beer,
you don't ask why."*

—BROCK CLARKE

to do with the flies buzzing and death personified and the loaded gun of a heart that made me love Dickinson's poems, even—especially—though I didn't much understand them? Nothing, as far as I could tell. So, why were we here? Why go to the house at all? Was it because the house

was easy to understand, whereas the poems were not? What is wrong with me? These are the sort of questions that, if you are a sensitive young man, make you start drinking beer again, and so I did, and, soon drunk, I swore I would never, ever go into another writer's house.

And yet I did, I have, many times, into many different houses, and every time I've gone into a writer's house it's been full of paying customers. And why? Are we getting something we want out of the houses that we can't get out of the books? And is that the books' fault, or is it our own? What is *wrong* with us? Would we be better off without the books, or without the houses? But as everyone knows, you can't get rid of the books—there are too many of them, and people are writing new ones all the time. And, as everyone knows, you have to be brave, or crazy, or both, to get rid of a house by, say, burning it to the ground, and few of us are that brave, that crazy. But if you're not brave enough to burn down a writer's house, maybe you can at least write a book about people who are. ■