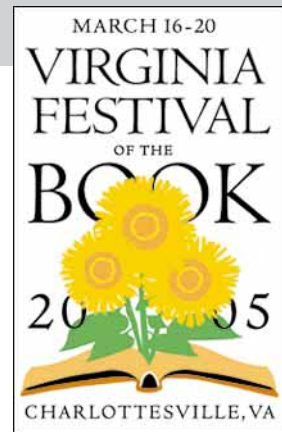


## *Brightwood* by R. T. Smith recommended by Claudia Emerson

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Claudia Emerson—author of *Pinion: An Elegy* and associate professor of English at Mary Washington College—recommends *Brightwood* by R. T. Smith. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



R. T. Smith is one of the finest lyric poets we have, and reading his work is an immersion in emotional intensity beautifully honed by formal precision. Author of eleven poetry collections and a book of short stories, Smith is also editor of the literary journal *Shenandoah* at Washington and Lee University.

I recommend his most recent book *Brightwood* to Virginia readers in part because many of the thirty-eight poems make rich use of a landscape that native Virginians know well—the mountains around Lexington, where Smith lives. Far more than lyric renderings of the Blue Ridge, however, these poems move by way of particulars—gravel roads, the banks of the Maury, a museum in Mississippi—through the greater South's complex narratives, histories, and myths.

Smith draws throughout the book on various experiences of maturation, what I have come to think of as emotional awakenings. The poem entitled "Singer," for example, opens with "I used to meddle with everything forbidden— / flour sifter, coffee mill, carpenter's level" as the speaker remembers watching his grandmother work the treadle sewing machine and his desire to understand how she seemed easily to keep "the needle leaping." Such poetic "meddling" continues in other poems that record the awareness of a watchful child intent on the ordinary, whether it be a sewing machine, a drive-in picture screen, or a word so common others cannot hear it.

Several poems in the collection challenge us to consider the hard-earned education of the everyday world, from working on a road crew ("The brush ax was my first B.A., / with post-hole diggers I earned a Ph.D.") to listening to tall tales in a country store with the ultimate realization that "every story cauled a grief, regrets, / cruel ruin and a world of the darkest scars."

Smith finds nature instructive as well. In one of my favorite poems, "In the Night Orchard," whitetail deer made frantic for the pears in a neighbor's orchard remind the speaker that while humans might remember our own "driven season," "the world turns us practical, tames / us to yearn for milder pleasures." And what he finds beautiful, even enviable in the deer is not "the grace / of their gliding"—but the "instinct that draws them after dark / into trespass and the need to ruin / the sweetest thing they've ever known."

In his varied explorations of the Southern past, Smith doesn't shy from the hard subjects of racial violence, ignorance, and rural poverty. In "Voices, Traces, the Whip-poor-will's Plea," he describes a tree long ago used for lynching as one that "never grew again but can't / ever die"—suggesting a metaphoric link between the physical artifact and the hatred it yet represents. Similarly, in "Timber Ridge Poor Farm," the place, abandoned for years, is still haunted by "spirits so skittish and lean not even / the red-tailed hawk can spy them."

In spite of Smith's concern with difficult subjects, or perhaps because of it, the idea of healing threads itself throughout the book. The title poem offers the best example as it details the laborious process of crafting a fiddle. Only such painstaking skill coupled with belief in the possibility of music can make it a reality, and Smith builds his poems the same way, finding life—purposeful, vivid—in the overlooked, the painful, the raw. R.T. Smith's *Brightwood* proves that a poem, too, “fashioned with such

ardor / ... can stir the world's first spark, / drawn the way healing always is— / from the stridor of the dark.”

*Authors R. T. Smith and Claudia Emerson will appear in a panel-reading on “Poetry and Autobiography” in Charlottesville during the Virginia Festival of the Book (4 p.m. on March 18 at Barnes & Noble).*

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### Virginia Festival of the Book

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