

A blue-toned photograph of a house reflected in water. The house is on the left, and its reflection is visible in the water. On the right, a person's silhouette is visible above the water, with a bright light source behind them. The water is dark blue with ripples and reflections. The title text is overlaid on the image.

**THE
WEIGHT
OF
MEMORY**

**S H A W N
S M U C K E R**

Praise for *These Nameless Things*

“Those who enjoy Jolina Petersheim, Carrie Stuart Parks, and Tosca Lee and who appreciate mind- and genre-bending fiction will want to add this to a reading list.”

Library Journal

“In *These Nameless Things*, the edges of an earthly world bleed into the next. Trauma and guilt fold into an immersive fantasy that’s eerie and precise in its world building.”

Foreword Reviews

“In the tradition of C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, and Neil Gaiman, yet with a style all his own, Shawn Smucker has invited us yet again into a magical story. Powerful, startling, and with a good dollop of heart, *These Nameless Things* will stick with readers long after they’ve read the final page. This book is a wonder.”

Susie Finkbeiner, author of *Stories That Bind Us*
and *All Manner of Things*

“*These Nameless Things* is an imaginative, dark, morally complex (and therefore realistic) exploration of the distorting effects of sin, guilt, hatred, and revenge on the human spirit. With a setting seemingly just outside Dante’s hell, Smucker’s novel is something of a blending of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, indebted to both but carving out its own path.”

Daniel Taylor, author of the Jon Mote Mystery series

“A poetic, heartfelt meditation on guilt, grief, grace, and forgiveness, reminiscent of both Dante’s *Inferno* and *Lost*.”

Anne Bogel, creator of *Modern Mrs. Darcy*
and the *What Should I Read Next?* podcast

Praise for *Light from Distant Stars*

“A compelling tale of family and faith with a paranormal twist. . . . A tense novel exploring the breadth and limitations of loyalty, forgiveness, and faith. *Light from Distant Stars* is a memorable dive into the human psyche.”

Foreword Reviews

“Smucker takes readers on a man’s faith journey, reconciling his past with his present and reckoning with his views on God in the midst of life’s hurdles. Told with elements of magical realism, Smucker’s take on visionary fiction is an immersive reading experience.”

ECPA

Books by Shawn Smucker

The Day the Angels Fell

The Edge of Over There

Light from Distant Stars

These Nameless Things

The Weight of Memory

Once We Were Strangers

THE WEIGHT OF MEMORY

S H A W N
S M U C K E R



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Extracts are taken from George MacDonald, *The Light Princess* (Lit2Go, 1864), accessed December 28, 2020, <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/28/the-light-princess>.

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To Maile

Is there a single person on whom I can press belief? No sir.
All I can do is say, Here's how it went. Here's what I saw.
I've been there and am going back.
Make of it what you will.

LEIF ENGER, *Peace Like a River*

Death alone from death can save.
Love is death, and so is brave.
Love can fill the deepest grave.
Love loves on beneath the wave.

GEORGE MACDONALD,
The Light Princess

And, so, there is
the weight of memory

LI-YOUNG LEE,
"The Weight of Sweetness"

Anytime to Three Months

Her words hover in the air, hummingbirds, and I hold my breath, glance up at the clock above the door, and watch the red second hand twitch its way through a minute. I pinch my bottom lip in between my teeth. There is a small piece of paper under her chair, the tiniest corner torn off, left from the previous examination. What news did that patient receive? What diagnosis?

What will I leave behind?

“I’m sorry, Dr. Cortez,” I say. “Can you repeat that?” Each of my blinks is like the shutter on an old camera, holding for an extra moment so that I see the negative of her on the inside of my eyelids. I reach up and rub my eyes. Why do I not feel a deep sadness?

I think it would be appropriate for me to feel a deep sadness.

“Mr. Elias,” she begins again, and her words have a lullaby quality to them, as if she’s explaining a monster to a child, the darkness sleeping under the bed, the movement subtly shifting in the corner of the room after the light turns off.

My mind wanders, this time to you, to the happiness on your face when you see me waiting outside of the school,

or how heavy your eyes are when you're trying not to fall asleep. I think of all the made-up tales you have told me, all the imaginary friends, all the whispering voices. I realize in that moment that I can never tell you this news, because it's a monster far too scary, a story far too dark for an eleven-almost-twelve-year-old. There is relief with the realization that I do not have to tell you. That I will not tell you. So I look over at Dr. Cortez, finally ready to listen.

"Mr. Elias," she says, "do you understand what I'm telling you?"

I wonder how doctors can possibly appear to be so young. Like high school students. Dr. Cortez's hair is held together in a bright pink scrunchie, and she has no wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. We have become friends through the last months, closer as the news has become increasingly worse. She has always tried to soften the blows.

The thought hums through my mind that this is a practical joke, one of those television shows where they play pranks on unsuspecting chumps. I smile to myself, eager for this to be true. I actually check the room for a hidden camera. Perhaps in the light switch, or in that pointy wall mount behind the glass jar of cotton swabs? Or in the tiny pendant that sways, barely visible inside the neck of her blue blouse where the top button sags, undone?

But there is the knot on my head behind my left temple. That is no practical joke. And there are waves of nausea, moments when I nearly black out. Those are not practical jokes. And Dr. Cortez wouldn't lie to me. Maybe it's God. Maybe God is the prankster here.

My face must be suitably blank, because she tells me once again, for the third time.

“Mr. Elias? There is no treatment available,” she says. “It’s too far along. I’m very sorry.” The buds of tears form in the corners of her eyes, those eyes that have no wrinkles, and the left side of her mouth twitches in a sad dance. She stands and turns away and pretends to rearrange the various pamphlets on the counter. I shift ever so slightly on the examination table, and the paper underneath me crackles like electricity.

She turns, holding out one of the pamphlets, and I take it from her smooth hands. She is a child. The words on the pamphlet read, “Hospice Care and You.”

I take another deep breath. I am full to bursting with air. I let it out in a long sigh.

“Are you still blacking out?” Her voice is probing, gentle. I shrug, nod.

“Are your pain levels okay?”

I nod again.

When I think I’ll never find words again, five of them disturb the surface. “How long do I have?”

She clears her throat. “Mr. Elias, I don’t normally . . .” Her voice collapses in on itself.

“Dr. Cortez, I’ve been trying to get you to call me Paul for over a year now.” I try to chuckle, but no sound comes out.

“Mr. Elias . . . Paul . . .” she says.

“I understand,” I say, and my composure seems to catch her off guard. I shrug and give her a small but heavy smile. “I’m fifty-eight years old. I’ve had many good years. But I have a granddaughter in my care. She depends on me. She has no one else, and I’ll need to find someone to take her in.” My voice cracks. I clear it. My words come out all breath. “It would help, I’m sure you understand, if I had some idea.”

I have never felt so much like I'm underwater. I think of Mary. What was the last thing she thought, going under? Was she afraid? Was she thinking of me? Could she see the light from the midmorning sun, glimmering too far above her?

The doctor shakes her head. "I don't normally . . . It's a guessing game. You could live much longer."

My mouth tightens into a smile. "I understand," I say again, trying to nudge her with a kind glance. "Your best guess."

She breathes quietly, a bird quivering in the brush. She licks her lips. Her head tilts, and her hand moves instinctively to the unbuttoned collar of her blouse, hiding the triangle of tender skin. She can't make eye contact with me as she says the words, and this fills me with an immense amount of affection for her. It's all I can do not to move across the small room and hug her.

"The soonest? Anytime, really." She seems to be holding her breath. She doesn't know where to look.

Anytime.

"And the longest? Perhaps two or three months."

Three months.

Her chest quivers in what seems to be a stifled sob. It strikes me as both completely unprofessional and deeply human.

Between anytime and three months.

I feel a subtle relief. There it is. The finish line.

I think of you, and the relief turns sour. How can I leave you behind? Who will take care of you?

The idea comes to me as I sit in Dr. Cortez's office. I will take you back to my hometown, back to where I grew up.

Back to Nysa. I will show you the home I was born in, the creeks I fished, the small town where my friends and I caused trouble. To me it feels like the last safe place in the world, and if I have to leave you, that seems the best place to do it. I don't know who will take you in, but the idea of driving with you through these early autumn days feels so good that I decide we will leave today. This afternoon.

Or tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow morning at the latest.

I stand and take a deep breath, as if everything is finally beginning. I approach the door, and Dr. Cortez doesn't stand. I know she is very new at this—her face is in her hands. I reach down and my fingertips graze her small shoulder, and I squeeze her collarbone reassuringly. I'm surprised at how fragile it feels, like an eggshell.

“Thank you, Sarah,” I whisper. “You have always been forthright with me. I know you've tried many things. And I appreciate that. This will get easier. Telling people. Don't worry.”

She reaches up to squeeze my hand, but her reach stops somewhere short of her shoulder, short of my fingers. I walk away, breathing, each step a deliberate effort to keep going.

Outside, the late September air is soft and warmer than it should be.

I'm Afraid Not

During my walk home through the city, I reassure myself once again that I don't have to tell you about the diagnosis. The asphalt smells hot, and there is a distant beeping, perhaps from the road crew paving the next road over. The lunch hour has passed, and office workers have returned to their desks. The schoolchildren have not yet been released. The rest of us run our errands. Groceries. Post office. Doctors' appointments. It strikes me as strange that, besides the doctor, I am the only person in the entire world who knows what I know, that my end is near.

Anytime to three months.

I imagine traveling back to my hometown, entering that strange little peninsula of Nysa from the west, the dank smell of the river as we cross the bridge before driving Cat Tail Road through the woods, passing the Steward farm on the left, driving through all those cornfields. It's nearly fall now, but some of the corn will still be standing, lining the roads like high walls, and some of it will be cut down to dry stubble, leaving behind lines like a labyrinth. All the way to town. Maybe I'll even take you to the cabin on the shore

of the lake. How much will I tell you about what happened there forty years ago? How much will I leave out?

How much do I even know for sure?

Anytime to three months.

I glance at my watch. My house is there on the left, and it observes my approach. I know that somehow the house knows about my anytime to three months. The morning paper leans against the front stoop—I was so distracted by the knot on the side of my head and the doctor’s appointment that I was knocked out of my normal routine, forgetting to collect and read the paper after I walked you to school this morning. I pass the house, our house, and I turn left at the next alley and walk the five long blocks down to your elementary school.

That’s when the first shadow of doubt creeps into my mind. I’m not sure I can keep this news from you. You are very perceptive for eleven-almost-twelve.

Not long ago, I thought I had received a phone call from your father, and when it turned out not to be him, what felt like a near miss almost crushed me. When I walked up to you at school that day, you reached out, took my arm in a gentle hold with one of your small hands, and gave a sad smile.

“It’s okay, Grampy,” you told me. “We’ll be okay, the two of us.”

How do you know these things?

It is still thirty minutes until your day ends, and the parking lot is full of teachers’ cars, but there are no parents, not yet. I sit on the swing and the chains protest. The thin rubber seat pulls in tight against my hips as I sag down in the middle. I push myself gently, feet not leaving the ground. I close my eyes and remember that swaying, that freedom,

forward and back, forward and back. The breeze kisses the sweat on my forehead, and I wonder if I'm sweating because of this thing inside of me that's making me die or if I'm sweating simply because it's hot for September.

I reach up and touch the marble-sized lump above my ear. It's a little larger than a marble now, and my stomach drops at this new realization. Evidence of the culprit. The root. The knot, always growing.

This unusual autumn day has gone from warm to hot, but the heat is comforting. It is weight, like a gravity blanket. I remember where I was the day Mary left me, how hot it was on the lake, how the water felt too warm to swim in. John, your father, only days old, had fallen asleep on my bare chest where I lay on the stale, golden sofa in the cabin. The top of his head was covered in night-black hair, fine baby hair, and he smelled like powder and sour milk and sweet drool. His eyes were small black embers rarely revealed in those early days, his yawning mouth somehow both tiny and gaping. I looked up over that fine black hair, through the glass doors that led out to the deck. Beyond it all, beyond his hair and his smell and the heat waving up off the deck, I could see the lake, and out on the lake I could see Tom and Shirley coming, each in their own kayak. Only them. And I thought, *Where on earth is Mary? And why are they coming so quickly?*

I hear the thunk of the heavy metal door.

"Mr. Elias?" It is Ms. Howard, your principal.

If Mary left me forty years ago next week, that means John's birthday is . . . today? Tomorrow? Did I miss his birthday?

"Yes?" I say without opening my eyes. I know today is Friday and that there's no school on Monday, and I imagine my

doctor going home and telling her husband, if she is married, about the old man she had to talk to today, the old man who is only fifty-eight and has anytime to three months left to live. Did I seem old to her? I imagine him drawing her close and the two of them not saying it but thinking it, how sad it would be to only have anytime to three months to live. We are all comforted by the misguided confidence that we have certain decades ahead of us.

“Mr. Elias,” Ms. Howard begins again.

I jump, opening my eyes, because there she is, right in front of me. I don’t stand up though. I sway there awkwardly in the swing, and she’s not much taller than me, even though she’s standing.

“It’s about Pearl.”

“Pearl?”

She nods.

“I hope she’s not misbehaving.”

“Oh, nothing like that. Nothing at all like that! She’s doing very well. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

I raise my eyebrows and wait. I am good at waiting for other people to speak. I have somehow developed a patience that almost enjoys the awkward silence.

Ms. Howard clears her throat nervously. I watch a gust of warm wind animate a few loose hairs on her head. “There’s . . . it’s . . . Pearl has been selected by her teachers to attend a weekend camp for high achievers. Not this weekend but next.”

“Yes,” I say. “No school on Monday?”

“That’s right. The retreat isn’t this weekend—it’s next weekend,” she repeats, as if talking to one of her students. “They’ll go to a camp north of here, play games, go through

leadership exercises. It's a wonderful opportunity for only a handful of children."

I think of Dr. Cortez sitting on her stool as I left the examination room, the tiny birdlike feeling of her clavicle as I squeezed her shoulder. I think of how one side of her mouth twitched. I think of her words.

Anytime to three months.

"No, I'm afraid not," I say vacantly.

"Oh, you can take some time to think—"

"No, not Pearl. I'm afraid not."

She stares at me with something like confusion. I can tell she is not someone who is used to hearing the word no.

"It would really be a wonderful opportunity for—"

"Not Pearl," I say, each word a dead weight. "I'm afraid not."

She purses her lips. I close my eyes and lean back in the swing, begin that soft front-and-back movement. Even with my eyes closed I can feel her disdain cling to me like humidity. I know what she is thinking—I am causing my grandchild to miss out. I am too old, perhaps, to recognize the opportunity for what it is. I'm not a fit parent.

I can hear the light scuffing of her footsteps back to the school. I hear the heavy sound of the metal door opening.

"Ms. Howard!" I suddenly say, untangling myself awkwardly from the swing.

"Yes?" she asks, pausing, cautiously hopeful.

I walk across the playground, limping. My right foot has fallen asleep. "What's the date?"

"The date? Of the camp?"

"No, today," I say.

"Today?"

“Yes, today’s date.”

She stares up into the hot sky, the ash-colored sky, hovering as it is above us, perhaps threatening a thunderstorm later. Her gaze pierces the humidity and finds the sun even there, even while it is hidden. She shakes her head and wrinkles her brow. “The 22nd?”

“September 22nd?” I ask.

“September 22nd,” she says, flitting inside, the door crashing scornfully behind her.

I wave at her absently, return across the expanse, and sit back in the swing. And for the first time since the doctor’s words—*anytime to three months*—I feel quiet tears forming behind my eyes and my throat aches, because today is John’s birthday, and I have not seen him for four years. You have not seen your father since you were seven-almost-eight, and in a week it will be forty years since Mary left me. It is a tornado of memory, and I glance up, certain I will find the sky in a boiling state of Armageddon. But there is no approaching lightning, no funnel cloud. The gray actually appears to dissolve like melting cotton candy, and the blue seeps through.

A bell rings from the bowels of the school, and a few of the doors unlatch. The parking lot has filled with parents, and all the children spill into the heat, their feet sliding like sandpaper on the pavement. As my rough hands try to dry my face and stop up any more tears that might think about leaking out, your wispy voice calls out to me, and it’s like you’re in some faraway place, calling to me from a land I will never find.