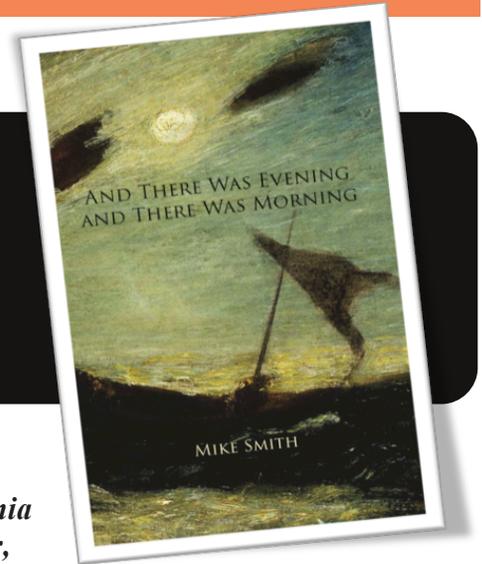


**AND THERE WAS EVENING AND THERE WAS MORNING**  
essays on illness, loss, and love by **MIKE SMITH**

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*I was thirty-five, midway through a life I wanted over, when I told Virginia that her mother was dead. I had intended to say it gently, a mere whisper, holding her in my arms, but I ruined it. I just blurted it out. It was the second time that day that I had acknowledged my wife's death out loud.*

What a gift Mike Smith has given us... He is a clear-eyed and trustworthy guide through the harrowing kingdoms of illness and grieving. His prose is nuanced, his voice considered and considerate, his wisdom hard-earned but never bitter. There is beauty and solace here and gorgeous imagery. Smith has written a book for all of us who are dying—which is to say, all of us who are living, and our lives will be the better for having read it.

—**Beth Ann Fennelly, author of *Heating & Cooling***

Brimming with hard-earned truths, Smith's memoir doesn't simply plumb the depths of grief. He deftly weaves in his late wife's brilliant theological insights and his own strong tether to literature while telling a sweeping love story that is also about loss and hope and renewal. What I love most is that this isn't a book about learning to let go but instead learning that the heart can expand to hold more love.

—**Julianna Baggott, author of *Harriet Wolf's Seventh Book of Wonders***

Rarely does a book demand so much strength of a reader... Seductive to read, it is a minefield of heartbreak on every page. The book is a stunned, out of body experience; we have all heard of these exuberantly tragic stories that happen to friends of friends, neighbors down the street. But Smith, a reflective and precise writer, invites us to walk each step with him as his heart is annihilated by the sort of tragedy we beg, beg God will never come our way.

—**Tony D'Souza, author of *Whiteman* and *Mule: A Novel of Moving Weight***

## INTRODUCTION

*And There Was Evening and There Was Morning* orbits around two distinct narratives. On March 1, 2011, Mike Smith's eleven-year-old stepdaughter Emily was diagnosed with a germ cell tumor in her ovary and admitted to St. Jude Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, where she would spend the next four months in residence with Smith's second wife, Jennifer. Jennifer and Mike had married the summer before, taking their new blended family of seven immediately after the ceremony and driving the 850 miles from Raleigh, North Carolina, to Cleveland, Mississippi. This narrative ends happily, and the other narrative stands as a counterpoint. Smith's first wife was also named Emily and had also been diagnosed with cancer, dying four months after giving birth to their second child. The memoir opens with these unlikely and tragic coincidences, including the fact that on the very day Smith's stepdaughter was diagnosed, his late wife's book arrived in the mail, finally published three years after her death.

## CONVERSATION STARTERS

### My Two Emilys

- How would you describe the speaker's perspective on his stepdaughter Emily's "silent treatment," and how he views this in terms of her illness
- What might be the parallels between Emily Arndt's relationship to Genesis 22, its influence on her view of relationship, and the speaker's journey through loss and grief?
- As the speaker relates the tragedy of Emily Arndt's death followed by the cancer diagnosis of his stepdaughter Emily, the tone of the language creates distances from the deep loss and sorrow of the events. How would you describe that tone, and what does it say about the speaker who has experienced this series of extraordinary events?
- How does the account in "My Two Emilys" portray Emily Arndt's illness with that of the stepdaughter Emily, as well as the wider effect on the families and loved ones?
- What does it mean to be an outsider when someone is ill, versus one's involvement as an "insider"?

### Gifts She Named Mine

- The essay tracks the naming of the speaker's children by his late wife and the significance and circumstances of each. What about a name carries the memories we have of those we're close to?

### Hours of Lead

- How does the author portray his own concept of time in this essay, and time in the context of illness, and medical treatment?
- How would you describe the changes the author underwent in becoming a "case manager" for Emily during those first days in the hospital?
- The essay contrasts routine and schedule with the unpredictability of serious illness. What kinds of details does the author choose to portray this relationship?
- At the most difficult point of Emily's hospital stay, the author writes, "my inability to respond emotionally lacerated me." Describe the contradictions in feeling that occur for the author.
- For the author, much of the routine in those final days of Emily's life came to be seen in terms of ritual. What is the role of ritual in life's significant events, and how does the author's portrayal of the acts he performed illustrate this?

### The Gales of Coming Winter

- For those in the midst of grief, seasons and holidays can be particularly difficult. How does the author reconcile his love of Thanksgiving with the grief that time of year brings?
- In what ways can a holiday that is celebrated nationally also be “regional”?
- The author references a labyrinth that Emily walks after their miscarriage, in which she follows a path that is reversed until it takes her back to the beginning. How does the metaphor of labyrinth suggest the process of mourning?

### And There Was Evening and There Was Morning

- How does portraying time in a Genesis-like fashion heighten the progression of events? How might that story-telling approach also underscore the experience of grief and loss?
- The events and decisions charted here range from the pivotal to the seemingly minor. What is the effect of the author’s choice to portray them side-by-side in this condensed account?

### Pigeons and Turtledoves

- The author contemplates what effect words can have on absence of the beloved, and their uncertainty. Can words, whether stories, poems, or prayer, provide comfort in a time of loss? What kinds of texts does the author feel provide him comfort?
- The author writes, “Our senses confuse us, and they’re our only way of knowing the world.” This observation points to the contradiction he experiences between words and felt experience. Do you feel the author comes to reconcile this opposition? If so, how?
- The author tells us that Emily Arndt’s investigation of *akedah*, the account in Genesis depicting Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac, “suggests a deeper complication” in the relationship between Abraham and God. Yet in the end, the force is ambiguous rather than clear in its directive. How might this idea apply to the author’s struggle with his feelings of failure in the wake of Emily’s death?

### Whispers of Gratitude and Praise

- After Emily’s death, the author struggles with mourning, and the tasks and decisions to be made. Yet the struggle helps give shape to the chaos of grief. What kinds of “shape” do the rituals he cites provide?

### Why I've Been Out of Touch

- Over a period of seven months, the author's emails to friends, family, and colleagues convey both practical matters of Emily's care during her illness and the daily affairs of life outside the hospital. How do these epistolary accounts differ from the portrayal of the same events in the essays? How would you describe the difference in the voice and narration?

### Shadow Texts

- The author keeps Emily's Yahoo account open as a way to "preserve something of Emily's voice" for their children, but there is a downside too, of reading the texts from that time. What might those be?

### Play Dates

- In meeting and falling in love with Jennifer Shy, the author writes he isn't initially aware of the shift in his feelings. What kinds of detail does he use to portray the shift?

### There We Are

- In the course of building a new life with Jennifer, the author observes, "the possibility of a new beginning for me might mean the end of possibility for Jennifer's children." What kinds of issues might be at stake in the blending of these two particular families?

### Tell Me What You Want and I'll Tell You Who You Are

- A social worker, the author writes, once told him that his stepdaughter Emily's illness would change her, and that "undergoing treatment for cancer would make her a better person." How has she changed from the girl portrayed in "My Two Emilys"?

### In Our Town

- The author notes that part of the play's effect is to "encourage the audience to embrace the illusion that the passage of time will not auger in painful change." How does this idea relate to the larger story the author has to tell?
- The Stage Manager's lines that "the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long," prove especially difficult for Virginia, yet provide a way for the author and his daughter to talk about Emily's ongoing presence in their lives. How does Wilder's play help put words to Virginia's sense of loss?

### Claiming Space

- The author writes of the house occupied by the blended family, and the objects in his children's rooms. How can we know people through the physical possessions they display in their spaces?
- The author describes comforting Virginia in the loss of her mother by bestowing upon her objects that had once belonged to Emily. How might these "tokens" allow Virginia to continue to feel connected to her mother?

### To Wait with the Pigeons to Wake

- As the author recalls his prior life with Emily, he writes, "I could think of that time without trying to construct a way out." How does he come to reconcile the present and the past?