

Washington University in St. Louis
Washington University Open Scholarship

Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition

Student Contests & Competitions

2008

Impossible, Infinite Illustrations

Michael Dango

Washington University in St Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec>

Recommended Citation

Dango, Michael, "Impossible, Infinite Illustrations" (2008). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 32.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/32>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Contests & Competitions at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

Michael Dango
Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition—Undergraduate
April 2008

Impossible, Infinite Illustrations

I sometimes wonder if it would be different had I held in my hands a memo pad and a mechanical pencil and had taken notes on what it looked like, what it felt like—what it meant—after my mom died. The time since her death a year and a half ago has been a time of new experiences and sometimes absurd emotions, most of which still confuse me. Because I did not take notes then, I have tried to copy from another's notebook in order to describe and understand these feelings. My book collection reflects a persistent journey of attempting to name the aspects of mourning: attempts to break down my experience—through others' writing—into concepts and then metaphors and ultimately into a single word.

I began with a textbook. Enrolled in a Psychology class at the time, I thought the chapter on social interactions would shed some light on what I was supposed to be feeling. David G Meyer's Psychology introduced me to a world of theories describing how one copes with loss. The book gave me a list of others to pursue: Freud's "Mourning and melancholia"; Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's On Death and Dying, which posits a popular model of dealing with tragedy characterized by five stages: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance; and John Bowlby's Loss, which suggests a contrasting model with four phases. I considered all these theories interesting: I read and read with fascination. However, I also thought them troubling, for here was a scientific community that could not agree on what the process of mourning was, offering copious and diverse models, none of which seemed to mirror what I was feeling and what I was experiencing. I did not find myself belonging to one of Kübler-Ross's easily defined stages or to one of Bowlby's four phases. My goal was not, as Freud said it should be, the cutting off of ties with my deceased mother; in fact, I wanted more than anything to persist in a relationship with her.

So I shut my Psychology textbooks and sought something more, something that, by abandoning technical terms and data analyses, might end up being closer to the truth. I started with creative non-fiction and specifically with Joan Didion's The Year of Magical Thinking. I have always been a fan of Didion—finding a sort of elegance that is at once fragile yet forceful in her prose and a beauty in the way her sentences can run on and on then end suddenly, powerfully—and owned already two collections of her essays. When I heard about her newest book, which deals with the year of grief following the death of her husband, I thought I would find the answers I was looking for. I read Magical quickly (over the course of one day) and found in it a certain rawness I had not seen in Didion before, as if she had been forced to let her guard down. I saw in that vulnerability and in her words many of the notes I had forgotten to take, for the very idea of “magical thinking”—the illusions our minds force upon us after a significant loss—is perfect. However, I became disappointed to realize in the end this was a book not about *A Year*, but The Year of Magical Thinking, and that imposition of a time limit unsettled me: it is more than a year now my mom is dead, but I still have days of magical thinking. Didion's experience was not coterminous with mine. Ultimately, she and other non-fiction writers gave me some of the words I wanted, but still left me needing a few more, because the “factual” experiences of “real” people rarely align with one another.

I then began a journey away not only from science, but from non-fiction as well, for it seemed there was a difference between Fact and Truth, and I was interested only in the latter. Seeking abstractions to define the tangible, I immersed myself in fiction. I began to read more and more, diving deeper into the sometimes imaginary and always literary losses of others in order to better understand my own, hoping to find in their emotions and in their quotations the words to describe what I felt and what I wanted to say. I quickly went through packs of Sharpie

Accent highlighters, marking with bright orange and green and yellow the lines I felt most relevant. As I look back through these books today, I see that sometimes the lines I highlighted have nothing to do with loss or grief, but it seems I began to cling to anything poetic and beautiful, as if escaping to some other world through perfected phrases. I found everywhere such phrases. I still have colorful bedsheets leftover from days I forgot to cap the highlighters before going to sleep.

The first fiction novel I read at this time was the most obvious one given its title, A Death in the Family by James Agee. I respected it for its religious motifs, especially since religion had been a confusing facet of my life with the following funerals and prayers and the alleged consolations of “she’s in a better place.” I also read more contemporary books, falling in love with the voice of the child narrator in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, who lost his father in the World Trade Center on September 11; I reread the last chapter often. I saw much of myself in the defeated college student from Mary Robison’s short story “I am Twenty-One,” written with such tragic and minimalist prose it is almost physically painful. From these pages I copied most of the notes I needed. Following the suggestion of a professor, I turned also to poetry, and as I journeyed through the pages of Mary Jo Bang’s Elegy, I found myself confronted with a woman undergoing the same quest: the search for a perfect metaphor, always changing, to capture the experience of grief. Bang is “[m]arried to the inexhaustible / Need to be accurate” (72), and when she was faced with the improbability of such an accurate description following the death of her son, I also felt faced with the same crushing realization. Every book I read gave a new phrase, a new description of grief, and each offered one piece of the elusive whole, but I came to understand that whole would never be in just one book and

certainly not in one word. Instead of narrowing my search to one word of explanation, I was constantly adding more to the lexicon.

I was not much of a reader before this journey began, before the empty shelves of my bedroom became filled with something other than dust. I was, in fact, mostly a science geek in high school, and I find it funny now I plan to major in English. I began to read because I was, in essence, searching for the perfect words to describe the feelings after my mom's death, seeking a phrase to capture the essence of it all and a word to somehow show what it meant, perhaps because I did not know what it meant. I soon found—when first psychologists could not agree with one another and then when novelists certainly could not either—that there is no one word, no simple catch-all simile. As for Bang, I find the phrases too many, and different.

After my mom died, I was seeking to describe what it looked *like* and what it felt *like*, but I could never define what it actually *was*. My book collection shows me the impossibility of such a definition. It shows me the intersections of science and fiction, fact and metaphor, and the tension between those two realms in finding something more truthful. It does not exist. It is ineffable, something too intense to be relegated to one phrase. It requires instead an endless search among infinite phrases, each one contributing something new, building and then deconstructing. I have learned the importance of reading is not to define, but to sense; not to answer, but to suggest; not to finish, but to begin. Every book is a beginning, a gateway: I take out my highlighters and see where I am taken.

Bibliography

- Agee, James. A Death in the Family. New York: Vintage, 1998.
- Bang, Mary Jo. Elegy. Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2007.
- Bowlby, John. Loss: Sadness and Depression. New York: Basic Books, 1980.
- Didion, Joan. The Year of Magical Thinking. New York: Knopf, 2005.
- Elison, Jennifer and Chris McGonigle. Liberating Losses: When Death Brings Relief.
Cambridge: Perseus, 2003.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close. New York: Houghton Mifflin,
2005.
- Freud, Sigmund. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.
Vol. 14. Ed. J. Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 2000.
- Friedman, Howard S. et al, eds. Foundations of Health Psychology. New York: Oxford
University Press, 2007.
- Gray, Peter. Psychology. 5th ed. New York: Worth, 2007.
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. On Death and Dying. New York: Springer, 1969.
- Gruen, Sara. Water for Elephants. New York: Algonquin, 2006.
- Gutkind, Lee, ed. In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005.
- Sedaris, David. Naked. New York: Back Bay, 1998.
- Eggers, Dave. A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius. New York: Vintage, 2000.
- Meyers, David G. Psychology. 7th ed. New York: Worth, 2007.
- Murakami, Haruki. Kafka on the Shore. New York: Vintage, 2005.
- Robison, Mary. Tell Me: 30 Stories. New York: Counterpoint, 2002.
- Sontag, Susan. I, etcetera. New York: Picador, 2002.

Stroebe, M. S. et al, eds. Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequences, Coping and Care.
Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001.