



Emily W. Blacker

## Ending the Endless: The Art of Ending Personal Essays

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### Introduction

In the final moments of the TV series *The Sopranos*, the camera cut to ten seconds of blackness (many viewers thought their cable had cut out), leaving the fate of the mobster protagonist ambiguous. On June 11, 2007, Bill Carter wrote of that ending in *The New York Times*:

The reaction to the stunning last shot of an empty screen has been a mix of outrage among some fans at being left sitting on the edges of their seats, where they had been perched for much of the show's last batch of episodes, and awe among others who have always regarded the show as the most ambitious and unconventional of television series.

What was remarkable about *The Soprano's* ending was that it honored the show's aesthetic and emotional ambition while defying the conventions of fictional storytelling. In that sense, there was something "essayistic" about it.

While a writer of fiction is generally expected to craft an ending that resolves the story's central conflict, essay writers must navigate without formal guidelines toward something more nebulous—an ending that consolidates the investigation and style of the piece so that the work resonates beyond the final page. How do such endings arise? In talking about his own essay writing in *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*, Phillip Lopate writes, "For me, endings may arise from a combination of fatigue and optimism" (63). "Fatigue" suggests that there is a point at which the writer has said all he/she needs, wants and is capable of saying on a particular topic. There is no prescription for this—it is something the writer must *feel*. But it is also a matter of gauging the average reader's tolerance. As Lopate says, "I usually

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start with an apprehension of scale that tells me certain subject matter only merits  $x$  number of pages (bow ties, say, should get two, not ten), and not go beyond that point, however much fun one is having” (63). This “apprehension of scale” comes partly through avid reading, but mostly by maintaining empathy for the person in receipt of one’s pages. Writing, after all, is about communicating, and personal essay writing is about creating a portal through which readers can engage with the writer’s digested experience. Since doing this well involves subtle interpersonal and aesthetic assessments, there is no singular solution, no such thing as perfect—hence Lopate’s need for “optimism”—though some endings certainly falter by falling flat, diverting or overstating.

When writing nonfiction, it can be particularly difficult to determine a stopping point that does not seem artificial or smack of, “And the moral of the story is....” Lopate writes, “A common mistake students make is to assume they need to tie up with a big bow the preceding matter via a grand statement of what it all means, or what the life lesson to be drawn from it is: too often the result is platitude” (59). This tendency is likely a function of our human wish to reach a clarifying conclusion. Readers *want* to know if the boy gets the girl, if the queen wins the war, if the mobster gets killed, etc. But real life rarely offers such clarity. In real life, the boy spends months trying to decode the girl’s text messages while the status of their relationship remains undefined. In real life, the queen employs complex diplomatic maneuvers that trouble the legitimacy of the war itself. And the mobster... no one knows what happens to him.

The possibilities for such nuanced endings are as vast and varied as essay writers themselves. Consider the range of approaches exemplified by the endings to Rebecca Solnit’s “The Longest War,” Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl” and Ariel Gore’s “The Part I Can’t Tell You.” In “The Longest War,” Solnit explores the systemic worldwide violence against women. The essay ends with a directive:

We have far more than 87,000 rapes in this country every year, but each of them is invariably portrayed as an isolated incident. We have dots so close they're splatters melting into a stain, but hardly anyone connects them, or names that stain. In India they

did. They said that this is a civil rights issue, it's a human rights issue, it's everyone's problem, it's not isolated, and it's never going to be acceptable again. It has to change. It's your job to change it, and mine, and ours. (36)

These lines both consolidate Solnit's message and call the reader to action, creating a clear charge that extends beyond the bounds of the essay and into the realm of politics and daily life. Kincaid also achieves consolidation and resonance with her ending, though in a wildly different manner. "Girl" portrays the restrictions of Kincaid's girlhood through her mother's breathless instructions, which are only occasionally punctuated by Kincaid's own young voice. It ends with this:

... this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread? (44)

The essay ends in midst of the mother's dictates and irritations, evoking the ongoing, relentless pressure that Kincaid experienced as a girl. As the mother's voice steamrolls over Kincaid's, the ending also communicates that the expectation that girls be passive, lady-like and clean is a form of silencing. Ariel Gore offers yet another approach, ending with lines that express doubt about the essay itself. "The Part I Can't Tell You" explores Gore's struggle to write about her stepfather's death due to the shame she feels in exposing herself and her family. The essay contains many stops and starts that continuously circle back to the opening line: "On the last night of the *Travelling Death and Resurrection Show*, after my final reading and performance, my Catholic priest stepfather lay down and died" (58). In the end, Gore repeats that line once more and then closes with, "Maybe that's all I should have told you. Maybe I should take the rest

back” (67). This ending not only highlights Gore’s anxieties about her essay, it also demonstrates how personal shame can thwart a nonfiction writer’s sense of ownership over her own truth. So, Solnit ends with a statement, Kincaid with dialogue and Gore with a question, but all their endings share a common effect: rather than resolve a conflict, the endings illuminate and deepen the concerns at the hearts of the essays.

Well-written personal essays portray and honor ambiguity and our constantly evolving minds, so an essay writer’s challenge is to craft an ending that is at once satisfactory and true to life’s disorderliness. Consider the essay “Leap” in which Brian Doyle, in a prayer-like fashion, names witnesses to 9/11 and describes the bodies they saw falling from the towers. Throughout, Doyle circles back to the image of two people who held hands as they jumped to their deaths, closing the piece with this: “Jennifer Brickhouse saw them holding hands, and Stuart DeHann saw them holding hands, and I hold on to that” (153). Without slackening the horror of 9/11 or the experience of those who witnessed it, Doyle offers a vision of hope and beauty. This ending is at once raw and fulfilling, honoring life’s dark complexity while offering wonder as a means to endure it.

When studying a number of personal essays with an eye toward their endings’ effects and the dynamic between the endings and the bodies of the essays, a few of unifying concepts emerge:

1. An essay ending “works” when it clarifies and amplifies the dominant theme or emotional exploration of the piece without hitting the reader over the head with it. In other words, an effective ending does not jar the reader into an entirely new direction nor is it condescendingly redundant, rather it shines essential light on the pathway the reader has just come down.
2. Since personal essays are essentially emotional and/or intellectual inquiries, effective endings are ones in which an emotional and/or intellectual shift comes clear. That does not mean that an inquiry must be resolved (again, resolution tends to ring false

in personal essays), but rather it should have evolved, hopefully, in the direction of greater understanding.

3. A strong ending illuminates or consolidates the function of the form of the essay (particularly in the case of lyric or nonlinear essays). This doesn't mean the writer can't shift tones or modes at the end, simply that the ending should contribute to the reader's understanding of the relationship between the form and subject of the essay.

In sum, a satisfying ending to a personal essay doesn't strive to solve, surprise, stun, or twist, but rather to shine a point of light on the writer's best attempt at truth.

### **Clarifying and Amplifying the Thematic/Emotional Exploration of the Essay**

Many classic essays have a quality of thoroughness, meaning they create a sense that the author has explored the central thematic or emotional concern with the greatest possible candor and from as many angles as his/her emotional and aesthetic sensibilities will allow. In "Goodbye to All That," for example, Joan Didion comprehensively examines her relationship with New York City and interrogates why she felt compelled to leave the city in her late 20s. In the end, Didion comes to this:

All I mean is that I was very young in New York, and that at some point the golden rhythm was broken, and I am not that young anymore. The last time I was in New York was in a cold January, and everyone was ill and tired. Many of the people I used to know there had moved to Dallas or had gone on Antabuse or had bought a farm in New Hampshire. We stayed ten days, and then we took an afternoon flight back to Los Angeles, and on the way home from the airport that night I could see the moon on the Pacific and smell jasmine all around and we both knew that there was no longer any

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point in keeping the apartment we still kept in New York. There were years when I called Los Angeles “the Coast,” but they seem a long time ago. (688)

Here, Didion quietly evokes the subtle shifts that brought about the end of her love affair with New York: growing older, craving beauty, time passing. The matter-of-fact quality of this ending (“All I mean is...”) indicates that rather than having reached a neat or dramatic answer to her inquiry, Didion has instead reached the maximum of her exploration. Lopate writes that an ending will work “just so long as the illusion is sustained that the narrative arc has been completed, which may be nothing more than the reader’s sense that the author has grappled as honestly, bravely, and variously as possible with the problems introduced” (59). [Note: Grappling “as honestly, bravely, and variously as possible” is a tall order and a subjective metric, and there are many wonderful essays that are not quite so rigorous, but that’s for another time.] Didion’s essay is about grappling with why she fell out of love with New York, and the ending works symbiotically with the self-investigative process that unfolds throughout the body of the essay. In other words, the reader’s investment in the emotional exploration of the essay is paid off with an ending that illuminates, clarifies and amplifies that exploration, without tying it into a falsely tidy bow.

Scott Russell Sanders’ “Under the Influence” works similarly in that it establishes a clear theme that gradually unfolds toward an ending that enhances what has come before. His essay begins:

My father drank. He drank as a gut-punched boxer gasps for breath, as a starving dog gobbles food—compulsively, secretly, in pain and trembling. I use the past tense not because he ever quit drinking but because he quit living. That is how the story ends for my father, age sixty-four, heart bursting, body cooling, slumped and forsaken on the linoleum of my brother’s trailer. The story continues for my brother, my sister, my mother, and me, and will continue as long as memory holds. (733)

This first paragraph lays the foundation of the essay’s central inquiry. Sanders begins with his subject (“My father drank”), and then shifts to the essay’s true emotional concern (“The story continues for my brother,

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my sister, my mother and me...”), so the reader understands within the first few lines that the central inquiry is not the father himself, but how the father’s drinking impacted the family. A few paragraphs later, Sanders sharpens this inquiry even further: “I am only trying to understand the corrosive mixture of helplessness, responsibility, and shame that I learned to feel as a son of an alcoholic” (734). Not all essays state their objectives so clearly, but all effective essays have an identifiable objective, an *inquiry*, at their core, and without this movement of the writer’s mind, a satisfying ending is not possible.

Sanders investigates his inquiry through multiple lenses (himself as a boy, imagined scenes between his mother and father, what he knows of his father as a young man, etc.). As he approaches the end, he comes to this:

...I played the stalwart and dutiful son who would hold the family together. If my father was unstable, I would be a rock. If he squandered money on drink, I would pinch every penny. If he wept when drunk—and only when drunk—I would not let myself weep at all. If he roared at the Little League umpire for calling my pitches balls, I would throw nothing but strikes. Watching him flounder and rage, I came to dread the loss of control. I would go through life without making anyone mad. I vowed never to put in my mouth or veins any chemical that would banish my everyday self. I would never make a scene, never lash out at the ones I loved, never hurt a soul. Through hard work, relentless work, I would achieve something dazzling--in the classroom, on the basketball court, in the science lab, in the pages of books—and my achievement would distract the world's eyes from his humiliation. I would become a worthy sacrifice, and the smoke of my burning would please God.

It is far easier to recognize these twists in my character than to undo them. Work has become an addiction for me, as drink was an addiction for my father. Knowing this, my daughter gave me a placard for the wall: Workaholic. The labor is endless and futile, for I

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can no more redeem myself through work than I could redeem my father. I still panic in the face of other people's anger, because his drunken temper was so terrible. I shrink from causing sadness or disappointment even to strangers, as though I were still concealing the family shame. I still notice every twitch of emotion in those faces around me, having learned as a child to read the weather in faces, and I blame myself for their least pang of unhappiness or anger. In certain moods I blame myself for everything. Guilt burns like acid in my veins. (743-744)

This is the kind of “honest,” “brave,” and “various” exploration that Lopate calls for and, at this point in the essay, Sanders seems to have met his stated objective: to understand what he “learned to feel as a son of an alcoholic.” This would be a solid ending, especially because that final note of burning guilt is the key emotion that dominates the essay. But Sanders goes on, transcending his own objective and opening the essay out into something much more consequential than self-knowledge alone:

I am moved to write these pages now because my own son, at the age of ten, is taking on himself the griefs of the world, and in particular the griefs of his father. He tells me that when I am gripped by sadness, he feels responsible; he feels there must be something he can do to spring me from depression, to fix my life. And that crushing sense of responsibility is exactly what I felt at the age of ten in the face of my father's drinking. My son wonders if I, too, am possessed. I write, therefore, to drag into the light what eats at me--the fear, the guilt, the shame--so that my own children may be spared. (744)

Sanders is not merely exploring his own experience, but trying to spare his own children from suffering. Here, Sanders elevates the essay into an imperative—a desperate attempt to halt a legacy of pain. This would also be a good ending, but Sanders takes it one beat further:



I still shy away from nightclubs, from bars, from parties where the solvent is alcohol. My friends puzzle over this, but it is no more peculiar than for a man to shy away from the lions' den after seeing his father torn apart. I took my own first drink at the age of twenty-one, half a glass of burgundy. I knew the odds of my becoming an alcoholic were four times higher than for the children of nonalcoholic fathers. So I sipped warily.

I still do—once a week, perhaps, a glass of wine, a can of beer, nothing stronger, nothing more. I listen for the turning of a key in my brain. (744)

With this ending, Sanders amplifies and widens the essay's concern even further. The final line is an echo of an earlier line— "I watch the amber liquid pour down his throat, the alcohol steal into his blood, the key turn in his brain" (742)—which emphasizes the dangerous legacy lurking in the genes of the Sanders family. This idea also recalls the notion of continuation that was introduced in the opening paragraph, thereby closing the clasp of the essay.

Most importantly, this ending troubles the version of self that Sanders has previously presented, and thus shines brighter light on the body of the essay. By and large, Sanders presents himself as a man in control—the essay is logically structured, the writing clean and precise, the voice forthright and reasoned—but with these final images of his own carefully measured drinking, Sanders reveals that he must exert great energy in order to stay in control of himself. This final gesture is profoundly intimate as it exposes that the self in the essay is constantly staving off another, more dangerous self. If Sanders had ended with one of the previously quoted sections, the reader would have been left with a sense a thorough and completed inquiry, but one that would have been tidy. With this ending, the reader is left with an on-going struggle, and therefore Sanders opens the essay out, so that it pulses beyond the final page.

### **Portraying Emotional/Intellectual Change**

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Personal essays appeal because they illuminate slices of the human experience, and since the human experience is one of constant change, essays that don't contain some form of evolution tend to ring false or be unsatisfying. The change may unfold gradually, as in Sanders' essay, or it may emerge in reaction to a final transformative event that awakens new perceptions in the essayist. The latter type of ending runs the risk of seeming contrived or abrupt as the change may seem overly dramatic or insufficiently processed à la bland college essays—*I saw things one way, something happened, and now I see things differently*. Done with awareness and subtlety, however, these endings can enrich and deepen the essay by casting what has come before in a newly nuanced light.

David Sedaris achieves this effect in his essay “Repeat After Me.” In the piece, Sedaris writes of visiting his sister, Lisa, who he portrays as quirky and floundering through life. Through most of the essay, Sedaris describes Lisa in a tone that is at once dry, teasing and sarcastic: “My sister’s the type that religiously watches fear segments of her local Eyewitness News broadcasts, retaining nothing but the headlines. She remembers that applesauce can kill you but forgets that in order to die, you have to inject it directly into your bloodstream” (444). In moments throughout the essay, Sedaris acknowledges with a wink that using his family members’ foibles as fodder for his writing might be problematic:

In my mind, I’m like a friendly junkman, building things from the little pieces of scraps I find here and there, but my family’s started to see things differently. Their personal lives are the so-called pieces of scrap I so casually pick up, and they’re sick of it. Our conversations now start with the words, ‘You have to swear you will never repeat this.’ I always promise, but it’s generally understood that my word is no better than Henry’s.  
(446)

Henry is Lisa’s mimicking parrot, who Sedaris sarcastically describes as her “emotional cheerleader” (448), so the comparison of his word to Henry’s is a flippant admission of the emptiness of Sedaris’ promises. By simultaneously acknowledging and shrugging off the consequences of this emptiness, Sedaris

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communicates that the concern of the essay is a casual one—to humorously explore how his work makes his family uncomfortable.

In the end, however, Sedaris' inquiry transforms into something much more serious as he finally allows the full weight of responsibility to bear down on him. In the final pages, Sedaris describes a scene in which his sister tells him a troubling story from her life and then explodes into tears. Instead of comforting her, he reaches for his notebook, at which point she asks him to swear never to repeat the story. Sedaris writes:

In the movie version of our lives, I would have turned to offer her comfort, reminding her, convincing her, that the action she'd described had been kind and just. Because it was. She's incapable of acting otherwise.

In the real version of our lives, my immediate goal was simply to change her mind. "Oh, come on," I said. "The story's really funny, and, I mean, it's not like you're going to do anything with it."

Your life, your privacy, your bottomless sorrow—it's not like you're going to do anything with it. Is this the brother I always was or the brother I have become?

(450-451)

This passage marks a significant shift in tone as Sedaris realizes that the person he wishes he were ("In the movie version of our lives...") is not the person he is ("In the real version of our lives..."). In acknowledging the coldness of his response and then questioning his behavior as a brother, he moves from wryness to earnest self-reflection. Here as he approaches the end, Sedaris begins steering the essay into deep waters with a voice that has emerged from beneath protective comedic layers.

He then goes further, closing the essay by imagining possible endings for the movie-version of his book:

Dusk. The camera pans to an unremarkable suburban street, moving in on a

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parked four-door automobile where a small, evil man turns to his sobbing sister, saying, “What if I use the story but say that it happened to a friend?”

But maybe that's not the end. Maybe before the credits roll, we see this same man getting out of bed in the middle of the night, walking past his sister's bedroom and downstairs into the kitchen. A switch is thrown, and we notice, in the far corner of the room, a large standing birdcage covered with a tablecloth. He approaches it carefully and removes the cover, waking a blue-fronted Amazon parrot, its eyes glowing red in the sudden light. Through everything that's come before this moment, we understand that the man has something important to say. From his own mouth the words are meaningless, so he pulls up a chair. The clock reads 3:00 A.M., then 4:00, then 5:00, as he sits before the brilliant bird repeating slowly and clearly the words, “Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me” (451).

This ending transforms what appeared to be a lighthearted, somewhat snarky essay about Sedaris' awkward relationship with his quirky sister into one about his personal limits, shame and wish for redemption. The final words (“Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me”) suggest that Sedaris feels he must atone for his sins as a writer. Sedaris invites the reader who likely has just enjoyed his humor to consider the human cost of that pleasure. Not only has Sedaris hurt his loved ones, he has also lost his family's trust in his words (“From his own mouth the words are meaningless”), which is a hefty sacrifice for a writer.

It is also significant that in this scene, Sedaris imagines himself as a 3<sup>rd</sup> person character attempting to place his plea into the mouth of a parrot. Imagining is an effective ending strategy for an essay about limitations because it reveals the author's true desires without diverting into a discordant persona. Michael W. Cox employs this strategy in his essay “Visitor,” in which he recounts his discovery of a teenage boy, Jody, who his father kept hidden in the family basement. Cox never states it directly, but it becomes clear as the essay progresses that Cox's father was a serial pedophile and that his relationship with Jody was

sexual. Cox only implies this truth by sketching the story around it, evoking the limitation created by his memories and his father's denials, a limitation that exacerbates the horror pulsing at the heart of the essay. Cox closes the piece by imagining what would have happened if his father had one day found Jody gone:

Upstairs the kids'd be asleep, he'd think, his wife watching TV—a commercial'd be on, the music drifting out the window to where he'd be standing before the gaping hole of the trash can. He'd let the bag drop, loudly, into the can, announcing to the neighbors that all he was doing was taking out the garbage. And then he'd look around, out there in the night, and walk quietly across the planks into the basement. Hey, he'd call out to the small room there in back. But there'd be nothing there but darkness. (147)

Through this imagined scene, Cox reveals a wish that is too painful to state directly—that his father's victims had escaped and that his father had confronted the darkness he created. With this ending, Cox at once removes himself from the scene and reveals his deepest truth via fantasy. Sedaris' distancing maneuver also provides the most intimate view of his interiority as it demonstrates that he can only access sincere emotion via proxy or through a filter. In the end, the reader finally understands that the real purpose of Sedaris' humor is self-protection and that his deepest wish is to be vulnerable enough to lay down his armor and ask sincerely for forgiveness.

### **Illuminating and Consolidating the Function of Form**

In his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classic Era to the Present*, Lopate writes, "Unlike the formal essay, [the personal essay] depends less on airtight reasoning than on style and personality" (xxiv). Endings, then, ought to shine a light on both bedrocks: "style" and "personality." The previous sections looked at how endings can illuminate/deepen the writer's persona. This section will focus on style, or more specifically, form. In some cases, the form of an essay seems to emerge around a writer's personality, but in other cases, the form is the driver of the essay. In nonlinear and lyric essays,

form tends to be primary. In “A Case Against Courage in Creative Nonfiction,” which appeared in the October-November 2011 edition of *The Writer’s Chronicle*, Brenda Miller poses that creative nonfiction writing is a matter of transforming experience into artifact and that many writers (in her view, the most interesting writers) prioritize the creation of artifact over the precise relay of experience. She explains:

When creative nonfiction writers choose to write in nonlinear forms... they magnify the fact that they are manipulating experience for the sake of art. These writers immediately signal to the reader that the intent is not necessarily to convey information or fact, or to bravely illuminate dark areas of one's life, but to create the truth of literature, of metaphor--a truth that is not always so direct.

When the writer’s form (or his/her artistry) is central to the work, an effective ending will sharpen “the truth of literature, of metaphor” that the writer has been seeking and building throughout the essay.

Eula Biss’ nonlinear essay “The Pain Scale” explores the concept of pain in sections numbered 0-10, reflecting the scale that is commonly used to assess patients’ discomfort. Woven throughout are meditations on mathematics, religion, Dante’s circles of hell, wind, and the challenges of measurement. Biss reveals that doctors have been unable to identify the cause of her own physical pain and she only cursorily addresses the specifics of it, so unlike Sanders’ and Sedaris’ essays, “The Pain Scale’s” primary interrogation is not the writer’s personal experience (though that is an aspect of the essay), but a universal linguistic and experiential problem: how to communicate the subjective experience of pain. Biss employs associative fragments to explore and reflect this complex problem and the effect is of a mind attempting to make sense of a slippery concept. To illustrate, the essay begins:

0 ----->No Pain

The concept of Christ is considerably older than the concept of zero. Both are problematic—both have their fallacies and their immaculate conceptions. But the problem of zero troubles me significantly more than the problem of Christ.

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I am sitting in the exam room of a hospital entertaining the idea that absolutely no pain is not possible. Despite the commercials, I suspect that pain cannot be eliminated. And this may be the fallacy on which we have based all our calculations and all our excesses. All our sins are for zero.

Zero is not a number. Or at least, it does not behave like a number. It does not add, subtract, or multiply like other numbers. Zero is a number in the way that Christ was a man.

Aristotle, for one, did not believe in Zero.

If no pain is possible, then, another question—is no pain desirable? Does the absence of pain equal the absence of everything? (28)

The untraditional form of this essay—fragmented ponderings contained within a finite scale—calls for an ending that will consolidate Biss' inquiry and her aesthetic approach. In "A Case Against Courage in Creative Nonfiction," Brenda Miller writes that when we prioritize form, "We are hammering out parallel plot lines, not plumbing the depths of our souls, but as a collateral to that technical work the soul does indeed get tapped and gushes forth." In the end, Biss' "soul" "gushes forth" as the function of the form becomes clear (the "truth of metaphor" revealed). The fragmentation and white space reveal the failure of language or theory to accurately describe pain, and by extension, suffering. The restricted object (the 0-10 essay) mirrors Biss' entrapment in her subjective experience of pain. Intellect and language may rotate in both prisons, but they cannot free her from them.

The sole certainty in this essay is rising intensity. By using the architecture of a number line, Biss evokes the anxiety of physical pain—the inevitable rise of the numbers implies that no matter how awful current pain may be, worse is possible. The only theoretical comfort it that the number line is finite, ending at 10. Biss ponders "10," the maximization of pain:

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I would like to believe that there is an upper limit to pain. That there is a maximum intensity nerves can register.

There is no tenth circle in Dante's Hell. (41)

The space (the silence) between those two fragments suggests that, in fact, pain may be limitless. So, the top of the pain scale (and the top of the essay) does not, in fact, mark the limit of pain, but the limit of what a person can endure.

This creates a dilemma for the essay's ending. Is it "okay" to leave the reader at the highest, most awful point in the essay's exploration? Traditional wisdom says that a writer should bring the reader down from the climax, but the structure of this essay dictates an ending at the apex "10." With traditional essays such as Sanders' "Under the Influence," an ending at climax would feel incongruous with the writer's otherwise exhaustive gathering and arranging of loose ends. Lyric and nonlinear essays, however, tend to allow for more breathless endings, so long as those endings are harmonious with the form and objective that the writer establishes. Consider "Collective Nouns for Humans in the Wild," in which Kathy Fish establishes a pattern of imagining symbolically resonant collective nouns: "A group of grandmothers is a *tapestry*. A group of toddlers, a *jubilance* (see also: a *bewailing*). A group of librarians is an *enlightenment*." As the piece progresses, the emotional and socio-political intensity of these statements increases, culminating finally in the line, "A group of schoolchildren is a *target*." By leaving the piece hanging at this precipice, Fish forces the reader to confront the true, ongoing horror of school shootings in America. An added line of resolution would have diluted the effectiveness of the inclined structure and provided false relief.

Biss approaches the ending to her inclined essay this way:

...reading statements collected by the American Pain Foundation, I am alarmed by the number of references to suicide.



“. . . constant muscle aches, spasms, sleeplessness, pain, can't focus . . . must be depression . . . two suicide attempts later, electroshock therapy and locked-down wards. . . .”

The description of hurricane force winds on the Beaufort scale is simply, “devastation occurs.” (41-42)

These lines evoke a sudden fall (into suicide, devastation and zero) after the relentless rising. So, in a sense, Biss does bring the reader down from the climax, though not by conjuring relief (which would be a falsehood), but by writing of what happens to the body when it can no longer endure: black out, death. The message is that the only end to pain is the ruination of the object of that pain. Biss then extends that message with one final line: “Bringing us, of course, back to zero” (42). This line points back to the beginning of the essay, to ‘0,’ interestingly, to a place of painlessness. But at this point in the essay, it is clear that painlessness is also an undesirable state. Biss implies that the absence of pain and unendurable pain are opposite ends of the same coin, both equally untenable because they mean obliteration of one’s humanness. Returning to the beginning also means returning to the starting point of Biss’ inquiry, to the origin of the ‘artifact’ before us. The final line thus redraws the form of the essay from a rising number line into a circle, implying that Biss’ endeavor to understand the nature of pain is Sisyphean. With this gesture, Biss at once illuminates the essay’s inquiry and the function of its aesthetic: both evoke confinement as she comes up against her limits as a writer and as a human being locked inside a suffering body.

### **An Ending to This Essay on Endings**

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While there is no singular formula for endings, writers can interrogate their work to assess an ending's effectiveness by asking these essential questions: *How does this ending serve what the essay has been trying to say and discover all along?* And, *Does the exploration in the body of this essay build or open toward an ending like this?* Those who came to the defense of *The Sopranos* ending argued that its irresolution was congruous with the overall style and content of the series-- that it highlighted the moral and existential ambiguity that ran throughout the narrative. In other words, it was the *right* ending for *that* show. Whether it was *the* right ending is debatable, but it is fair to say, given the conversations it inspired, that it was *a* right ending. Solnit, Kincaid, Doyle, Didion, Sanders, Sedaris, Cox, Biss and Fish all find *a* right ending for their particular essays. Would other satisfying endings have been possible? Of course. But these endings work because they clarify and amplify the dominant concerns of the essays, indicate emotional/intellectual evolution, and illuminate the function of form, resulting in closures that feel at once authentic and harmonious with the writers' inquiries and aesthetics.

But the most effective endings don't only meet these criteria, they also resonate beyond the essay itself, making them one of the most memorable features of the work. It is hard to think of Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman," for example, without remembering the final punishing image of her aunt's ghost threatening to pull Kingston into the well in which the aunt drowned herself: "The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute" (16). And then there is the quiet image of death at the end of Virginia Woolf's "The Death of the Moth": "The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am" (267). And the deliciously indulgent and wry conclusion to William Hazlitt's "On the Pleasure of Hating": "...have I not reason to hate and to despise myself? Indeed I do; and chiefly for not having hated and despised the world enough" (198). These, like all great endings, are effective and memorable because they communicate

consequential ideas. As they pluck universal chords—legacy, death, indulgence—they vibrate and make cracks in the seams of human experience, letting light through.

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