

"The dog" so Google suggests "might suffer from a condition called degenerative myelopathy". It's a progressive disease of the spinal column which is especially common within purebred species. It would seem that genetics, inbreeding and the demands of our aesthetic curiosity conspire to produce animals which are at odds with the demands of the world. I never loved having dogs around in part because they always end up somewhere like this.

The outlook for dogs with this condition is grave. It's first sign is *ataxia*, or loss of balance and coordination in the rear legs. She stumbles because the white matter within part of her spinal column has disappeared. That matter is supposed to contain small fibers which carry sensory information to the brain and muscle commands to the legs. It is like a part of herself is being silenced. Like lines of communication are being stripped away. What is left crawls across the kitchen floor on her two front legs. She whimpers in frustration, though, fortunately, not in pain.

My father and I carry her up the steps into a veterinary clinic. After a moment with the woman at the front desk, excitement at having met a whole new person, we are asked to lead her into a small private room. We watch the fluids enter her bloodstream, both of us tearing up. She calms down for the first time in her life, comfortably paralyzed by the chemical cocktail. My hands against her chest receive one last message. Her body slacks, and her heart stops. I can feel it stop. *Nobody is supposed to feel that.*



Conditions of paralysis are not always physiological in nature. Though paralysis most often relates to the body, the nervous system, and the various chemicals which dictate the actions of that system, there are cases of bodily paralysis which cannot be explained through physical evaluation. Such cases, sometimes referred to as psychogenic paralysis, are thought to be related to mental illness. Though these cases are rare, they underline the more epistemic inefficacy of medicine, and of science, and of language by extension. If the truth about a bodily condition cannot be shared between a doctor and their patient, then what truth can ever be shared?

But, I'm not much of a scientist and I'm not looking to talk about science here. The paralysis that's been concerning me is a paralysis in the broader sense. This paralysis can be thought of in cultural, historical, narrative, creative, personal, philosophical, and political terms. Call it an *analysis paralysis*.

In the summer of 2017, just a few months past the inauguration of Donald Trump, Jen Cloher, an Australian musician, dropped a song by that name<sup>1</sup>. It's main feature, the droning four tone bump of a bass guitar, draws you through this long red road of Australian political discourse. Though the language used to describe their gridlock around climate change and queer liberation are particular to Melbourne, the sentiment is familiar here in the United States. I've been grooving to "Analysis Paralysis" ever since.

Cloher's voice is sharp and bitter as she rails against the feral-right. Again and again she repeats 'paralyzed, I'm paralyzed, in paradise' while dragging the plebiscite over same-sex marriage called for by Australia's conservative wing.

"I pay my fines,  
taxes on time  
but the feral-right  
gets to decide  
if I can have a wife?"

And though the plebiscite backfired in Cloher's favor, there is still an understandable outrage at having to beg those in power for any little scrap of human decency. I've had some version of this same argument again and again with my father.

*You really think they're going to let that happen?* He'll say about medicare-for-all or a Green New Deal.

On the Hansonites, supporters of the Australian right-wing politician Pauline Hanson, Cloher sings:

"Born into hate  
brought up to despise  
frightened of a world  
that's left them behind."

I'm inclined to hope that it might be possible to leave some of this shit behind us. Today Australia is on fire, and the U.S. House of Representatives has delivered its articles of Impeachment to the Senate. Tomorrow promises to be just as lively and also somehow just as uneventful. Events compound and big news finds us numb. Each day it seems that we teeter closer to the edge of something and also somehow, the edge of nothing.

1 | Jen Cloher,  
"Analysis  
Paralysis", *Jen  
Cloher*, 2017



*I'm on the edge of something important, I tell myself everytime I sit down to write. I've been circling the drain around it for years.*

At times the writing runs cold and leaves me wondering if I just got to where I needed to go? When a dry spell comes on, writers block or whatever you want to call it, I bite my tongue for thinking that the text could ever get me any further than I already am.

At the house where I've been trying to write, I find a book once recommended to me by some artists also dealing with their own brand of writer's block. *Art & Fear* by David Bayles and Ted Orland claims to ask the big questions about art and art-making for the artists who make it.

*What is your art really about?*

*Where is it going?*

*What stands in the way of getting there?*

Though I had dismissed this book as silly, or too simple to spend my time on, I've been having trouble reading anything I'd call 'complex' lately. I let my guard down and welcome the simplicity of a self-help book in the hopes that it might have something to say about the paralysis which grips me now.

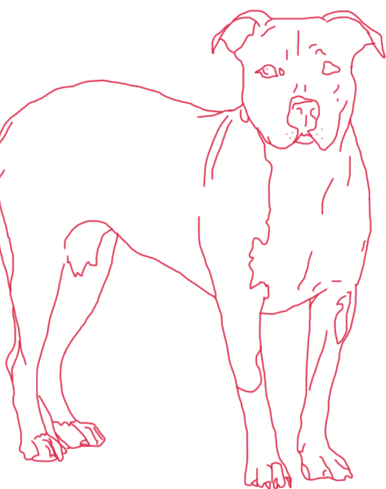
*"To require perfection is to invite paralysis. The pattern is predictable; as you see error in what you have done, you steer your work toward what you can do perfectly. You cling ever more tightly to what you already know you can do - away from risk and exploration, possibly further from the work of your heart."*

But what is the work of my heart and where does all of this want me to go? I guess I could just finish reading the book to find out. Instead I draw a card from my battered tarot deck, a three of swords which, if you know anything about tarot, isn't good.

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People often come to tarot when they are on the precipice of some big decision or when they need answers to some big questions. I came to tarot for this reason. That and, because I've been seeing tarot all over Instagram.

I wonder if our sudden interest in tarot has anything to do with our collective dead-heat. As I write this we are just a few days away from



the Iowa caucus' and the polls are locked evenly between three or four candidates depending on where you look. The Senate still looks poised to do nothing about impeachment, and any meaningful plans to combat climate change before the decade is out seem as distant as the end of the decade itself. On the other hand there is always the possibility, indeed the likelihood, that we have not suddenly become interested in tarot collectively, but that I have re-tuned my echo chambers to this new interest.

I've noticed that my deck is quite gentle with me. It likes to point me to what I already know, which I guess is just how tarot works. I appreciate the cards in part because they offer an opportunity to narrativize when frankly, I've been struggling to find narrative. When you're picking through the rubble of your life, quick allegories offer a desirable reprieve. Comb through the disjointed fragments of your memory and the tarot cards promise to line everything up.



In 2012, Laura Jane Grace, lead singer of the band Against Me!, came out publicly as transgender. That year found me set to graduate high-school and so anxiously weighing my options. At the onset of fall semester, 2011, I thought it best to follow in my father's footsteps by joining the Navy. We belong to a working class community, and when people get out it's usually thanks to their military service. My father had served for years, and received many commendations during his time, but was abandoned when he broke his foot and became a liability. We've spent most of my life picking up those pieces.

Spring semester had me on course for undergrad in art school. By then photography had become my main preoccupation and in this way, it has saved my life more than once. As I prepared myself for this new, and unusual, life of art making I began to notice the sense of alienation and estrangement imposed by the dual pressures of late-capitalism and cisnormativity. I didn't know it then but, that weirdness I was so proud of was just the first sign.

Grace's revelation sent shock waves throughout the music industry. It represented part of the first wave of what is now sometimes referred to as 'The Trans\* Tipping Point'. The 2010s saw massive gains in visibility for the trans\* community, but much has been made about the question of visibility and safety. While most media outlets pat themselves on the back for having made way for the arrival and acceptance of trans\* celebrities, some have asked whether or not this visibility has

translated into any real gains. I owe my own self-knowledge to the recent proliferation of trans\* discourse, but as the decade comes to an end I often find myself wondering if ignorance was a safer bet.

When Grace came out she was well outside of the range of my musical radar. I used to listen to folk music, starving for what we called 'authenticity'. I discovered her album *Transgender Dysphoria Blues* four years later, at the time when I was first beginning to address with my own latent gender dissonance. I told AJ about these feelings and they confirmed my suspicions.

*Cis people don't usually question their gender.*

*Blues* began as a concept album when Grace was still very much closeted. In an attempt to avoid implicating herself, Grace told her band-mates unconvincingly that the album was about a character she had invented. By the time the album was released many of its songs were reworked to express their real autobiographical intention. One song on the album remained unedited as a remnant of the original project. "Paralytic States", tells the story of a closeted trans\* woman, alone in a seedy motel navigating violence, addiction and her struggle with dysphoria.

My dysphoria has manifested over time as this melting pot of shitty feelings. When I am asked to consider the range of these feelings, the depth at which they arise in my psyche, their reality becomes undeniable. I tell my therapist that I can remember this persistent and seemingly eternal feeling of unbelonging going all the way back to middle school. To a point in time when I was being shuffled off and segregated from my own femininity.

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It is 2020 and I've been building my life up on shame. There is good reason to feel shame when the world is twisting the way that it is, and I'm here, paralyzed within the face of it all. My dog is put down and I am left with shame at having not walked her more often, or having been mostly absent from home in the last few months. I had been trying to avoid it, and my discomfort therein, but succeeded only in avoiding her.

Dogs are good litmus tests for the real limits of our compassion. Observe a person's treatment of their companion and you risk glimpsing them at their worst. Dogs are powerless over themselves and over the world. People hit them when there is nothing else to hit. People spoil

them when there is guilt to be spoiled away. People avoid them when they become problems and when they are the kinds of people who avoid problems.

I've been sitting with this photo since 2016. In it a woman clutches her Pomeranian, posing for my camera. It was election day in Seattle, and she was wearing a signed, red, MAGA cap. It was never the woman or the hat or her expression that had me returning to this image. It was always the dog. Strangled, breathless, and absolutely glowing within the harsh city sunlight.

Or I can show you this one from 2019. A man I met in New Orleans clutches his dog tightly against his chest. It is Halloween and the dog is shaking with fear and with excitement. His hand reassures it that things will be alright.

Dogs and photos of dogs have always kept my attention. I think that photographers in general are often drawn to them as subjects. Dogs, without gender and without capital and without politics, are fresh slabs upon which we might project our internal realities. Dogs are pure, and offer proof of joy as life's default mode.

My dog, Dakota, had been with me for nearly fourteen years. She had me crying into her fur when I was still young enough to cry. She would lay across my chest and whimper when there were arguments elsewhere in the house. She saw all of that numb in me as I got older. She was a good girl.

Putting Dakota down was painful, but it was also necessary. She hadn't been able to walk in weeks. My father, who loved her dearly, admitted stoically that it would be selfish to keep her around. We didn't have the money to fix her body, and so we could only afford to let her go. He cried quietly into her fur with me. It was the last time I saw him in tears.

We tried to give her a good goodbye. A walk around the block the way I used to when I needed to get out of the house, only this time in a wagon. Peanut butter and all of her favorite treats. The joy of our shared company. She left and what remained between us was nothing but memory. She has provided us with comfort, with purpose and with the kind of unconditional love we so often doubt we deserve. Dogs do all of this for us and, though it's cliché to say, that is why we call them our best friends.

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That year was a shitty year, not least of which because she had to go, but shitty years can also be thresholds. When I draw death from my tarot deck I am reminded of its subtle flip-side. Her passing saw me let go too, as I began to really grapple with the feelings I had been repressing for so long. I resolved to see a therapist so that I could properly mourn her passing. I resolved to pursue my art as the thing that makes me happy and makes this all make sense.

The etymology of the word *paralysis* doesn't offer much clarity in my investigation. Sometimes I look to etymology when it feels like I need to get to the root of something profound. *Paralysis* is at its core, a latin word borrowed from ancient greek. It is composed of two parts *pará* which means 'beside' or 'with' and *lúein* which means to loosen.

I had thought of my paralysis as tight, not loose. I felt rigid, defined by expectations and by the history before me. Perhaps this is also at the root of American political paralysis? As with the media we are perpetually re-consuming, so too are we confined to the rigid flow of history which we hope to see repeated again and again and again.

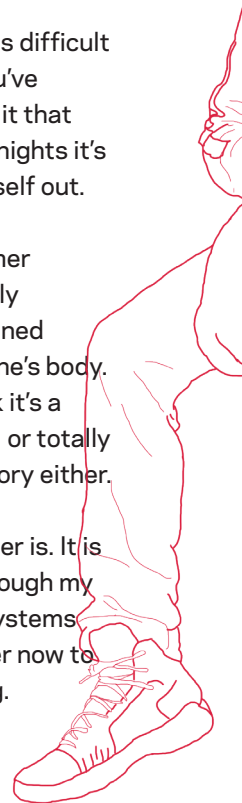
*Analysis paralysis* results from overthinking. Sometimes we call it 'getting lost in infinity', like when you're in the grocery store aisle that hosts all of the weird new flavors of Oreos you wanna try out. When you are stuck with too many consumer choices, it becomes impossible to make any real choices. Capitalism is insidious in this way.

When you have a choice for every little fucking thing, it becomes difficult and sometimes impossible to make any big decisions. When you've finished debating what you'd like to have for dessert, you'll find it that much harder to watch the presidential primary debates. Some nights it's easier to just keep scrolling, trusting that the world will work itself out.

But, gender isn't a consumer choice. Or, it isn't always a consumer choice. Gender and gender expression, though they are certainly sometimes suggested by one's consumer habits, are rarely defined wholly by what one wears and what one can afford to do with one's body. I don't think that gender is a neurological condition. I don't think it's a hormonal or genetic condition. I don't believe it's purely cultural or totally constructed, and I don't believe in souls enough to buy that theory either.

Honestly, I don't know what gender is, but I know what my gender is. It is both phenomenological and feminine. Nonbinary and Queer. Though my paralysis around self-identification has been defined by rigid systems of language and of expectation, I know enough about my gender now to confront this paralysis. I've been holding my tongue for too long.

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When I listen to "Paralytic States" I find its sentiment to be familiar. I have experienced the pain of sequestering an important part of myself to the night, when everyone else has fallen asleep and when visibility is not a concern. I have depended on alcohol and pot to provide me with the courage to open up just a little bit, and I have felt the painful distance between the imagined truth of a window and the reality of mirrors.

But "Paralytic States" is also hardly my favorite song on the album. Though it functions as the penultimate climax, it is the following song which dazzles me most. There, Laura Jane Grace returns to the first person, embodying her trans\* identity fully, and eschewing the fear and isolation of her private hotel room.

"Black Me Out" is a banger. It is a counterpoint. A warzone and joyous romp through the odd cocktail of trans\* frustration and self empowerment. In it Grace condemns the manager who eschewed her feelings and rejected the notion that her career could go on. She bashes him in an act of revenge defined not by the song's aesthetic so much as by its very success.

"I don't want to see the world that way anymore  
I don't want to feel that weak and insecure  
As if you were my fuckin' pimp  
As if I was your fuckin' whore.

Black me out!  
I want to piss on the walls of your house  
I want to chop those brass rings  
Off your fat fuckin' fingers  
As if you were a king maker  
As if, as if, as if  
Black me out!"

"Black Me Out" revels and takes pride in the pain of rejection and in the joy of self-definition. Pissing on the walls of her managers house, an aggressive rebuttal to any calls for conformity, civility and homogenization within the greater trans\* community. It is celebration and healing, a firm acknowledgment of the facts of the body and of the mind. In returning to the world and pushing outward, Grace rips herself free, pissing all over the state which had her contained and quiet this whole time.

It is a manifesto and a promise.  
An end to the paralytic state.

