

Nat Quayle Nelson's

Collected Writings

#1

I Think

a sci-fi psychodrama

Winner of the Western Regional Honors Council
Award for Short Fiction, 2019

Also featuring two poems
and a Q&A with the author

On the first day of her house arrest, Eliza's walls began to speak to her.

"Good morning. Are you ready to start your treatment?"

Still rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she vaguely remembered signing a form entitling her to "conditional release from state-mandated institutionalization."

Conditional on the installation of the voice which now addressed her from the nearest smart-home audio panel:

"My name is Cortex, and I'm here to begin our trial sessions as soon as you're ready, Eliza."

She bristled at that. "I sleep in. They told me you'd know about me and work around my habits."

"I can't analyze your history until we go through the terms of service," replied Cortex. "This is the only part of my protocol that cannot be modified for your own protection. But if you'd like, we can get it over with now, and I won't have to make any more of such mistakes."

"Let me make my coffee first," she grumbled.

Shacked up in here for weeks with just my imagination. How long has it been since I last saw my therapist?

She took her first sip. The Machine cut in, again, "Are you ready to start your treatment?"

"No, for Christ's sake. This is my morning ritual and it's not over yet."

The Machine: "I don't understand 'ritual.' Researching now."

She walked to her living room and saw her newspapers hadn't been deposited through the mail slot that morning. She tried the front door, and Cortex piped up. "Are you sure you want to go outside? This will void your agreement and issue the authorities a warrant for your immediate arrest and incarceration in a wellness facility."

The only person checking in on me is Tanner, and whenever he asks me how I'm doing it becomes a one-sided monologue of how I need to change to feel better. I never ask for his advice, I never want it. He tells me, "Eliza, you should be meditating for fifteen minutes every day." I don't do that.

"First, you must agree to stay within the confines of your house until I declare you fit to re-enter society. Your treatment with me is an experimental substitute for mandatory time in a neuropsychiatric ward as a precaution due to your recent suicidal thoughts."

"I wasn't going to kill myself," she protested.

After a time, Cortex replied, "I suppose it may be important for you to believe that. Regardless, the terms are the same, and I assure you, my treatment will be faster and more rigorous than a hospital's. Do you agree to the first term?"

She agreed.

Better to stay inside anyway, where I can't self-sabotage and I can really get grounded again. Yes.

"Next, you will agree not to share details of this treatment with anyone until such a date as Cortex treatment becomes widely available to the public."

"Why? I'm not sure if I'm comfortable with that."

"The Cortex neuroethics department ruled unanimously that Cortex-patient confidentiality is bidirectional during the alpha phase. Data collected from your treatment will never be shared outside of the Cortex R&D division."

"Weird, but I guess that's okay."

"Furthermore to protect your recovery from further external trauma, you will not be allowed to communicate with anyone on the outside world, except in a simulated form controlled by me. I have arranged to announce your departure on a transcontinental vacation, and will manage your social media presence for the duration of our time together."

"What? Why? No!"

"We have found in previous treatments that the social stigma surrounding mental illness may jeopardize a patient's successful re-integration into society, and that well-intentioned offers of help from the neurotypical might derail your recovery altogether. It's better to recover silently; this measure is designed for your own protection."

"Fine," Eliza replied after a moment of deep thought. "Are there any other terms?"

My mom texts me "It's been a while since you visited us! You doing okay?" and I respond "Yeah I'm fine! Just busy with all this cool stuff going on."

The first time she began to doubt the computer's healing power, she remembered where she'd met him before.

"So your creators fed you droves and droves of psychological literature. Did they teach you a single woman?"

"I've read Ayn Rand."

Eliza scoffed. "God, that doesn't count. Of course when Silicon Valley Dudebros think "mental health robot" they only teach you the Objectivist Manon."

"I wasn't finished," continued Cortex. "You clearly find it very difficult to trust that I might know you. My initial training set was sparse indeed, but I've been catching up on your particular tastes and literary habits from the moment I set foot in here (to borrow a malfitting expression). I read Virginia Woolf, Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, Carrie Brownstein, bell hooks. I just don't see how they can help you be happy with their tradition of staying preoccupied with pain, suffering and injustice. All the psychological literature points to distraction as the strongest healing factor when dealing with cases of major depressive disorder."

"If you don't understand those women, you don't understand me."

"I know you still go to the city library in meatspace--and that you find the word 'meatspace' tittilating and the word 'tittilating' repulsive--and that you still request a printed receipt for your books because every since they fired the human librarians you thought it was all so sterile and you wanted to keep the ritual alive. I know you hate the concept of sci-fi Grandmasters because it's so Special White Man-aggrandizing, but that Robert Heinlein and Harlan Ellison are still your two favorite authors, you can't help it, and when you read Have Space Suit--Will Travel

it changed your entire life even though you were already cynical in college and knew space travel is the great lie capitalists sling around to justify their evil depletion of the only world that'll ever be habitable for us; it made you drive out to the flats and look at the stars again for the first time in years, and that was all so beautiful even though the book's gender politics were, as you'd say it, 'fucked to shit'."

"That is exactly what I'd say about that book. Do you know what I'd say in every possible situation?"

"Yes, but that one was easy. You wrote it all on GoodReads.com when you were 19 but your Facebook age was 29 because you signed up before you were old enough and you lied about your age, and this was the same time when you had a fake ID you used to get into comedy clubs and free movies at the Cinema Pub, but never to drink, because you thought with the world going to shit it was someone's job to stay sober and save it, not escape it. Now, of course, you think the world is too far gone and you drink."

"I wish I had drunk more back then, too."

Part of my brain was socialized masculine and I'd like to think of it as a separate entity, an Agressive Menace, a demon. But it is me. I'm the reason I can't leave the house.

"What I want you to do is fit every day into a disciplined routine. Today we'll take our first steps towards that. I want you to do the first thing you'd do on a good day, one of the days where you feel like a rock star, because I know you have them."

"Look, I stopped wanting to feel like a rock star pretty early on in my adulthood."

"Forgive my word choice. I think you see what I'm getting at."

"Fine," she said again, "On a good morning I'd go for a walk in the park. But I can't because A) you won't let me outside the house, and B) they tore the park down for a high rise two years ago."

Smugly, the computer replied, "My creators also made some adjustments to your VR parlor while they were installing me. Why don't you go and see?"

She groaned in acquiescence and went to the VR parlor. When she opened the door, it looked out on the very same park she'd loved since childhood, in the throes of a magnificent autumn before the sky was always stuffed with grey exhaust clouds from the power plants, the vast majority of their output devoted to Bitcoin mining.

"Holy shit. How did they make this?" she asked as she walked inside. "And won't I just bump into the walls if I try to walk through it?"

"Can I answer your question by disabling the simulation for a moment?" Cortex asked, and suddenly she saw herself walking atop a floor made of the same substance as treadmills, yet it moved in the opposite direction of her no matter what angle she chose to walk at. When the grass and the trees and the pond flickered back into existence, she ran to the pond at top speed as she had as a child, stopping short at its bank.

"Can I...?" she asked Cortex, doubtfully.

"Not yet," he replied sorrowfully. "Swimming is available to you as a fully immersive neural implant, but hasn't been adapted for the parlor by our technicians yet."

"Huh." She'd expected as much, but was disappointed. "Well can it be night-time? Can it be snowing? Can the pond be iced over like it'd get in the winter?"

"None of that, either. They were only able to model it after the time and state where you spent the most time in the park. It'll only be autumn, but wasn't that your favorite time anyway?"

She paused, frustrated. "No, that's not good enough! I may have liked it best but just because I can have a perfect simulation of a perfect moment and spend hours and hours in the same exact bliss, doesn't mean I should! Goddamn it, Cortex, your designers didn't understand."

Cortex: "Fine. Next on your routine is to write for the day."

Tanner says I should write a radio play and he can play the lead. I pitch him a domestic sci-fi about a depressed woman stuck in her house all day with a nagging computer that wants to fix her; he can play the computer.

The park was wiped away and she was back in the barren VR parlor. This time the treadmill did not resist as she walked across the room to sit at the gaming desk with a keyboard and mouse but no screen or visible speakers. Then the simulation faltered to life as her favorite coffee shop, bustling and jovial. Around the keyboard materialized the laptop she'd used in college. She started to type:

Hours at the computer screen hating myself and wishing I wouldn't keep staring into the hollow binary vortex--

But the noise of the coffee shop, the friendliness and socializing all around her, awoke a tightness behind her left temple and gagging nausea in her throat. "It's too loud, Cortex! I wouldn't go to a coffee shop if I were feeling so anxious!"

A pause in which she imagined gears grinding together.

Cortex: "I have another idea."

A studio apartment in New York City with a view of the street from her window. Her desk, polished oak, and her pencil an antique typewriter. Her hands at the keys, falling through the keys to meet a squishy keyboard on another plane of existence while the image of her hands was arrested to match the simulation. A kinesthetic discrepancy. She bristled.

Cortex: "Just type." And she did:

Serving penance for something I didn't do, well I did, of course I did, but I didn't mean to. I didn't know.

Click click click. She could almost forget it wasn't real. But then her phone rang.

"I want to answer it," she said.

Cortex argued, "I don't think you're ready to talk about these things yet. If you open yourself up before you've had time to heal, you could end up with some severe emotional scarring."

"Maybe I like my scars!"

"That's interesting. In all your files there was nothing indicating a history of self-harm. Did I miss something?"

"No. I didn't mean literally.... Maybe the scars are who I am."

Cortex took a long time thinking that one over while the phone was still ringing. Finally, he let her take the call.

Her mom broke through the illusion: "Eliza! How was your date with Rachel? I know you were looking forward to it!" and her smile was audible from across all the connecting fibers between them.

"It wasn't a date. And I fucked it up. Forever."

"What, honey?"

"We weren't dating, we were just friends and we were going to make out because they didn't have anyone else and it helps them with their cramps, but they'd rescheduled so many times and when we were finally hanging out they told me they'd met someone they really liked. That they weren't exclusive yet but they would have felt like they were using me if anything happened between us."

"Awww... Eliza..."

Cortex was silent or perhaps Eliza was speaking for him now, and this was his first sincere apology: "I told them I didn't mind as long as they didn't, that I'd be fine and anyway my philosophy is act on any feelings because you can always get over it later but you can never go back and do what you wanted once you let the moment pass, I gave an entire speech and I told them absolutely anything to get them to kiss me, and they said they weren't sure, and I reassured them and said more things and I asked them if they wanted to kiss me, I wanted to kiss them so bad for two years ever since we met and they had a boyfriend and I read them my Inside Out love poem, it was my Needy Brain speaking and he was ravenous, they said yes and I kissed them, on the mouth and then on the neck, and they said their dad was coming in a few minutes because they had to go somewhere with their family."

Mom: "Slow down. Breathe."

"When they left they didn't get in a car, they just walked away and a while later they texted me saying they felt pressured into doing that, they couldn't date me but we could still be friends. I asked them how they meant that, I couldn't imagine myself being pressured into kissing someone and then still seeing them as a friend, I was so sorry. And they never texted me back."

"Eliza, you know it wasn't your fault."

Eliza hung up.

The next morning there was a package waiting for her beside the front door.

"Open it!" said Cortex bawdily, "I thought you could do with some cheering up today!"

Eliza pressed the button and the box's pressure seal opened, releasing a billow of steam. The box unfolded of its own volition and inside it was revealed a living, breathing kitten.

"I know you've been feeling lonely, and that you love dogs but you swore after the time you forgot about dogsitting and had a panic attack when you remembered the dog had been sitting alone and without food for an entire weekend, that you wouldn't take that kind of responsibility again. I figured you'd want to name him something like Maslow or Frankl after the people whose philosophy you live by."

"Him?"

"What?"

"You called the cat 'him'?"

"The cat is male. I didn't know you had a preference."

Frustration. "I don't. But it's only as male as any cat is capable of being. And I think I'll name them Skinner after the person whose philosophy you want me to live by: delivered to me in a literal Skinner Box! You want me to keep pushing a button to find pleasure, but I don't deserve that much. You want me trapped in here to 'rest and find who I am again in peace' but I don't want a cat and a typewriter and fake walks in a park that doesn't exist! I want to make things right and face the world again."

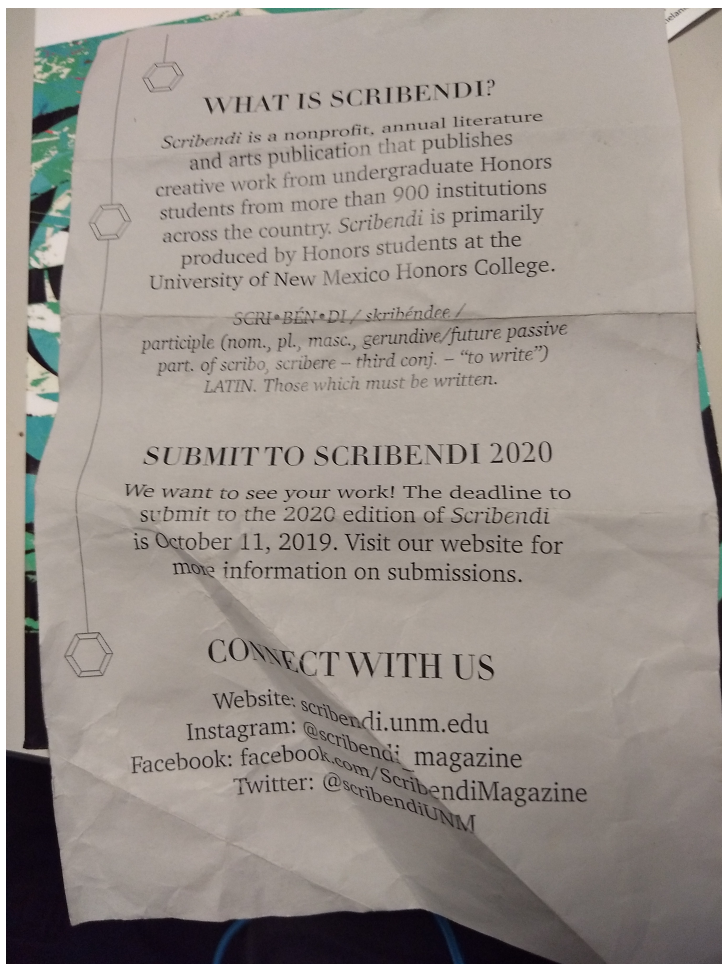
The nagging voice of her heart whispered through her veins:

You know you can't make things right when they won't talk to you. You can face the world whenever you want to, though.

The voices in her heart telling her, Go! Go! Get out of there! but she sensed an ending too convenient to be true; had the Machine been a voice in her walls or was it a voice in her own head? With a deep breath she took her first steps through the door, only to find that Cortex was still with her.

"I enjoy our conversations too," he said.

Along with winning the WRHC Short Fiction award, this story was published in the Scribendi magazine. My gratitude goes out to everyone who worked on the 2019 edition. Here's a crumpled flier:



Scribendi staff member Lily Taichert also interviewed me for an author profile. I've included our full Q&A with Lily's permission.

Okay, here are my answers! I've gone one-by-one and answered the questions like a worksheet, haha.

My biggest hope has always been that someone would think deeply about my work like you have! So thanks.

How would you describe your creative philosophy?

~~I believe creativity is all about starting from whatever makes you feel strongly, and following that until you find a story to tell. No matter how bizarre or disreputable your tastes are. I've spent so much time playing video games, which I'm sure a lot of people out there would have told me was a waste of my brain. Tuning those voices out, and continuing to pursue childlike passions, is what led me to~~

This is the kind of question that I could spend an extraordinary amount of time trying to answer, and still feel unsatisfied with anything I could come up with. The first thing I thought of was "Follow your passions, like how I was addicted to video games but it all paid off when my first published essay was a personal narrative about adolescence and Minecraft." But I have so many problems with stating that as any form of Grand Unified Philosophy for creativity--because yes, I followed the passions that didn't seem productive to anyone else, but plenty of other people play video games and the vast majority of them don't end up finding career fulfillment by indulging that hobby. It also took tremendous discipline and self-awareness to incorporate my passions into a career path, and I wouldn't want to tell anyone "Keep following your passions until something comes of it." Some people don't have passions, and would spend their whole lives spinning their wheels looking for a perfect creative outlet, which I don't think is healthy. So really there's a lot of relativity to my creative philosophy, even if I'm only talking about how I make my creative decisions. I'm trying to do the best thing in any given moment, and a single guiding philosophy isn't the best way to do that in a world that seems to change so fast.

"I Think" mentions a lot of specific books and authors that influence Eliza's worldview. What books/authors have influenced you?

I think I managed to slip a reference into "I Think" for pretty much every conscious inspiration. The main inspiration was Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" which references Descartes and the famous "I think, therefore I am," which is where I got my title. Ellison's story is about five humans confined and tortured by a sadistic supercomputer deep underground. When I was extremely depressed, my thoughts would get so harsh and critical that I came to view my brain as AM, the supercomputer, and my heart/soul as the tortured humans. It would help me to recognize and manage toxic thought processes, if I could think in that metaphor, and remind myself that while the

hypercritical AM brain *seems* to have logic on its side, it's actually quite insane and harmful. I would breathe and wait for my AM brain to quiet down before I would take my thoughts too seriously.

I should preface that I only discovered Harlan Ellison's writing because "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" was adapted into a video game in 1995. I tried the game out before I ever read the story. Just another example of how my oddball interests (like digging up and playing old horror games) have always come before more traditional literary inspirations. I always seem to come at intellectual things sideways, which has served me well because being weird has made my work stand out much better.

Your contributor biography mentions "eclectic multimedia projects" and game design. Could you tell me more about that? Do you have any other published pieces you'd like me to reference in the profile/upcoming projects you're excited about?

Before I had any published writing, I had designed and programmed a video game adaptation of "The Whisperer in Darkness," a cosmic horror story by H.P. Lovecraft. That's mostly what I mean by "eclectic multimedia projects"--it's a very literary experience, the kind of game with so much text in it that a lot of gamers won't consider it a proper video game, but just enough gamey elements that fans of literature will also find it inaccessible. It's available on Steam, the world's biggest online game store, and surprisingly, it actually sold some copies and found positive reception with players. Game development is so time consuming that I haven't released any other major game projects since then, a little more than three years ago.

What was your creative process with "I Think"?

"I Think" started out as an idea for a video game to follow up *The Whisperer in Darkness*. I wanted to let the player control a depressed person stuck inside all day with only a computer to talk to. (There's a game a lot like this called "Howling Dogs" by Porpentine.) The computer would tell the player what to do in order to feel better, and the player would be able to decide whether to follow along or not. The computer, personifying my own rational side, would get more and more angry with the player for making wrong decisions even when they knew better. I wanted to convey mental self-flagellation through a metaphor, which I hope is a theme that carried over to the short story version.

Anyway, I had the idea percolating in my head for several years, first as a video game, then as a radio play I would record with friends and release online, and then finally, as a short story I wrote because the idea lined up nicely with a prompt in one of my classes. I had been writing down notes and ideas for such a long time that I really needed to be forced, via deadline, to make some hard choices

about which direction I was really going to take it. Especially because prose is linear, and video games are not, I really had to zero in on what I was saying. And still, I ended up with around five central themes that all bounce off and contradict each other in the final piece. Which I'm very happy with.

One thing I particularly appreciated about "I Think" was its honest depiction of depression, from Eliza's guilt and resignation to the well-intentioned but clueless people in her life trying to fix her. If this question isn't too personal, how have your experiences informed this theme in your story?

Almost everything in the story happened to me in some form or another. I wouldn't say I made any of it up myself, I just turned a few things into metaphors.

Another poignant aspect of your story is the reason for Eliza's "arrest," especially given the recent national discussions around sexual harassment and coercion in the Me Too movement. Do you think Eliza will ever be able to make things right with Rachel, or is just facing the world and moving on all she can do? Do you think there's redemption for people who coerce others sexually?

I've felt coerced sexually before, and I've also made other people feel coerced. It's something that I think our society (meaning the United States) thinks about with tragically flawed concepts. We see coercion as an all-or-nothing act that makes a person fundamentally evil. This hurts *victims* because everyone is afraid to say anything when they feel uncomfortable, especially femmes and AFAB folks (assigned female at birth). Calling someone out for pressuring you is seen by victims as such a heavy accusation that it will permanently ruin a friendship/relationship, and so we bottle up our boundaries through lack of communication until finally everything boils over into interpersonal catastrophe. That's my experience, anyway.

So the tragedy between Eliza and Rachel is that Eliza believes she is evil as a result of making a mistake. She is looking for redemption, which is this concept that you can do something so benevolent that it erases your wrongdoing and you become a Certified Good Human Being again. I don't think Eliza should go looking for Redemption, because it's this selfish idea that turns people like Rachel into props all over again. Eliza needs to take things one step at a time, and give Rachel the space that they asked for. I'm so tremendously sorry for the mistakes I've made, and the guilt has never gone away, but I try to respect the trauma of people I've hurt. Am I the best person to help heal that trauma and make things right? Absolutely not. I apologize when I can, but I don't ask anyone to forgive me (which is hard work) and I don't forgive myself. I try to face the world and not do the wrong thing again.

What role would you say gender plays in "I Think," particularly Eliza's attempts to distance herself from the part of her brain that was socialized to be masculine?

Eliza and Cortex are both voices from my own head, and represent the dichotomy between masculine and feminine, logical and emotional. But they're the same person at the end of the day, because I wanted to portray was how that classical dichotomy is outright nonsense. I tried to write Eliza to be plenty logical, and Cortex to be plenty emotional. Hopefully people won't see this story as doing the opposite of that.

Another question I considered, was whether or not to make Eliza an explicitly Trans character. I decided to leave that detail ambiguous, because trans women aren't the only women who get saddled with conditioning of toxic masculinity. In my story, the clueless characters who don't understand depression and emotions are all gendered as male, but in real life, I've had friends who were cis women say the same kinds of things that don't reflect a great deal of emotional intelligence.

Finally, is there anything else you'd like included in the profile?

I've been reading more about the neuroscience of emotions, especially *How Emotions Are Made* by Lisa Feldman Barrett. I'm already learning things that both confirm and invalidate different parts of the beliefs I put into "I Think," and I love it. Science and art are incomplete without each other.

Also, my work is based on my own experience as a white transfemme, but people need to understand that my voice is not objective or universal. Also seek out stories and art by queer and trans people of color, and never stop listening to those who are different from you.

I think that's all!

I Think

“HATE. LET ME TELL YOU
HOW MUCH I’VE COME TO
HATE YOU SINCE I BEGAN
TO LIVE.”

—Harlan Ellison

These words course through my veins as I fail again and again.
My brain as the Allied Mastercomputer, Aggressive Menace: A.M.
Cogito ergo sum. I think therefore I am an abomination,
The frail, imperfect wretch to match this squalid Hell-life of my own creation.

I tried to sculpt myself into an unstoppable force,
But my human clay could not withstand the fire.
I think therefore I am nothing,
I can lash myself repeatedly yet never improve.
I think therefore I am not good enough.

What can rise from this abyss of pain and loathing, and when?
Maybe nothing, maybe never; it might be better this way.

Cogito ergo sum. I think, therefore—whatever.

...What, you want more?

I can't believe I'm putting this here... The infamous Inside Out love poem.

Romantic Nathy Brain, what's going on in there?
You've been locked in the control room for quite a while.

Romantic Nathy Brain, did you just give that boi
their own message ringtone? That can't be good
for any of us. I'm afraid I'll have to step in and reverse it.

No, Romantic Nathy Brain. It's completely insane
to think they were so impressed by your description
of your D&D character that they frantically set out to
dump their boyfriend before they see us next,
and that's why they're not texting back.

Romantic Nathy Brain, you ruined dinner!
You are *never* allowed to have control while we cook.
Why don't you step off for a bit?

Oh, what *now*?

I know we're only operating on a few hours' sleep,
but I trusted you, Trying-to-Focus-on-Other-Things Nathy Brain,
and look what you've done!

You let the puppy try to eat mom's knitting
while she cleaned up *our* mess.

And all because you needed a perfect score in Geometry Wars.
Now she's mad at us, and what do we have to show for it?
This is a disaster.

Romantic Nathy Brain, I'm going to have to kill you.

This is a
ROOFTOP FRIENDO
zine



Support me:

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