

## A Snapshot

---

Angelo R. Lacuesta

“**I**n the game of life and evolution,” writes George Dyson in his 1997 book *Darwin Among the Machines*, “there are three players at the table: human beings, nature, and machine. I am firmly on the side of nature, but nature, I suspect, is on the side of the machines.”

Exactly ten years later, in 2007, I lost my first battle against a machine. I had just come from my first trip to the United States, where I had been a fellow at the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

For a middle-class Filipino, I was a relative latecomer to America. Most of my friends had been there to visit family and finally see Times Square and Disneyland. I can't lie—to me it had been a dream, too, fed by Hollywood and TV and glossy magazines, and of course by my upbringing in a country that America had occupied for a long time.

Before the trip I had saved enough money to purchase a second-hand DSLR camera. I borrowed a couple of lenses from my brother, who was a photography enthusiast. I knew enough about how to take pictures because many decades earlier I had assisted my father, who had been a hobbyist when he was still alive. I tagged along with him to on-the-spot photography contests and far-flung locations, tasked with changing lenses and loading film.

Digital photography, I found out soon enough, was so much easier than celluloid—I didn't have to think about how many photos I was taking or how much expensive film was left in the camera. I could take as many

photos as I wanted and only needed to transfer them to my laptop at the end of every day. Three months later, by the end of my residency, I had amassed hundreds of photos, of everything from the brick pavement that lined the streets of Iowa City, to the turning leaves of Central Park, to casual portraits of my co-fellows, who I had been so sad to leave after months of living together and working with them.

Immediately upon arrival in Manila, I was swept by a wave of work—a backlog of immense proportions that took all my attention and energy. As a result, I had to constantly put off my lofty plans: of organizing the photos in my laptop and using them to complete an electronic diary of the trip, made richer by links to articles on the monuments and curiosities I had seen and even short video recordings of readings.

You probably have an idea about what happened next. My hard drive crashed a few weeks after my return home, in a freak accident involving a table at a restaurant and a careless gesture. As my laptop fell hard on the floor, hundreds of images flashed before my eyes, as though I were dying: landscapes and cityscapes, the people I had met and promised to keep in touch with. Trips to repair shops and consultations with experts, each one dodgier than the last, only repeatedly confirmed my worst fears.

My documents were gone—unpublished material and work stuff. Recovering that loss, I decided, came down to the simple, though tedious, act of reconstructing them from handwritten notes or old drafts. I also quickly accepted that I could, in a worst-case scenario, probably rewrite them from scratch.

But how do you recover a photograph—especially if it is one of your own feet standing on the wooden beams of the Brooklyn Bridge? How do you recreate the moment you sat at a restaurant and got served the biggest burger of your life? And for each of those instantly lost photographs I could remember, there were sure to be hundreds I couldn't.

In the aftermath of the accident I wandered around like a man who had suffered a brain injury; I felt like I had lost not just my memories, but memory itself: what exactly did I eat at that restaurant? What exactly prompted me to lift my heavy camera out of my bag and pause in the middle of the day, in the middle of the street?

This may all seem so overly dramatic now, or even simplistic, but perhaps that contains some of the point. I realized how much I had trusted

my camera to capture everything, and by extension, my computer.

Years and years ago, when my father was still alive—that's how I measure many things, whether they happened before or after my father's death—he taught me how difficult it was to realize a single image from what had been photographed, by winding the film back into its canister, and with my hands unseen within the folds of a special hood that allowed no light in, carefully taking it out of the camera, extracting it from the canister and threading it into a special spool that I then placed in a container that allowed me to immerse the film in the chemicals that would start the development process. That was step one. After shaking the container and hoping the chemicals worked properly, I would take out the film, cut it into strips, and line the strips up in rows on a piece of photographic paper, which, when fully developed, made a black and white contact print that was the size of a standard letter, which contained the thumbnails of, at most, 36 photographs that I never completely knew what would look like until they showed up, gaining slow detail, on the white photographic paper.

The color process is, I was told, much more complicated, and my father was never able to learn it, or afford the equipment one needed for it. He also never saw a digital camera in his life, but not because he couldn't afford it. It had not been invented yet.

Fast forward to today, ten years after 2007. My father would have been 70 years old if he had survived that heart attack in 1997—not a very old age, and not a very long period of time to be gone. But come to think of it, 20 years is an entire generation. I am certain that if he had somehow caught a glimpse of the future using some sort of magic camera, everything to him would be nothing short of science fiction, defying even what he had richly imagined, thanks to his love of *Star Wars* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

I would have wanted to show him the photographs I had saved on my laptop: the cornfields of Iowa, the interstate highways, the view of the Statue of Liberty from the Staten Island Ferry. Unlike many Filipinos, he had never had a desire to visit the United States, despite his photographer's curiosity and love of the unknown. Of course, he would have saved his final awe for the fact that I would have all these photos saved on a single device. Although he had computers in his time, and had worked on a laptop himself, there was never room for such bandwidth and fidelity.

Today, ten years after 2007, I have two cameras on my phone and the cloud takes care of ensuring the photographs are never lost, in any aspect: each is timestamped and geotagged, and the operating system even stores a split-second of video before and after the image. I have taken too many photographs now—thousands upon thousands—that I hardly have time or inclination to even look at all of them anymore. What is important is that I took them.

When aggregated with all the other snapshots taken by everyone at that particular moment, the photographic record helps create an almost complete image of everything and everyone that exists in that space and time. Combined with other captured information—in my case, biometric and biographical data, the words I've written, read, and said, and, soon enough, those I am predicted to write, read, and say—a complete version of myself in full human resolution may be created: no longer corruptible and always available to anyone who wishes to remember me.

My father never even took a selfie. In fact, the word had not been invented yet when he disappeared from the world. As a result, there are only two photos of him available in all of the internet, both so very small and so very grainy that you would not be able to identify him from them if by some magic or accident of time you bumped into him. In other words, we would not be able to recreate him out of any useful memory.

In many ways, we do have magic cameras now. But, really, there is no need for any magic. All we need is straightforward time: nature made man, and man makes machines, and machines will one day will make nature. At this point, we must learn to accept that the progression is natural, and to change things—if we ever wish to—we must do the unnatural.

I have a friend who seems to have gone off the face of the earth. They used to be really good friends of mine, and he used to be part of our really close gang. We were classmates all throughout grade school and high school, and though we took different courses in college, we continued to hang out. Back in the day—I'm finally of that age where I can talk about being "back in the day"—hanging out meant spending entire weekends and after-school afternoons playing videogames, Dungeons & Dragons, and trawling bookstores. I don't know if you could call that a gang, though: we were about as threatening as pimples on a Friday night—not that we did much on Friday nights.

We had a name for our gang, of course, and we had our official designations. Like all other gangs, there was the jock and there was the bookish one. There was the academic achiever. There was the wealthy one, and I was the poor one. He was the weird genius who was the writer, comic book creator, class cutter, morbid thinker, and Dungeon Master, all put together.

Apart from formal class photos, there exists no single photograph of us. There was hardly ever a camera within reach, and I don't remember there having been much sense in having one taken because we saw no point in preserving our memories that way. We saw each other every day, anyway. Until the usual things happened, as they do in gangs and among friends, and he just stopped showing up and we stopped expecting him.

This is how my friend, like my father, completely disappeared. Except that he remains—coming from the nonexistence of reports of his death on my alumni Facebook and Viber groups—completely alive.

The image I have of him in my mind remains that of a soft-faced schoolboy, a bit on the handsome side, but a lot unkempt, some hurt in his eyes remaining from stories he told us a long time ago about the death of his own father, many years before mine. That description won't work on google, of course, so I've had to subsist on his name—unfortunately quite generic—and all variations thereof, including his family's province of origin and his possible line of work (based on all those career aptitude tests we all took, back in the day). I've also sought him out using the Facebook page of an older sibling of his, where there is a profusion of selfies, hashtagged beach poses, and group shots at tables in geotagged restaurants—in short, the sort of things we everyday people take and look at every day.

But there is no trace of my lost friend. No matter how long and hard I backread and how many google pages I turn. Time froze on that thumbnail memory I have of him, and today I doubt whether I could recognize him if I saw him in the flesh in a mall or in an airport. I think I remember where he lives, or used to. Getting there was once a matter of muscle memory; a jeep ride and a bus ride, a short walk past a village gate. But what a stretch and a chore and a step that would be—to actually go see someone because you haven't seen them in some time.

Besides, to be completely absent today could only be a willful and deliberate act, requiring considerably more effort than choosing not to be

completely present. For example, I have a number of very close friends (especially the wealthier ones) who are not actively on any form of social media for reasons of security, or modesty, or plain lack of interest. But I very often still see their faces, captured by mutual friends at the ribbon-cuttings, the clan reunions, and the vernissages. There is also a kind of reassurance, similarly mutual, that springs across the screen: “I’m just right here, old friend,” they seem to be saying. “You haven’t missed anything, and we haven’t been missing anything, either.”

But for someone to avoid phone cameras at company outings and required-attendance meetings, and to elude the most mundane listings—voting records, alumni rosters, random discussions on Dungeons & Dragons and videogame forums—well, that requires some sort of weird superpower, or a special hatred for mankind. Has something gone horribly wrong? Are they still interested in this world?

My generation alpha kid, born in 2010, is not on any social media platform, but I am often shocked to find out how some acquaintances know him enough to greet him by name when they first meet him. The fault is all mine. I’m talkative on Facebook and I’m a bit of an oversharer and I like going with the flow.

We have just snuck out in the middle of a very busy month to a small gem of a resort by the sea, where we spend long days swinging in hammocks and drinking iced tea, receiving Indian head massages, eating kinilaw, bananas, and Kit-Kat bars of various flavors.

In the middle of it all, he says to me: “You know why holidays are the best? Because you get to miss stuff.”

By ‘miss stuff’ he means he does not miss being in the city and seeing his classmates and attending school and his Kumon math and taekwondo classes and his music lessons.

There are other things to occupy him here. He asks me why the grass is wet under his feet in the morning. He jumps at the sight of birds alighting on our breakfast table and tensely cocks his ear to the *tu-ko* sound coming from the garden behind our cottage. I tell him it’s a gecko and wonders how a thing that can’t be seen can make such a large and scary sound. He squeals with delight in the pool and his eyes light up at the thought of seeing whale sharks for the first time tomorrow morning.

He is perfectly content being alone in our small circle of family—as long as there’s a fast wifi connection for his iPad, of course.

He happily and instantly obliges when I tell him to pose for what I’m sure is his millionth photo. “Post it on Instagram!” he shouts—though he doesn’t even have an Instagram account yet. Oh yes, I thank him for reminding me, and I dutifully and mindlessly post it, for remembrance, for posterity, for all the million reasons I don’t know, and don’t bother to know, but mostly because I don’t want us to disappear.