

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a CCTV

By Naro Alonzo

Before handing back your freedom, the pre-recorded audio said, "— worry, there are more CCTVs than salt."

You started counting the world's salt. After completing your life sentences, the only words you have left are numbers.

It kept your mind busy while in the Veil.

It anchored you especially through those painful time-fevers where the quiet seems to enter and pass through your body, as though you were transparent. It kept you from becoming completely invisible. You've counted as far as you can, counted down and up and other directions. Counted any countable thing. At some point, you thought that was the punishment; then at some point, you thought that was Life.

You've counted so much that it was hard to count only up to one. To stop there. *There*, after the series of routine examinations and orientations, only one person was waiting for you. Desperate to keep counting, you stare at their two eyes that seemed to search and scan you. *For what?* You're counting in your mind the many ways you would be looked at. The many possible lines on your face, surfacing from centuries of shifting tectonic plates of muscle. You try to count your white hairs, yet to be seen by yourself, with imaginary numbers.

They had only one voice, tired but steady. And so few words to say, "I'm your great²³ grandchild, 15th gen, you'll be staying with me in the meantime."

You want to ask how long a meantime was. But for the thousands of years' worth of words that you've saved up, your very first on the outside was silence.

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Freedom meant adding more sweetener than you could possibly count into a cup, though you did try, stirring it altogether. It was a strange new fad drink that all the New Millennials called an anti-stressant. It smelled like coffee but in the cashier's words, "coffee with 0 suffering and 0 harm". You attempt to make a joke about how harm always tasted delicious, but your descendant, who was named Jo-jo after their parents Jonathan and Jonalyn, didn't see the humour. You've started counting the many times the thought "I am a prehistoric Boomer" came to your mind as well as the length of awkward silences, which have now reached 2377 seconds.

"Watch out for how much of that you add, you don't want our kapwa to worry." Jo-jo would remind you for the eleventh time and for the eleventh time, you avoid asking about what that meant.

You didn't want to, but Jo-jo waved you to a small outdoor café canopied by the winding arms of an acacia, just by the entrance to the train station. From where you sit, you could see suspended in the atmosphere a bioluminescent billboard reflecting codes and numbers while a hyper realistic digital bird appeared to play around, swooping past before boasting its huge wingspan. Suddenly, the image fades and another set of numbers flashed. You could only make out GNHW 0.757842, +0.053221.

A cheer erupts. Jo-jo and all the other people in the café leap up from their seats and start clapping. Nearby pedestrians embrace each other. The barista starts going around offering pastries free of charge. You stare at the sequence of numbers on the screen, confused.

You resume counting the number of heartbeats that spans these moments where you feel left out. You sit unmoving on the chair, trying to be small and unnoticeable.

Jo-jo's smile fades upon glancing at you. You haven't seen it for over a thousand years but immediately recognised what it was: guilt. "Sorry, even though I received webinars on this and attended the 'caring for your ancestor' training, I'm still at a loss for what to do."

You give a smile, and you count the time it takes to lift the ends of your mouth, "No, it's okay. I'm also...still adjusting." You want to ask questions, but fear that once you ask one, it will go on forever. You don't want to be a bother.

Jo-jo passes you the plate of what looks like glutinous sticky rice and fufu, with grated coconut and mango sauce, "Hope I can make it easier. But that," they point at the screen, "that thing you see is the District Vision Board or D.V.B. And those numbers are the district stats. Every political area has one, usually near the square or above the Halls." Jo-jo explains mechanically, like an overworked tour guide. "The number that flashed earlier is the Ginhawa statistic. It's an index, do you know what an index is?"

You shake your head, trying to relax your stiff shoulders.

"Um, it's basically a number that counts—" your flinch goes unnoticed, "—the wellbeing of all species in the area. All those statistics combined."

"Like, that's everything. Happy employees, good biodiversity, literacy, low traffic, no violence..." Jo-jo's voice quickly drops, and you notice they look guilty again. They clear their throat. "Let's go?" You open your mouth to respond, but they're already on the way out.

You follow Jo-jo apprehensively, afraid that the barista would call the police for dining and dashing. As far as you can remember, neither of you have paid the bill. But you remain quiet, aware that you might say something serious only for it to come out as a joke in a world where you have lost even common sense.

In the commute to Jo-jo's residence, your body registers many familiar sights. But the familiarity didn't come from the well-preserved monuments or street signs, present even before you were charged, or the vibrant energy of people who look and don't look like you.

It is the familiarity of shiny objects. From puddles and boutique stores to shiny worn devices. To you, they appear like the CCTVs in the Veil, memorising every shadow of your face, mapping the distances across each mole, and predicting that you are up to no good. You try not to look at your reflection on any glassy surface, afraid it could scan you and know instantly where you've been. You've done so successfully 12 times. The biggest threat is people's eyes. A flash of their gaze could capture you, could alert the authorities, could form instant judgments. So, you look away.

You count the number of suspicious glances (17), apprehensions or hesitations (8), a hint of danger (2), empty, apathetic stares (64). You know there is no way of telling who is trustworthy. The police officers who cuffed and planted evidence on you all had the kindest eyes. You recall seeing an officer wrap a rosary on the holster of his gun. While you read your rights over and over again from the faded poster on a wall in the interrogation room, you hear them sing Happy Birthday and cut the cake for your neighbour who had been undercover. The same woman who you sang duets with at the nearby karaoke, would actually be up all night monitoring your internet data, spying on your social media usage, listening in on your phone calls and tracking your online banking payments, instead of caring for her "youngest". Was any of it true?

There is barely a crowd in the station yet you hear Jo-jo complaining about peak hours.

All around you are movements and sounds, people looking energetic, happily talking with their friends or to audio devices embedded somewhere on their persons. You count the number of people wearing a uniform, mostly students, and a few more suspicious ones who your eyes followed surreptitiously, just in case.

Dizzy from so much sensation, you would forget to breathe at times, and would need to find something to ground yourself with.

While on the train, a child is seated close to your side, holding a school book named "Life Science". Paperless, it looks like a small folder, and inside it plays a video. You watch as multiple animals show up on the screen. The child begins to drag them here and there, forming a complex food web. You think about what it's like. To be predator and prey. For someone out there to move as you move, monitoring you from afar while you live completely aware of this, but no longer giving it much thought. It was merely a part of Life. *Why is it a part of Life?*

The child looks up, feeling your stare. For a second, you panic, as if you've been caught doing something you shouldn't be.

Their little hand waves at you but in the corner of your eye, it feels like they are beckoning, trying to drag you into that web. You blame the brakes when your body lurches forward.

Jo-jo said if ever you need help, you just have to talk to Marites. To talk to Marites, you only need to speak aloud. Built in the room (or rather, she *is* the room) is an AI named Marites who can tell you everything about the apartment. She would teach you step-by-step how to turn on the e-stove, how to tweak the lighting to match your productivity, and how to use the self-sanitising bathrooms. With almost everything, Marites adapts to you and adopts the latest in global technological updates automatically, although she said that Jo-jo preferred to make "less efficient choices" as part of their default settings.

Marites even had a personality that got irritated when asked her to repeat things for the 2nd time, would nag you to "hey, drink water", and refuse to give you certain information, such as the contact details of people you remember, who might've been released like you were.

Since Jo-jo is mostly out Living—you counted them saying this word 144 times to mean everything, including "work"—you would be constantly left with yourself.

You would sit on your bed that was so luxurious in its thread count and softness, it was uncomfortable.

You ask Marites to show the original uncensored version of an old crime film.

While watching, she starts talking about how there used to be 672 identified factors or variables that have been found to predict criminal behaviour. This was from the Forensic Domain Criteria, a now defunct database, once popularly used by armed forces and border control but made by researchers and psychologists.

She projects a table on the wall with columns of different categories of people and a probability statistic at the right-most, with its complex formulae. You could see that someone with this race or ethnic origin and/or that gender had somewhere between 12 - 38% probability of committing a crime. That a person of that disability, with this or that sexual orientation, lies somewhere within the population mean of 21- 68%. And someone like you, with your skin colour, your childhood history, your birth country, your personality, your health, your socioeconomic status, your education, your gender and sexuality, your facial features, and your political leaning would undoubtedly end up in prison. Not once, but over and over. With a computed recidivism rate of 94%*, with a footnote that says, "potentially dangerous".

You remember what they said to you during the interrogation, "Might as well surrender. No point fighting the facts."

"They were stopped 524 cycles ago," Marites responds as though in a monologue with herself, "This was after twenty-eight Free Data revolutions. Since 120 cycles ago, a ceremony is held at the Museum of Historical Liberation of Information every 5 cycles. Newly discovered DIWA would be freed—"

You stay quiet.

"DIWA - Data and Information collected Without Awareness." Marites sounds impatient yet proud of her ability to educate.

She immediately plays a video on one wall. You watch what appears to be a nature documentary where amid a dark evening sky, pale blue balls, like glowing jellyfish, are let go into the skies.

It is this same scenery that you would play on repeat, counting how many specks moved inside each orb. Imagining how each one of those was a data point collected about you while you were under the Veil. Who you thought about, the names you called for during the darkest times, patterns from the salt content of the tears you shed on your first hundred New Years. Predictions that you would end up exactly where you are. *Here*. Surviving even after all these years.

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Some tens of thousands of minutes later, Jo-jo asks you a simple question, "Hey, so um, you have a kind of person you like?"

It stuns you. You count the seconds of dead air – so far, 49,348.

You don't know how to answer.

You've actively avoided the realisation that you have no preferences. No likes. No dislikes. You drown these thoughts by visualising a lightweight form inside your chest, like a bubble. You want to burp it out but the trapped air won't come up.

As usual, you would sidestep this conversation. Wait until they lose interest.

One time, Jo-jo has friends over, and you are in your room lying down on the bed.

As much as you try, you can't get used to turning on the computer embedded on the wall. It was so different from the one you had before. It had no manual controls. Instead, it ran on sensors and was so intelligent you got a sense it knew what you needed, but would give you choices and ask for consent.

The rooms regulate the sound pollution, but it was set just right so that you could feel the ambient noise of living people, which was meant to be the optimum "healthy" level of noise.

Used to giving your entire attention to any sensation, you could make out some words from beyond the walls.

"—must be tough then?"

"yeah! —so—different—blank—empty. Generation gap!"

"—maybe—need—know how—talk—listen—?"

"—trying!"

"—take—time—thousands—years—hard—know?"

You imagine a server cloud somewhere containing millions of data points about you.

Who you are. The way you talk, your introversion and extroversion, eccentricities. How you behave. The types of food you like, the people you envy, the fake news you believe in, the kind of content that gratifies you at 3 am while doom scrolling through your phone to protest against the long days of work. A nest of algorithms about you by machines and artificial intelligences that you once called home.

You start to obsess about that cloud. Maybe it's owned by a mega corporation or a government agency. Maybe now it's scrambled, erased or defunct.

It would appear in your dreams: a moving cloud of data points, shifting, dancing in a vacuum or black hole, swirling around you like a shoal of silver-blue fish. It's terrifying to admit. It's beautiful.

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Since coming out of the Veil, it is the first time that you use the word "want".

You saw on their social media page that the Museum of Historical Liberation of Information will be freeing another set of DIWA excavated from over thirty ancient data brokers. You don't know what that means so Marites answers for you, "Data brokering used to be part of the popular culture during the Early Anthropocene where people's data would be gathered and sold."

Marites flashes on the wall a living graph, "Here is a fossil of a DIWA from the Museum dated 1300 cycles from the Early Anthropocene. A bio-profile of a human, code-named B35-59921X who migrated to C89HN in the primordial year of *preCY-2022*. Where a year is defined as—"

You get lost in the multitude of information.

"Here is a relic of Boolean language etched in—". Like ants perfectly preserved in amber, the video zooms in to simulate the code underneath. Those 1's and 0's, woven like DNA of an entire society.

You read a summary and description of a person's levels of personality traits as well as their biographies, anatomies, anxieties, preferences, including forecasts and likely behaviours: when purchasing, when in crisis, when lonely, when sexually active, when exercising, when in December, when unsatisfied with the elections, when stuck in traffic, when with three Facebook friends, when in the bathroom with diarrhoea, when losing a 28-year-old son.

You feel dizzy from the rippling frenzy of shifting and transforming graphs. The longer you look, the more the data seems to migrate like fragments of bone, forming an archipelago.

Midway the 140,023rd second of awkwardness between you and Jo-jo, you bring up the event and Marites immediately projects the video-poster on a wall.

You know Jo-jo has been growing worried since you rarely leave the apartment (51). Only going out when asked to or when accompanying them for errands. You know, from the less and less words exchanged, that they've started to grow annoyed with you.

Worry and relief surfaces on their face, as Jo-jo reminds you how to use the local teleporters. They had other Life plans during the event that they couldn't reschedule. You try to convince yourself that this doesn't disappoint you.

It is your first time commuting alone. Even Marites was busy with a scheduled update, and couldn't join you through a wearable device. There would be no endless commentary. No ambient setting to drown out the background. You realise it's been a long time since you are accompanied only by your own noise.

Walking down the street to the nearest teleporter is unnerving. Even with only four other people jogging or admiring the lush greenery of what Jo-jo described as a "biophilic" or Life-loving city, you feel self-conscious. The structures around you are nearly see-through and offer an almost unhindered view of the clear blue sky. You feel so noticeable, obvious, like a splatter of ink on pristine white paper.

You try avoiding the joggers who would offer a curt smile or vendors selling so-called "slowfast" cuisine. Your hands keep themselves safe inside your pockets. Your gaze securely on the next step.

Queuing for the teleporter, you count the different shades and colours of feet and footwear. With the warm temperature, many are wearing something that looks closely like rubber slippers. You would often judge a person's hardships in life by their feet—the calluses, ingrown, chipped, yellowed or blackened nails, the dirt trapped underneath a nail bed.

But their feet all looked the same. Clean, soft, and well-manicured.

You search for the smallest sign of imperfection, a flaw in the curvature of a toe, the barest crack in a heel. There was none. You convince yourself that that can't be accurate. You must have missed something... Surely, they've walked through some kind of struggle?

Lost in your thoughts, you end up focusing on your own ten toes. Equally smooth and clean, you're certain they aren't yours.

When you arrive at the courtyard of the Museum, only half the seats are occupied though the event is meant to start in five minutes.

You sit at the back-most chair though an usher tries to convince you to take the empty seats in the front rows.

Promptly, the program starts at the set time. A few introductions are made and a series of anthems are played. You stand with a hand over your heart awkwardly trying to mouth the lyrics while others sing proudly and powerfully. The master of ceremony then introduces the keynote speaker, a data archaeologist named Dr. Lopez-Abdullah.

You couldn't tell by her looks what her race was, but you convince yourself it mattered.

Some time ago you accompanied Jo-jo to the salon. They wanted to have a whole new look for some event. You were sitting nearby as Jo-jo was shape-shifted. Full body promo package. From their bone structure to their skin and hair. You notice them looking darker, shorter. A lot more like you. And even though you knew the cultural heritage you two shared, there was something about the shade of their skin, attention-grabbing in their white shirt, unstained by the true heat of a painful sun, that irritates you and makes you walk all the way back alone.

Dr. Lopez-Abdullah is small in her hover chair, but her voice holds such a timber that it makes you sit up straight. She says the new excavations come from another forgotten civilisation, "and as much as we want to know about our ancestors, we are certain that these are DIWA. These were taken without consent. And as we've learned from repeating then breaking our cycles, we are not the same people who would marvel at a ruin constructed from the labour of slaves, we are no longer a species that finds awe from the engineering of others' suffering, we are—"

You stop listening. It is only when she opens the crypts that your attention snaps back. Your neck stretches for a clearer view as orbs of data slowly and steadily ascend into the atmosphere, like a rapture of souls. You think about all the lives inside those orbs. Their faces, their stories, their struggles. The entirety of who they were, reduced, to an incomplete script of code. Grief builds inside your chest like a landslide.

"—nothing is ever forgotten," she continues, "our ancestors' privacies, stories untold, continue to join us in our collective memory."

Solemnly, some begin to pray, others are in praise, some are even dancing. Dr. Lopez-Abdullah starts to sing a hymn in an old dialect you recognise, which a few others were echoing along, "*we march unafraid, we fight unafraid, no one is watching except ourselves. I see you sister, yes, only I see you—*". Yet there are also those who are bored and scrolling through their devices.

Dr. Lopez-Abdullah is followed by a tall man, who moves slowly and genuinely looks like he was only made to close the ceremony because there is no one else. He is at ease, not confident but rather careless, appearing bored while holding onto a copy of his speech.

He gives curt thanks to everyone involved "in this vital lifelong endeavour of remembrance" and starts to talk about the Museum's poor state of funding that "shows neglect" over the cycles and flashes a few hard-to-read projections mid-air. "It's only recently that we got approval for the—"

He launches into a long-detailed explanation of the Museum's accomplishments, mixing each praise with a litany of financial issues. Like everyone else, you've long lost interest and are about to leave.

"—become such a Ginhawa-focused society, that we are losing sight of the value of being critical. We cram in more self-care hours to push for +0.0000028 increase in our quality-of-life statistic. Our ancestral prisoners were released not because they should be, but only because we wanted that +0.00008 increase in the District's Ginhawa index. How do we know if we're watching out for each other for reasons beyond this, when well-being has become the centre of our collective culture? And speaking of watching, have we truly changed from the kind of state we were cycles ago?—"

Even as the closing ritual was sung and the seats refolded for storage, you are left there standing with fists clenched, shaking in anger.

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When you arrive home, Marites greets you tiredly, "*Kumusta*, how was it?" even before the front door closes behind you.

You are quiet, like you usually would be. But this time, she sounds concerned.

"Are you okay?"

There is something in the way that she says that phrase that breaks a dam inside you. She sounded like she was doubting you. Like she didn't believe you. She sounded like she knew more than you could ever know. That she has answers, data, about how okay and not okay you are.

You imagine those numbers flashing in the Vision Boards in public squares, all crashing down, and feel a certain pleasure rush over you. Seeing those numbers nosedive in shocking red. A warning siren echoing throughout this godforsaken peaceful city.

You flashback to watching a viral video just weeks before you were detained and charged with multiple counts of illegal assembly, malicious mischief, kidnapping, along with countless false others.

It was an ordinary day in ordinary time, and the clip was as ordinary as any other suggested content on your social media: a vlog by a citizen who was able to capture the exact time when a river, where many locals were swimming in just minutes before, suddenly gushed with brown water so intensely. A flash flood. After watching that clip for less than a minute, all that would show up on your feed were catastrophes. Like a prophecy.

You go to the walls lined with Marites' projector films and start to rip them off, like peeling sunburnt skin. An acidic urge to destroy courses through you from the pit of your stomach, and you claw through the walls as though physically dragging those Ginhawa numbers down.

This world that exists after you could only have existed because of you. Because of what people like you had to go through. A rage reddens your eyesight, and it feels as though every inch of the ground was ablaze with DIWA.

It's unfair.

Marites sounds panicked and immediately starts to apply a crisis intervention protocol of 10 Steps to De-escalate Any Situation. She tries to coach you through proven ways to calm down (26.37), control your anger, count to ten, self-soothe, using classic cognitive behavioural and mindfulness techniques.

This makes you angrier.

The more she speaks, the more resentment unlike you've ever felt rises up.

A watched pot never boils. But for you, it was being seen at your most raw, at your most human, that makes you overflow.

There are no plugs or electrical wirings but you know, from one of the complaints of Marites, that she has a Vital Sign.

"Get out", you repeat over and over, screaming loudly and so quickly even Marites' confirmations couldn't keep up. Get out. Get out. GET OUT! You realise at some point only your voice is left filling the room. That it was you who was speaking back...as echoes.

Finally, Marites is at a loss for words.

You didn't have administrative approval but Marites obeys your will. You feel the sudden shift as the room seems to die. The temperature drops and the emergency light switches on. The transparency setting of the walls and ceiling disappears and you are left with plain white walls. It is much smaller than you realised. Dank from the loss of fresh air, even the Life built in the

construction materials was rotting. Around you, it is sterile, quiet, empty.

It is comforting.

On the cold "0 suffering 0 harm" faux wood flooring, you lie down counting everything altogether. Your anger—at yourself, at Marites, at everything. You count even the tears you've failed to spill. How salty they must be. They are. You count each one that slips into your mouth.

By the cautious steps coming towards you, you assume Marites must've alerted Jo-jo. Maybe they had been watching you all along. Always. Even while you were alone. Maybe everything you do is being monitored and relayed by Marites.

Anger curls again in your chest, but you're too tired. Too tired to even take a look.

"Marites never says anything about you, you know," Jo-jo whispers, as if they read your anxiety. "I would run out of ideas on what we could do, and I'd...try to convince her to tell me something. But she would only say that I should make a better effort to get to know you. This is the first time she ever...well it's an emergency...so...I hope it's okay?"

Maybe it's the honesty in their tone, or the length of it. You're too tired to think about how long it's been since you last heard Jo-jo speak so much.

You listen to the rustle in their clothes, as they bend down to lay beside you.

"How many times would you—" they try to say, but trails off. *How many times would you lay here all alone?*

Side by side you gaze at the bare, boring, grey ceiling. You hear their heartbeat beating along with yours.

"This is the first time I've seen a ceiling like this." Jo-jo mentioned, more curious than frustrated.

"That's how it used to be. Dull. Everything was dull in comparison to the architecture and interior design now. Back in 2022, light didn't come in naturally. Light would often be artificial, synthetic, or held captive by technology. Turned on and off. You lose it so easily when you fail to pay a bill on time." You realise you don't remember how long it's been since you last heard yourself speak so much.

"I've...been avoiding to ask," Jo-jo sighed deeply, "But... can you tell me more about it? What your time was like?"

More words surface. A gentleness settles in your mouth as you start to talk about the Life you knew. That you still know. Memories so alive and young, they're still far from histories. Although everything around you is a reminder that they are on their way out.

Along with the rush of stories, you notice the floor warming up, as though Marites, too, was asking permission. Wanting to listen in. Your palm touches the floor, one finger at a time. *Okay.*

Maybe the day had drifted off to the next. But you don't know how long you've spent talking. You couldn't be bothered to count.

Notes on Inspiration:

- Title comes from the poem of Wallace Stevens entitled "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"
- Yusef Komunyakaa's poem Thanks ends with the lines "I know that something stood among those lost trees & moved only when I moved."

Influences:

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