

## The Quiet World

By Jeffrey McDaniel

In an effort to get people to look  
into each other's eyes more,  
and also to appease the mutes,  
the government has decided  
to allot each person exactly one hundred  
and sixty-seven words, per day.

When the phone rings, I put it to my ear  
without saying hello. In the restaurant  
I point at chicken noodle soup.  
I am adjusting well to the new way.

Late at night, I call my long distance lover,  
proudly say *I only used fifty-nine today.*  
*I saved the rest for you.*

When she doesn't respond,  
I know she's used up all her words,  
so I slowly whisper *I love you*  
thirty-two and a third times.  
After that, we just sit on the line  
and listen to each other breathe.

I start with that poem because my work is about space. Why it is important, how is it resistance, what does it allow us to do, but most importantly, what do we do with it when we get there? The poem posits a society that decides upon a definitive and absurd policy, not unlike *our* defining and absurd policies. But the 'quiet world' of the poem *is* different than the ones in our world at molecular level, because the word rationing comes from a society that identifies the need in its constituents for the soft electricity of eye contact, and too, a group of people who often are left out (the mutes). Is rationing wages, or health, or education in our reality any more reasonable than rationing words? Is it any more human?

All the poet really does in 'The Quiet World' is describes his external realities; pointing to soup on a menu, waiting to listen on the phone. But these external descriptions open up an internal world of experiences that let him, and us through him to feel and to know that outside world *differently*. This is what space can do. Listen to your neighbor breath.

<I want for us, now, to try that for a moment. Turn to someone close to you, preferably a stranger, for just a short uncomfortable moment. Hold each other's gaze, listen to each other breathe, and if you can bear being a bit vulnerable, hold their hand firmly in yours. For 30 seconds.>

Now, and for a long time before, possibly always, we've had cultures whose main objective was and is still the concentration of power. It's a very direct although extremely inefficient way to solve the problem of the insecurity of life. What then, if we took that singular effort and replaced 'the concentration of power' with the concentration of, say, 'compassion'? We all know what power means, even if we cannot always name it, we feel it. But by 'compassion' I don't mean the sticky sentimentality of pity or the smug resolve of charity, rather an act of striving toward something that cannot be reached. 'Compassion' that is predicated on the notion of the unquantifiable yet essential value of difference.

What then would a culture, by which we mean an economy, not motivated by the consolidation of power but the striving toward compassion look like?

What if we had the feeling of an abundance economy rather than a scarcity economy?

What does an economic model not based on 3% annual growth, which is the current standard for a healthy global economy, but 0% growth, or perhaps even a contracting economy look like?

What does that all look like? Who would live there? Is there any clean water left?

Here are some propositions:

#### An Economy of Compassion (or Refusing a culture of Power):

-Currency: Aside from money it is "the fact or quality of being generally accepted or in use". The only currency that exists in an economy of compassion is difference.

-Nothing is free here, because nobody pays. There is no concept of the relation of expense to that which is free because neither exists. Only need and generosity exist.

-That existence is terribly (and by that I mean 'sublimely' 'overwhelmingly' 'abjectly') complicated is incontestable if one has survived any period of time. But locating that complication, hence difference, in only the material dimensions of culture, language, relationships while confirming through a binary and reductive thinking the myth of a universal interior experience neatly shuts out that terrible sublimity of 'difference'. It's certainly much easier than facing the honesty of our unconquerable \*internal\* 'difference'. Because that would mean we're really finally and incurably alone. And when we accept that aloneness is the only legal *tender* is when we find how rich in experience we are.

-The opposite of cynicism isn't optimism, it's tenderness.

-There is no such thing as net worth or any other kind of set value or changing but constantly re-set value. Worth is based on engagement. Productivity is engagement. Value is in engagement.

-As we move towards dwindling resources and growing populations on the planet, the affective poverty of our present condition (which is the lack of reliable access to basic needs in terms of care, space, and dignity) would diminish. This will move us toward better addressing material poverty (the lack of reliable access to basic needs in terms of food, water, shelter, and health care).

-Plastic tonnage equals  $\frac{1}{3}$  that of fish in the oceans right now. That's not getting better anytime soon. Maybe it will just get worse more slowly.

-We center caring over producing. Every year we distribute resources where they are needed. No one starves; people mostly get the health care they need though it's not perfect, not even close. And people still die, every. single. day. But it's the only thing that's really fair.

-Scratching the sores from an encounter with poison ivy or poison oak feels tremendously relieving, even pleasurable, but one would rather not have sores to begin with.

-There is still suffering in the world, lots of it. But we're willing to face it now. Jimmy Baldwin says of struggle, "...what is crucial here is that if it hurt you, that is not what's

important. Everybody's hurt. What is important, what corrals you, what bullwhips you, what drives you, torments you, is that you must find some way of using this to connect you with everyone else alive. That is all you have to do it with. You must understand that your pain is trivial except insofar as you can use it to connect with other people's pain; and insofar as you can do that with your pain, you can be released from it, and then hopefully it works the other way around too; insofar as I can tell you what it is to suffer, perhaps I can help you to suffer less.". That is the role of the artist, he says, and I agree.

-Lastly, commodities cease to be what moves the markets because everything moves away from disposability. Instead, objects made are appreciated but not coveted. Art flourishes and everyone is an artist.