

TENACITY, ALIENATION AND CLASS IN *THE GONE THING*

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Monica McClure. *The Gone Thing*. Winter Editions, 2023.

In the 2004 film, *Take Out*, a handheld camera follows a Chinese immigrant in New York City through a long, breathless day of food delivery. Ming Ding scrambles breathlessly to repay his debt to a group of immigrant smugglers. Every frame seethes anxiety. Ding's life as a cyclical crisis contrasts with the cowl-like apathy of customers and passersby, which renders him invisible most of the day, confined to solitude in a city of millions. Alienation and paralyzing debt dominate the overwhelming majority of human life, and this trend is set to multiply as resources grow scarcer and displays of national power become more obliterative. Any work of literature produced in our era requires an integration of this pattern.

Another example comes from Monica McClure's 2023 collection, *The Gone Thing*. McClure's book addresses financial scarcity, especially in rural America. The holographic idylls which once propelled colonial mythos across the continent have collapsed into splintered fugues where, "we moved inside a system/that suffered but never died." I would not say that rurality, for McClure, represents a reprieve from white-knuckled cosmopolitan alienation. But *land* embodies an "undeniable necessity." The speaker "chews" on it, until precarity interferes and "makes me spit it out." Although McClure's poems are not primarily ecological in content, the writing is structured on an understanding of everyday life as hewn through crisis.

While this alienation is unmistakably present in *The Gone Thing*, moments of escape exist, often as gifts passed between commiserators. In the single-poem opening chapter, "*INHERITANCE*," McClure's speaker describes working in retail as a teenager, learning the contours of financial precarity. Throughout the poem, McClure makes a motif of the verb *to give*: "I gave my sisters rising flurries of pebbles which sumptuously overflow their champagne flutes/...I gave my younger sister an \$18 cocktail/I gave my youngest sister microgreens dressed in preserved lemon/Ring pop yacht yacht yacht gunshot automatic." Readers observe rapid fluctuations in tone—from resignation to bloodthirst to sardonicism to celebration—as McClure surveys class society: "Yes I am talking about being poor in America/Suck my dick I'm no longer poor I'm high salaried/I lubricate the

hinges of information design....” Swagger and complexity are consistent traits of McClure’s writing, stretching back to her debut full-length, *Tender Data*. These traits directly contradict the domesticatory mechanisms of the early 21st century, which include widespread illiteracy, cowardice, fatigue and paranoid narcissism.

In other words, McClure cultivates a confrontational voice because that is what survival requires. Each poem stacks brisk declaratives atop one another, building a braggadocious velocity. “Meekness is a baton traveling down a river, pausing at every dam./Blessed are the crimes of the American poor/for they will inherit horses.” If all economic vectors require your decimation, survival will inevitably become, nominally, “criminal.” “Let us send a herd to trample the market. She’s devoured my hours. She’s shrunk my life.” The criminal archetype understands courage as the essential lively posture. This also happens to be an irremovable feature of any actionable politics, as history proves in abundance. McClure’s poetics has *tenacity*, a trait drained from an increasing swath of social life, and one that ought to be preserved with icy, relentless courage.

Above examples mostly develop through the speaker’s experience with working class life, but alienation is embodied in other ways as well. For instance, *The Gone Thing* critiques the inculcation of the American middle class into an irrational, emaciating project. Cuttingly, McClure writes “Joy is/Sharing domination and the art of everyday terror/With a spouse with whom you’ve made/Irreversible mistakes that still feel trivial.” McClure’s sequence, “BABIES,” at times assumes the voice of a professional managerial subject. This subject requires mystified socialization, so large portions of the first-world live as contradictions, twisting themselves sore to justify an opulent unreality. “Employment is a strange country./Its loves are not my loves.” In contrast to other passages, this subsumption is written with prevailing fatalism. Life in America is scrambled by a tragic, asinine irony, and McClure incorporates that irony as a vocal trait. “I am simple and virtuous/But my country moneys my layette...” Never separating themselves from the perplexing “art of everyday terror,” *The Gone Thing’s* speaker uses irony for emotionally-charged critique. This distinguishes the text from the self-conscious posturing popular among professional and academic cohorts during the 2010s. McClure uses the malleability of the speaker as an *ieron*, a dissembler, an antagonist to egoic obfuscation.

The eponymous closing poem—a barbed, looping, eight-page stream--synthesizes both sets of financial circumstances previously mentioned. “We tried to go home with ourselves/But when we got there our labor stood/... She’s a long glassy tooth that we kiss/Goodnight....” When I read the poem,

I thought about the exigence of alienation, the profit incentive for confining people to atomized impotence, for “devouring our hours” in service of “intellectual minnows who take/Our most common deeds and build from them concepts.” I thought about the arbitrary nature of this extraction, the pompousness of a tyrant who might say “Who are you dithering out in the open Not/Trying to be rich or remembered.” And *this* is the enemy: the reduction of all earthen life to narcissistic transaction, and when I read *The Gone Thing*, I am reminded of the incisive, relentless response poetry can offer to that threat.