GRETCHEN STEELE PRATT

Bone Prayer

—New Bedford Whaling Museum

Though for decades the whale skeleton, still heavy with the creature’s oil, is suspended from the rafters, bolted with pinions, taut metal cords, and the oil drips from the ribs, the jaw, onto the museum floor

Though the bones were first soaked in manure, then cured like leather, then left to dry for three years in the sun on the roof of the museum

Though the weather has me here all afternoon, the rain lashing the windows and the warm wood beams creaking like a ship

Though the children of New Bedford have named the whale King of the Blue Ocean

Though nothing in our time burns as bright and clear, and we would find its flame unfamiliar

Though the bones go on imagining the whale, while the statues in the old unlocked churches weep oil and blood, sign of sorrow for the world

Though lanterns long unlit, but this is no dark church

Though the whale’s flesh was removed at the town dump

Though at home my children practice lockdown drills for fun

Though it is three in the afternoon, each day marked with the Hour of Our Lord’s Greatest Suffering

Though gravity wrings oil from bone

Though my grandmother told me the Rosary could solve any problem, and I had one with beads made of rose petals

Though I wake each morning with a nun’s heart

Though this is a lockdown please secure all doors and lights off

Though the bones keep their own time
Though as a child my mother took me to see the face of the Holy Mother in a wounded tree trunk

Though the pilgrims are elsewhere, the Incorruptibles, the saint in her glass coffin, not recumbent but seated, her eyes blue as the day she died

Though a sweet fragrance once issued from her coffin

Though the tractless sea, the blown-out beeswax tapers

Though I walk the length of spine

Though there are trails of salt and dried blood on the wooden cheeks of the statues

Though if children are outside during a lockdown, they should run into the woods with their teacher

Though the whale songs play on a loop, and the weather of the harbor has me here all afternoon

Though the embers hiss when dumped overboard

Though the eyes of the statues well up as we sleep, their tears shed for our ills

Though I have caught not a drop of oil

Though the churches in my town were always unlocked

Though there was a different era of light

Though they will drip for decades to come

Though the cloak was burst with roses

Though my mother made the sign of the cross on my forehead each night before bed

Though the bones are swaying

Though this Bedford was once the City That Lit The World