

[poetry selected by Katherine Gallagher]

Road Show

When it came to our town the Mayor declared a holiday,
not a stroke of work got done, my father blamed the fly-posters,

overnight they had plied their trade and the place got plastered,
walls bawling out Sensational! Educational! Do not miss this!

The weather was fine – we queued for hours, train drivers
left their engines steaming, the road sweeper threw away his broom,

dreaming salesmen abandoned their cars, in St. Opportune's Primary,
class-rooms were empty, the dairy closed, the milk went sour,

the bakery shut, not a loaf of bread to be had, the midwives struck,
so Mrs. Bucktrout at Number 10 was out of luck and delivered herself

of mewling twins but eight minutes later she lined them up
with the rest of us, no priority asked, none given. The one-eyed busker

and the ice-cream man both made a fortune, gangs of pick-pockets
had it easy, even the kids grabbed a bob or two hawking lemonade

and ginger bangs at tuppence a go, that incredible, indelible day
of the Great Black Whale Road Show, and when our turn came

we filed in through the ebony ribs into the far, high arch of vertebrae –
it haunted us for years – the gibbering candles, the sour wet smell

of rot and nightmares – and everything pickled in tar, from
its monstrous, mummified head to the rigid flick of its tail.

Angela Kirby