The title of Robert Pinsky’s “The Want Bone” identifies itself immediately as a poem about desire. The title says, on the one hand, that there is a bone called the want bone, but it also suggests that this bone has wants or desires. So the bone may not be a literal bone at all but a symbol. By the end of the poem, we come to understand that this bone is a symbol of human experience and that what defines human experience is longing.

Ironically, this human longing is shown through human absence. The poem begins: “The tongue of the waves tolled in the earth’s bell” (Pinsky line 1). It is not a human tongue but the “tongue of the waves” the poem opens with, and its sound is not a human voice but “the earth’s bell.” Hollowness is evoked by the image of the earth as a vast bell and also by the hollowness of the sound of the word “tolled.” The sound of the “o” is open, like the mouth that pronounces it. This openness is elongated by the “l” silenced only at the final “d,” which closes the mouth. The emptiness continues in the next line, in the description of “The dried mouthbones of a shark” (3) that “Gaped on nothing but sand on either side” (4). Here the word “Gaped” is clearly a pun, meaning both open-mouthed and open-eyed, seeing “nothing but sand,” the absence of life. The shark, being dead, sees nothing, and we, who are looking on, see nothing living. It is this perception of hollowness or emptiness, this absence that gives rise to the speaker’s longing.

The speaker, in describing the bone as “A scalded toothless harp, uncrushed, unstrung” (6), presents us with an image of something that is not only lifeless but without purpose or meaning. He lists not what the bone is but what it is “less” and what it isn’t (“un”). It’s missing flesh—the
flesh having been “scalded” off—and teeth (life). But it has also gone “uncrushed [and] unstrung.” This bone is now the only reminder (and only a reminder) of a life that has been emptied, silenced. It is a life that the speaker can only long for and that only the living, human speaker and we can long for.

As if in an attempt to fill this absence, the bone becomes for the speaker and for us “the shape of birth and craving” (7). But because birth is followed immediately by craving, even if birth is a possibility, it is birth into longing for which there is no answer or remedy, only “O” (8), more hollowness. Likewise in the next stanza, the speaker asks, “But where was the limber grin, the gash of pleasure?” (11), knowing that no answer will be satisfactory. The response—“Infinitesimal mouths bore it away” (12)—can only explain the death, not restore the life. Thus it cannot quench the longing.

In the final stanza, the poem gives voice to the shark, bringing it to life, having it exclaim plaintively: “But O I love you it sings my little my country / My food my parent my child I want you my own / My flower my fin my life my lightness my O’” (14-16). And its voice is the voice of longing. Between the two “O’s,” is everything that death eventually hollows out, but here too the examples reflect human existence more than they do the shark’s. So really the “I” belongs to the human speaker, who speaks for the shark but reveals his own longing, his love for everything that has already been lost, summed up by the hollowness of the final “O.”

The want bone, then, the longing it represents, which first seems like a synecdoche, a part representative of the whole once living shark is, in fact, really a metonymy, something that stands in for the shape of human existence. But this image is like the negative of a photograph, depicting not what is there but what is wanting and wanted. The poem is both or neither celebratory nor mournful. It illustrates the shape and feeling of longing.
The Want Bone  
By Robert Pinsky

The tongue of the waves tolled in the earth’s bell.  
Blue rippled and soaked in the fire of blue.  
The dried mouthbones of a shark in the hot swale  
Gaped on nothing but sand on either side.

The bone tasted of nothing and smelled of nothing,  
A scalded toothless harp, uncrushed, unstrung.  
The joined arcs made the shape of birth and craving  
And the welded-open shape kept mouthing O.

Ossified cords held the corners together  
In groined spirals pleated like a summer dress.  
But where was the limber grin, the gash of pleasure?  
Infinitesimal mouths bore it away,

The beach scrubbed and etched and pickled it clean.  
But O I love you it sings, my little my country  
My food my parent my child I want you my own  
my flower my fin my life my lightness my O.