GRETCHEN STEELE PRATT

This Is How You Must Leave

—*Seaside Heights, NJ*

The rollercoaster rusts in the ocean—
   at high tide only the peaks
   visible, at low we see

every plunge.
   Black scaffolding of the old century,
   now the long wash
down the next.
   At dawn the sun rises from
   the coaster,
a burnt building.
   Teenagers swim out
   at sunset, drink

from their silver flasks,
   legs swinging from
   the peaks.

They cheer the moment
   the sun drops inland and
   the whirligig lights

of the boardwalk
   whir on—
   Pirate’s Plunge, Surf Shack,

Moby Dick,
   Shore Shot, Wave
   Singer, SuperStorm.

The rollercoaster does not
   lift with
   the waves and the teenagers

stand the rails, wait
   for a big one and leap
   into the canyon
left as it passes through.  
    This is how  
    you must leave.

It could collapse  
    at any moment—  
    lifeguards staple the warnings

to pilings  
    along the boardwalk.  
    And yet

there is no talk  
    of taking it down—  
    it has lent some ancient tone

to this stretch of shore,  
    like the shipwrecks  
    in our dreams that

disintegrate as we wake.  
    The children throw  
    their white rocks

toward it, summer  
    steepens, and  
    in a tattoo parlor

on the boardwalk,  
    a man leans  
    forward, his t-shirt lifted

above his shoulders.  
    Over his entire back—  
    the coaster,

almost complete.  
    The door to the parlor  
    is flung open
so the tattoo artist can
    see the thing
    and get it right—

launch track,
    lift hill,
    each black brace—

it is needled in—
    the roiling sea.