

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

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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.