The Death of a Gulf Coast Town

We are all there, gathered
around the television flashing
images of storm swell, downed power lines,
roofs peeled back like paper wrappers,
the few who refused to leave plucked
one by one from the tops of their houses,
from the beds of their pickups driven out
to higher ground, now left to flood and rust
among tree trunks snapped and shredded
to the pith. A gas station’s siding is stripped away
and we watch it flutter and twist and disappear
into the gray that is both sea and sky,
and my mother knows it well, that stretch
of beach, now flooded, where as a girl
she used to play, patting gobs of sand
and piling them one by one into a wall,
then defying her brother, three years older,
to knock it down, which he did with one
swift kick, later sent by their father
to apologize and help rebuild, my mother,
not yet my mother, nodding silently
and sucking in air to stop her crying,
her brother, now dead seven years, his children
far away, her father, too, and now,
the town she both remembers and has forgotten
long ago is sinking, the waters rising to cover
the fence line of her elementary school,
the baseball diamond, the souvenir store,
where, as a child, she spent hours
selecting the perfect present.