**Exit Zero**

*Just outside of Mobile, Alabama*

Courtney Justus

I.

I know river cities. Grey banks cut in slants

by human hands, asphalt opening like a mouth

to snake rubbled through the green, Tex-Mex

spots and coffee shops dotting the promenades

I love to walk, 7 Elevens and Citgos sprouting

on the muddy ledges from the Cape Fear –

from Wilmington of river bridges, coffee dregs

in all my mugs – to the Gulf Coast of my birth,

to Houston where my mother cracked crab legs

and I plucked their meat, my father staring

at the barges crawling across the water grey

as a fossil, the boats’ burgundy husks creaking

in the current.

I loved red brick baking under

San Antonio summer sun, raspberry paletas

in every season, sweat licking shoulder blades

from April until October.

I’ve always

loved Houston though I forget the name

of my first street. Was my house mint green?

Did we grow tomatoes in the backyard, vines

sprouting at the window by my crib? Did my

father still wear shirts the color of a tainted sun

as he grilled spareribs, took my chubby hand

as I tottered by the stale water in our inflatable

pink pool?

We feasted pink back then: fresh

shrimp on childhood trips through Louisiana,

at the shack right before the I-10 bridge, each

steely table sticky, arcade machines flicking

pink neon across the surface between plastic

baskets, the highway bending like a backbone.

II.

I drive these roads alone, hazy April, long after

my father stopped being a father. At Exit Zero,

I watch the highway part like a snake halving

itself, Billie Eilish humming as long as I’m

here, no one can hurt you. I don’t stop, not

for shrimp or Pac-Man or Galaga, which

my father always won; blue eyes hollow

as he gripped the joystick in a fist.

I rise at dawn with the fire

alarm, look one more time

at this grey river city, tongues

of asphalt tasting grit, red brick

I will never touch with both

hands, and then I am gone.