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... And Mourning Jubilee

By RAVI HOWARD

MOBILE, Ala.

MY uncle worked at the Scott paper mill on the western shore of Mobile Bay, and through the day he watched the direction of the smoke rising from the stacks. He continued to check the wind after he made it home to Daphne, on the eastern shore, standing in his backyard lighting matches and watching the movement of the smoke. Neighbors and relatives joined him through the night. A cool breeze blowing east was one of the signs of an impending jubilee.

On a few nights each summer — no one knows precisely when — the waters of Mobile Bay push thousands of fish and crabs onto the shores around Daphne. Decaying leaves and sediment from the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta flow into the bay, lowering the water's oxygen level. The fish stop swimming and float to the surface. Most of them end up on the beach, stunned but alive and ready to be harvested.

Word spreads quickly, and people from Daphne and the surrounding cities crowd onto the shore to collect the free seafood. It is a rare, unpredictable moment that happens nowhere else but Mobile Bay. Thanks to the BP oil spill, we're wondering if it will ever happen again.

The word "jubilee" is a term often found in slave narratives and spirituals, used to mark religious celebrations and emancipation. It's a fitting name for a natural phenomenon in Mobile Bay, a waterway once called the Bay of the Holy Spirit.

The jubilee tide is communal: there's more than enough for everyone. It's what some French speakers on the Gulf might call a "lagniappe," something extra or unexpected, or in the case of

the jubilee, pounds and pounds of something extra, free of charge, a reprieve from the cost of living.

I grew up in Montgomery, a few hours north, and every so often a jubilee happened during family visits. The morning after the jubilee felt like a holiday, complete with gifts from the Bay, bin after bin of blue crab covering the linoleum floor of my aunt and uncle's kitchen. The family gathering that had started in their backyard, fueled by hope and speculation, ended with the crab boils and cookouts in the weeks that followed.

I moved to Mobile in part because of this experience — because of the water and the familiar places that dot the shoreline. I grew up with the jubilee, a real-life legend built around sweet anticipation and mystery. Now we wait again, but not for something rare and joyous. Now we wait to see if there will be a jubilee at all.

Ravi Howard is the author of the novel "Like Trees, Walking."