

Goodbye Cloud Reflections in the Bay

Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana

FOR A LONG TIME, I THOUGHT THE STORY OF THE ISLE DE Jean Charles ended beneath Edison's persimmon tree. With him and Chris both staying in the place that shaped them, even when that place was changing irrevocably. But in May 2016, nearly three years after my first visit to the island, the *New York Times* runs a front-page article with the headline "Resettling the First American 'Climate Refugees.'" Above the fold is an aerial photograph of what little remains of the island.

I call Chris immediately and ask if he is going to leave.

"Yes," he says. "I'm not celebrating, but I'm going."

Three months later, I am back on the island for what I imagine will be the last time. As I drive out on the Island Road I try to notice what, if anything, has changed. Perhaps the oil refinery is sitting a little lower on its stilts—or perhaps a few more cracked cypresses have dropped into the encroaching sea? Though I know there must be *slightly* more water here, to my eye everything is just

as it was the last time I came to Jean Charles. Still my knowledge that relocation will go forward alters my relationship to the landscape, if not the physical land itself. I feel as though I must say goodbye to every little thing I pass.

Goodbye sno-ball shack and snowy egret.

Goodbye sign that says, "Home Lift Slabs or Pier."

Goodbye cloud reflections in the bay.

Goodbye algae-covered jetty, and the men with their taut lines and their pickups parked alongside.

Goodbye shrimp lurking in the seagrass stalks.

Goodbye persimmon tree.

By the time I reach Edison's moss-green cottage I am getting pretty good at saying goodbye. Inside, his wife, Elizabeth, is watching television. At first she doesn't want to tell me where Edison is. Then I explain that I interviewed him some years ago and that I have brought a small gift. Eventually she acquiesces. "He's down on the bayou, the one across the road," she says, "throwing the cast net."

I walk down the blowsy bayou spine and there in the first cove is Edison, his shirt sun bleached and soaked through with sweat. A pile of oyster shells heaped at his feet. He is heavier than before, his hair longer.

"Edison," I say, "I'm not sure if you remember me. I was here a couple years ago, and—" I am uncertain of how to continue, of how to distinguish myself from the parade of journalists and writers and documentarians who have probably been here since. "You gave me a cluster of oyster shells from your altar, and I brought you something in return." I hand him a hand-painted ceramic rooster from Providence. "They say it brings good luck into a house," I add. He motions for me to lay the figurine in the high grass, his hands salty and wet with bayou brine.

“How’s the altar?” I ask.

“Gone, flood took it all away,” Edison says.

I look back across the road to where the altar once stood and see nothing but layer upon layer of roseau cane and cordgrass. I turn back toward Edison, thinking through my list of questions. They are all different versions of the same thing: Are you going to leave the island?

Just then two representatives from Concordia, the architecture firm hired by HUD to orchestrate the resettlement, appear. They have mod sunglasses and accents from away. The older of the two looks at me and asks if she is interrupting something.

“No,” I say, curious to see what they want.

Edison shifts his weight back and forth—momentarily, it seems, feeling surrounded.

“We’re conducting a survey,” says the younger one.

“I’m not leaving,” Edison responds. “This is my home. You can write that down.”

“What is it that you like about your home?” She flips open her clipboard.

“I have no interest in moving into a poorly made house fifty miles inland,” Edison says. “If you want me to move, why don’t you let me find my place, where I want? I could build in my son’s yard in Bourg.”

“In order to be part of the resettlement you have to move in with the rest of the community.”

The older woman removes her sunglasses and adds, “When the relocation is complete, the road to the island won’t be repaired after a storm.”

Edison looks right at her, unblinking. “I know you’re not saying everything you know. I can tell by your eyes,” he responds.

To which the woman says nothing at all.

When I first heard that nearly \$50 million had been allocated

to the islanders I was ecstatic. In the three years since my initial visit to Jean Charles I had watched a handful of other coastal communities band together to try to secure state, federal, and private funds for their retreat. Some, like the residents of Oakwood Beach, had been successful, while others, like those living in Kivalina, Alaska, had not. Then came the National Disaster Resilience Competition, which grew out of a series of planning workshops hosted by the Rockefeller Foundation in Sandy's wake.

The goal was to encourage communities to consider not only how they could recover but also how to avoid future losses. All state and local governments with major disasters declared between 2011 and 2013 were invited to participate and submit a design proposal that would use recovery funds in an innovative and forward-thinking manner. HUD awarded over \$1 billion to thirteen different project proposals. Louisiana received nearly \$100 million to protect coastal wetlands, retrofit communities to withstand increased flood risk, and, in the case of the Isle de Jean Charles, experiment with relocating residents *in advance* of the next storm. The state would purchase open space inland and build dignified residences for the islanders, likely even those who had left long before the most recent flood. From a remove, it seems like a win-win.

But up close, relocation is more complicated than I had imagined. The woman's comment about a future where the roadway won't be repaired acts like a threat on Edison. He digs his heels in even deeper.

"Don't come in here and take me and put me where you want," Edison says, his voice getting louder with each word. "What am I going to do inland, watch TV and get old quick?" He has a point, I think. I wouldn't want anyone telling me where I had to live, especially when I had figured out a way to be happy where I was.

"There's talk of building a pond on the project site so you can keep fishing."

“You call casting a line into a stocked puddle fishing?” Edison snaps.

“We hear you, loud and clear,” says the younger of the two. Then the pair turn around and walk away. If Edison won’t fill out their questionnaire, they aren’t interested in keeping the conversation going.

He looks at me then as if to say, *You’re still here?*

I tell him about my work on this book, about the inadvertently coercive retreat in Pensacola and about Oakwood and the buyouts there, how residents got to choose where they wanted to go. But while Oakwood was full of working-class whites, postal workers, and civil servants, those who live here are seen, first and foremost, as Native Americans, even if the federal government doesn’t formally recognize them as such. As I speak I begin to see that the communities with the least options going into a flood have predictably fewer paths toward equitable relocation afterward.

“I guess one of the reasons the grant money was allocated to the island is because they want to bring the tribe back together,” I say. It sounds like I am trying to convince Edison to leave, so I add, “You know, Albert says, ‘If you put the pieces of a chopped-up snake alongside one another it will reanimate. The snake will become whole once again.’”

“If we do have to move, make sure the ones in charge walk out front,” Edison says. I nod and a bead of sweat falls into my eye.

Together we stand in stunned, hot silence. The air is full of lovebugs. I watch two land on Edison’s faded blue T-shirt, right next to the dime-size hole worn through near his belly button. After mating, adult pairs remain coupled for days, even in flight. Their larvae feed on decaying vegetation, which is likely why the number of them living in the Gulf Coast’s drowning wetlands has skyrocketed over the past fifty years.

“And the shrimping, how’s that?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Better than it was.” Edison leans down and tilts the white five-gallon bucket toward me. It is at least a third of the way full, hundreds of live shrimp squirming at the bottom. For a while we talk about the tides and the return of the Louisiana browns after the disastrous Deepwater Horizon explosion five years earlier. “Come back later and I’ll give you some, cleaned and all.”

I tell Edison thank you, that it is good to see him and that I will come back closer to sunset, when it is cooler. I am about to step over the rooster and go when I turn to him and say, “I’ve put it there on the ground.”

“I won’t forget it. Not ever,” Edison responds.

I suspect that most who travel to Jean Charles these days either want to carry the story of the island away from the island, like me, or else are trying to convince Edison to move. Few, I imagine leave something, anything, behind.

On my way back to the car I pass a new sign that Edison has tacked next to the old one. It reads, “THEY SAY THE ISLAND IS FADiNg AWAY SOON WE WiLL NOT hAVE A ISLANd LEFT. iF THE ISLAND is NOT GOOD STAY AWAY. MAY God BleSS THE ISLAND!!!”



I park my car in the empty lot across from Edison’s place and walk the rest of the way back out to Chris’s house.

I walk past the husk of the home where I once saw Howard and Juliette jumping on an abandoned mattress. The roof is missing and the pilings are all charred. Past the empty fire station and the abandoned fishing camps. Past trailer homes with their contents spilling out like organs from a wrecked body.

Eventually I arrive at Chris’s. I walk up the long flight of stairs

to the front door. Everything looks exactly as it was, except that the swimming pool is gone and the sheets in the interior have all been taken down. Chris is there, sitting behind a hot plate, frying hamburgers. He hands me a slender patty sandwiched between two slices of Wonder Bread and I set it on the table so we can embrace. Ever since my first visit to the island, we have stayed in touch. Chris always calls on Christmas and Easter. I send him photocopies of the articles I write.

“Thank you,” I say.

“For what?” Chris responds. “The hamburger? No, it’s nothing. You have to eat, shore up, to make it through the day.”

“No, thank you for taking care of me. When I first came out here, I was in the middle of leaving a life I’d built and you fed me and welcomed me into your home. Showed me a kindness I’ll never forget.”

“Aw, child, all of us out here remember you. I’m glad you came out the other side, that’s all.”

I hand Chris a ceramic rooster like the one I gave to Edison, a hand-painted heart on its chest. “There are a lot of Portuguese in Providence, the town where I moved,” I tell him. “Over a hundred years ago, they came to Rhode Island for the fishery jobs, and many of them stayed. They say these roosters bring blessings into a home, no matter where it is.” He unwraps the animal from its plastic and places it right in front of his big-screen TV.

“Let’s go down to the porch,” Chris says. “There’s a nice breeze.”

We spend the entire morning beneath the house, following the shade as it moves from the western side of the slab to directly underneath. I tell Chris about Rhode Island, my new job and new beau. He tells me about Juliette’s sudden transformation into a teenager and Howard’s football practices, touching here and there on the relocation.

“Ever since the *New York Times* ran that article, there have been at least three television and movie crews out here every week. Since I don’t tend to go far,” he says, tapping the wheel of his chair, “it’s kind of nice. The world coming to me and all. Last week there was a group from Holland.” I look at Chris and smile. In case I am jealous, he adds, “But I don’t keep in touch with anyone else, that’s only you and me.”

Just after noon a white Cadillac Escalade parks in the driveway and a television crew pours out, unloading camera equipment, boom mics, and rolling dollies. They don’t come over.

“I forgot about them,” Chris tells me, lowering his voice. “I think they’re from *National Geographic*.”

I tell Chris I don’t want to keep him. I will be sure to return the next day, to say goodbye. I step back and watch the young men with their grizzled beards, tortoiseshell glasses, and ball caps swarm around my friend. First they ask him to roll over to the eastern side of the slab where the sun isn’t so bright. Then they hold up light meters and hand Chris a lavalier mic. They prompt him to say something for practice.

“I am making a choice today for tomorrow,” Chris says. The words flow out with rehearsed ease.

I walk back down the length of the island to my rental car. When Edison sees me coming he descends the set of stairs that connect his cottage to the road. At the bottom he hands me a ziplock bag full of freshly caught shrimp and a second of shrimp jerky.

“I dried it, spiced it myself,” he says.

That night I sauté the fresh ones, drowning the whole lot in butter and mixing it with spaghetti. It is the best scampi I have ever had. The flavor deepened by my knowledge that Edison caught these shrimp himself, in the bayou behind his house. Though I hate to admit it, I think, *Someday that bayou will be gone.*

“Goodbye,” I say aloud to no one, popping the last pink shrimp into my mouth.



My visit to the island is short—I’ve squeezed it between Pensacola and the start of the new school year—so the next afternoon I drive out to Chris’s one last time. Together he and I and a cousin of his, Walton, drink a dozen cans of Bud Light. Unlike my previous work trips, this feels less like research and more like a farewell or a homecoming; I can’t exactly tell which. I have a hard time separating excavation from elegy. The confusion of the two, however, leads me to conclude that drinking weak beer under Chris’s house is a perfectly acceptable way to spend my final afternoon on Jean Charles.

Chris tells me that the wife of his other cousin, Dalton, gave birth to a baby boy in the night. From there the conversation turns nostalgic, with both men remembering their fathers when they passed. Walton’s had contracted a debilitating form of diabetes that took his right leg and later his life. Shortly after he died, Gustav wrecked the family trailer and Walton moved to Houma. Still within spitting distance of the island, but far enough in to avoid all but the strongest of storms.

“I make it out once a month, sometimes more,” he says, walking over to his pickup truck to pull another can from the back.

Walton and I talk about all the different drivers behind the National Disaster Resilience Competition, speculating on just how much of the allocated funds will end up aiding directly in the relocation. He thinks that everyone from New Orleans to Houma is going to want a slice of the pie and that far less than anyone imagines will end up making it all the way out here. Growing tired of the steady stream of acronyms we use to describe the

various stakeholders, Chris eventually interjects. “Quit using all those fancy words,” he says, slapping his hand on the table and taking another sip of cold beer.

It’s a joke, and I can tell that it is not designed to sting. Chris makes fun of just about everyone he loves. But it makes me think that no matter how close we have become over the years, I will always be from away. No matter how good I get at leaving—a loved one, a rental apartment, an adopted state, an advantageous work relationship—I am not an islander, not the one who has to figure out how to say goodbye to a swollen home on a sodden island that for a good two hundred years few cared for or visited.

Chris pulls out his photo book. He has got it well organized now, with clippings of his favorite articles about the discovery of oil on the bayou laminated alongside Polaroids of past storms and portraits of each of his family members.

“When folks ask me what the island used to be like, I show them this,” he says with pride.

After three Bud Lights I am both bloated and buzzed. The early evening light is a clear and glowing thing and I am deeply glad I made the drive. Regardless of how familiar I have become with the idea of human communities moving in, looking past the bare arms of the dead cypress trees that line Chris’s drive out into the open water that surrounds his soon-to-be-former home unhinges me still.

“What are you going to do with your pirogue?” I ask, pointing to the flat-bottomed boat near the refrigerator.

“Don’t get out into it often now,” he says. “Last time was about three years ago. And I tell you what, when I looked back at the island, most of it had disappeared. I knew then that at some point in the future Jean Charles would be gone.” Like Yellow Cotton Bay and English Bay in nearby Plaquemines Parish, its name will eventually be removed from the maps. The inked black letters will

fade into blue. After the last crumb of red earth that once was Jean Charles dissolves into the Gulf, after the emergency that is the loss of a home place passes, something else will emerge from the salt water. The story of the island will replace the island itself, and those who loved Jean Charles will guard that tale, just as the Penobscot in Maine still celebrate the caribou a century after colonists killed the very last one.



Months later I am asked to respond to a lecture given by Harriet Tregoning, the former director of the Office of Economic Resilience at HUD and the woman who launched the competition paying for the relocation of the islanders. The event organizer hopes that I will add an “on-the-ground perspective,” which I understand as an invitation to share Chris’s and Edison’s experiences with the planners, bureaucrats, and environmental engineers whose work affects those living at the hard edge of climate change. It felt like a huge responsibility, but one that I was honored to have been asked to bear.

During Harriet’s lecture, she shows only two slides of the island. The first is a then-and-now comparison. In one aerial photograph the island is huge and green and pastoral, and in the other it is nothing more than a solitary road surrounded by the Gulf. “This is how much land has been lost in less than fifty years,” Harriet says. The second slide is of the Island Road in a storm. Water laps over the crumbling edges of the macadam while a single lone figure forges on, out toward the shell of Jean Charles.

I realize instantly that the image is a still taken from the movie *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. The figure isn’t an actual resident of the island but the film’s six-year-old protagonist, Hushpuppy. Her afro is backlit in the storm light and her tattered white

T-shirt slips from her right shoulder, weighted down with rainwater. She's walking back out to the Isle de Charles Doucet (as it is called in the film) because she, like the rest of the residents, refuses to leave. It is a shot that Benh Zeitlin, the director, hung around deep into hurricane season to get. While the person in the image is fictional, the landscape and the flooding depicted are not. Likely the scene was filmed during Tropical Storm Lee, when the tidal surge topped five feet.

I wonder if Harriet knows that her image was staged; if she knows that in another context it signifies something else entirely—resiliency in place—and the extent to which its origins matter. The funny thing is, when Benh Zeitlin made his magical-realist indie epic he couldn't have known just how fundamentally it would end up mirroring real life. He didn't know that millions would be set aside to get the islanders to move in, and that there would be some, like Hushpuppy, who refused to leave no matter what. If nothing else, when you understand the provenance of the image illuminated above Harriet's head you can see, clearly, that the environmental apocalypse we often think of as existing only in films is already with us. The lines between our imagined futures and the present tense grow increasingly blurry with every passing day.

In the Q&A session a man in a blue checkered shirt moves toward the microphone and asks the million-dollar question: "If retreat is a useful adaptation strategy, how can we make more people interested in giving up their homes?"

"I'm not sure you can," I hear myself say. "It has to be a decision a person arrives at themselves. Those who feel forced aren't going." This logic holds true for most anyone, but especially for those whose homes were hard won and left alone by the greater community as they came undone.

Where Chris sees opportunity, Edison sees coercion. Where

pull up our roots and move in. When we suffer unthinkable losses we can conjure images of what once was. In the future, the children of Howard and of Juliette, should they have them, will hear thousands of stories of the island, some real, some transfigured through a game of telephone that began even before their grandfather was born. I imagine that when Chris's descendants are living high above the highest tides they will say, "Long ago the island was a magical place. So magical that many who once lived *there* moved *here* to keep its memory alive."