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COMMERCIAL FISHING

Rising Down

J. T. Blatty spent five years photographing the commercial fishing communities of southeastern Louisiana. Her new book offers in an intimate portrait of their disappearing way of life.

BY DZANA TSOMONDO

Fish Town: *Down the Road to Louisiana's Vanishing Fishing Communities*, a new book by J. T. Blatty about life in southeastern Louisiana's fishing communities, is a compelling and unpretentious document of a region and its people, surviving in the face of economic decline and rising, warming seas. Blatty's view of the region she photographed over the course of five years is unvarnished and unsentimental: washed and wrung of its color. There are many striking images but few of them are beautiful in a traditional sense. This is a community at work, and occasionally at rest: clinging to this wild, overgrown land, its dark, patient water, and the lush swamps where the two meet. The book offers candid,

intimate moments sandwiched between the mounds of glistening shrimp and acres of rusting corrugated metal.

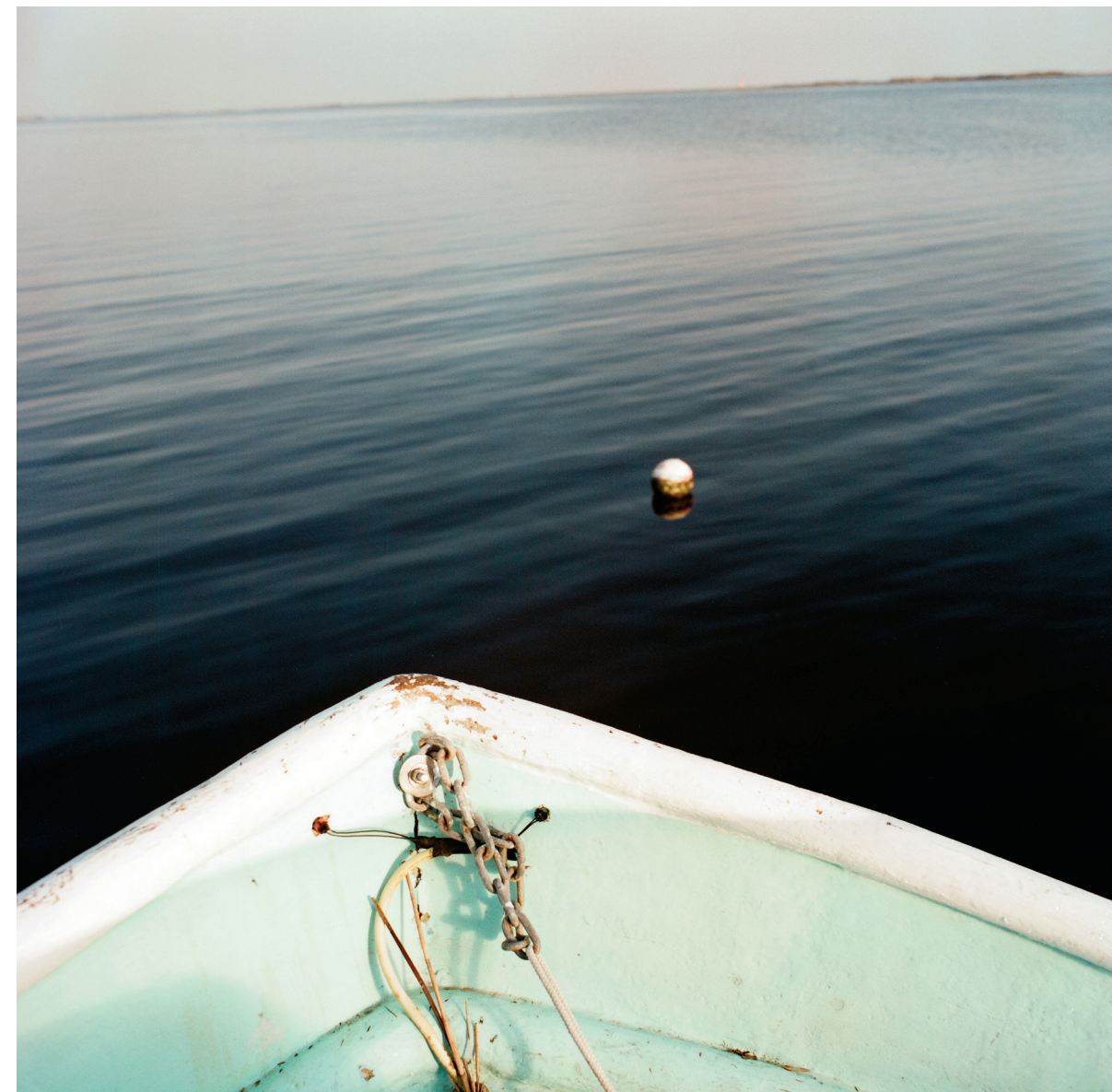
A West Point graduate and veteran of the war in Afghanistan, Blatty says she was drawn to the project in part because commercial fishing reminded her of her military career. "I've always identified myself with the hard working, salty and gritty guys, probably because of the army, the simplicity of life, the camaraderie," Blatty explains. "Then there's also that parallel to the seclusion of a combat zone. In the bayou, there's no cell phone service. You're in this remote world, almost a wild west, with no one but these people and nature."

Most of the work was shot in the St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes, aboard five or six different boats. But beyond the fishermen, boat owners and dockside buyers, *Fish Town* is suffused with a sense of place, and of time, that belies its documentary style. The focus is on people and their labor, but in between those hauls of crustaceans and fish there are quiet moments of magic. Long-abandoned Fort Beauregard, tipping out of the water like a fairytale castle; aerial shots of the waterways, empty roads cutting through them like old scars; a Hurricane Katrina memorial rising from the water like the prow of a lost galleon.

Blatty was born in New Orleans, but was introduced to the life aquatic in Georgia's coastal Low Country, where she moved after she was discharged from the army in 2006. Going to war had influenced Blatty's decision to pursue a career in photography. She'd always made pictures, she says, but "in Afghanistan, I really remember being drawn to capturing the world around me because it was a way to share my life with a world at home that I was so disconnected from." Fresh out of the army and living in Savannah, she started spending time with the locals, listening to their stories and exploring the waterways. Blatty took her first ride on a shrimp boat after pitching a story about struggling local shrimpers to *Connect Savannah* magazine. That eventually led to a bigger story for the magazine about the collapse of regional fisheries, which was a launching pad for *Fish Town*.

LEFT: Brothers Ross (right) and Gabriel Robin head out on Bayou la Loutre in Yscloskey to hunt nutria.

BELOW: Approaching a crab trap buoy.



Blatty gives documentary photographer Zig Jackson much of the credit for her transition from an eager-but-unfocused photographer to a professional honing her craft. She met Jackson, a professor at Savannah College of Art & Design, at her first exhibition, when he stopped to admire a print. Jackson became an important mentor. "[He was] the guy who said 'stop taking pretty pictures' and 'you need to learn the darkroom,' and 'you're all over the place, get focused on something!'" Jackson also encouraged her to apply for an internship with *National Geographic Traveler*, which she got in 2009. Just after the internship ended, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded off the coast of Louisiana. She packed up again and moved to New Orleans, intent on creating a long-term project.

"I felt like: That's my hometown, I am going to go and try to do something. I took a job with wildlife response and created my first real body of work around the whole recovery process," Blatty says. "I also started exploring the bayous where my grandfather drowned

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ABOVE: The Fourth of July flotilla in Lake Borgne. Over the course of five years, Blatty developed friendships with the extended family of people who inhabit the commercial fishing communities she photographed. "I don't think I'd ever think [the project] was finished, even if I shot it for ten more years," she says.

years ago, met the locals and it was like 'Wow, real fishing communities' because, unlike in Georgia, there was still something left."

To gain entrée into this tightly knit world, Blatty says, she just drove around and talked to people. Initially, *Fish Town* had a broader scope, encompassing both the Georgia Low Country and the Gulf of Mexico. Blatty's decision to narrow the focus was spurred in part by meeting Alexa Dilworth, publishing director and senior editor at Duke University's Center of Documentary Studies (CDS). The two met at the Society for Photographic Education portfolio reviews in Atlanta. Blatty took her first course at CDS in 2011, earned a Certificate in 2013 and still returns often, especially when she needs direction.

"CDS helped me make the decision to just focus on Louisiana's fishing communities—get situated with freelancing, working for the Baton Rouge daily [newspaper], *The Advocate*, applying to work as a photographer with FEMA, doing artwork commissions for hotels," Blatty explains. In 2012, Blatty moved back to New Orleans permanently.

Ultimately, *Fish Town* is a story about community, so it's fitting that Blatty has found a place of her own in this extended family. The recollections of fishermen and other community members punctuate the book and read like prose poems, and in her introductory essay Blatty describes the book as an attempt "to preserve what is left and make sure there will always be a story of this amazing place once it is gone." She poured six years of her life into the project, and into the relationships and places that *Fish Town* is all about. She describes the people as friends and she talks about her next coastal trip with genuine excitement, even though the book is being released this month. She knows that, whether because of climate change or market forces, the way of life she captured won't last forever.

"I've never thought it to be finished, that's what drives me crazy about it," she says. "It's not finished. But I don't think I'd ever think it was finished, even if I shot it for ten more years. Maybe, actually, a finishing point would be when all of the communities cease to exist, which might be sooner than later."