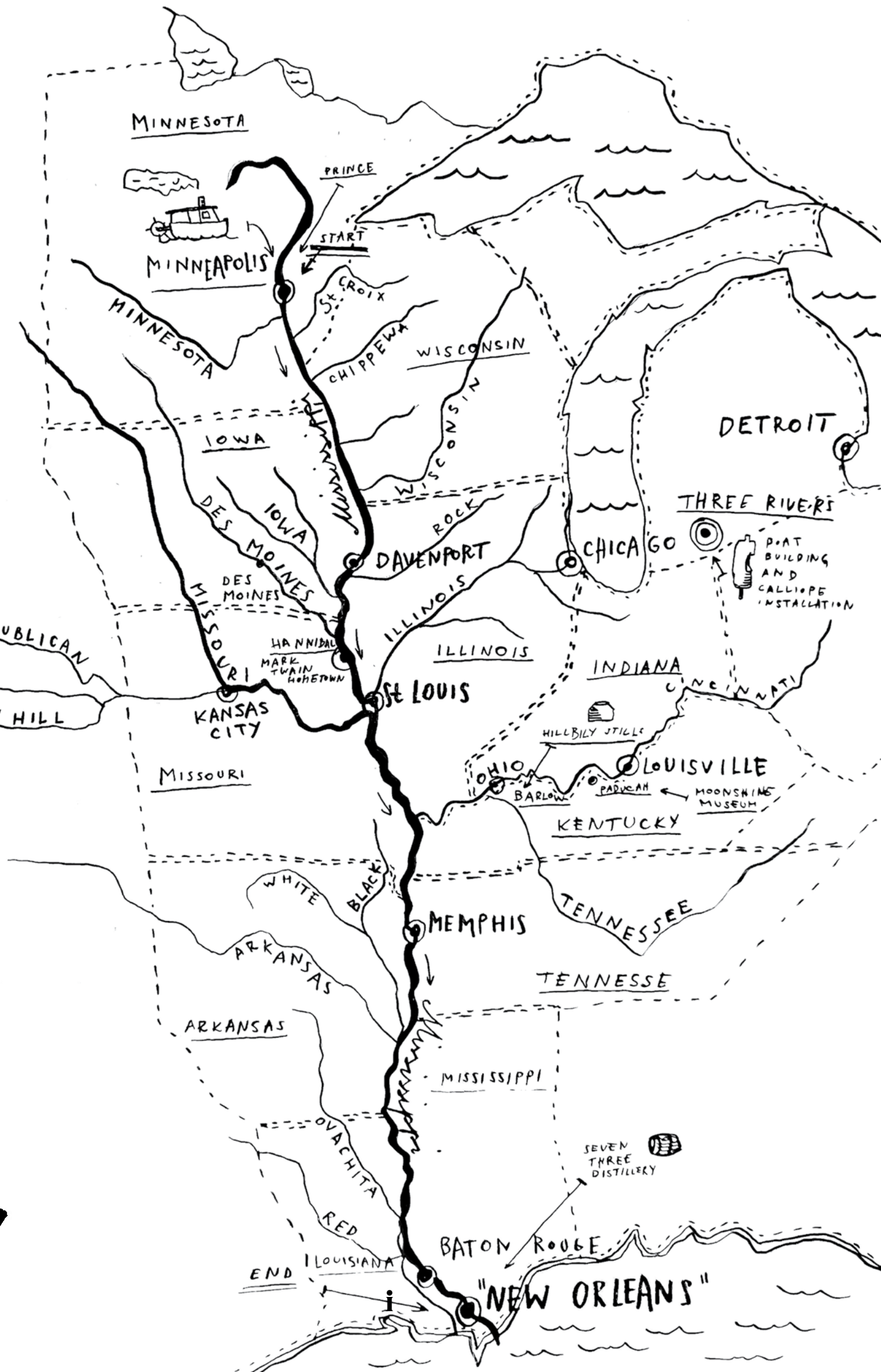


MISSISSIPPI



18 October, 2017 somewhere around Three Rivers, Michigan, USA

Max and I are sitting in a rented pick-up truck, with the heating on, in the middle of the fields on the outskirts of Three Rivers. It is six in the morning and the sun has come up, but the sky is completely dark. A storm has raged across the landscape and flooded the fields of brownish, unharvested corn.

The six-meter steamboat that we are preparing for our trip down the Mississippi is stored in the warehouse along the main road.

Vast fields as far as the eye can see; just the cornfields and woods. Deer are running across the road, pheasants are flapping their wings in the bushes. If it wasn't for the young oxy junkies at the gas stations, this would have been a true American dream. Still on the frontline, but idyllic.

A huge American flag is hung to dry on a porch next to the cornfield. The person who stretched it over the fence is vanishing into the shade of the trees lining the avenue.

Max and I pull over in front of the flag. I open the window and point my camera when Max suddenly whispers: "Look out, someone's watching!"

"What are you two doing here?" we hear from the shadow.

"Hello! We were just taking a photo."

"What were you taking a photo of?"

"Err, the flag... and... the cornfield."

"Um-hum, ok... well... yes, there are still a couple of patriots around here. Let's go, out of the car."

The silhouette steps out from the shade. Although it is literally freezing, he wears shorts, slides, a long beard, a hoodie with the hood over his head. He must be around fifty. Just when I open the door, a gun briefly flashes from underneath his armpit, and it's no pocket pistol, it's a Magnum, the kind Dirty Harry used to kill crooks. The one that makes big holes.

"What do you think about our president?"

Like being shot with a gun; I go numb. My gaze desperately pacing between Max and the bearded stranger.

"Well, I don't know him personally," Max says.

"Heh, smart answer," replies the man with the gun.

"And what do you think about your president?" Max asks.

"I think he's doing a good job for us," he proudly replies.

Born in socialist Yugoslavia in 1981, I had a romanticized image of the USA burned into my conscience. I got my hands on the stories of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, and Dylan, Young, the Stones and Zeppelin were blasting from the speakers. With Coca-Cola. With the first comic books featuring Zagor, Commander Mark, and later on, Mister No, who all fought for higher causes and victoriously vanished in sunsets. With the Marlboro Man as life's driving force, on the edge of wilderness, answering to no one. With my father wearing a woolen sweater with an American flag, explaining to me that this was the symbol of free speech, democracy and equality. With my first movies on videotapes: *Robocop*, *Indiana Jones*, *Dirty Harry*, *Rocky*, *Rambo*, and *Death Wish*.

Of course, all these images would eventually change, fade away or take on new nuances, forms and meanings. But when

Max and I started thinking about sailing the Mississippi, all these characters came back to life in a whirling cocktail of childhood emotions and euphoria. I could easily compare the feeling to an overly excitable dog overwhelmed with pure happiness, running around in circles with his tail tucked between his legs while his eyes glow with ecstatic joy and he drools so profusely that he sprays his saliva all over the place.

Mississippi!

We want to experience and investigate modern American society along the mythical river. We want to sail the length of the Mississippi River, from Minneapolis to New Orleans, some 2,340 miles. To put it simply, we want to internalize the roles of Huckleberry Finn and Hunter S. Thompson.

In 2017, we buy a small, home-built steamboat from an online ad. The owner built it to sail the Mississippi; sadly, he was only able to try it out in the local lake, as he died soon after. The boat is six meters long. The steam engine is working, but we still have to build a roof so we can spend the month-and-a-half-long trip on it, as planned. It is stored for two years at a warehouse in the small town of Three Rivers, Michigan, and we visit it every once in a while, as money and time permit.

We intend to finance our Mississippi adventure by selling moonshine that we will distill in New Orleans, our final destination, from the corn obtained from the local farmers along the entire trip. The upper part of the Mississippi River—Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, and Missouri—forms part of the so-called Corn Belt, a region that dominates corn production in the United States. Of course, the way corn is farmed defines the entire environmental and social picture of the river. For the 2,000 liters of moonshine that we've decided to make, we need two tons of corn. The spirit is not very good, but it is authentic and legendary. Fifty or more percent of alcohol by volume—that's 100 proof or more—directly distilled from corn, no additives or barrel-aging. The recipe was brought to the States by Scottish and Irish immigrants at some point in the early eighteenth century. It only became illegal and highly sought during Prohibition, from 1920 to 1933, as it could be made cheaply and fast. It was distilled illicitly, in hiding places in the woods, sheltered by the night. Hence the name: *moonshine*.

Three Rivers is far from the Mississippi. On our visits to the States, we had driven twice along the entire Great River Road—the roads following the Mississippi River through ten states: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. But traveling by car, you only watch the river from the banks. You feel its presence, how wide and long it is, but you do not feel the currents, you do not know what is hiding underneath the muddy surface, what a storm can bring along, how deep it is, how fast those big logs and tree trunks are carried, how the huge cargo ships sail, and what life with the river is like. So, the entire time, we were building our steam boat with a phantasmal idea of the Mississippi and hoping for the best.



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Our previous experience, with *Hogshead 733*, was painful. We had entrusted the restoration work on our boat, *Soutien de Famille*—or “Family Support”—to a carpenter, who turned out, to put it politely, not to be the person we needed.

This time we decide to do the arrangements and some of the necessary work for the smooth running of our project ourselves. Beyond the logistical challenge of organizing a project in the USA from Europe, the real issue is to correctly anticipate the technical difficulties that we are going to encounter.

With each trip I carry more tools with me, which I then leave behind, including meters in metric systems to be able to make conversions into the American Imperial units.

Every day is presupposed, every task anticipated.

For the works on the steam machinery that we cannot do ourselves, I want to hire the Amish, whose community is widely represented in this corner of Michigan and whose “traditional” know-how is unquestionable.

But soon we find, after a quick on-site investigation, that the only Amish we encounter are wearing Bluetooth headsets to facilitate business discussions with potential customers.

Our first disillusionment with the image of an American community.

So in the end we opt for a very ordinary plumber and his son, who travel from Chicago to complete the connections and check the steam engine.

At Three Rivers we receive some nice surprises, particularly at Pub 60 Grille, a few hundred meters from our site, which we visit every evening to find the same heads leaning on the Formica counter. In this decrepit bar made up of two prefabricated buildings, many men and a few women are doing the same as we are, “ending” their day with a big sip of beer.

The regulars have known us for a while: two Europeans in overalls, coming every season to this corner of America in the middle of nowhere to work on a steamboat.

This project intrigues the pub’s customers, who have lots of questions about the why and the how. The Mississippi attracts fantasies, many have a story to tell, an uncle who caught a man-sized catfish, a cousin who drowned, etc.

Over time, certain faces, Kyle and Dwayne, for example, start to ask what we are doing and we begin to feel they want to help us. When we are looking for something in particular, we ask the patrons of the bar. This is how we come to make a stop at a lot where boats, tow trucks and pick-up trucks share the wasteland. XXX, the owner, sells us, one after the other: a caravan window, a piece of sheet metal, and a ladder. Because we’re always stripping the same old motorhome, a Chevrolet Southwind, we decide to name our boat as well as our project after the old roadhorse. The south wind always brings bad weather.

We go there several times before the owner really opens his workshop up for us. It’s an Ali Baba’s cave for a petrolhead—a heap of tools as precise as they are unique, all organized around a car lift where XXX is building a dragster piece by piece around an airplane engine.

Everything is possible in America. We regret not having met this man earlier in order to devote a little more time to him, to understand his history, his passion.

XXX knows his region perfectly, and his passion for mechanics enables him to find, at low cost, THE very part which could not be found... Thanks to his good advice we buy much of the equipment that we are going to need later, and most importantly, we meet Mark Bidelman, who is based on Bidelman Road near Pleasant Lake. With his ex-wife and another employee, he makes protective tarps for the local recreational boats. Without hesitating for a second, he offers to make us tarps and mattresses for our bunks for free, a considerable increase in comfort for our spartan boat.

II

THE JOURNEY BEGINS UPPER MISSISSIPPI

La Crescent, Minnesota

The 'phone rings, it is 8.00 a.m. Tony has already arrived at the agreed spot with his trailer carrying our steamboat. The voice on the other side sounds tired and fed up. He has been driving all night from Three Rivers and he wants to get back home. The front windows of our steamboat look like a bloody battleground of mosquitoes and all kinds of flies. Tony is clearly in a hurry and really must have stepped on it on the highway. He backs the trailer toward the river and our steamboat slowly slides into the water. Max and I watch with careful anticipation; the last time it was in the water was six months ago in a lake near Three Rivers. Everything seems OK, it isn't leaking anywhere. We tie the boat to the floating dock and start arranging everything for our departure, which is planned for the following morning.

We get firewood, mostly oak, from the locals. We fill the entire cockpit with it and tie some more onto the roof. According to our calculations, that amount is going to suffice for two days of sailing. We aren't worried about the wood. It's only a month after the end of a flood that lasted six months—the locals said it was the biggest flood since 93—and we know the banks will be full of dry driftwood. As for other equipment, we haven't really brought much: two canisters of potable water, food for a few days, a pan, a small gas burner, tools, sleeping bags, some clothes, and technical gear. We have two electric outboard motors and solar cells on the roof to charge the batteries for backup, in case of problems with the steam engine. The motors aren't really powerful and we realize they would be no match for the current, but we're too afraid to use a motor with a petrol engine because everything is so close to the steam engine boiler and the fire that has to burn the entire time we are sailing.

Two days ago, we were still been in Europe. I flew from Vienna to Paris where I joined Max and our tiny filming crew of two members, and we flew together to Atlanta and from there to Minneapolis. I love long flights. When all the passengers take their seats and switch on their small screens, I am overcome by a sense of complete peace and calm that I sustain with alcohol and airplane food. Despite the anticipation and excitement, I drifted once again into a moment of blissful timelessness. In fact, that is how I have pictured our adventure: a month and a half of sailing on this mini vessel that will be our private universe and our ticket to all the parallel worlds running along the river. We have built a backdrop for a story and I can't wait for us to enter it.

We still have Airbnb rooms rented for the night, and we decide to spend a last night in soft comfortable beds. On the steamboat, we each have a wooden bunk bed, one over each side of the boiler, that come together at the bow. I've installed a small partition wall at the point where our beds meet, so at least we won't snore directly into each other's face. At three o'clock at night, we are awakened by a strong storm that wasn't forecast. The wind is howling around the corners of the house, and splashes of rain are slamming against the windows. Afraid that the storm might damage the steamboat, we run to the river. We did cover the cabin with tarp sheets, but we haven't tested it and have no idea how it would weather such a storm. Quiet and worried, we slouch back to the steamboat while the rainstorm continues its raging dance above us. Luckily, the boat is still there, unharmed and completely dry inside. Overjoyed and soaking wet, we crawl into the cabin and brew our first coffee on the boat. We fold

back the boat cover. Through the fragrant steam rising from our cups, we watch the subsiding storm slowly giving way to the new dawn. Mornings near Minneapolis are already cold in September. A thin haze descends on the river and lazily shuffles across the surface. The Mississippi's stream is still slow here. It's our first morning with the river. We hear the chirping of small birds that might be somewhat similar to European swallows, black with a white cap, gliding down to the river surface, hunting for small flies. They are followed by gulls flying higher up. A pouch of white pelicans are gurgling from across the river, sticking their long beaks into sand, foraging for breakfast. They are soon joined by fish, most likely predators, also hunting for their morning meal. There are no alligators here, we are still too high upstream and too close to a big city.

At about six in the morning, we start the fire in the boiler. It gets warm in the cabin, and the thick smoke coming out of our chimney is dissolving in the morning fog.

Steam power may sound romantic, but this is a long and laborious process. First, the boiler has to be filled with water. It is manually pumped directly from the river, into a spiral laid out around the boiler. The pumping lasts until the first drop of water drips out of the safety valve. Then, the fire is started in the boiler. Oak is the best wood, as it yields a lot of long-lasting heat. The fire in the boiler heats the water in the tubes surrounding it and thus generates pressure. It takes about two hours for the pressure gauge to reach the maximum point, which is a reading of 160. If the gauge pointer goes beyond this mark, the boiler could explode. There is a safety valve on top of the boiler, which should release the pressure from the boiler if it gets too high. But it can also be done manually. To release pressure from the boiler, you open a valve on a tube fitted with a whistle that sounds a loud *whoop—whoop—whoooooooooo*. When the pressure gauge reads between 110 and 130, you open the accelerator valve connected to the pistons. The gear lever should be in neutral. You then kick the starter that in turn sets the pistons in motion. The pistons turn the sprocket to which a chain is fitted. The gear mechanism is taken from a Hot Rod; you only have to gently push the lever forward from the neutral position, and it already shifts into first gear. The paddle wheel at the back started to slowly turn. *Southwind* is on its way.

The camera operator and his assistant record our departure from the pier. There is only enough room on the steamboat for Max and me, and we agree for the film duo to drive along the river, following and recording us.

We sail out slowly, in first gear. *Tk-tk-tk-tk-tk-tk-tk-tk-tk*—the sound of the steam engine reminds me of the old two-stroke engines.

Jack Kerouac never sailed on the Mississippi, but he crossed it many times during his cruises over the vast American expanses. "And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up," he wrote about his first encounter with the Mississippi River in *On the Road*.

We are sailing; not fast, but we are sailing. Red paddles behind us are turning and splashing, with loud whistles coming from everywhere, the chain squeaking, the pistons pacing up and down, and steam hissing out of the tubes. It's so loud we have to scream at each other. We scream and laugh, a roaring laughter. We are sailing.



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It is the day after Labor Day and vacationers are taking advantage of the warmth of late summer to gather for this long weekend on the still “recreational” shores of this corner on the south side of Minneapolis.

By the time we launch our boat most of them have already left this little resort town in their disproportionate RVs. The few people still present curiously attend this baptism, which takes place without a spectacle. *Southwind* touches the Mississippi water quietly, without surprises.

Having been rapidly dragged from the launching ramp to the floating pontoon where we can moor, the boat begins to play its role and attract people.

The first questions are about its mode of propulsion: is it a steamboat?

Then about its origin: did you make it?

Finally, about our own origin: where do you come from?

After answering—“Yes,” “Partly,” “Yes,” and “Europe”—we say that we want to get to New Orleans aboard this boat. It doesn't take much to start a discussion on any topic.

The combination of two Europeans wishing to navigate the entire river on a steamboat is enough to arouse the deepest fantasies.

Two men quickly suggest we pick up the remaining wood that they brought for their weekend fires. We have no idea how much wood the boiler is going to consume, but it's already a good starting point.

The film crew assist us and film us. All the time I keep one eye on the boat, one eye on them. I hope that we'll quickly find a way to work, and I motivate them to be independent, to take over the project. Their point of view is welcome.

Paper, kindling, stump, blowtorch, that's it, the boiler is heating up. We only have a vague idea how long it is going to take; we've only used the boat once, for an hour at most, on Pleasant Lake in Michigan, which means we have no experience.

While waiting for the pressure gauge to rise, I check the pipes like a racing driver. I visualize the course of the water from the river to the wheel. Every chicane, every acceleration, every valve. I need a good overview if I'm to have any hope of mastering this archaic machine.

Two hours later, at 160 PSI, the safety valve is activated. We can no longer build up pressure and have to leave. Without artifice, without the public, without difficulties, without noise, we are there, heading south.

The wheel is turning slowly, the boat maneuvers quietly, and at times it is as if we have been doing this all our lives. How is that possible?

A few hours later we have a more precise idea of what our daily life is going to be like for the next 50 days. We are navigating at an insignificant pace, at 2 or 3 knots, sometimes 4. The boiler is indeed greedy, very greedy, as Kenneth, our helpful paddle-wheeler adviser back in Michigan certainly warned us. The engine is so loud that we can't communicate in any other way than shouting, but the crew slowly find their place.

The solar panels that I installed on the roof are working and we have electricity on board. This level of comfort reassures us, because the next few weeks promise to be rather restricted, although it is not fatigue that we fear, but

III

the fact of not being able to talk to each other during the day. However, thanks to our computers we can at least write and continue our transcription of the project.

It seems to take forever to arrive at the first lock, having wasted so much time stuck in the shallows in the middle of the river. The first lesson is to stay in the channel despite our shallow draft, which tends to make us think that we can cut the path and take shortcuts. When the lock keeper hands us the rope to tie us up, the sun is already low and the day is over in the blink of an eye. We have no idea if we are going to achieve our goal of getting to McGregor.

The pontoon that I've identified for our first stopover ends up revealing itself behind a wide metal bridge. Mark is maneuvering the boat, but misses it by a few meters, trying to go upstream so that we might arrive with more ease, as with a sailboat.

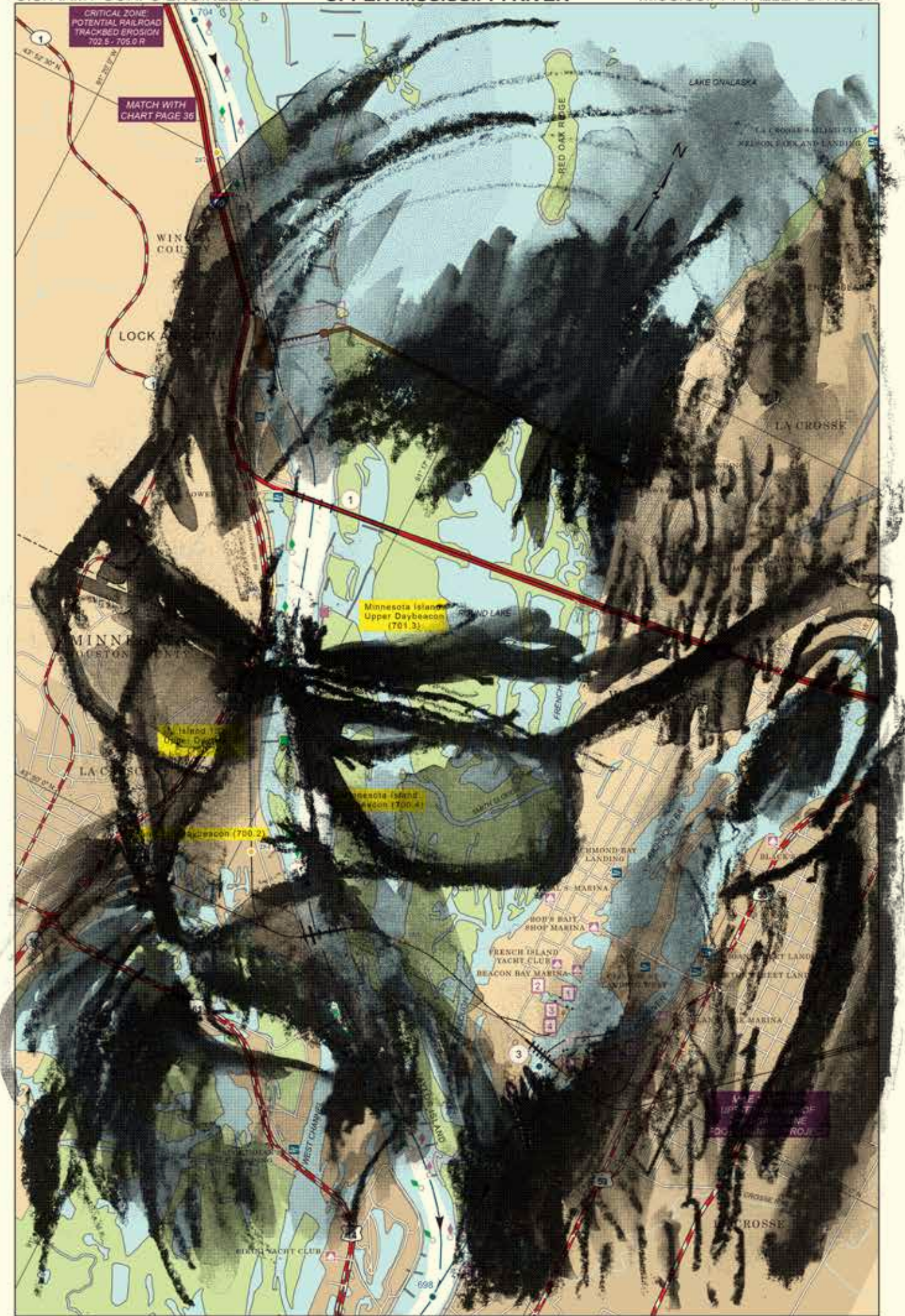
Night falls quickly in this time of late summer, the mist is setting in, and soon we have no visibility on the way ahead. Our phones are the only tools to tell us approximately where we are, but it is impossible to see if a tree trunk blocks our path, or if we are in the channel.

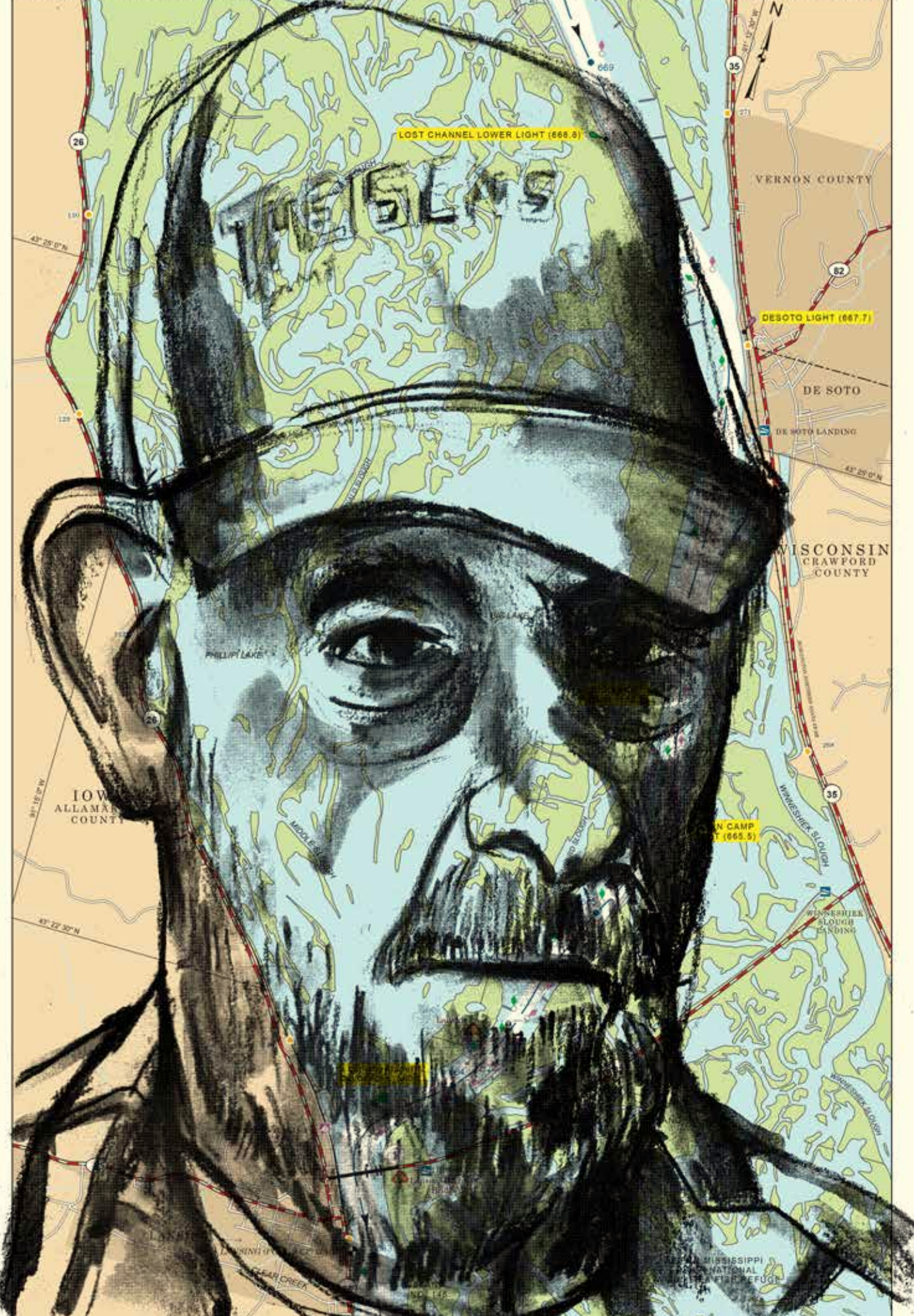
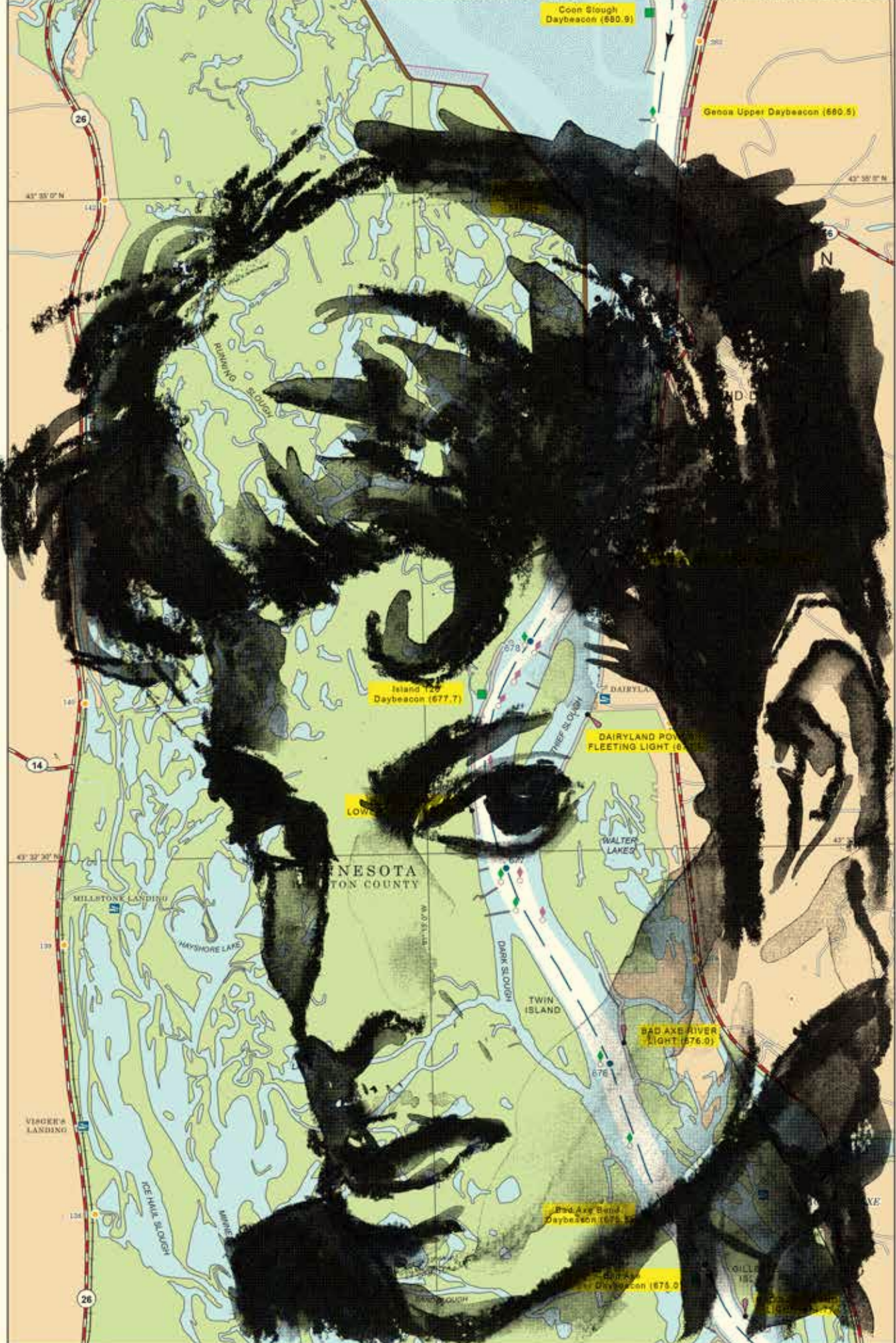
At this point we try to go up the river, but we have little pressure left because Kenneth has told us that perfect navigation is when you arrive safely, boiler empty and fireplace cold.

We miss and run out of steam.

By blowing on the embers for 45 minutes, my head in the hearth, I revive the fire that I had intentionally let die. Mark puts the electric motors to full force, but they are of no help, we gradually lose the battle against the current which takes us away from our goal and leads us to the center of the river where it is stronger. Suddenly we are bathed in a blinding light, it is a huge projector capable of casting light for kilometers coming from the top of a pusher boat, with twenty barges in front of it. We think it's there to help us; we wave to the boat which seems still far away, but we can't get out of the current. We no longer have electricity for the back-up engines or pressure in the steam engine. We're not able to maneuver a flat-bottomed boat in the middle of the Mississippi, and a city-sized boat is heading toward us. We drop anchor to secure our position, the pressure eventually allows us to move away from the waterway, and the pusher boat and its load avoid us. It quickly moves far away from us and only its overpowered headlight scans the shores and the surface, on the lookout for any potential problems.

I still have my head in the boiler, blowing on the embers as if the danger were still imminent, when a much less intense light shines on us. It's our film crew, who have taken the initiative to ask a fisherman on his way back to the port to assist us. From his motorized boat, a big guy with red hair throws us a rope and pulls us to the port of McGregor.







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