

Laurie Palmer

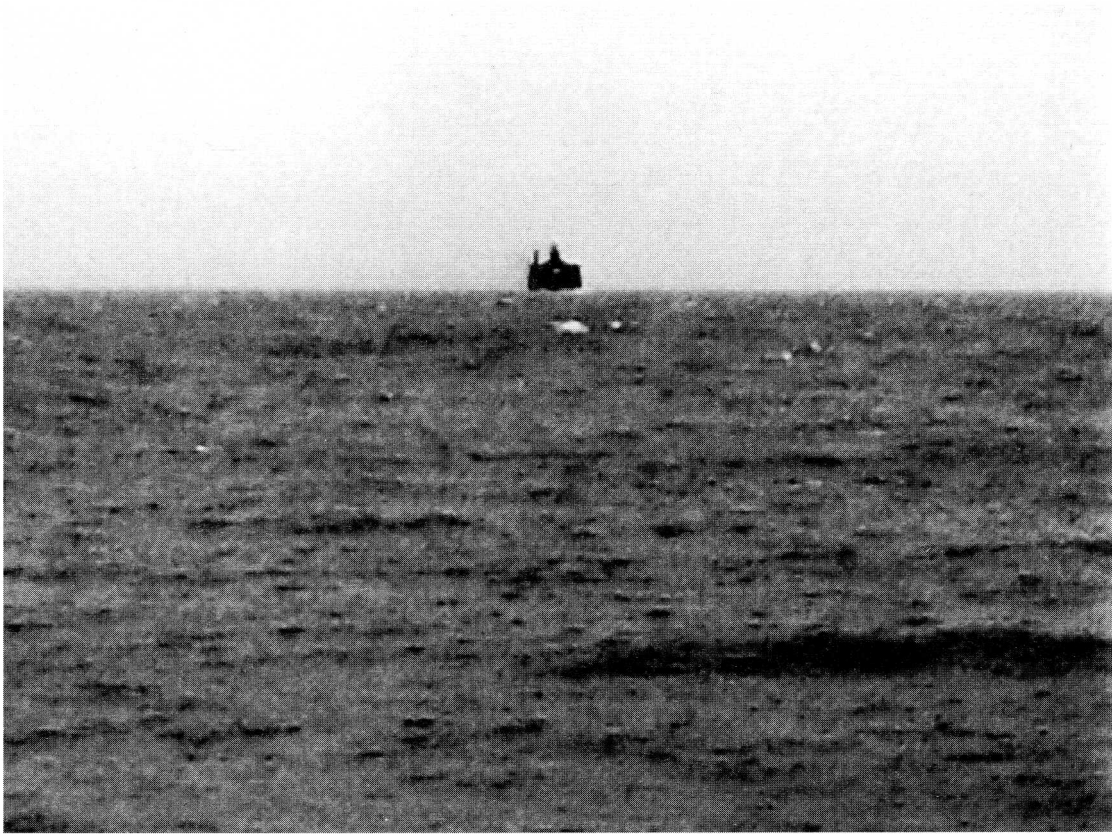
Before returning to Chicago, K. took me for a
tour of the Venetian islands in her parents'
powerboat. She asked me to drop anchor
when we neared the island where the lepers
had been exiled, so we could swim. I felt the
pull of her broad back as she maneuvered the
wheel and the rope channeled through my
hands—a long passage of frizzed nylon, rough
on my skin—and then it was gone, the anchor,
and a hundred feet of rope, evaporated into
the lagoon. She called me an idiot.



When I got back to Chicago (after trundling a new replacement anchor on a luggage cart across the Venetian cobblestones—an idiotic thing to agree to do), I took a one-room apartment on the landlocked lake, with a picture window that framed water and sky. I was thrilled with that view. It filled my room and divided the world with a horizontal slit through which to project my longing; but there was one drawback, a little blip of something on the horizon, sometimes closer, sometimes farther away, made of bricks, it looked like, with a roof, a floating building, sitting on top of the water. It was small and distant but obnoxiously present, and refused to float away.



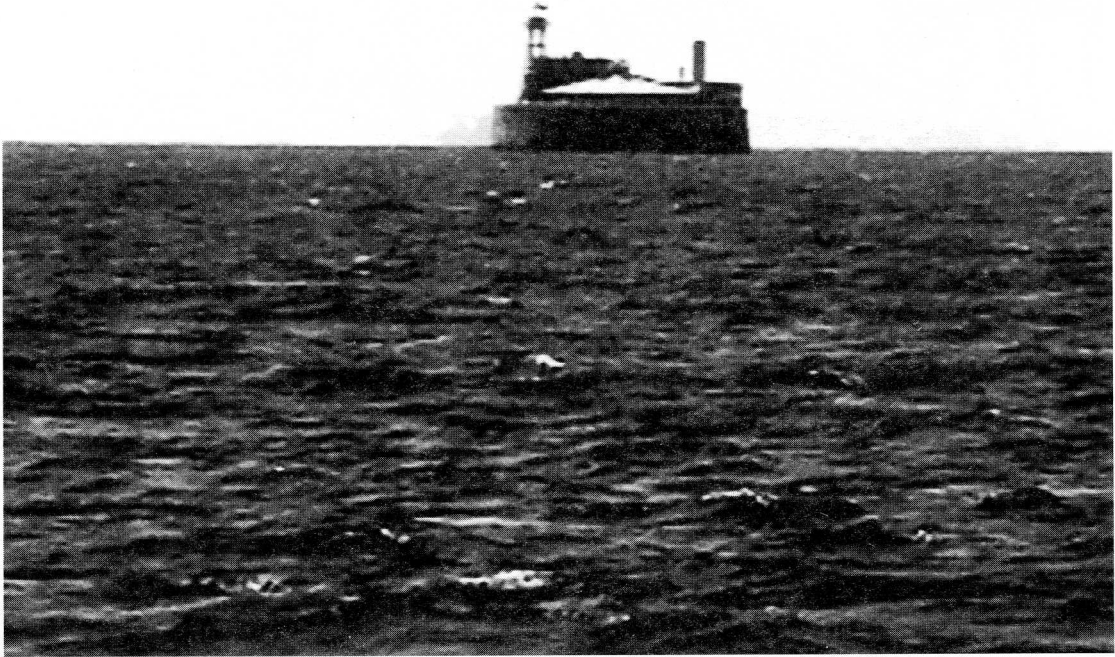
What kind of building sits on water? It looked like a castle, like where K. grew up, a villa perched on the side of a hill, taller than it was wide, with a wine cellar and a bell tower. The first time I visited her parents' home, local politicians were expected for dinner, and K. drove me down the mountain in the dusty afternoon to fetch racks of songbirds that her brother had shot on a hunting trip to Croatia. A woman who farmed K.'s parents' land, feudal-style, had been roasting them in ovens built into the rock. She was silent in response to K.'s thanks, wiping her hands on her apron and staring at us both. I helped K. pile the black skewered birds in a grid pattern on tin-foil in the back of the Cherokee import. Then, we drove back up towards the villa, which looked huge from the perspective of the town, towering over the smaller, shorter, redder buildings below. During dinner, while K. sat at the head of the table, leaning forward, elbows on knees and hair slicked back, in a suit jacket and pants, holding court with ex-communists, I stopped up my mouth with Croatian songbird, crunching head, beak, and wings in single bites of charcoal, cartilage, and bone.



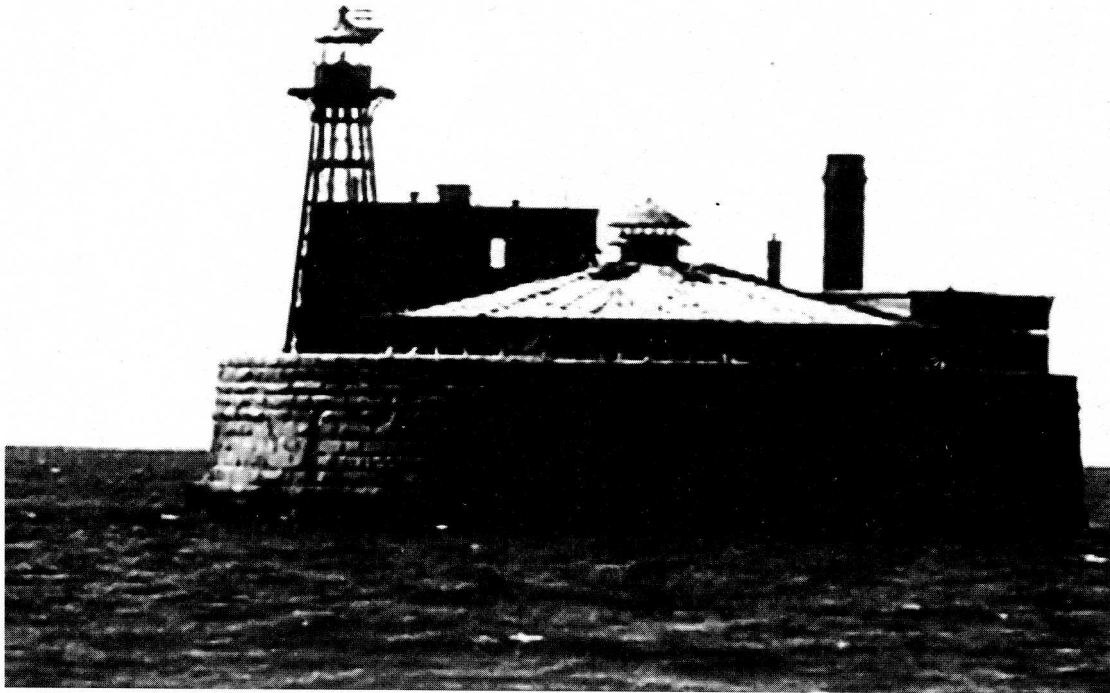
The ceiling in the Chicago apartment was low and the main room boxy and squeezed. There were grease stains on the wall behind the stove and rusty, plaster-encrusted circles, like symptoms of ringworm, on the bathroom ceiling. The only good thing was the window, which completely filled the central room and cropped the rest of Chicago out. K. said to look at the silhouettes of the waves: their profiles would testify to the curve of the earth, and therefore to the existence of something beyond what I could see (herself for instance). But there was that building in the way. No matter how I tried to loop my attention over the horizon, the building gave me a subject, something present and concrete I didn't want to acknowledge but couldn't ignore.



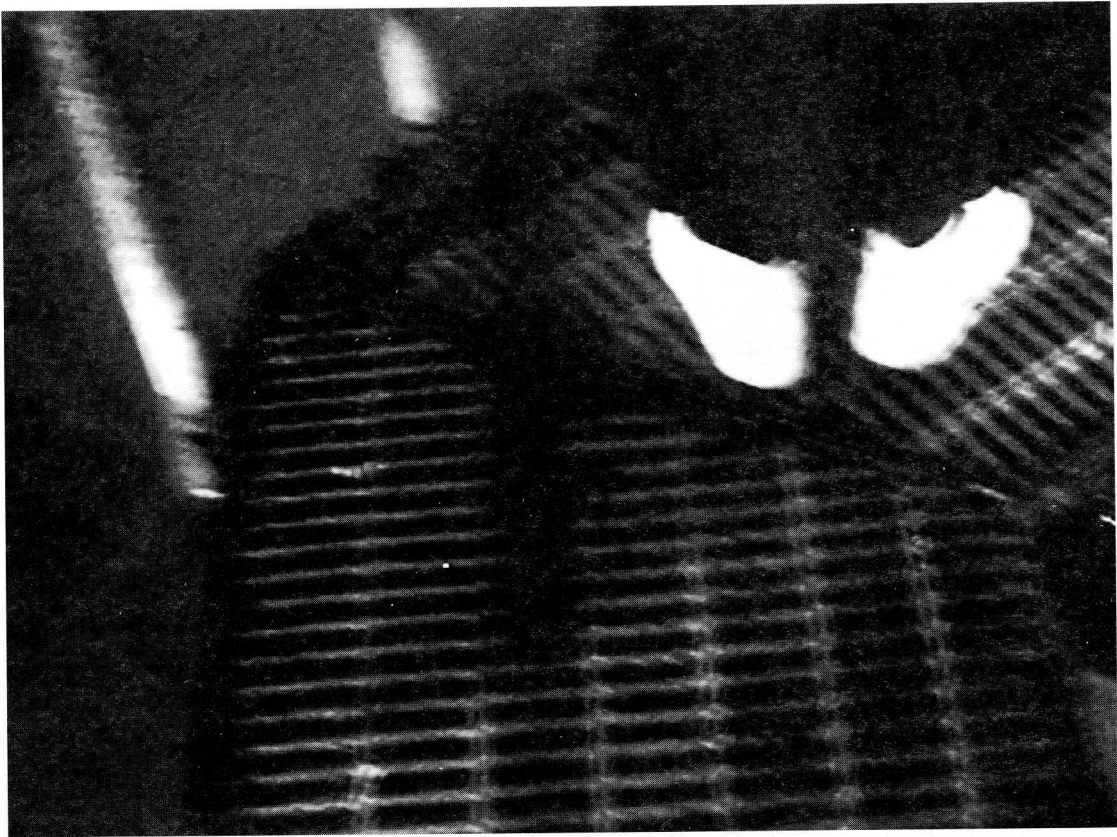
When Robert Smithson unearthed a giant boulder in the process of bulldozing land for *Broken Circle* in Holland, he was initially infuriated that this boulder, which simply couldn't be budged, had presented itself exactly in the center of the yin/yang pattern he was drawing on the land, a symbol of flux and motion and everything that isn't centralized or still. But it allowed him to talk about this contradiction. A student digging a terraced hole in the sculpture courtyard of the Art Institute of Chicago unearthed an elevator counterweight. His project was to sculpt a pyramid out of negative space, digging its shape down and into the earth as an inverse memorial to the ancient Mayans of his heritage. Once the counterweight appeared it was impossible to move; it sat there victorious, massive, and real, a monumental industrial antidote to emptiness, this heavy thing that allows us to fly up.



I watched sailboats flitting and tacking around the crib, knowing that not only did I not have a boat, but neither did I know anyone in this city who had a boat, nor did I run in circles here that might lead me to someone with a boat. Neither was I one of those people, like K., who could just go down to the yacht club, looking legitimate and entitled, strike up a conversation, and arrange a ride. The Head Crib Keeper at the Chicago Water Department didn't answer my letters or calls. I hadn't mentioned the camera or the vague plan for a film about bottomless houses, about living with uncertainty and flux, because I assumed the Head Crib Keeper might think me either a terrorist or a journalist in disguise—that “art” might be a hindrance rather than grease. And then it began to seem that there was no such thing as the Head Crib Keeper (a suspiciously feudal name) or that there was no such thing as me—if attempts at communication are not acknowledged, doesn't that mean that one or the other party doesn't, in some sense, exist?



I ran into M.—who I'd met at the party—at the gym. She told me not to lose hope. The bureaucracy at the Water Department was baroque. Like K., M. had dark skin and a broad back, and wore her hair greased to keep it flat. But she was neither a hero nor a snob; methodical, and strategic, instead. M. said she used to think about leaving Chicago, but her job with the city was just interesting enough to tie her down. K. would never have dreamt of letting a mere job (never having had to have one) hinder her freedom. M. said she found freedom in limited choice. I put it a different way, not that I couldn't or wouldn't leave (it was just a matter of time, and saving up, until I could return to K.), but that there were things I wanted to do here before moving on. Like get out to see the Water Department intake cribs.



M.'s response was better than I could have hoped. In August the Head Crib Keeper miraculously took on shape and substance and we were ushered through the door of his office. M. sat across from him, leaning forward. I sat back and began to imagine that I was halfway home—that the momentum of this achievement could carry me to the next step. I began to wonder if this was what life could look like: all distances known and mapped; all rooms, drains, goals, and tunnels seen, cleared, traveled, attained—after years of experiencing only muddiness, longing, and infinite delays. I remember asking M. as we left the Head Crib Keeper's office if she knew what it felt like to get what you want; I don't remember her response.



. . . K. said to me once, sometimes you can see things with perfect clarity, and other times you are blind as a bat. I thought I was that close—. But the expedition was inexplicably delayed. First, due to weather, or so M. said, reporting from her subsequent meetings with the Head Crib Keeper. Then (she said) he got sick; and then, she got too busy to deal with it. When I began to do the calling, I never got a call back; a couple of times the receptionist “inadvertently” hung up. After November 1, there was no possibility of going out in the boat, because of choppy seas and insurance concerns. I would have to wait until May—yet another winter in Chicago. My correspondence with K. grew fitful and dwindled. M. invited me over for a drink. Her house on the west side was dry, open, spacious, right-angled, and stiff; the hum of a sturdy furnace in the basement, the stillness of dead trees framed in the windows. No inkling of water anywhere. She was sorry, she knew I was disappointed. In all confidence, I needed to understand the complexity of the situation. Operation Silver Shovel had dug its way into the Water Department—there were corruption charges; the commissioner was being investigated; the department was in turmoil. None of the temporary replacements had any knowledge of my request. I would have to write new letters, make new calls. Come spring, she would help me; she was sure I could get permission and a ride (eventually).

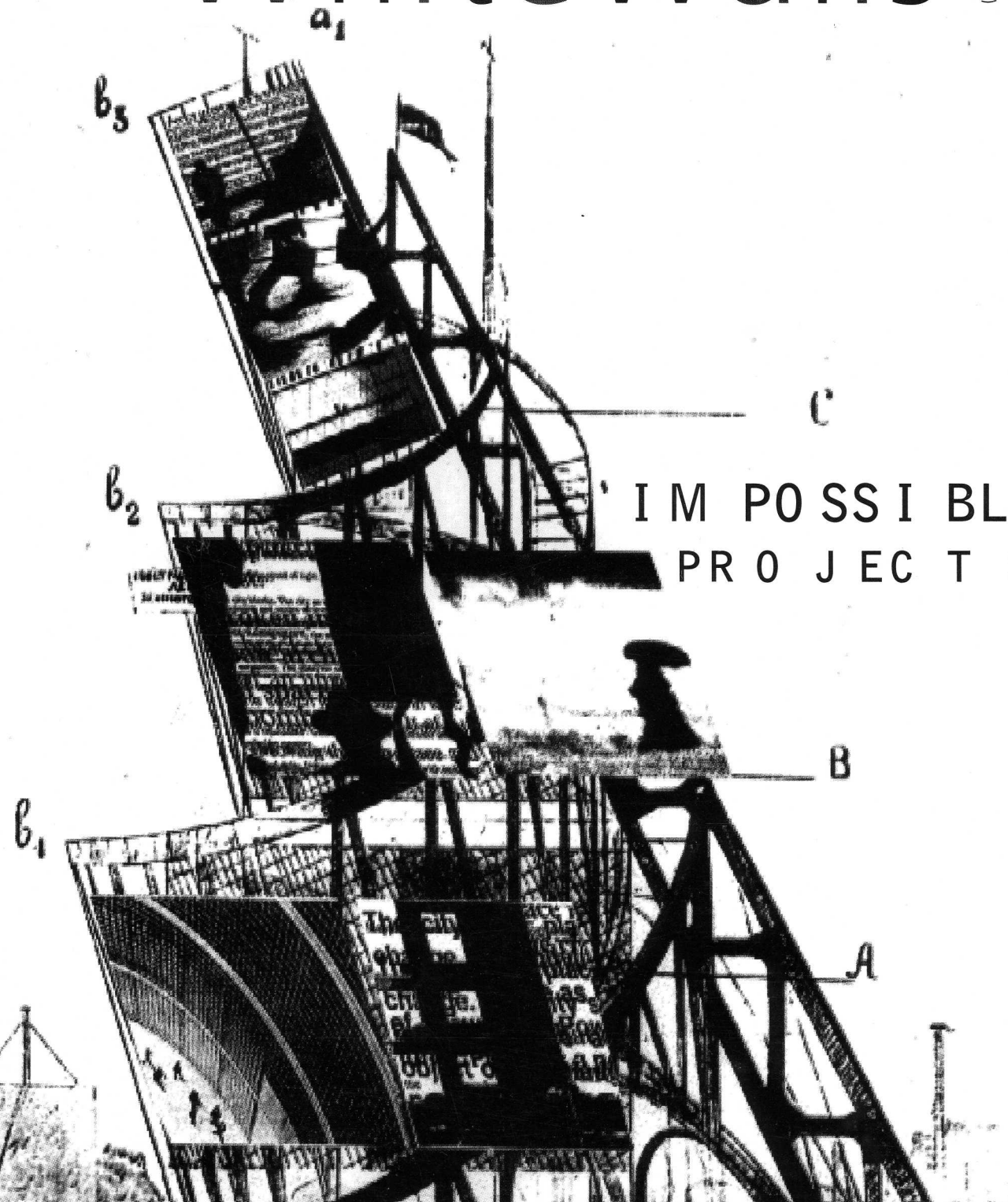


Three years later I got a message from the Head Crib Keeper on my answering machine: “Jardine Treatment Plant. 8 a.m. Slacks and flats.” The public relations officer assigned to accompany me wore a dress and a trench coat, with new white tennis shoes. She had just gotten engaged. The ride in the boat was long and boring and the spray too high to risk filming except through the window, which was splattered with drops. The Head Crib Keeper rattled off facts—how much, how clean, how far, how deep. The public relations officer showed us her ring and chatted about her wedding. Inside the crib, the sound of our footsteps and the trickling water reverberated off the stones, echoey and blue. Dark. The public relations officer’s tennis shoes were white beacons ahead of me on the platform. There was no roar, no maw, no hole, only a flat, black, slightly disturbed surface, trembly like Jell-O or extra flesh. We stood around for a while in the echoey, drippy, amplified silence of the well, then climbed out again and took the boat home.

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