

#2

Antun Šoljan

Ship in a Bottle

All museums are alike, as if they carried on from each other, room after room, in some imaginary sequence. In whatever country they are, whatever it is they are exhibiting, after a certain time everything loses its sharpness of edge and clarity of colour, from the half-light, the dust and the sheer transitoriness, and becomes the same: that impartiality of the cemetery.

Marine museums are no exception: in many cities, around many seas, the same lacquered flotsam under glass, the same smell of floor polish, even the same visitors, who have all wandered in from the life of the present as if they were exhibits of fragments from the past. I don't quite know why they attract me so much. My voracious memory has mixed them all up – Greenwich, Monte Carlo, Dubrovnik, Copenhagen, San Francisco – as if they were all to be found in a single unreal city on the coast of some ancient and long ago unreal sea.

Perhaps I simply don't remember in which city it was, which sea it was on, or perhaps I simply managed to find my way to that unreal generalized museum; I only know that I can't tell you where it was: but I did see that ship in a bottle. Perhaps everyone

can see it, and everyone does see it, but without recognizing it. It was obvious to me at once that I knew it.

The few visitors were loitering around among the cases, perhaps not even looking at the strange shape of the shell, but conjecturing which deeps it had been taken out of. They didn't look at the angular Phoenician anchor, which had arisen like a Phoenix from the depth, but at how old it was. All this was kindly written on white enamelled labels.

But on the great greenish bottle standing in the corner, alone on its high stand, which contained the ship, nothing was written. Not even the ship in the bottle had a name. The visitors passed it by with just a cursory glance; it was one of many models.

I am not particularly special; I've seen many models of ships too. I have seen models conjured up with enormous longing, made by retired sea captains; I've seen models put together with obstinate patience, constructed by sailors on long monotonous voyages that lasted for several years. I have seen expensive toys, that rich men have had made to sail on their indoor pools under an artificial wind from a fan. I've seen models in shipbuilding institutes that have been used for research into the characteristics of ships' hulls. I have seen famous models of bone, made by French convicts in penal colonies before the time of Napoleon. In San Pedro I saw a model so large and so strongly made that it could itself have quite calmly sailed the sea. And I have also seen, of course, many models in bottles.

I have heard lots of stories about how the ship gets into the bottle. Of course, one simple fraud is

to put the ship into a bottle without a bottom, which is glued on later – this is how dealers have cheap souvenirs made. There's the common fairy story saying that you put a little ship in the bottle and then sometimes, if you are lucky and the stars are propitious, the ship will grow into a real model that won't go through the neck any longer. It's a naive fallacy that it's the ship that's built first and the bottle, by some involved process, is blown around it later.

But a long time before I found out how ships are actually made in bottles, I occasionally had this dream that I was building one, or that for some reason I had to build it. In long, complex recurring dreams, in which my fingers would go numb and my eyes fill with tears, I would patiently, bit by bit, using blunt needles and long pliers, glue and string, put together a perfectly defined ship in a bottle. Perhaps I didn't even dream it, perhaps it was real, and was in some other life of mine, for the dream was more distinct than waking, the task more vital than my current life.

That is why I know better than others what a trouble and torment it is: you have to have a lot of patience to build such a boat, and a lot of love to summon up so much patience. Even in your sleep. And although I was dreaming, the torment was real, the love true.

And so I stood in amazement when I saw this ship. Under its transparent green mantle of glass, which shimmered like mother of pearl in the half light, there was an old Mediterranean carrack complete with rigging, hawsers, flags on the tip of the masts,

with barrels of water and wine on the deck.

It was the work of a miniaturist of genius with perfect hands and a perversely meticulous imagination. The sheets were not only old and worn, but you could see perfectly well the frayed places where they had worn down rubbing on the blocks and gunwales. You could see with absolute clarity the genuine splices where the ropes had parted. And on the sides, where the paint had flaked away a bit, the caulking that poked out from between the planks. It seemed to me that I could remember certain details quite clearly, that I recognized the ship. The ship had no name, it is true, but I know that I racked my memory: what was it called, what was it supposed to have been called?

While I stared at the ship, teetering on that slender borderline between memory and reality, all of a sudden the flags on the ship fluttered, the sails began to swell, one topsail started to run up the mast, a jib folded. And the tiny crew ran briskly around the deck, pulling ropes, hauling up the fenders. The little captain stood by the mast, with his hands behind his back, a pipe between his tiny yellow teeth. Was he perfectly made, or was he just perfectly imitating his creator.

The ship was obviously under way. How? At first I panicked and looked for some kind of mechanism like in some magical Renaissance casket that was the moving force of it all, but I could see nothing logical, everything around was empty, it was dark, and I became reconciled to the idea that there was no hidden mechanism that I could make out with my limited technical abilities, and I watched what

was going on, happy to be standing there, happy that I could be the witness of this little slice of life.

The ship sailed in an invisible wind, on its own mysterious course, on which it was vigorously kept by the tiny captain. He clearly knew where they were going, and why. I stood fascinated and gazed at the voyage. I stood long, even when the last visitors had left the museum and the lights began to go out in order, and some distant great door closed. I knew it was time to be off, but I couldn't tear myself away.

The guards paced around impatiently behind my back, coughing. Museum guards are always grey and faceless, but in this museum they had particularly hard, expressionless faces, and their uniforms were long and grey, almost like cloaks, or was it just that it seemed like that to me in the dusk? They moved particularly cautiously and soundlessly, as if they were lying in ambush for you, as if they were especially suspicious of you. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see them whispering to each other.

In the end one of them came up to me, as soundless as a confessor. He was very old, furrowed, and when he turned some invisible wall switch and put out the light that lit up the scene in the bottle, his eyes gleamed in the dark. But his voice was mild and compassionate. He whispered as if he didn't want the others to hear him.

"You can see it too, can't you? Not many can. Everyone thinks the ship sank, smashed, went down for ever. But it didn't. You can see it didn't."

"For heaven's sake," I said, "but it's only a model after all."

"No, it's not. That's the ship itself."

The ship itself, I thought to myself furiously, it's the ship itself.

"You know, you have to know, how the captain and the crew loved that ship of theirs," the guard went on whispering rapidly. "They had nothing else, they didn't know anything else. They wanted to sail for ever. Not unusual, if you take it proper. You get on board once, and you don't know anything else, and you don't have anything else, and in the end you get used to it, or you're afraid of changes, and so right till the end of your life you just want to go on sailing. Didn't you know that? I hope you do."

"Me? Why?" I asked, not understanding his muffled tones.

"Anyway, they wanted it so much that their wish came true. We can see that someone made it come true or that it just happened to come true, some mistake of nature. But wishes are strong. The witch of wishes made them little and locked them up in the bottle like in Aladdin's lamp. Their desire cut out a piece of time together with them and stopped it there in the bottle. It's all like real. Only if you look at the little hourglass in the captain's cabin window, you'll see that the sand doesn't flow. Time stands still, only the voyage goes on."

"But where is it sailing to?" I asked the old man. "Why? For what purpose?"

"As if that mattered," the old man laughed shortly. "The most important thing is that they can sail. That's the only thing they wanted."

Suddenly, with rapid and energetic though hard-

ly audible rubber steps two other guards came up. One of them shoved the old man gently, looking at him with hard blue eyes.

"Forgive him if he's bothering you with anything," he said evenly. "He's old by now, and a bit cracked, and imagines all sorts of things."

"Not at all," I said, "with my own eyes I've..."

The second guard had put his hand on my shoulder and was pushing me carefully but firmly towards the exit.

"Not to wonder, not to wonder," he said. "The light plays such tricks at sunset that people imagine things. But we are closing now."

I looked one more time at the ship in the bottle. Now it was completely dark there. I had to go somewhere, do something; I soon forgot about the ship, forgot the museum, forgot the town.

Not long ago I was among the guests at the annual dinner of the "Cape Horn Society" which was held in a big empty hotel, out of season, in a tourist spot along the coast. The members of the society had to have rounded Cape Horn under sail. On the whole it was a society of decrepit old men.

"There are fewer and fewer of us," complained the secretary to me, an eighty year old himself. "We get the odd younger member in, but you know how it is, they are mainly, if you'll excuse the expression, sporting types. There's no one to talk to any longer."

I talked with the oldest member of the society, the captain of a sailing ship whom I was accidentally seated next to for dinner. It was a weird, quiet

dinner, the few voices echoing out under the cupola of the great dining room, the waiters gliding along on their rubber soles, wordlessly taking the meagre fare around. They were more like guards in some museum than waiters, but then, the guests were more like mummies than live people.

The face of the old captain was like a mask of moulded wax; as if hundreds of candles had for centuries dripped a thick, slow rain that had hardened on the face, creating an eroded, deserted landscape with torrents of veins.

"They say the earth's round," said the old captain to no one in particular. "But that means there's no end to the world."

In the muffled space this sounded like some ultimate prophecy. The secretary of the society leaned towards me confidentially.

"He's very old, and a bit senile," he whispered towards me, "and says all sorts of things. You have to have a bit of patience with him"

"I sailed to the very end of the world once," went on the old captain, still not addressing anyone. "We had got lost in a storm, the compasses went wrong, we couldn't get any kind of fix on our position and we just sailed on and on for a very long time until we should get somewhere. You have to get somewhere, we proved that, but we didn't know where; for things got all mixed up there, the fog and the fire, the day and the night, the sea and the sky. But all at once we saw the end of the world and knew that we had to go back."

"How did you know?" I asked him. "I mean, how did you see that it was actually the end of the world?"

He looked at me for the first time, turning his head slowly and deliberately like a turtle.

"The sky was lower and lower, and then, almost vertically in front of us, it dropped into the sea like a great green wall of thick glass. We reached to where the waves beat against the glass, and there was nothing behind the glass, an emptiness, some lights, some darkness. We heaved to by the glass itself, and touched it with our hands, and the awfulness of that final barrier went through all of us through our spines, we didn't say a word. The glass rose above us in an endless vault, and it dropped into the deep, as far as you could see through the sea. And then..."

He stopped, looking at me somehow strangely, as if trying to weigh up whether I was going to believe him, or at least keep his secret.

"Then, quite distinctly, though a little unclearly through the thickness of the glass and the refractions of the light, on the other side of the glass we saw an enormous human face. It was as big as half our horizon, his eyes were like two vast setting suns. On such a gigantic scale, it was difficult to say what kind of an expression he had. At first you would have said it was inquisitive, the way a child looks at ants. But we could have been wrong. The one thing we were able to make our minds about at once, that we knew for certain, was that it couldn't be anything else but the face of God. He had shut us in here, and now he was awaiting with interest to see what we would do when we discovered the bound-

aries of our prison.”

“And what did you do?” I said with sincere interest.

“Nothing. We prayed, begged, asked questions. But there was no sort of answer, no sort of mark of comprehension. As usual. And then, suddenly, inexplicably, darkness descended, thick, black, starless. The face disappeared. We at length raised our sails and voyaged without stopping until we arrived in familiar waters.”

He fell thoughtfully silent. Something reminded me of something, for some reason I was afraid.

“That face,” I asked him, “what was it like? Was it like anyone? Would you be able to tell it by anything?”

He looked at me long, silently, opaque in his elderly way.

“Since you ask me,” he said, weighing his words, “it was most like yours.

And I heard his voice suddenly full of hatred. If he could, he would have nailed me to the mast on the spot.