

## The Shipping Views

*Water views*, Vic would have said about the Box if he'd ever had a visitor. It was true that if you hauled yourself up the side of it, one foot on the steel lock rail, you could get a good look at the flat brown square of the stormwater catchment dug out between factories like an industrial moat. It was a little joke Vic had between himself and the Box.

Of course, there weren't any visitors in the months Vic had been living there. The old blue shipping container he'd found empty and abandoned in a disused industrial lot barely fitted him amongst the bits and pieces he'd collected. He marvelled at himself sometimes when the planes woke him; it used to be him and his swag, but as soon as he moved into the Box he started filling it. Even with no money and no particular desire to accumulate possessions, he felt the tug of a nest and picked up things off the street, insulating his few square metres with books, useful things that needed fixing, and unuseful things that didn't.

The planes were a part of it too. He needed insulating from the regular Sydenham skyquakes that rattled the Box, rattled him awake at six each morning. He'd look up at the flat steel roof and think about where they were going, those loud tin birds, and after a while he'd get to thinking where the Box had been. They would have the same conversation, as if Vic was a little kid who never tired of his favourite story.

*Tell me about Hong Kong*, he'd say wistfully, or *Liverpool* or *New York*. The Box would describe it for him: the way the junks cut like feathers through reflected lantern light on the harbour, or the men shouted hey-oi through a fog half mist half factory, or the shine of the cut-glass buildings made even Liberty humble. And Vic would lie back with his hands laced under his head and his lids closed listening, dreaming up pictures of these cities behind his eyes. He came for the change, to have a place, but stayed for the stories of elsewhere. Like the things he collected, staying in the Box was something he did almost in spite of himself.

Days, the Box heated up like a bastard and Vic would go for strolls. A stroll was what he liked: it lacked the purpose of a walk. He'd skirt the factories, picking up bits and pieces. If he got hungry he'd pop by the Woolies bin for a surprise feast or wander the back lanes behind Marrickville shops to pick fruit and veg from the boxes lining loading

docks. He never took more than he ate right away, but he tried always to bring a little something back for the Box. Vic figured if it wasn't him that wanted to collect things, it must be his house. Calling the Box *house* was another of his little jokes.

Often the things he found would prompt a particular story. A lone sandal was for Cairo, a trolley-wheel Detroit. When he found the little wooden boat he knew that when he got home he would lie back and close his eyes and say *tell me about the ocean*.

The ocean story was different. It wasn't about anywhere but the going. It scared him a little.

Vic found the boat in a pile of broken glass next to the Vinnies bin and it took him a moment to work out that the glass used to be a bottle and the boat used to be stuck. Its mast hung by a string. His stroll was finished now he'd found something to take back, so he started walking home, thinking how good it would be to hear the ocean story.

When he got back to the lot the gate was shut. This had never happened before, and it puzzled Vic. He waved through the chain-link at the cheerful, rusting blue rectangle that sat amongst the concrete and weeds. It seemed okay, so he carefully slid the little boat under the wire and climbed over the top. He was an awkward climber, but he got there. Giving the fence a little wink of victory, he picked up the boat and went home to bed.

That night Vic cradled the boat in his hand. It was only about the size of a small bird or the little fish you throw back in the sea. After a while of looking at it, he lay down and closed his eyes, took a deep breath and said *tell me about the ocean*.

Waking before dawn to the day's first skyquake, Vic rolled off his foam, almost crushing the delicate thing in his hand which when he recovered himself turned out to be a small wooden boat. Which meant he was at home in the Box. When its shuddering abated, he got up off the floor, gently putting the boat down on a pile of cloth offcuts, and opened the doors to inhale the fresh sea air. The Box tipped to its side to roll down the waves and the horizon lifted its corners up in front of him like a picnic finishing, dropping back and then rising into the sky. From the wave's crest Vic saw how far off they were from everything; it was ocean all the way to the edge of the world. Lost. He panicked, nearly shutting his finger in the door. Sucking it he closed his eyes and spoke a litany of landing places: he said *singaporesanfranciscohanoilisbonoslotokyo*, lids

clamped against the noise of sea outside and feeling one hand to steady his sealegs and heart.

Vic opened his eyes, took a deep breath, and opened the door again before fear could take back his hands. It was concrete. Weeds grew. With relief he stepped out onto the solid lot.

*Whatcha do that for*, he said to the Box but it didn't answer; sulking, probably. Best leave it alone today and stroll, forget how the ground might turn against you.

He closed his doors behind him, slid the lock rail in place and got three quarters of the way across to the gate before he remembered it was closed. But looking up he saw it wasn't. Two men stood just inside it, pointing at things and talking.

Vic hesitated. The men were new. He looked back at the Box which sat silent with the vague threat of dreams. It might do the sea thing again, but the men might be worse. He decided to chance it while the ground was still there and tried to walk invisibly through the gate.

'Hey, mate.' The men had spotted him. One was large and white and grubby, the other neat and short. The large one came at him, waving his arms around.

'This is private property mate,' he said. The neat one nodded from behind. 'What are ya doin here?'

Vic looked at them and said *listening*, but he was so used to talking to the Box that the words didn't come out right and he surprised himself by emitting a sort of gutturing noise.

The men conferred with glances and decided. Vic looked down for answers, but the concrete wasn't about to co-operate, he saw: the weeds were becoming like the stick-mast of the little boat, starting to bob disturbingly as if on string. He glanced at the gate space between him and strolling.

The large one said something Vic couldn't catch. Their words flew off like gulls cawing into the morning. Then the neat one spoke. 'Maybe we should,' he said. He got out his phone and started to press its buttons.

Another plane cut the sky, and Vic saw the man hold his telephone at arms length while the earth shook. The gesture reminded him: white arms testing needles, false smiles which tranquilised, the bedstraps and the blunt spoons and the bars you saw the sea

through, saw all the harbours in the one outside so that junks feather-cut the light and men hey-oi'ed and cut glass humbled.

Vic wants to run. The plane's growl has faded to a low hum and the neat man is talking to his machine, and the gates feel lucid froth between their toes as the tide comes in. Through his broken boots the water creeps, and over tongues to soak Vic's single sock and raw foot. He shakes the sock foot out and looks at the men, who seem unruffled by the rising sea. When the car comes he's already treading water, though the blue and white craft seems made to slide through the ocean's skin like a razor. The new men are like hospitals, gentle and brutal. He lets them take him – it's hard to get air, now – but he wants to tell the Box. Looking back between hospitals he watches.

The Box floats up, blue on the grey waves with all its things inside, and sails, loosed from its moorings. The whole fence is underwater now, no barrier to seafaring. Taking its stories home. Under him a motor coughs and outside Sydenham swims, pressed against the glass. Vic closes his eyes and says *tell me again, tell me about the ocean.*