Ships have featured prolifically in social theory, yet have rarely been objects of social scientific inquiry. In this paper, I raise a deceivingly simple question that I have been thinking about for a long time. This question can—at its most basic—be phrased as “What is a ship”? Drawing on over a decade of anthropological research on and around ships, I explore this question in two distinct but related ways. First, I examine how ships are empirical real-world objects, whose ontological presences in the world are entangled with multiple and complex economic, social and cultural processes and practices. Second, I analyze how “the ship” can offer an epistemological tool and theoretical device for helping us understand some of these same processes. I build my analysis around the life story of one group of ships that I have interacted with throughout their entire lifecycle. By telling the life story of these ships, I simultaneously tell a larger story of continuity and change in the maritime industry, including shifts in practices of maritime labor, as well as the changing materialities of ships and seafarers’ physical and affectionate engagement with their vessels.