
Meditations on a Memory



*An interactive digital exhibition at Scandinavia House
Online reflects on the legacy of Sweden's Vasa warship.*



BUILT TO BE THE most fearsome military weapon of its time, the immense and elaborately decorated Swedish warship *Vasa* sank only minutes into her maiden voyage, by a small gust of wind, in 1628; since her recovery and restoration in 1956, the warship has gained new life as one of the most legendary artifacts of Swedish maritime archaeology. In the exhibition *Conversations with a Shipwreck*—now on view through Scandinavia House Online in a unique interactive digital format—artists and ASF Fellows Joan Wickersham and Adam Davies meditate on the warship's stunning legacy through presentations of poems and large-format photographs, with short durational video and audio. Now extended through September 7, 2021, on scandinaviahouse.org, the exhibition opened on March 4 with a virtual discussion with writer Wickersham, photographer Davies and Darcy Frey, director of the Creative Writing Program at Harvard University. Read on for an adaptation of their conversation.

—By Emily Stoddart
Manager of Exhibitions and
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Scandinavian Foundation

Adam Davies, *Starboard*, 2019.

Darcy Frey: I'm curious to hear about the beginnings of this project.

Joan Wickersham: My husband read about the *Vasa* in *National Geographic* when he was six, in the early '60s, just when the ship had been rediscovered at the bottom of Stockholm harbor. So when he and I visited Stockholm in 2013 he wanted to see the Vasa Museum.

I'd had no idea what to expect, and I fell in love. The ship embodies a whole set of paradoxes. The only reason it survived was that it was a colossal failure. The way it is displayed in the museum makes time seem ambiguous and compressed, as if everything that ever happened to it is all happening at once.

DF: What you've written spokes out from the story of the ship in unexpected directions. You speak to the shipbuilder's widow; you speak to the shipworm; you speak to one figure who survived the wreck and one who didn't. You found your way imaginatively into all sorts of different portals.

JW: When something in a museum stirs you, it brings up your personal associations. These small human objects that were found with the ship—a sewing kit, a game board, a button—make you feel the helplessness of being caught by some unexpected tragedy, along with whatever is around you.

These visits to Stockholm unlocked feelings I had about my mother's death. She was suddenly paralyzed and had to go to a nursing home. She never got to go back to her house, and everything there was frozen in that moment when this terrible event had happened to her.

I think I was at a point in my life where I was trying to reckon with my own failures and my sense of what had gone well and what hadn't. I was starting to see the shape of my life and to reckon with my own mortality.

DF: How did the collaboration with Adam come about?

JW: We both teach at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Adam presented his work one night, and I was blown away by his photographs—their beauty, and his emotional eye. They're monumental in scale, but also incredibly precise about small details. I had never thought of having images with this project, but I wanted to see what Adam's eye would do with it.

Adam Davies: Something that attracted me to Joan's work is the precision and rhythm of her language. That's really important to me in photographs as well, this sense that everything has importance and everything has meaning.

DF: Adam, when you first went into the museum, what was it that stirred your visual imagination?

AD: To me it felt like a tomb. There's this very dark object resting inside a

concrete construction. The museum was lighting the ship as an object on display, and what I wanted to capture in the photographs was something more emotional and evocative. The idea I had was of this object appearing out of darkness, and we had to work with the museum to turn off all the lighting and use natural light.

DF: I'm struck by the incredible depth of focus that you achieve. Foreground and background seem almost equally precise.

AD: It's a very slow process, using a very small aperture. All these pictures were done on a tripod; the shortest exposure was half a minute, and the longest was 45 or 50 minutes. Instead of expansiveness, it's more about going deep into the picture frame. These photographs were all shot on large-format film negatives and then scanned and printed digitally.

DF: There's such originality and daring in both the literary and the visual components of the project. Was it similar to, or a great departure from, the work that you had done previously?

JW: *The Suicide Index* is a memoir of my father's suicide—what led up to it and its impact on our family, structured in the form of an index. My next book, *The News from Spain*, is fiction: seven unconventional love stories, each called "The News from Spain" but the title means something different in each story. So these were highly structured books about very messy subjects. The index was the spine of the memoir, and the stories all sharing the same title was the spine of *The News from Spain*. For me the ship itself is the spine of this project and gives it a place from which it can go shooting off in all directions.

AD: For about five years I'd been doing work mainly around bridges and tunnels, different types of infrastructure, looking at how these structures changed the landscape and also were being absorbed by the landscape. Then increasingly I got interested in the way people were using that space, the subculture that existed in these spaces. I think in general my interest is in these delicate subversions of space.

This very much applies to the *Vasa*; it was designed to be a warship but deviated very quickly from its original path and started to be used in ways that were different and unexpected, and to take on other meanings.

JW: The 17th century had the convention of *vanitas* paintings, where they would paint a skull on a table with a candle, with the ideas of mortality and transience. I think the *Vasa* is that kind of contemplative object. It encompasses all the cycles of being built, having a mission, failing in that mission, being somehow resurrected and now deteriorating again. It stirs our deepest feelings about success and failure, mortality and corruption and preservation.



Adam Davies, *Pump*, 2019.



THE OWNER OF THE SKULL

I mean you. Not the museum
or the Swedish government, but you,
the man who lived in it, in whom it lived.
Whatever stories you had heard of shipwrecks
you didn't hear this one. You knew
in the violent suck and torrent
that this was final. Maybe you thought of heaven,
Christ, whatever you'd been taught.
You never thought of a diver.

You never thought they'd build another man
using your scaffolding. They've given him
a face, and hair, some freckles, moles.
You wouldn't know yourself. His name, they say,
is "Filip"—the quotes marking the place
where knowledge leaves off and fiction begins.
No one knows your name. More people see him
in a day than saw you in your lifetime.
He lives in your bones, lays claim to your possessions,
your clothes, your knife sheath, and your coins —
four of them. He's taken everything you had.
He, they say, still had two milk teeth, hidden behind
permanent teeth in his lower jaw. Those tiny
pointed secrets that only your tongue knew
and never could have told because they
were so much a part of you that you
never knew you had them. *He had two milk teeth*,
the label says, meaning Filip, meaning you.

The book on my desk is open to the pictures
of your skull and Filip, the wrong blue eyes
staring from your sockets. Maybe being found, restored,
is just a different way of being lost. Come back,
I want to say, to my father and my mother.
Be who you were, and not who I try to make of you.

—Joan Wickersham





THE RECKONING

No one knows quite what it was, or how it went:
it happened in secret, among the shipwrights,
who reckoned, and judged her fine. She wasn't.
She was wrong from the beginning—top-heavy,
or badly ballasted, or with a greedy extra row of gunports
too close to the waterline. She was doomed, they all agreed
right after it happened. And still, today,
they are not sure. It was this, and it was this,
or it was this, I have said about my father and the gun,
reckoning—maybe just as he did, maybe not—
the way things could have gone, the way they had to go.

—Joan Wickersham

Adam Davies, *Stern*, 2019.