

Imagine you are walking along a path. It's a beautiful day—a warm breeze tempers the heat from the sun. Suddenly you are lying on the ground, blood spurting from a hole in the back of your head, you're not unconscious, you're dazed and confused, and the pain feels as though it can't be endured, but it must be endured, you weren't offered a choice. And you are just eight years old.

What does it mean? Are there accidents? Are you being punished by God? Did you sin in another life? Does the meaning lie in pondering the meaning?

Imagine you are on the other side of the world immersed in a chamber, designed by an artist to make you feel the world differently. You emerge, dazed and confused, but feeling light and enlightened. You emerge into a sunny afternoon, contemplating whether an artist can show you an enhanced reality. The reverie is broken by your ringing phone. You answer, and you hear of your daughter being struck by a stone, ten thousand kilometres away.

What does it mean? Is it a more profound experience for you, as you fly across the ocean, unaware of the consequences of the broken head, of the fractured reverie? Or for your daughter, who may be just chemistry and physics by the time you see her, her body alchemised from gold into lead? Or maybe, back-peddalling desperately into beliefs that you long ago purged as absurd, you start to contemplate the possibility that she has an anima, a spirit that survives. Maybe this experience had purpose, maybe your daughter was punished for your sin, you doubting Thomas. Fuck you and your doubt, did you do this to your daughter?

Little by little, your daughter recovers, and you return to the world of the rational. But you are altered, for you held the moment in your hands, and you saw what you could become. And now, strangely, you detest the fact that your daughter went through this appalling ordeal, but you realise that you're a better man for all this self-interrogation, for all this fear, for all this suffering.

Your daughter has done a Jesus for you. Her Calvary is your benediction. But your daughter is too close to you. The price she paid was too big. Christ, they say, suffered too. Mainly he suffered from the delusion that his self-importance could carry the burden of all our doubts. His manipulation engenders in me no empathy, and a different kind of doubt.

I want to see the suffering, to feel the pathos, to be dragged inside myself, by a mediator that I can walk away from. I want Marina Abramović.

I got her.

I haven't sat opposite Marina, avoiding eye contact until the tears flowed. I haven't chosen to brush against her breasts to avoid her partner's genitals, but I can feel my flesh reddening as I contemplate the moment. I haven't ripped the flesh from my head with a brush, the pain a salve for the notion that beauty might be absolute.

But each time I see these things, or even think of these things, my body identifies itself to me. My testicles feel shrunken, or my stomach feels distended, or my heart feels open.

We humans are moral creatures. We do unto others as we would have them do unto us, for the most part. Evolution built this level of cooperation into us. But it also built into us a mechanism by which we can do things we know are bad. We are, potentially, also immoral creatures. But it is hardest to deny our cooperative natures when we are self-aware. Our beliefs and our behaviour align when incidents of our travels in time force us to look inside ourselves. Jesus doesn't make me do that. Daughters do. And artists do, at least one does. Let's have a big round of applause—one that lasts until the embarrassment wells, and the fingers swell, and the discomfort makes us dwell on what we are—for Marina Abramović.

—David Walsh