

## Soft Target



According to the Gospel of St John, Christ rose from the dead and appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden. *Noli me tangere*, don't touch me, he says when she reaches out towards him, *you can't touch this*. Or maybe he's saying, *don't get too hung up on all this flesh*. Christ knows all about touch, when and how to do it, when it shouldn't be done, what it can and what it cannot mean. He shows himself to the disciples, who, overwhelmed, tell their friend Thomas about the visitation. "I don't believe you," Thomas says. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." How could his friends be so cavalier when it's a question of salvation? Thomas knows already that humans are credulous, that testimony — perhaps especially when it concerns desirable news — is often dubious, that souls do not usually return to their dead bodies, take up their former residences, and walk. Everyone knows that sometimes the eyes and the mind play tricks. Seeing isn't always believing. And sometimes people see only because they already believe. That's not Thomas's way. Thomas, aka "the twin," is someone split or doubled, someone who knows that whatever presents itself may have another face. Literally, tactilely. Strangely enough, Thomas himself is not all there, lacking his twin; not by coincidence, neither is Christ, at once dead flesh and transcendent spirit. Thomas and Christ are both doubles, doubtful, ontologically fractured (if in altogether different ways). They share division. But they share it asymmetrically. Thomas needs to touch, and Christ knows it. So he walks in through a bolted door and appears before Thomas, just as he had

for his other disciples. It's time to stop doubting, says Christ to Thomas, it's time to stick your hands in my wounds, and start believing. Did Thomas doubt his eyes, or did he doubt his mind? Did he doubt the testimony of his friends? Did he doubt the professions of Christ himself? Perhaps Thomas's senses had become unhinged or, more precisely, perhaps he couldn't be sure whether or not they had become unhinged. He would verify with a touch. He would touch the wounds that Jesus received on the cross, the holes made by the nails hammered through the hands, the wound made when the Roman Centurion pierced his victim's side with the spear. The spear was itself a tool for dispelling doubt: it would ensure that the victim was dead if he wasn't already. Where the spear of the enemy was, a friend's finger would come to be. Knowledge comes from a spear or from a finger, murderous verification that flesh is just flesh, or miraculous revelation that there is so much more than flesh. To penetrate that little hole, its soft edges glistening, to press the tip of your index finger into the pulsing opening like the head of an arrow into the dead centre of a distant target, surely that experience would sew together any doubt, would force vision and knowledge to become one, and, in that ecstatic epiphany of presence, ensure the jubilation of belief without end? If Thomas finally believes, it's because he hears and sees and touches Christ himself. Or rather: he touches the *holes* in Christ, Christ's holey flesh. Those stigmata are signs of what is only there because it is not all there, because it is missing something. The doubter's finger comes to plug the gap between seeing and knowing and believing. Yet Christ has come to neutralise this gap, to overturn forever the testimony of the senses. It's a miracle. True believers don't need to see. They can be blind as a bat or obedient as a Magdalene. Perhaps Thomas did not doubt at all, perhaps doubt was merely imputed to his actions by the spectators who did not understand that he in fact understood the situation very well. Perhaps Thomas just wanted to touch, perhaps he needed an alibi to touch Christ again. Or perhaps he was the required dupe for a didactic show about the nature of belief? Although the writer of these lines does not believe at all, he wonders if his disbelief would be banished if only he could touch whatever he sees. But can art even be touched, those images somehow in excess of their materials, yet just there, utterly material? Art hasn't returned from the dead, it doesn't demand or compel belief. It certainly won't save you. Whether borrowed

plumage or soft target, the images before you are empty and centreless and point elsewhere.

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