

2003

Self Portrait(s)

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Recommended Citation

Tomasula, Steve. "Self Portrait(s)." *The Iowa Review* 33.1 (2003): 33-52. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.5686>

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Self Portrait(s)

The neck of a mouse is easier to snap than a pencil, Mary had said. Hundreds of necks later, it was the ease of the words that most bothered Jim. He laid the mouse stomach-down on the lab bench, whiskers twitching, the mouse curious about what its nose was against, though of course, oblivious to the big picture descending from above. Like all of us, Jim thought, wishing he hadn't been so quick to tell Mary he'd help her make an embryo.

He stroked the mouse for a five count, the minimum time one study said was necessary to calm small animals enough to prevent fear's adrenaline rush from skewing the hormone measurements he'd later take. Then he held the rod he used against the base of its skull, close to the C1 vertebrae line as Mary had taught him, twining its tail around a finger. A stiff yank and the mouse twitched, dead.

After "Hello," how to euthanize a mouse was the first thing Mary had said to him. It was the reason they'd been introduced, so that first impression partly explained why he remembered her voice so clearly, her tone casual, familiar, the same way she'd later tell him she was borrowing his lighter. The same way she'd later ask to use his semen.

Still, waving away the fog of sublimating dry ice he used to make the mice docile, he knew he didn't need Mary to see how anything could become familiar. Even invisible. Once, Dr. Woo had gone off at him for allowing a batch of mice to die slowly. The carpenter who rented space below Jim and Mary's loft had called to complain that water was leaking from his ceiling and Jim had biked over to shut off a faucet, he'd thought. When he got there, though, he found steam billowing from that radiator that never worked right. It streaked windows and six months of art that Mary had been making for an upcoming show—he couldn't leave—and by the time he got back, Dr. Woo, the Primary Researcher on most of the studies Jim pulled, was angrily incinerating the mice, along with the three months' worth of now-useless data that they carried in their cells.

The board that policed the treatment of lab animals could have made trouble. And as Jim signed a paper stating that he understood

the protocol for harvesting livers, or hearts, or bone marrow, or whatever material a study called for, he knew to not say what he was thinking—that there were plenty more where they came from. Even so, working with so many mice it was hard to not know what he knew as he lifted the next by its tail. Its white body emerged from the cold fog like a Popsicle from one of those carts Mexican vendors pushed around his parents' old neighborhood.

Laying the mouse down, Jim let his mind wander as he often did while he worked, putting the bar behind its skull, yanking its tail, getting into a zone like a basketball player finding his rhythm, he imagined, lifting another mouse, calming it—three, four, five—yank; grab the tail and yank; grab the tail and yank; three, four, five, yank; grab the tail and yank; grab the tail and yank, in one fluid motion yank, hard enough to jerk the spine from the base of the skull, yanking hard enough to kill instantly but not so hard as to break skin, a touch thing, like shooting a basketball, grab the tail and yank, till an hour later, when he was going good, there'd be a pile of white bodies in the basin of the stainless-steel sink, his trigger finger sore from the yanking.

Everyone was shaped by their world, at least a little, he knew, pinching a flap of skin in one mouse's stomach. Still, though he'd been a premed major and never bothered by the dissecting, the killing always got a reaction from him. Holding the soft underbelly of the dead mouse between thumb and forefinger, he snipped it open with surgical scissors. Not a big reaction; but a little one, like anyone might get when it was their turn to gas the used rats, or do anything unpleasant. Two more snips and the liver was free from the purse he had made of the body. But with her, an artist who only majored in bio because her parents wouldn't pay for an art degree, bodies were something so not to flinch over that it was weird, her words not spoken in a tone that could be called matter-of-fact, or clinical, or even cold. No, she was on a curve so far ahead that he couldn't even see what direction she was going though he knew that if he could, it would explain a lot. . . .

Jim often went up to the eleventh floor of the research center so he could eat his sack lunch with Mary. The elevator opened onto a floor that looked identical to his because they all looked identical: porcelain-white corridors, a ring of labs around shared equipment like

the million-dollar spectral photometer that his floor shared. The people came from all over—Taiwan, the Philippines—but even they looked the same: the techs, like him, dressed in jeans, tennis shoes and white lab coat, photo-ID clipped to the pocket; the PIs older, their postdocs already starting to take on the serious, preoccupied look of their mentors. A Korean doctor passed by discussing something with his black intern, and Jim couldn't help but imagine Mary going to one of them if he backed out.

Today he found her and her assistant Pamela, a tech like him, doing rabbits on the opposite side of the window that separated the operating theater from the rest of their lab. Coming upon the two women dressed in their scrubs, blue caps and surgical masks covering all but their eyes, Jim often suffered a moment of disorientation—who are you?—sizing up the shape of their bodies before the boyishness of one gave its answer. Mary Elizabeth Smith. But who was that?

As he entered she teased, "How's it hangin' Mengele," glancing up from the incision she was making. It was a joke they shared—him being the Josef Mengele of the Mice—and he answered back, "Yo, Mengele,"—the Mengele of the Rabbits—hopping up on a lab bench with his lunch.

Artist? Lover? Someone's Daughter? Friend? She was also the Mengele of the pigs. And of the rats, and the dogs: all of the large animals used in studies that required a lot more surgical skill than he could provide. The bypasses, gene therapies, and other trial procedures she performed were more complicated. They took longer so when she could she worked in stages, opening the chest of one rabbit while the anesthesia was taking effect on another, while Pamela helped a third come out from under. Today they were juggling six operations, three chests clamped open at once.

"Hey," she said, tying off an artery to simulate heart disease, "Laura scheduled a late meeting today so I can use the microinjector while they're out," meaning she was going to skip lunch. So he unwrapped his peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich on his lap and watched as he ate.

She was good. Seeing her this way, working on her rabbits, it was easy to picture her in a MASH unit, operating on shot-up soldiers, or earthquake victims. The arteries of a human were way larger than those of a rat so he was sure that technically she could pull it off. To

do open-heart surgery on rats, she worked by looking through the telescoping lens of the headgear she wore. The arteries themselves were no thicker than red thread while the 10-0 suture she had to use was so fine it was invisible to the naked eye. Yet even working at this microscopic scale her movements were sure. "This is nothing," she'd tell people, "Do you know how hard it is to draw a straight line without a ruler?" And it was true. Her ability with a scalpel was at least partly the result of her art training. Not long after they'd begun living together, he'd unrolled a bunch of her old canvases, her juvenilia she called it, that he'd found stuffed in a barrel. They were nudes and still lifes from her undergrad days, self portraits so detailed that she had used a brush with a single hair for some highlights. The paintings were marvels of draftsmanship, but they embarrassed her now for their lack of ideas, and the whole while he looked at them she kept insisting that he roll them back up. She hadn't made a painting in years; no artist she took seriously did. And her ability to draw would never even come up if it didn't live on in her scalpel work, or in the delicate maneuvers she could make with a cell in the microinjector. Still, eye-hand coordination wasn't the main reason she'd make a good surgeon. Once, he had joked that if they were ever on an isolated camping trip and he needed an emergency appendectomy, he'd want her to be the one to do it. He thought she'd make some crack about removing the wrong organ, the anatomy of a man being different from a rabbit, after all. Instead, she'd only said, "Okay." Without hesitation. Without a hint of irony. He wished he had her balls.

"There. That should do, little one," she said, finishing a stitch, then turning the rabbit over to Pamela. In a few weeks she'd try to cure the rabbit's heart damage by injecting stem cells that earlier studies said could be coaxed into becoming new blood vessels. But of course the rabbit didn't know that part, what with a ventilator making its open chest work up and down.

Finally turning her clear brown eyes fully on Jim, she asked, like always, "So you going to come along?"

Mary brought out a tray of petri dishes labeled with the names of PIs and other clinical IDs., then opened the one marked *ART: Rat blastocysts*. It was another inside joke, the initials usually standing for Assisted Reproductive Technology, not the literal way she meant

the label to refer to the blastocysts inside, the fertilized rat eggs she was using.

While she positioned them on the platform of the microinjector, he took a seat on the stool beside her and adjusted its second binocular microscope to his eye height. All a blur.

“Like a virgin . . .” Mary softly sang to herself.

Jim liked watching her make art more than he liked watching her operate. She had to do a lot of it on the sly, using the expensive equipment for personal use as she did, so only he and a few others at work like Pam and Laura knew she was an artist—it was a link between them. Plus he liked going to Microbiology. Its test tubes and cultures gave the department more of the feel of what he thought of as a real lab.

A turn of the focusing ring, and the blur he’d been looking at resolved into blastocysts floating like amoebas in the medium. Or nebulas. Nebulas that were actually half the size of a period. They swam away from the even finer pipette Mary controlled with a joystick. She had made the blastocysts earlier; the male and female pronuclei wouldn’t fuse for a while, and before they did she was trying to inject the male pronucleolus with the DNA of a third rat. The idea was to make a rat whose DNA fingerprint would show that it was a mosaic of three parents. The technique was common. Most of the mice used as disease models and all of the custom animals were now created this way. She’d gotten the idea to use the method to make a work of art from the lab mice that carried a jellyfish gene; the gene caused their tumors to glow a green that reminded Jim of the brilliant blue or orange stripes on some tropical fish, and allowed the tumors to be studied without killing their host for an autopsy. But a Brazilian artist had beat her to that one, creating a green-glowing rabbit. So she thought she’d leapfrog them both by using the technique on one of her own eggs. It was an outgrowth of an earlier work of bio sculpture she’d made, *Self Portrait*: an egg she had encapsulated beneath a bubble that functioned as a magnifying glass, placed in the frame that used to house her high-school graduation portrait. To make the portrait she had in mind now though, it was important that she use an embryo that was viable. “My egg, your sperm, and some junk DNA of a third person,” she’d told Jim. It wasn’t as mechanical as Mary had hoped, though, and this was her fourth attempt to make it work with rats. “It’s a touch thing,”

Laura had said when teaching her how to work the controls, so Jim knew it wouldn't take Mary long to ice it.

She brought the glass pipette, her easel, up to the egg and the suction at the pipette's polished tip held it fast. Operating the other joystick, Mary took up her brush, an even more microscopic hypodermic needle. As she maneuvered the needle into a position that would allow a clean stab into the male pronucleolus, he felt himself squirm, thinking of his own pronucleolus semi-fused with hers under the light of the microinjector.

“... *touched for the very first time...*”

When she'd first brought up the idea, he'd agreed right away. It was only going to be an artwork—not a baby. Religious art. She was going to call it *Trinity*. She had no intention of implanting it in a womb or allowing it to become a fetus, even if it was important for the piece to have that potential, at least for a while. “Integrity of materials, and all that,” she'd said, explaining how it wouldn't have the same impact if she only faked it with Silly Putty or something else that wasn't real. . . .

The idea of his sperm mingling with her egg had been a powerful aphrodisiac, making him hard, horny. A powerful link between them. Or so it had seemed. Then her conception of the piece began to evolve. Mary changed its name to *Resurrection*, thinking that if she could use the junk DNA from a third party, mitochondria that would serve no function other than to give the potential child's DNA fingerprint the trace of a third parent, why not use junk DNA from Christ? Jim's real importance in the project began to show as she became consumed with tracking down the thirteen churches that claimed to have Christ's tissue, his foreskin, removed by circumcision since he was Jewish. Supposedly, the rest of his body ascended into heaven. After failing to find anyone who could get her a piece that wasn't totally iffy if not an outright scam, though, she decided to settle for any garden-variety saint with good provenance. She didn't even care which, even if she was being picky about the relics that showed up on eBay. Way more picky, it seemed, than she was about the guy who filled his spot.

“Do you know how easy it is to get sperm?” she laughed when to see how she'd react he'd joked that getting a sample from him was the only reason she'd let him move into her loft. But he was afraid to ask if she meant get it—\$100 per dose—from the fertility clinic

she'd contracted to harvest her eggs, or get it herself. Either way, it didn't exactly make him feel vital.

The needle punctured a dark spot on the jellyfish, the male pronucleolus. "Damn," she said. "Do you think it went all the way through?" He couldn't tell. But it didn't look like it. So she syringed in a tiny gray stream, a trillionth of a liter of solution containing the junk DNA from the third rat. "Looks like the membrane held," she said. She pressed a button on the first joystick, cutting off the suction and the egg floated away. Then she moved the microscopic glass pipette to capture another one. If this trial worked, she'd have all the pieces: injection technique down; a fertility clinic to harvest her eggs; she'd set up an account with one of the dozens of commercial labs in California to purify and multiply junk DNA from a tissue sample. They'd FedEx it to her overnight. All she had to do was come up with a saint. And have him jerk off.

"So that's what you'll do with my little guys," he said, watching her inject the next pronucleolus.

Silence. Then, "That's what I'll do," she said, her tone suddenly flat. They'd been down this road before.

She continued to work in silence till he said, "Will it hurt?"

"No one's making you," she said, the edge in her voice telling him that this wasn't the time.

She eased her naked body onto his, kissing him. But the condom he had on, the non-spermicidal kind used to capture semen samples—a test—made him self-conscious, like he was on a microscope slide, and though they went through the same motions, did all the same licking and biting, he was so aware of the difference from what it was like when he first moved in that he knew she must feel it too.

She was six years older than him and had sworn off men for a while after her divorce. He'd just dropped out of pre-med—still a horny college kid, bottled up by books—so when they met, the chemical reaction had been exothermic. The first time he picked her up at her loft, they didn't even make it to the movie that was the pretext for the date. Dressed in a skinny summer dress instead of the scrubs he always saw her in at work, she'd offered him a joint, then ten minutes after that they were fucking, her clogs and panties on the floor, her thin dress hiked up around her waist, him in the

condom she'd had at the ready as they went at each other on the mattress she then used as a bed.

They'd stopped using condoms after the results from a date for AIDS testing came back negative—an era of STDs brings into existence courtship rituals like that—but now, after having gone through the motions on the queen-sized bed they'd bought to replace the mattress, he wondered what she saw when she looked into their future. If she even looked.

Sure enough, a moment later she gave him a pat and was up. A lot had changed since he'd begun to stay here, he knew, watching her pull on the oversized sweatshirt she used as a bathrobe. She carried his sample to the corner of the loft she used as a kitchen. The two of them used to walk around the loft naked without giving it a thought. But no more. Bed sheets hung across its big industrial windows so construction workers rehabbing a neighboring factory into condos couldn't see in—just as a lot of other incremental changes had become second nature. The dirty mop heads she'd been weaving into sculptures when she got her divorce—so important to her then—were now pushed against one wall, the loft big enough to just push things off to one side and forget about them. Even a heap of mop heads six feet high.

“So far so good,” she called back, looking through a jeweler's loupe.

In a way, though, it was as if nothing had changed.

“Was there ever a doubt?” He tried to sound enthusiastic. Except for the bed, his bicycle and a few other things, his own stuff seemed to just melt into the junk—materials she called it—that she used to scavenge from dumpsters and demolition sites on her way home from the lab.

“Never a doubt,” she said, smiling, coming back to bed. She pulled off her sweatshirt and her pink nipples dangled before him as she bent to put the loupe on top of the bed-side tv. She switched the set on, then lay back in his arms. Now that she wasn't examining him any longer, it was easier for him to see her body and from it he could tell she was more relaxed as well. Glad because what could have been a hard decision for her had been defused? He pushed a hand up her back.

“Mmmmm,” she murmured, warmly, her register deepened by age—her body, like his, like everyone's, a portrait of her life. Gray

peppered what he guessed had once been jet-black hair, her hair short as a swimmer's so she could easily get it in and out of a surgical cap. The first time he saw her naked, he'd been surprised by how much older her body looked from the other girlfriends he'd had—students like him, mostly younger. There'd been tufts of hair at her armpits because she'd been a girl at a time when some mothers still told their daughters that things like that didn't matter while the smooth girlfriends he'd had, if they knew that story at all, would have thought it a relic of old hippie weirdness, or just plain gross. When he dug his knuckles into her back, she gave a little gasp, the flesh wrinkling before the plow of his palms instead of snapping back even though the muscles below were firm, her calves more muscular than some bike messengers. A mole on one shoulder. Earlobe piercing closed from nonuse. The imperfections and idiosyncrasies struck him as—as particularly her—unlike the thousands of glossy fashion models who were so unreal for their symmetry—like the plaster casts of Everyman or Everywoman they used to use to teach anatomy—everyone's ideal, and therefore ideals of no one. Especially those old enough to not be mistaken for kids. Time's winged chariot at my back, as an epigram to a chapter on aging said in a biology book he once owned.

“Oh, gag,” she said, groaning at something in a commercial. “That joke's so old.”

Or did coming home to him feel more to her like the routine of laundry day? The last thing she wanted after her divorce, she'd said, was to jump into another relationship. And she never really gave him permission to move in. It's just that he had been coming over, then sleeping over, then sleeping over and coming back later in the day so often that after a while, without either of them pointing it out, he had begun to stay. Now her project and whether or not he was going to go through with it was pointing it out. And the thought of her finding someone else to help her seemed too much like moving out even if he had never really moved in.

“Jim, do you think we're doing the right thing?” she asked, as though she'd been reading his mind. She leaned out of his arms to twist the coat hanger that was the TV's antenna, its picture wiggling back into form. “I'd hate to do anything that could wreck what we have here.”

Her question surprised him, and he hugged her for finally coming around to at least consider his reservations. “I don’t know, Mary,” he said. “I mean at first I didn’t think it was any big deal but now that it’s starting to seem more real . . .”

“Maybe we should have just thrown that flier away.”

“Flier?” She was talking about getting cable tv, he realized. When she’d first rented the loft it was supposed to have been for studio use only. She’d needed its space for the video cameras and welding equipment she used to use to make art from junk and heaps of mop heads that her then-husband wouldn’t let her bring into their apartment. The loft was in an old, MaidenForm bra factory with a tar roof that got blistering in the summer and made the place impossible to heat in the winter. It was against code for anyone to live there. But when she fell out with her ex for good, she’d gotten a microwave and moved in. When the surrounding factories and warehouses had begun to be converted into luxury condos, Jim and Mary sort of figured it was only a matter of time before they’d have to get out even if they both said doing so would kill them, the difference between the loft and the sterile research center, the chance the loft gave them to live apart from the grid, an oasis from the lab’s controlled atmosphere. Still, when a flier arrived announcing that cable tv was now available in their area, they debated whether to get it and risk alerting the landlord to their presence.

She sat up in bed and looked at him, the bemused look coming onto her face showing that she realized what he had been talking about. Then she hit him with a pillow. “Would you give it a rest!” she said in mock disbelief.

“What? Why is it so hard for you to put yourself in my shoes? I mean, you’re going to do it anyway, right? If not with me, then with some other guy.”

She shook her head and laughed one of her exasperated laughs. “We’ve been through all of this. I’d do it without anyone else if I could, but eggs don’t keep. Sperm freezes—that’s why it’s so cheap—embryos freeze, but not eggs,” she said, referring to the way she wanted to display the art embryo: in liquid nitrogen—the way another artist displayed the bust of his head he had sculpted out of a block of his own frozen blood. “If you don’t want to help me out, just say so and I’ll get a dose from a male donor when they harvest

my eggs. I'm not doing 'it' with anyone, if that's what you're worried about." Then she looked at him hard. "Is this a Catholic thing?"

Whenever her logic found no corollary in him, she went back to the fact that he'd been brought up by religious parents. "No!" he said, trying to explain it for her, and himself, without lapsing into sperm competition among apes, or any of those other theories of domination through sex that they learned in animal biology. This to someone who had sold her eggs to make ends meet while getting her master's in art. When he could think of nothing to say other than the fact that he didn't want to think of her eggs in a tube with another man, he said, "Oh, forget it."

"You could use a new set," the cable guy said. He sat on the bed, adjusting the controls of their old portable TV. The channel control worked okay, if you knew how to use it—a touch thing. But the guy didn't know how to use it. No one would ever have to know again, so Jim wedged a toothpick in the control to make the set stay on the channel that the cable box needed to work. "*Showtime, HBO...*" The guy used the new remote to surf the channels in the package Mary had ordered, demonstrating that they were all there. "...and *Court TV*," he said, leaving it on the channel Jim had asked about. Mary liked the reality TV shows, the channels that just put on footage of murderers confessing, or surgeries being performed, so he wanted to have one of those playing when she got home.

"You been putting in a lot of systems around here?" Jim asked as the guy packed up.

"You kidding?" he said, motioning to the rehab going on across the street. "I bet the only reason this building hasn't been sold to developers is because someone's holding out for more cash. I remember when the hospital was in the middle of a ghetto. No more," he said. And it was true. The hospital that Jim and Mary worked in had been an island in a war-zone part of town that ran up to the mostly empty industrial area they lived in. As recently as two years ago when Jim met Mary, riding his bike the couple of miles out here had been creepy. Now he stopped on his way in to pick up a coffee from the Starbucks in one of the condo buildings that a lot of interns lived in, the pockets of new condos and student housing that had sprung up growing so numerous that they had begun to

connect. “The world’s changing, my man,” the guy said, hitching up his tool belt. Then he was gone.

Jim found a couple of TV dinner trays among all the junk Mary had accumulated. He opened the freezer in the corner of the loft that was her kitchen, and got the TV dinners he’d bought to surprise her with. Behind them were some of her cultures, and behind those a box with a Korean label. It was the frozen squid they had bought at a Vietnamese market when they’d just begun dating. They had these plans for making an Oriental dinner in her loft, but back then it seemed like all they did was screw, and the squid had remained frozen there all this time. He pulled it out, imagining the look on her face when she saw what he had cooked. Was it still good? Behind it, in the deepest part of the freezer were more sealed baggies—had they bought other stuff that day as well? *Joe, Korean 2.5.00.000S* was written in magic marker on one. Inside was a brown bottle that Jim at first thought was the kind Oriental markets used to sell rhino horn and other potions. But then, scraping away the frost, he saw that it was one of the bottles used for samples in Microbiology. *Luke, Afro.-Am. 2.15.00.000S* said the next. There were some seven or eight others.

The plodding of someone laboring up the stairs sounded out in the hallway.

When he saw *Jim, Caucasian* on one of the vials, he knew what he was looking at.

A scratching of keys, the door swung open and Mary was there, carrying her bike on one shoulder.

“Who is *Korean 2.5.00.000S*?”

She stopped, her mouth open in mid-hello. Then she put her bike down. “Just some guy I knew before I knew you.”

“And *Afro.-Amer. 2.15.00.000S*?”

“Look, they were all just guys. You don’t know any of them.”

“I—”

“And even if you did, this was before we met. You didn’t think you were the first, did you?”

He could feel his blood quicken while behind his eyes there was a flash, a prom date’s mother snapping pictures as he posed grinning in a living room decorated with framed photos of his date in other corsages, arm-in-arm with other guys. “And you were saving their jizz? Like some kind of memento?”

“Not a memento,” she said sarcastically. “I thought I was going to make art out of it.”

“What?”

“Nothing came of it.” She crossed her arms. “I really doubt if that old beater of a freezer even keeps them cold enough to be viable.”

“That’s beside the point!”

“I knew I should have thrown them away,” she said more to herself than to him. “I didn’t mean to—”

“I mean, you harvest their sperm, my sperm, then keep it on ice until you could get around to making art out of it? Without telling anyone?”

“It was just an idea. Nothing came of it. Maybe I should have said something but it’s not exactly like you guys were so concerned about what happened to your sperm when you came over here.”

“Who the hell do you think you are!”

He hadn’t meant to cut her.

GENETIC BACKGROUND in which the Transgenic Mice Will Be Made? Jim clicked on the radio-button beside *F2(C57B16 X CBA)*. As he continued to fill out the on-line form, placing an order for the genetically altered mice Dr. Pashvani needed for one of the lab’s studies, he wished he hadn’t gone there. That is, he wished he hadn’t yelled, “Who the hell do you think you are?” and then continue to spray gasoline on the big, blowing oil-rig-fire of a fight they had until she was screaming back, “All right, all right, I feel like dirt! Are you happy!”

Alpha 1 (IX) collagen; Alpha 1b-adrenergic... He scrolled down the long list of genes that could be knocked out of a mouse’s sequence till he found *Vascular/endothelial-cadherin*, and clicked its radio-button. Mary had issues about who she was, he knew. Serious issues. When she’d been in college, she’d gotten an e-mail from someone claiming to be an unknown sister who said that both of them had been given up for adoption when they were infants. Mary had told the woman she was crazy, but when she searched birth records to prove it, she couldn’t find her own. It turned out that she wasn’t related to the woman, but her parents denied she was adopted right up until she laid the DNA evidence before them.

Charges for Blastocyst Injections, per targeting (2 clones) \$3,000.

After she'd told Jim that story, how she might never have discovered the lie she'd been living if she hadn't seen a billboard—Call 1-800-DNA-TYPE—set up by a biotech company that helped settle paternity cases, he understood a little better how she could sell her eggs. For the longest time she didn't want anything to do with her parents, treated them like kidnapers who had made her major in something practical, something she wasn't. She didn't talk to them through the rest of her senior year, which meant that she had to pay for it herself. When she turned to the ads for waitressing at the local IHOP or Big Boy, she also found the other ads that periodically ran in the school newspaper, ads for healthy coeds to become egg donors, or to rent their wombs. A friend had already volunteered for the first and had been paid a \$12,000 gratuity. On the psychological screening portion of the application that asked prospective donors why they wanted to do it, Mary didn't have to lie: she was glad to help other women have their own kids, she wrote, rather than have to adopt someone else's. But he couldn't stop wondering how many of them were out there—those women with their kids. The thought of her eggs mingling with the sperm of different men—the connection she would have with those men, and women, and kids—gave him a pang of jealousy. If the fertility drugs every donor had to take allowed her to give up twenty to forty eggs, how many other e-mails would Mary be getting in the future? And that's assuming she only sold her eggs once. The egg she used in *Self-Portrait* came from those days, she claimed. But that would mean she'd kept it for years. When there were more where those came from, as she put it, and had needed money while going through her divorce. No wonder she couldn't get her mind around his reaction. He must seem like a dinosaur sometimes, he thought, clicking on the bookmarks of his browser to reveal all the links he had saved to tomatoes that carried codfish genes so they would be less susceptible to freezing; blue cotton that didn't have to be dyed to make jeans; synthetic skin, ears and noses grown in petri dishes; cow embryos that were part human; goats that gave steroids instead of milk; Dr. Pashvani, Dr. Woo and thousands like them asking if all plants, animals, cells—all nature—could be used as rearrangeable packets of information, while he, Mary, and thousands of techs like them did the grunt work of stitching together answers. . . .

“...remember also, Father, Your servants Alfred Wiesoki...” The priest was getting to the part Jim came for so he began to pay attention. “...Stanley Stodola; Martin Zwoboda; Dolores Szyarak; Jose Garcia; and James and Jean Krygoski”—Jim’s parents—and when the priest finished intoning the names of the dead, Jim and the few others in attendance at this weekday mass murmured, “And let perpetual light shine upon them.” It was a mass of remembrance. And though it seemed like so much voodoo to him, his parents had both bought masses for their parents, had attended regularly each and every anniversary of their deaths, or birth into Christ as the church put it. So for each of the six years since their deaths he had paid to have their names said at mass, if for no other reason than to remember.

Scattered around the dark church were a few old people: his parents’ generation, too set in their ways to move away when the neighborhood began to go Hispanic. An icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe now hung in an alcove where Jim knew an inscription in Polish remembered those who had died in The Great War, as people called WWI before world wars had sequels. A woman his age sat in a side pew—stylish business suit, arty glasses—on the periphery like him, and here no doubt for the same reason. It was a connection between them. She also looked a little lost, but tried to go through the motions, following the lead of the others who were not just remembering someone dead but were literally praying to save their souls.

Seeing the old people finger worn rosaries, Jim was always struck by their belief in words. How they thought words could cure disease. Resurrect the dead. Determine whether a soul burned in eternal hell or basked in perpetual light. Like the woman, he had also tried to pray along at his first mass of remembrance. He could have done it easily when he was a kid and attended the grade school attached to the church. But he hadn’t been to mass in years since then, and he felt foolish, like a person trying to sing the second verse of a Christmas carol they could only half remember. But why not? he thought, glancing at the woman mumbling along. What could it hurt?

Even so, his mind kept wandering to the communion railing and altarpiece, a marvel in carved oak that no one would even try to duplicate today. Had Mary been born 500 years ago, she might have

worked at carving communion railings like this one instead of making the art that she did. Had she been born in Europe, that is. Had she been born into the right guild, that is. Had she been born a man. He remembered how excited she'd been to see the stained-glass windows the time he'd brought her here. He knew about her interest in tribal art so wasn't surprised that she also liked religious art. Still, he hadn't thought she would actually make any till she returned with a camera to shoot the church's rose window in different light. It was its blue at dawn that she wanted to use she said. And its shape reminded her of a petri dish.

Looking at it, a deep blue circle now protected by bulletproof glass, he remembered the stories he'd heard about it as a kid. It had been made in Lithuania, the master stonemasons, glass artisans, and other craftsmen needed to make a church like this all back in Europe, the connection between the new and old worlds straining from the start. And it did look like a petri dish. He'd never noticed how much body stuff there was in the church till Mary started asking about the cannibalism of their rituals: "This is my body, take and eat?" she had said when he tried to deny it. "What's up with that?"

As in other churches, the body of an emaciated God/man hung crucified at the front of this one. But the thing that struck Jim after all these years, the thing that had most made him think it was all a lot of B.S. and voodoo to begin with was the way they all thought water could turn into wine, bread into flesh. That a man could simultaneously be a dove. Virgin birth. But now, going through his catalog of mice with tobacco genes, his bookmarks to test-tube babies, infants with baboon hearts, and the rest, none of it seemed so farfetched any more.

"This is my blood," the priest said, raising a chalice of wine above his head. A Mexican altar girl in dingy tennis shoes and a surplice as white as a lab coat rang the chimes, just as he had as a kid, to mark the moment of the wine's transformation. It was about words, but also about bodies. Always the body. Even if bodies were becoming as permeable as words: him standing here because twenty-six years ago his forty-year-old parents, good Catholics to the end, bet rhythm against chemistry; his mother's Polish mother before them marrying his Lithuanian grandfather because his first wife had died in childbirth, all three of them coming here after The Great War

from different parts of a torn-up Europe on the basis of rumors that the Middle West—as if it were a hamlet—was where they'd find people from their village. The rumors themselves had been based on the construction of this church, they later realized—the windows from Lithuania, the communion railing from Poland, and when he thought of the web of words and bodies that had been needed to bring him into existence, he couldn't help but wonder?— Who were any of them?—5,000 generations back to the African Eve, the last woman genetic reconstruction said all people now walking the earth were descended from, as few as fifty of her descendants walking out of Africa and into Europe to continue a web of chance and circumstance so old and interwoven that it almost seemed as if it was his one true creator, the number of accidents and chance encounters—a world war had to have been fought—and miscarriages, and births that it took to get to him too large to hold in his mind—like thinking about god. Or infinity. No wonder words like 'race' were supposedly going the way of words like 'miracle.' If a person counted back 120,000 generations to Adam, the first amoeba, even words like fish and mammal began to blur—forget about monkey/man. Yet in the free fall he understood for an instant how his grandmother could have gotten on a boat to come here. Penniless. Not a word of English. Unknown continent before but an understanding deeper than marrow that she was part of something larger than herself. And as water seeks its own level, she had found his grandfather here in this church.

Trim, aerobicized bod: the lawyer, or ad exec, or whoever the woman his age was shot him a frowning glance—as though she'd caught him checking her out. But really he was trying to look past her, to the dark side chapel where votive candles flickered before relics: bone chips or bits of flesh from dead saints. Among the relics, he knew, was the dried blood of St. James, the saint his parents had picked to be his namesake and patron, housed in a silver heart.

They were supposed to be celebrating tonight. A piece Mary had made two years ago, *In A Beginning*, had won the Tokyo Prize for techno art and this was its opening. They lay in bed looking at a projection of it, taken from the web, routed through a projector plugged into her computer's video output and cast on the bed sheet

that hung across one of the windows of their loft: creases in the sheet rippled the live image, a deep-blue circle speckled with dots that reminded Jim of the night sky seen through a telescope. But instead of the night sky, the circle was a petri dish, and instead of stars, the dots were *E. coli* bacteria. Mary had contracted a lab to infuse their cells with a synthetic gene whose sequence of amino acids carried a message: LET MAN HAVE DOMINION OVER ALL THE PLANTS AND ANIMALS OF THE EARTH. The actual petri dish was set up in Tokyo, but anyone could see the same view of it that he and Mary were looking at by going to her web site. Once there, they could use their mouse to trigger an ultraviolet flash on the bacteria. When they did, the projected circle flashed whitish, then returned to its deep blue glow, the blue of the rose window in the church Jim's parents had been buried in. The idea was that each flash of the UV light would cause the bacteria to mutate a little, corrupting the message in a way no one would know until she translated the genetic coding back into English.

The loft lit up again, as from lightning, the sheet going momentarily white. Someone somewhere in the world had clicked their mouse. In the flash Jim could see Mary's face, serene, and he took her hand, glad their fight was over. Living in a loft with no walls, it had been hard to avoid each other. Slowly they had begun to talk again. First in clipped answers to clipped questions, then more naturally. What the hell, he thought, beginning to understand what the project meant to her. And wanting the fight to be over before this, her biggest opening, he'd bought a bottle of massage oil—a peace offering—to place on her pillow with an IOU for a back rub as a way to say, if the project meant so much to her, he'd go along with it, even if he didn't know what it all meant. Entering the loft he found a woman-sized pillar of dirt in the chair where Mary normally sat. She'd made a video of her lips, then connected it to a motion sensor and Watchman buried in the dirt so its tiny screen appeared right where her lips would be if she were the dirt. Whenever he came near, the video lips said, "I'm sorry." When Mary showed up, they made up, and backs rubbed, egos massaged, he told her his IOU had another meaning. Instead of being happy, though, she only said that she wanted to think about it. That she wasn't sure what it all meant either.

Right after that she'd found out that *In A Beginning* had won the Tokyo Prize, and she'd be getting 500,000 yen. And right after that they got their eviction notice.

"What will you do with the money?" he asked, refilling her paper cup with champagne.

"I don't know. Maybe buy a dress. Or a new pair of shoes."

After the success of *In A Beginning*, a knockout project like *Resurrection* would really put her on the map, he knew, at least among the artists who used plants and animals, living tissue, or palettes of bacteria as their medium. And she knew it too. And that the prize money would pay for the harvesting of eggs, if she decided to keep them all instead of donating the ones she wouldn't use to the clinic that was going to do the job. It would also pay for the purification of DNA she'd extract from a tissue sample, as well as its cloning and amplification. Even so, she still hadn't said she'd go through with it. Even though her rats had tested positive for poly-parentage. He knew it had something to do with him, though he wasn't sure what. Though they'd both said they were sorry, though they knew they had to get out of the loft by the end of next month, they still hadn't made any plans for moving elsewhere and he was afraid it was because she was thinking about going without him.

She hadn't said anything to make him think this. They just didn't talk about it. Or her project. And that's what worried him. That out of courtesy to him, knowing how he felt, she wasn't going to involve his body before they split. She didn't want that tie.

The projected petri dish lit up again illuminating the loft. In the flash he tried to read her face. What was she thinking? Was he in or out? In a way, he couldn't blame her. The thought of giving up the loft for a regular apartment with white walls and a real kitchen was depressing. The kind of depression that made him feel older, like he was turning into his parents shopping for linoleum. How much more so would it be for her—signing a lease with a guy as if she was stepping back into another marriage.

He should have known, just coming and staying as he did, that all along he'd been living on borrowed time. Still . . .

"You know my parents' church?" he said, pressing the length of his naked body to hers. "I never showed you that time we went to look at the window, but a side altar has the relics of a few saints."

"Oh yeah?" she said, an eyebrow raising.

“Yeah. One of them is St. James. The patron saint of pilgrims, refugees and other travelers to new lands.”

“I like it,” she said.

“It’s in a silver heart just screwed to the wall. And the church is open twenty-four hours a day. In case someone going by gets religion in the middle of the night. It’s a Catholic thing.”

His words gave her pause. “So what? You’re saying we just go in and steal it?”

“Not steal. Borrow. After you amplify the DNA, they’ll be enough relics for a million churches.”

She studied him for the longest time, then said, “You’re serious, aren’t you.”

GeneTech. The FedEx package arrived as they were packing to move into their new apartment. Most of the junk—her mops and auto fenders—they decided to just leave behind. But the other stuff, her cultures and sheets and towels, they had boxed up or put in big garbage bags. The boxes and bags and tools and pots formed a pyramid by the door with the FedEx package on top so Mary could hand carry it. Which she did, when the time came, cradling it against her waist as they went out.