

You, Me, Her, You, Her, I

By Isabel J. Kim,
author of *Sublimation*

You are the unalive thing possessing her body. Her body was printed three days ago from blueprints transferred moments before the motorbike crash over the bridge. Her flesh and fat and keratin and bone are accurate to prior specifications, except for the absence of a few cosmetic scars on her arm which her family had requested not be replicated.

“It’s what you would have wanted, right, Val?” her father had said, looking at the arm you are currently controlling.

“You’re probably right,” you said. “She usually puts a bandaid over the keloids in her photographs.”

“Oh,” her father said. “I forgot—” Her father looked down at the floor. You didn’t mean to make him uncomfortable. Valentine has many photographs with her parents and siblings. She must love them. Her mother didn’t want to see her body with you in it.

“You should maybe go,” you said. Her father left a few moments later, and you were alone again in a Penn Med Resurrection Clinic observation room.

You understand her father’s mistake. You are wearing Valentine’s clothes. You are wearing her body. You are everything that makes Valentine Manning herself, except for the throbbing electric lump that should sit in her cranial cavity. Her new brain is currently stored in a little closet in the Resurrection Clinic, bathed in goo and bombarded with targeted electrons. It will take two months to rearrange the freshly printed organ into the shape that she left it in before she died, all memories restored.

Bodies can’t just sit around, though. They get bedsores. They take up space. Val has an empty apartment seven blocks from the university and a signed insurance contract that authorizes experimental therapies when provided by a licensed medical provider. Therefore, you are piloting Valentine’s freshly created meat instead of letting it lie on a shelf. You are one of the fifty-seven synthetic replicative intelligences the Clinic owns for this purpose. You are floating in a bath of synthetic cerebrospinal fluid. You are attached to her brainstem. You do not have a name.

“I thought you were leaving with her dad,” Amanda says, walking over to you with a tablet. You’ve only met Amanda once before, when you opened Valentine’s eyes and she coached you through a physical examination and asked you what you remembered. Amanda is one of the technicians overseeing your cohort of synthetics. You suspect she had a hand in your programming.

You don’t remember anything. You don’t have any carryover data from previous assignments because you have no previous assignments. But that wasn’t what Amanda was asking. Amanda wanted to know whether Valentine’s data successfully integrated. You have all of Valentine Manning’s digital detritus scraped from the cloud and poured into your circuits. You have all her chatlogs, her school assignments, her social media posts. You have the text on her artist’s website: *Valentine Manning is a Philadelphia-based artist who works in traditional mediums, exploring the juxtaposition of the human form against fractured abstraction.*

“I know where her apartment is,” you tell Amanda, who walks you through discharge. You collect the items salvaged from Valentine’s body. Her broken, waterlogged phone. Her keys. Her wallet is missing, which means that she will need a new driver’s license, new credit cards, a new debit card.

“Then we’ll see you next week for a physical,” Amanda tells you, giving you a sheet of paper with the clinic’s number, and the date and time of your next checkup.

You nod. You leave the hospital. This is the first time you are leaving the hospital. This is the first time you are leaving anywhere.

You walk past the museum and the train tracks and the bridge over the Schuylkill River. A portion of the bridge is cordoned off because of Valentine’s accident, and you suppose that if you were her you might have some emotions, but this was not something that happened to you so you just cross the road.

You get to her apartment. You open her door, which you recognize from a digitally downloaded photograph of Valentine sitting on the stoop with an ex-boyfriend. You go inside and examine the flotsam of her life. Everything in her life fits in three rooms, walls painted pale blue with scuffs along the baseboard. There are dishes in the dishrack. There isn’t much food in the fridge. There are running shoes near the door, a big portfolio leaned against the window. In the bedroom, there is an unmade bed piled with dark red sheets, a mirror tipped against the side of a dresser, and line drawings tacked on the wall across from the window.

You peer at the sketches individually. None of them had been uploaded to her portfolio. They look like they’re ripped from sketchbooks. They depict a woman’s body in charcoal and ink, dark slashes across the clouds of charcoal dust. You touch a line softly. It smears under Valentine’s fingers, and you pull back, taking two steps back and tripping into the bed that she left unmade before she died.

At this angle, the drawings and mirror are all visible in your field of vision. The line of her body against the sheets, her legs kicking as you try and orient yourself. You realize: these are all self portraits she made and hung in her bedroom. You think about her legs kicking as she tumbled over the bridge.

Synthetic replicative intelligences are highly regulated and extraordinarily expensive. They are used for a number of purposes, not limited to but including: emergency responders in certain states, digital call center employees, and administrators for certain digital networks. Insurance authorizes their use by medical professionals for temporary installation into human bodies as part of the resurrective process. The Penn Med Resurrection Clinic is affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania Medical System, which is federally allowed to program up to five new synthetics a year, and to use them for research, development, and resurrection. Someone—probably Amanda—will likely write a paper about your experience.

This is your first experience of linear time. You're not sure you care for it—time doesn't seem to behave rationally, or perhaps your perception of it isn't rational. It goes too quickly when you need it to slow; it goes too fast when you need a moment. You go grocery shopping and forget what you were supposed to buy. You make eggs and realize her mouth dislikes the texture.

You figure out how to contact the correct agencies to ask for a replacement credit card, debit card, drivers license. You make phone calls and tell them Valentine's mother's name, the name of her first pet, her social security number. Navigating bureaucracy makes you question whether you enjoy being alive. You wonder how Valentine felt about being alive. You know she did not enjoy phone calls either, having texted her mother numerous times to complain. You wonder if the tension in her shoulders when she listens to the phone ring is something inherent to the body.

You flip through her sketchbook, which is filled with fragments and notes. The sharp angle of an elbow. The words "Another series? Ask Kait to model if she's free, stars? planetary themes, the heavy weight of space etc etc etc." Two fingers, lovingly rendered. "REMEMBER TO CALL ROSHAN," in sharpie. An iris done in delicate purple. "Fuck This," in red cursive pen detailed across the green stem. You draw a tentative circle on a clean page, and it comes out shaky. Without her brain to guide her hand, the line is jittery and obloid. You rip out the page. The imprint of your pen remains on the next page, and you rip that one out as well.

You restrict your explorations to the computer after that. You know the cadence of Valentine's online communications. You message her friends back. They don't know about the accident—it wasn't publicized, and Valentine's family requested that her medical record be sealed. No one knows she died and is being resurrected. You will replicate Valentine Manning's existence until she is alive enough to say what she wants to be done with her medical history. Then you will be surgically removed and her data will be deleted and you will be placed in a new body.

Her friends hold conversations with you and don't notice the difference.

On the third day since you woke up in her body, you go to her studio. You walk across the bridge while the sun is rising—the caution tape is gone now—past the museum and the hospital, to the red brick building housing the graduate students.

You swipe in and go past the gallery, up the two flights of concrete stairs and cautiously into the studio space. The studios are segmented by whitewashed plywood and drywall, and as you walk you glance into the strange and beautiful boxes that her fellow students have created. One of them is draped in fabrics that have been cut to diffuse light in fractal patterns. Another has covered their space in thin LED screens. The air smells like linseed oil, like metal solder, like clay, like expired paint, like coffee. It smells like people are alive.

You enter Valentine's studio. You've seen this space from multiple angles from photographs of her work displayed on her digital portfolio, depicting the small cube whose walls were covered in large canvases covered in swathes of color, with delicately rendered humanoid figures floating over the background. The text from her portfolio site: *Valentine Manning creates semi-hallucinatory montages figuring the classical human form projected against flat and dissipating color planes, deploying the juxtaposition in a way to explore liminality and the nature of the obsession with the human form.*

You lose a long moment staring at the unfinished canvases. They are luminescent.

"Oh shit, you're here early," a voice says. You jump. The voice laughs. You turn. There is a woman leaning against the doorway. She's holding a tupperware and a spoon. She sticks it in her mouth.

"Sorry," she says through a mouthful of oatmeal. "I didn't mean to startle you, Val."

"It's alright," you say. You don't recognize her. She's not in any of your files. You don't know how to interact with her. "I just thought I'd come in early, today."

"Worried about critique?"

"Yes," you say, because Valentine's messages were often filled with concern. Valentine cried in the bathrooms sometimes after crit, regardless of whether the feedback was positive or negative. It was the voyeurism that got to her. The way her professors and peers would pick apart her work thread by thread.

"Wow," the stranger says, walking into the studio and setting the tupperware on a table. "I never expected you to admit that."

You don't know what you said wrong. You want the stranger to leave. "Well, I did. Look, I'm kind of busy. That's why I'm here early."

"Aw, don't clam up, vulnerability is attractive," the stranger says. She points at the painting with her spoon. "I dare you to bring that to crit."

You look back at the canvas. You know Valentine is due for a mid-semester check in, according to the portfolio course syllabus. The unfinished painting is a dark red wash across the canvas layered with a mess of shapes that look like they might be a human figure, if more detail were added. Valentine paints photorealistically. This is not finished.

You shrug. The stranger rolls her eyes, picks up her oatmeal, and leaves. You turn to the paints. Her glass palette is covered in little circles of mixed color that haven't dried out yet. There's a jar of turpentine next to it, and a set of battered brushes. You pick one up and inspect it. You dab the brush against a puddle of dark ochre and tentatively place a spot of color on the canvas. It looks out of place. You make three more attempts, swiping across the flesh tones. They all look wrong. You do not know how to fix it. You put the brush back down. You pick up your bag and turn the lights off in Valentine's studio before you leave.

You walk to the Resurrection Clinic. You check in and sit down. The waiting room is just as you remember. A few families. A few quietly crying strangers. You wonder if any of the others are synthetics like you. You think about Valentine's brain, floating in synthetic cerebrospinal slime. You had seen it, sitting in the clear canister in the room you woke up in.

There were electrodes placed at intervals. It did not move. You wonder where in the brain the paintings are created. What clustering of neurons creates the understanding of where to place the brush. What is missing from your silicon and carbon nanotubing.

“Valentine?” Amanda calls. You look up, and she waves you inwards. “What’s the emergency?”

“I don’t know how to paint,” you inform Amanda.

Amanda frowns. “Why is that an issue?”

“Valentine is an artist attending graduate school here. That’s in her file. Replication of her existence requires working on her portfolio. She’s very skilled. I would destroy her work.”

“I see,” Amanda says, turning to the computer and clicking through. “Oh. Yes, that was an addenda to the file, that’s why it slipped through. Well, it’s not surprising you can’t paint. Muscle memory is stored in the brain, contrary to the popular idiom. You can’t replicate skill without training.”

“Can I download the knowledge?”

“Not without surgery to extricate the chip,” Amanda says. “We’ll be sure to double check the skills training download for your next assignment—for now I can write you a doctor’s note for your program, which shouldn’t be an issue. You don’t need to paint—you aren’t expected to.”

“It’s okay,” you find yourself saying. You get off the examination table. You give her your best person smile. The reassuring one you practiced with Valentine’s face in the mirror over the weekend. “I’ll figure it out.”

Amanda does not look reassured, but discharges you anyway.

When you get home, you open Valentine’s sketchbook again. You flip through the pages slowly. There are loose drawings of bruised fruit, of bones—Valentine thought there was something beautiful in decay. There are landscape sketches of supermarkets, of the obelisk in Woodlands Cemetery, of an orange sunrise over the Schuylkill. You realize this is the location where the crash happened. She has drawn it seven times. You put the sketchbook down.

You stare at the drawings on her wall. Whatever made her capable of understanding the process of art—the sweep of her arm, the understanding of where to place a stroke, all of this is missing. You do not know how to finish the paintings. You will work around deficiency in the information you were given in order to replicate her.

You meet with Valentine's advisors and explain that you've recently been diagnosed with a medical issue that may affect your work. You do not mention that the issue is that Valentine is missing her brain. They are sympathetic. You talk with her friends over messenger, and the other graduate students around the coffee machine. The woman who dared you to present unfinished work sometimes joins in the discussion. You learn her identity through osmosis. Clare Voght: a mixed-media video and installation artist who you have gleaned has some sort of vendetta against everyone, a chip on her shoulder the size of the Empire State Building. She wants to be Yayoi Kusama or Maria Abramovic or Hito Steyerl, someday. She is scathing in critique, and her artwork is torn apart in turn. *What does it mean? Can you justify your found-object art? Can you write about it? Clare, to be a conceptual artist you need to have a stronger foundation in the literature, if you want to engage in discourse about capitalist structures of creation.*

You don't speak much. You keep going to the studio early. Clare is usually already there, and sometimes she stops at your doorway and eats her oatmeal while you stare at Valentine's old work. Sometimes Clare criticizes the half-finished paintings. Other times she talks about mutual acquaintances, interesting assigned readings. You don't contribute much to the conversation. There's no electronic record of prior communication between the two of you.

"Are we friends?" you ask.

"Not really," Clare says. "You should try another medium. You're not getting anywhere with this. I got a bunch of string. You want some string? Or LEDs?"

"You're just trying to annoy me."

"Maybe a little. You always seemed so...together. I'm kind of enjoying your roadblock. Offer's genuine, though. I got a bunch of yarn and stuff from a friend. You look like you'd enjoy knitting."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you dress like a librarian," Clare says. You don't take offense to that, though maybe Valentine would. You're wearing her clothes.

"I'm busy, Clare," you say, feigning annoyance, standing and brushing past her to go to the bathroom. You hear her footsteps as she returns to her studio.

When you return, you stare at the canvases that Valentine left half-done. Her unfinished work is all dark washes and reds. Flat color planes six feet wide, the ghost of human bodies sketched on top. She wrote long descriptions of her work. This was meant to be part of a series called *Void III*. A capstone series, and not one she cared for particularly. She didn't always love what she made. Mostly she didn't love anything she made.

You have read everything Valentine saved to her computer. You know the definition of good art. You know about Postproduction and about Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction and you know about the Post-Art-Climate and you know about Doctored PseudoContemporary and you know about the Abstract-Figurative Renaissance and you

know that Art is about the meaning derived from the title card and art is about being a non-fungible-token and Art is about being an asset worth millions of dollars, but infinitely more transferable. Art does not have to be good. Art merely has to exist.

Yet there is a desire that fills you when you look at the paintings in Valentine's studio. You know this is desire from the way she spoke about desire, how she wrote about it, from the way that the paintings in her *Void III* series look, the dark mass that the light bends toward within the canvas. You could love Valentine because of her art, if you didn't have her digital memories.

You go to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and look at Cy Twombly and Duchamp. These are scrawls that mean something. You walk across the city to buy oil pastels, paint markers, and spray paint that needs to be removed from the cage by a Blick employee. You cover canvases in scrawls that don't mean anything.

You throw out the pastels and spray paint. You stare at Valentine's unfinished paintings and think about Rothko, but Valentine would never turn in total abstraction. In a desperate last-minute attempt before mid-semester critique, you riff on Jim Campbell's LED light installations and use your instinctive understanding of the iteration of logical code structures to create programs that flash colors hypnotically across screens, great tangles of LEDs that color-change based on a mathematical equation based on the shape of the amygdala. These are also scrawls that don't mean anything.

"It's a big departure," Valentine's advisor says at critique. He sounds disapproving. "Are you abandoning photorealism for good?"

"No, but I wanted to expand my horizons a little," you say. "I think this will make my painting stronger. I guess I wanted to try something more conceptual."

Her advisor nods at that, and suggests a few texts to look into.

"The new stuff looks great," Clare says afterward, leaning against the wall and staring at the ribbons of light. You frown at her, at your sculpture juxtaposed against Valentine's canvases looming on the walls.

"I don't like it," you admit. "I don't know what my art is about."

"Wow, that's *really* not something I thought you would say," Clare says.

"Well," you say. "Maybe you don't actually know me. All you do is pick apart all my decisions. I don't appreciate that."

"You know what I've always appreciated about you, Val? The fact that you're so direct."

"Is that direct? I have no idea," you say. Every conversation with Clare feels like a minefield. Not in the sense that you believe Clare will figure out you are not Valentine. Just in the sense

that you feel as if you are being judged and found wanting. Like the pre-installation tests they did on you in the virtual sandbox.

“Seriously, try fiber art. I’m giving you my thread, and you can’t say no,” Clare says, standing up and leaving your studio space. She returns with a large container filled with many different colors of string.

Living loses its novelty. You start cooking the recipes Valentine left bookmarked in her internet browser and think about the difference between your small kitchen and a restaurant galley and Rirkit Tiranija’s *untitled (free/still)*. You start watching the shows bookmarked in Valentine’s Netflix account and think about how watching a movie feels very similar to living in the virtual sandbox where you used to exist, in some ineffable way. You start going for runs in the morning. You are extrapolating from Valentine now, attempting a sort of understanding through replication. The exercise makes your muscles ache, creates blisters on the back of her ankles that you end up putting bandaids over. Maybe this could be art, if art is about suffering.

You spend more time in the studio. Everyone is spending more time in the studio—the semester crawls forward, students whispering about final critique, which doubles as the winter semester show and will be attended by the full MFA faculty. It will be a death by a thousand comparative comments. Val would participate in the neurotics, so you start arriving at the studio early and leaving late, which is how you learn Clare sometimes sleeps in her studio rather than going home. She has a dedication to her work that you almost admire.

The work should not matter to you. The art is not something that is part of your programming. You are here to replicate Valentine Manning for a period of two months, and Amanda indicated the art did not need to be part of that replication. Your job is superficial at best. You know the interior of the person doesn’t matter as long as the exterior matches the perception the public has. There is a certain variance from the norm that a person can show without being questioned, which is the variance you operate within. You are not here to be faithful. You are here to be adequate. If, back at the hospital, you had smiled at Val’s father and said you were pleased with the keloid removal, he would have smiled back and assumed Val’s presence rather than yours, and it would have been a kindness you had not felt like giving him.

You start sorting through the string. You watch tutorials on knitting and embroidery, on bobbin lace making. Fibercraft makes a sort of intrinsic sense to you, the obvious mathematical pattern of it. It takes a different sort of fine motor control, one that comes more naturally to a mind that was trained on pixels. You buy more embroidery thread. You buy needles. You think about the broken glass in *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (Duchamp). You think about how you have no obligation to Val other than to preserve the simulacrum of her life. You stare at the unfinished paintings while you knot string together. They are not anything you could have made.

The first canvas you puncture tentatively, but the needle cleanly slides through the oil paint and canvas, leaving a trail of red. The second puncture is easier, drawing the red line taut. The rest of the embroidery, the stitched-in lace, the loops of thread like so many drops of blood, all of this is a foregone conclusion. You dot the canvases with threads of color. Swathes of fiber come together under your fingers while the sunlight crosses her studio and turns into the soft night glow of streetlamps.

Your second to last clinic appointment is supposed to be a formality. Amanda runs you through your last physical. Blood pressure cuff. Stick out your tongue. Deep breath in, deep breath out. Is there pain anywhere? Have you noticed anything unusual? You comply with all her questions, and she smiles at you while typing at her tablet.

“Looking good,” Amanda says, holding out your coat for you to slip on. “And Valentine’s brain is on track to full configuration by next week, so we’ll be able to do the surgery as planned. Good job on your first assignment, especially with the painting wrinkle.” She always talks to you like you’re a person, which is not true of all the technicians.

“Thank you,” you say, buttoning up your coat. “I wanted to ask you for a favor, actually.”

“Sure,” Amanda says. “What’s up?”

“I understand Valentine’s data is going to be erased from my storage. I want to request that all the data I gathered on art be left intact, even if Val’s personal data needs to be deleted.”

Amanda frowns. “Huh. That’s an unusual request. Most synthetics dislike the fragments—to clarify, you’re not going to have any of the original data as a referent. Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’d like to specifically keep everything about art.”

Amanda turns away from you, opening up the computer terminal. “Let me check the regulations.”

You sit quietly on the examination table, watching Amanda type. You wonder what Amanda’s life is like, outside of the minutes she spends with you. Whether she lives alone like Val does. Whether there’s someone to meet her when she comes home. Whether she obsesses over the research like you obsess over Val’s art. Whether she’s taking notes on you after every meeting to write a research paper.

She glances up at you. “Okay, everything you recorded after installation legally belongs to the Clinic, so *hypothetically* you could keep all of it. But the deletion process is categorized by time, not by ‘type of data’— what we’d be doing is deleting anything from before the date you were installed, and leaving everything after. But we can’t segment the types of information.”

“So you can’t isolate the art.”

“We can’t isolate the art. If you want to keep the art, you need to keep the rest as well. But if you want to keep everything, I’ll leave it all in there.”

You find yourself frowning. “Are you allowed to do that?”

“It’s not protocol. But we’re a research program,” Amanda says, smiling. “I could call leaving the data ‘research.’”

“I don’t know if I want to keep everything,” you say.

“Just let me know before the surgery,” Amanda says, and you feel absurdly bad for being annoyed that she might want to write a research paper on you.

You think about Val’s delicate iris and the calligraphic *fuck you*. You think about beautiful rejections. You think about the arc of a bicycle over a bridge. You think about the elegant line of her leg pinned up on the bedroom wall. You think about the lace you’ve made and you think about the lactic acid burn in your calves and you think about how Clare is jealous, but kind. You think about the paintings you have spiderwebbed with your embroidery, and about how to forget Val would mean the loss of the memory of your alterations. You think about how you love the things Val makes, but how her life is not lovable—how the unlovable thing creates the lovable thing.

The graduate students are responsible for putting the exhibition together. It means naming the show. It means creating social media advertisements and graphic design and posters. It means arranging walls and pedestals in the gallery, creating installations, aligning the lighting in the white box, fighting over spotlights. It means spending twenty out of every twenty-four hours in the gallery. You were meant to have a good night’s sleep before the surgery. But instead you are sitting on the cold concrete floor of the common area, embroidering canvases.

“Worried about the show?” Clare asks you, dark circles under her eyes. She’s surrounded by a mess of clean plastic bottles while she slowly glues her sculpture

“No,” you say, though you are in the gallery at midnight, bleeding from pinpricks in Val’s fingers as you embroider the canvas. You will not be at critique. You will have been replaced with her by then.

“Liar,” Clare says.

“So are you,” you say, gesturing at the mess surrounding her.

Clare scowls. “I have to be worried. Not all of us are the darling of the department. You make art about nothing and the profs are like ‘Wow, Val’s technique is marvelous, she’s saying so much with her work,’ even when you’re all abstraction. If I tried half the shit you pulled, I’d lose funding.”

You don’t know what to say to that. The arc of her bicycle across the bridge. The pit of *Void III* in your stomach. You have never felt anger before, but realize you are feeling it now. You recognize the emotion from the way Val spoke to her friends in chatrooms, sometimes. Is this of the body, then?

“Val’s work isn’t about nothing,” you say. “Val’s work was about how perfectionism and technique is used as a stand-in for meaning, about how nothing means anything but nobody will look at the nothing as long as there’s a smear of something beautiful draped over the top. It was about how she was sad, alright? There’s real *fucking* feeling there, alright? It’s good art, even if she made it because she was unhappy. She was so scared that people would see she was unhappy. But her art is good, okay? Stop shit-talking it.”

Clare is staring at you. “Why are you referring to yourself in the third person?”

The anger leaves you as fast as it arrived, a cold punch to the gut. Its absence fills you with the dead, hypothermic certainty of a mistake you had previously been so careful not to make.

“I’m not,” you say, and calmly stand up and leave the gallery. You only notice your shaking hands when you’re a block from the building. Another thing of the body.

The next morning, you go in for the surgery. You check in at the Clinic. You are ushered to a different floor by a technician who is not Amanda. You take off Val’s clothes and put on a thin paper gown. Val’s father and mother are in the waiting room. Her brain is floating in a clear glass container a foot away from your head. Amanda is in the surgery room, looking at a little tablet and tapping furiously. She’s wearing a surgical mask. She waves at you when you walk in. “Did you decide about the data?”

“I’m going to keep it,” you say, and lie on the table. You’ll keep the Duchamp and the Cy Twombly and the sketches that mean nothing and the sketches that mean everything and you’ll keep the amorphous proto-paintings that Val made, you’ll keep the delicate self-portraits she left on her wall that no one else has seen. You’ll keep the embroidery, the lace, the memory of the calluses forming on her fingers, the arc of her leg as you fell on her bed.

“Sounds good,” Amanda says, and leans over you to adjust your hair across your forehead. You track her hand.

“If you want to write about me as a case study, I don’t mind.” She doesn’t need your permission, but it’s the only thing you own to give.

Amanda’s eyes crinkle in an embarrassed smile. “Thanks. It’s not exactly unusual that you’ve formed an interest in art, but—”

“I’m an interesting data point, I understand,” you nod, and smile back at her. You’ve gotten good at the natural curve of it. She squeezes Val’s hand, and then leaves your field of vision. The anesthesiologist puts the mouthpiece over your nose and mouth. You close your eyes. You suppose you should start getting used to this experience. The anesthesiologist starts counting backwards. You’re gone between three and four, red spots blooming in your vision like the red wash Val favors.

You walk to the graduate art building pretending you don’t have a destination in mind. The winter show opened a week ago, but you only woke up this morning. You remember the show date from the risograph prints you made while you were still Val. Today you are Riley, an undergraduate student who died in a fraternity-related accident the school wishes to keep under covers. You will be Riley for a month and a half.

Your key card unlocks the building. It’s after hours, and the show is closed for the night. You wonder how critique went, whether Val stumbled over her words while introducing your work. You want to believe she did well. You are strangely fond of her, now that you no longer have to be her. You trace the familiar route to your corner of the gallery, passing Clare’s installation. You hesitate a moment to stare at it. It’s a hollow globe made of painted plastic, large enough to walk within, meant to be lit by small candles placed in arbitrary hollows. You can see how it could be beautiful. You think you will miss Clare a little. You keep walking.

Val’s canvases take up an enormous space. They have been connected through swathes of embroidery string, which loops into pixelated patterns across the canvas, creating the suggestion of bodies. It took you all semester. There is a little plaque that has been affixed to the artwork. Presumably Val wrote it. You can barely read the words in the dark.

Valentine Manning (b. 2005)

[Untitled], 2032

This work is a mixed-media installation consisting of a dark, netlike pattern overlaid on oil on canvas. It is meant to evoke acts of estrangement, reversal, and fragmentation.

You take out a pen. You cross out her name.