

Transition Dreams

by Greg Egan

"We can't tell you what your own transition dreams will be. The only thing that's certain is that you won't remember them."

Caroline Bausch smiles, reassuringly. Her office, on the sixty-fourth floor of the Gleisner Tower, is so stylish it hurts -- her desk is an obsidian ellipse supported by three perspex circles, and the walls are decorated with the latest in Euclidean Monochrome -- but she's not at all the kind of robot the cool, geometric decor seems to demand. I have no doubt that the contrast is intentional, and that her face has been carefully designed to appear more disarmingly natural than even the most cynical person could believe was due to pure guile on the part of her employers.

A few forgettable dreams? That sounds innocuous enough. I very nearly let the matter rest -- but I'm puzzled.

"I'll be close to zero degrees when I'm scanned, won't I?"

"Yes. A little below, in fact. Pumped full of anti-freeze disaccharides, all your fluids cooled down into a sugary glass." There's a prickling sensation on my scalp at these words -- but the rush I feel is anticipation, not fear; the thought of my body as a kind of ice-confectionary sculpture doesn't seem threatening at all. Several elegant blown-glass figurines decorate the bookshelf behind Bausch's desk. "Not only does that halt all metabolic processes, it sharpens the NMR spectra. To measure the strength of each synapse accurately, we have to be able to distinguish between subtle variations in neurotransmitter receptor types, among other things. The less thermal noise, the better."

"I understand. But if my brain has been shut down by hypothermia ... why will I dream?"

"Your brain won't do the dreaming. The software model we're creating will. But as I said, you won't remember any of it. In the end, the software will be a perfect Copy of your -- deeply comatose -- organic brain, and it will wake from that coma remembering exactly what the organic brain experienced before the scan. No more, no less. And since the organic brain certainly won't have experienced the transition dreams, the software will have no memory of them."

The software? I'd expected a simple, biological explanation: a side-effect of the anesthetic or the anti-freeze; neurons firing off a few faint, random signals as they surrendered to the cold.

"Why program the robot's brain to have dreams it won't remember?"

"We don't. Or at least, not explicitly." Bausch smiles her too-human smile again, not quite masking an appraising glance, a moment spent deciding, perhaps, how much I really need to be told. Or perhaps the whole routine is more calculated reassurance. _Look, even though I'm a robot, you can read me like a book._

She says, "Why are Gleisner robots conscious?"

"For the same reason humans are conscious." I've been waiting for that question since the interview began; Bausch is a counsellor as much as a salesperson, and it's part of her job to ensure that I'm at ease with the new mode of existence I'm buying. "Don't ask me which neural structures are involved ... but whatever they are, they must be captured in the scan, and recreated in the model, along with everything else. Gleisner robots are conscious because they process information -- about the world, and about themselves -- in exactly the same way as humans do."

"So you're happy with the notion that a computer program which simulates a conscious human brain is, itself, conscious in the very same fashion?"

"Of course. I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe that." _I wouldn't be talking to you, would I?_ I see no need to elaborate -- to confess that I've become a thousand times more comfortable with the whole idea ever since the ten-tonne supercomputers in the basements of Dallas and Tokyo began to give way to the ambulatory Gleisner robots, with their compact processors and lifelike bodies. When Copies were finally liberated from their virtual realities -- however grand, however detailed they might have been -- and given the chance to _inhabit the world_ in the manner of flesh-and-blood people, I finally stopped thinking of being scanned as a fate akin to being buried alive.

Bausch says, "Then you accept that all it takes to _generate experience_ ... is to carry out computations on data structures which encode the same information as the structure of the brain?"

The jargon sounds gratuitous to me, and I don't understand why she's laboring the point -- but I say blandly, "Of course I accept that."

"Then think about what it implies! Because _the whole process_ of creating the finished piece of software which runs a Gleisner robot -- the perfect Copy of the unconscious person who was scanned -- is one long sequence of computations on data structures which _represent the human brain_."

I absorb that in silence.

Bausch continues, "We don't set out to cause the transition dreams, but they're probably unavoidable. Copies have to be _made_, somehow -- they can't spring into existence, fully formed. The scanner has to probe the organic brain, measure the NMR spectra for billions of different cross-sections -- and then process those measurements into a high-resolution anatomical and biochemical map. In other words: carry out several trillion computations on a vast set of data which _represents the brain_. Then, that map has to be used to construct the working computer model, the Copy itself. More computation."

I think I almost grasp what she's saying ... but part of me flatly refuses to accept the notion that merely _imaging the brain_ in high enough resolution could cause _the image itself_ to dream.

I say, "None of that computation sets out to mimic the workings of the brain, though, does it? It's all just preparing the way for a program which _will be_ conscious, when it's finally up and running."

"Yes -- and once that program _is_ up and running, what will it do, in order to be conscious? It will generate a sequence of changes in a digital representation of the brain -- changes which mimic normal neural activity. But creating that representation in the first place also involves _a sequence of changes_. You can't go from a blank computer memory, to a detailed simulation of a specific human brain, without a few trillion intermediate stages -- most of which will represent -- in part or in full, in one form or another -- possible states of the very same brain."

"But why should that add up to any kind of ... mental activity? Rearranging the data, for other reasons entirely?"

Bausch is adamant. "Reasons don't come into it. The living brain reorganizing memories is enough to give rise to ordinary dreams. And just poking an electrode into the temporal lobes is enough to generate _mental activity_. I know: what the brain does is so complex that it's bizarre to think of achieving the same results unintentionally. But all of the brain's complexity is coded into its structure. Once you're dealing with that structure, you're dealing with the stuff of consciousness. Like it or not."

That does make a certain amount of sense. Almost anything that happens to the brain _feels like something_ -- it doesn't have to be the orderly process of waking thought. If the random effects of drugs or illness can give rise to distinctive mental events -- a fever dream, a schizophrenic episode, an LSD trip -- why shouldn't a Copy's elaborate genesis do the same? Each incomplete NMR map, each unfinished version of the simulation software, has no way of "knowing" that it's not yet _meant_ to be self-aware.

Still --

"How can you be sure of any of this? If nobody remembers the dreams?"

"The mathematics of consciousness is still in its infancy ... but everything we know strongly suggests that the act of constructing a Copy has _subjective content_ -- even though no trace of the experience remains."

I'm still not entirely convinced, but I suppose I'll have to take her word for it. The Gleisner Corporation has no reason to invent non-existent side-effects -- and I'm suitably impressed that they bother to warn their customers about _transition dreams_ at all. So far as I know, the older companies -- the scanning clinics founded in the days when Copies had no physical bodies -- never even raised the issue.

We should move on, there are other matters to discuss -- but it's hard to drag my thoughts away from this unsettling revelation. I say, "If you know enough to be certain that there'll always be transition dreams ... can't you stretch the mathematics a little further, and tell me what my dreams will be?"

Bausch asks innocently, "How could we do that?"

"I don't know. Examine my brain, then run some kind of simulation of the Copying process -- " I catch myself. "Ah. But how do you 'simulate' a computation ... without doing it?"

"Exactly. The distinction is meaningless. Any program which could reliably predict the content of the dreams would, itself, _experience them_, as fully as the 'you' of the transition process. So what would be the point? If the dreams turned out to be unpleasant, it would be too late to 'spare yourself' the trauma."

Trauma? I'm beginning to wish I'd been satisfied with a reassuring smile, and the promise of perfect amnesia. _A few forgettable dreams._

Now that I -- vaguely -- understand the reasons for the effect, though, it's a thousand times harder to accept it as inevitable. Neural spasms at the onset of hypothermia might be unavoidable -- but anything taking place _inside a computer_ is supposed to be subject to limitless control.

"Couldn't you monitor the dreams as they're happening -- and intervene, if need be?"

"I'm afraid not."

"But -- "

"Think about it. It would be like prediction, only worse. Monitoring the dreams would mean duplicating the brain-like data structures in still more forms -- generating more dreams in the process. So even if we could take charge of the original dreams -- deciphering them, and controlling them -- all of the software which did that would need _other software watching it_, to see what the side-effects of _its_ computations were. And so on. There'd be no end to it.

"As it is, the Copy is constructed by the shortest possible process, the most direct route. The last thing you'd want to do is bring in more computing power, more elaborate algorithms ... more and more systems mirroring the arithmetic of the experience."

I shift in my chair, trying to shake off a growing sense of lightheadedness. The more I ask, the more surreal the whole subject becomes -- but I can't seem to keep my mouth shut.

"If you can't say what the dreams will be about, and you can't control them ... can't you at least tell me how long they'll last? Subjectively?"

"Not without running a program which also dreams the dreams." Bausch is apologetic -- but I have a feeling that she finds something elegant, even _proper_, in this state of affairs. "That's the nature of the mathematics: there are no short-cuts. No answers to hypothetical questions. We can't say for certain what any given conscious system will experience ... without _creating_ that conscious system in the process of answering the question."

I laugh weakly. _Images of the brain which dream. Predictions of dreams which dream. Dreams which infect any machine which tries to shape them._ I'd thought that all the giddy metaphysics of virtual existence had been banished, now that it was possible to choose to be a Copy living wholly in the physical world. I'd hoped to be able to step from my body into a Gleisner robot without

missing a beat --

And in retrospect, of course, I will have done just that. Once I've crossed the gulf between human and machine, it will vanish seamlessly behind me.

I say, "So the dreams are unknowable? And unavoidable? That's close to a mathematical certainty?"

"Yes."

"But it's equally certain that I won't remember them?"

"Yes."

"You don't recall anything about ... your own? Not a single mood? Not a single image?"

Bausch smiles tolerantly. "Of course not. I woke from a simulated coma. The last thing I remember was being anesthetized before the scan. There are no buried traces, no hidden memories. No invisible scars. There can't be. In a very real sense, I never had the transition dreams at all."

I finally sight a target for my frustration. "Then ... why warn me? Why tell me about an experience I'm guaranteed to forget? Guaranteed to end up not having been through? Don't you think it would have been kinder to say nothing?"

Bausch hesitates. For the first time, I appear to have discomfited her -- and it's a very convincing act. But she must have been asked the same question a thousand times before.

She says, "When you're dreaming the transition dreams ... knowing what you're going through, and why, might make all the difference. Knowing that it's not real. Knowing that it won't last."

"Perhaps." It's not that simple, though, and she knows it. "When my new mind is being pieced together, do you have any idea when this knowledge will be part of it? Can you promise me that I'll remember these comforting facts when I need them? Can you guarantee that anything you've told me will even make sense?"

"No. But -- "

"Then what's the point?"

She says, "Do you think that if we'd kept silent, you would have had _any chance at all_ of dreaming the truth?"

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Out on the street, in the winter sunshine, I try to put my doubts behind me. George Street is still littered with colored paper from last night's celebrations: after six years of bloodshed -- bombings and sieges, plagues and famines -- the Chinese civil war finally seems to be over. I feel a surge of elation, just looking down at the tattered remnants of the streamers and reminding myself of the glorious news.

I hug myself and head for Town Hall station. Sydney is going through its coldest June in years, with clear skies bringing sub-zero nights, and frosts lasting long into the mornings. I try to picture myself as a Gleisner robot, striding along the very same route, but choosing not to feel the bite of the wind. It's a cheerful prospect -- and I'll be untroubled by anything so tedious as the swelling around my artificial knee and hip joints, once I'm wholly and harmoniously artificial. Unafraid of influenza, pneumonia, or the latest wave of drug-resistant diphtheria sweeping the globe.

I can hardly believe that I've finally signed the contracts and set the machinery in motion, after so many years of making excuses and putting it off. Shaken out of my complacency by a string of near misses: bronchitis, a kidney infection, a melanoma _on the sole of my right foot_. The cytokine injections don't get my immune system humming the way they did twenty years ago. _One hundred and seven, this August._ The number sounds surreal. But then, so did _twenty-seven_, so did _forty-three_, so did _sixty-one_.

On the train, I examine my qualms one more time, hoping to lay them to rest. Transition dreams are impossible to avoid, or predict, or control ... just like ordinary dreams. They'll have a radically different origin ... but there's no reason to believe that a different means of invoking the contents of my scrambled brain will give rise to an experience any more disturbing than anything I've already been through. _What horrors do I think are locked up in my skull, waiting to run amok in the data stream from comatose human to comatose machine?_ I've suffered occasional nightmares -- and a few have been deeply distressing, at the time -- but even as a child, I never feared sleep. So why should I fear the transition?

Alice is in the garden, picking string beans, as I come over the hill from Meadowbank station. She straightens up and waves to me. I can never quite

believe the size of our vegetable patch, so close to the city. We kiss, and walk inside together.

"Did you book the scan?"

"Yes. Tenth of July." It should sound matter-of-fact, like that; of all the operations I've had in the last ten years, this will be the safest. I start making coffee; I need something to warm me. The kitchen is luminous with sunlight, but it's colder indoors than out.

"And they answered all your questions? You're happy now?"

"I suppose so." There's no point keeping it to myself, though; I tell her about the transition dreams.

She says, "I love the first few seconds after waking from a dream. When the whole thing's still fresh in your mind ... but you can finally put it in context. When you know exactly what you've been through."

"You mean the relief of discovering that none of it was real? You didn't actually slaughter a hundred people in a shopping arcade? Stark naked? The police aren't closing in on you after all? It works the other way too, though. Beautiful delusions turning to dust."

She snorts. "Anything that turns to dust that easily is no great loss."

I pour coffee for both of us. Alice muses, "Transition dreams must have strange endings, though. If you know nothing about them before they start ... and nothing again by the time they finish." She stirs her coffee, and I watch the liquid sloshing from rim to rim. "How would time pass, in a dream like that? It can't run straight through, can it? The closer the computers came to reconstructing every detail of the comatose brain, the less room there'd be for ... spurious information. At the very beginning, though, there wouldn't be any information at all. Somewhere in the middle, there'd be the most leeway for 'memories' of the dream. So maybe time would flow in from the start and the finish, and the dream would seem to end in the middle. What do you think?"

I shake my head. "I can't even imagine what that would be like."

"Maybe there are two separate dreams. One running forward, one running backward." She frowns. "But if they met in the middle, they'd both have to end the same way. How could two different dreams have exactly the same ending - right down to the same memories of everything which happened before? And

then, there's the scanner building up its map of the brain ... and the second stage, transforming that map into the Copy. Two cycles. Two dreams? Or four? Or do you think they'd all be woven together?"

I say irritably, "I really don't care. I'm going to wake up inside a Gleisner robot, and it will all be academic. I won't have _dreamed any dreams_ at all."

Alice looks dubious. "You're talking about thoughts and feelings. As real as anything the Copy will feel. How can that be academic?"

"I'm _talking about_ a lot of arithmetic. And when you add up everything it does to me, it will all cancel out in the end. Comatose human to comatose machine."

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Words just come out of her mouth sometimes: fragments of nursery rhymes, lines from old songs -- she has no say in it. The hairs stand up on my arms, though. I look down at my withered fingers, my scrawny wrists. _This isn't me._ Aging feels like a mistake, a detour, a misadventure. When I was twenty years old I was immortal, wasn't I? It's not too late to find my way back.

Alice murmurs, "I'm sorry."

I look up at her. "Let's not make a big deal of this. It's time for me to become a machine. And all I have to do is close my eyes and step across the gap. Then in a few years, it will be your turn. We can do this. There's nothing to stop us. It's the easiest thing in the world."

I reach across the table and take her hand. When I touch her, I realize I'm shivering with cold.

She says, "There, there."

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I can't sleep. _Two dreams? Four dreams? Meeting in the middle? Merging into one?_ How will I know when they're finally over? The Gleisner robot will emerge from its coma, and blithely carry on -- but without a chance to look back on the transition dreams, and recognize them for what they were, how will I ever put them in their place?

I stare up at the ceiling. _This is insane._ I must have had a thousand dreams which I've failed to remember on waking -- gone now, forever, as surely as if

my amnesia was computer-controlled and guaranteed. Does it matter if I was terrified of some ludicrous dream-apparition, or believed I'd committed some unspeakable crime ... and now I'll never have the chance to laugh off those delusions?

I climb out of bed -- and once I'm up, I have no choice but to dress fully to keep from freezing. Moonlight fills the room, I have no trouble seeing what I'm doing. Alice turns over in her sleep, and sighs. Watching her, a wave of tenderness sweeps through me. At least I'm going first. At least I'll be able to reassure her that there's nothing to fear.

In the kitchen, I find I'm not hungry or thirsty at all. I pace to keep warm.

What am I afraid of? It's not as if the dreams were a barrier to be surmounted -- a test I might fail, an ordeal I might not survive. The whole transition process will be predetermined -- and it will carry me safely into my new incarnation. Even if I dream some laborious metaphor for my "arduous" journey from human to machine -- trekking barefoot across an endless plain of burning coals, struggling through a blizzard toward the summit of an unclimbable mountain ... and even if I fail to complete that journey -- the computers will grind on, the Gleisner robot will wake, regardless.

I need to get out of the house. I leave quietly, heading for the 24-hour supermarket opposite the railway station.

The stars are mercilessly sharp, the air is still. If I'm colder than I was by day, I'm too numb to tell the difference. There's no traffic at all, no lights in any of the houses. It must be almost three; I haven't been out this late in ... decades. The gray tones of suburban lawns by moonlight look perfectly familiar, though. When I was seventeen, I seemed to spend half my life talking with friends into the early morning, then trudging home through empty streets exactly like these.

The supermarket's windows glow blue-white around the warmer tones of the advertising signs embedded within them. I enter the building, and explore the deserted aisles. Nothing tempts me, but I feel an absurd pang of guilt about leaving empty-handed, so I grab a carton of milk.

A middle-aged man tinkering with one of the advertising holograms nods at me as I carry my purchase through the exit gate, magnetic fields sensing and recording the transaction.

The man says, "Good news about the war?"

"Yes! It's wonderful!"

I start to turn away; he seems disappointed. "You don't remember me, do you?"

I pause and examine him more carefully. He's balding, brown-eyed, kindly-looking. "I'm sorry."

"I used to own this shop when you were a boy. I remember you coming in, buying things for your mother. I sold up and left town -- eighty-five years ago -- but now I'm back, and I've bought the old place again."

I nod and smile, although I still don't recognize him.

He says, "I was in a virtual city, for a while. There was a tower which went all the way to the moon. I climbed the stairs to the moon."

I picture a crystalline spiral staircase, sweeping up through the blackness of space.

"You came out, though. Back into the world."

"I always wanted to run the old place again."

I think I remember his face now -- although his name still eludes me, if I ever knew it.

I can't help asking: "Before you were scanned -- did they warn you about something called ... transition dreams?"

He smiles, as if I'd spoken the name of a mutual friend. "No. Not then. But later, I heard. You know, the Copies used to flow from machine to machine. As the demand for computing power went up and down, and exchange rates shifted ... the management software used to take us apart and move us. From Japan, to California, to Texas, to Switzerland. It would break us down into a billion data packets and send us through the network by a thousand different routes, and then put us back together again. Ten times a day, some days."

My skin crawls. "And ... _the same thing happened?_ Transition dreams?"

"That's what I heard. We couldn't even tell that we'd been shipped across the planet; it felt to us like no time had passed at all. But I heard rumors that the

mathematicians had proved that there were dreams in the data at every stage. In the Copy left behind, as they erased it. In the Copy being pieced together at the new destination. Those Copies had no way of knowing that they were only intermediate steps in the process of moving a frozen snapshot from one place to another -- and the changes being made to their digitized brains weren't supposed to _mean_ anything at all."

"So did you stop it happening? Once you found out?"

He chuckles. "No. There would have been no point. Because even in the one computer, Copies were moved all the time: relocated, shuffled from place to place, to allow memory to be reclaimed and consolidated. Hundreds of times a second."

My blood turns to ice. _No wonder the old companies never raised the subject of transition dreams._ I was wiser than I ever knew to wait for the Gleisner robots. Merely shifting a Copy around in memory could hardly be comparable to mapping every synapse in a human brain -- the dreams it generated would have to be far shorter, far simpler -- but just knowing that my life was peppered with tiny mental detours, eddies of consciousness in the wake of every move, would still have been too much to bear.

I head home, clutching the milk carton awkwardly with cold arthritic fingers.

As I come over the hill, I see the light on above our front door, although I'm certain that I left the house in darkness. Alice must have woken and found me missing. I wince at my thoughtlessness; I should have stayed in -- or written her a note. I quicken my step.

Fifty meters from home, a tendril of pain flickers across my chest. I look down stupidly to see if I've walked into a protruding branch; there's nothing, but the pain returns -- solid as an arrow through the flesh, now -- and I sink to my knees.

The bracelet on my left wrist chimes softly, to tell me that it's calling for help. I'm so close to my own front door, though, that I can't resist the urge to rise to my feet and see if I can make the distance.

After two steps, the blood rushes from my head, and I fall again. I crush the milk carton against my chest, spilling the cold liquid, freezing my fingers. I can hear the ambulance in the distance, I know I should relax and keep still -- but something compels me to move.

I crawl toward the light.

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The orderly pushing me looks like he's just decided that this is the last place on Earth he'd choose to be. I silently concur, and tip my head back to escape his fixed grimace, but then the sight of the ceiling going by above me is even more disconcerting. The corridor's lighting panels are so similar, and their spacing so regular, that I feel like I'm being wheeled around in a circle.

I say, "Where's Alice? My wife?"

"No visitors now. There'll be time for that later."

"I've paid for a scan. With the Gleisner people. If I'm in any danger, they should be told." All of this is encoded in my bracelet, though; the computers will have read it, there's nothing to fret about. The prospect of having to confront the transition in a matter of hours or minutes fills me with claustrophobic dread -- but better that than having left the arrangements too late.

The orderly says, "I think you're wrong about that."

"What?" I struggle to get him in sight again. He's grinning nastily, like a nightclub bouncer who's just spotted someone with the wrong kind of shoes.

"I said, I think you're mistaken. Our records don't mention any payment for a scan."

I break into a sweat of indignation. "I signed the contracts! Today!"

"Yeah, yeah." He reaches into a pocket and pulls out a handful of long cotton bandages, then proceeds to stuff them into my mouth. My arms are strapped to my sides; all I can do is grunt in protest, and gag on cotton and saliva.

Someone steps in front of the trolley and keeps pace with us, whispering in Latin.

The orderly says, "Don't feel bad. The top level's just the tip of the iceberg. The crest of the wave. How many of us can belong to an elite like that?"

I cough and choke, fighting for breath, shuddering with panic -- then I calm myself, and force myself to breathe slowly and evenly through my nose.

"The tip of the iceberg! Do you think the organic brain moves by some kind of magic? From place to place? _From moment to moment?_ Do you think an empty patch of space-time can be rebuilt into something as complex as a human brain, _without transition dreams?_ The physical world has as much trouble shuffling data as any computer. Do you know how much effort it goes to, just to keep _one atom_ persisting in the very same spot? Do you think there could _ever_ be one coherent, conscious self, enduring through time -- without a billion fragmentary minds forming and dying all around it? Transition dreams blossoming, and vanishing into oblivion? The air's thick with them. _Look!_"

I twist my head around and stare down at the floor. The trolley is surrounded by convoluted vortices of light, rainbow sheets like cranial folds, flowing, undulating, spinning off smaller versions of themselves.

"What did you think? You were Mr Big? The one in a billion? The one on top?"

Another spasm of revulsion and panic sweeps through me. I choke on saliva, shivering with fear and cold. Whoever is walking ahead of the trolley lays an icy hand on my forehead; I jerk free.

I struggle to find some solid ground. _So this is my transition dream._ All right. I should be grateful: at least I understand what's happening. Bausch's warning has helped me, after all. And I'm not in any danger; the Gleisner robot is still going to wake. Soon I'll forget this nightmare, and carry on with my life as if nothing had happened. Invulnerable. Immortal.

Carry on with my life. _With Alice, in the house with the giant vegetable garden?_ Sweat flows into my eyes; I blink it away. The vegetable garden was at my parents' house. In the back yard, not the front. And that house was torn down long ago.

So was the supermarket opposite the railway station.

Where did I live, then?"

What did I do?

Who did I marry?"

The orderly says cheerfully, "So-called Alice taught you in primary school. Ms Something-or-other. A crush on the teacher, who'd have guessed?"

Then, do I have anything straight? The interview with Bausch -- ?

"Ha ha. Do you think our clever friends at Gleisner would have come right out and _told you_ all that? Pull the other one."

Then how could I know about transition dreams?

"You must have worked it all out for yourself. From the inside. Congratulations."

The icy hand touches my forehead again, the murmured chant grows louder. I screw my eyes shut, racked with fear.

The orderly says thoughtfully, "Then again, I could be wrong about that teacher. You could be wrong about that house. There might not even be a Gleisner Corporation. Computerized Copies of human brains? Sounds pretty dodgy to me."

Strong hands seize me by the shoulders and legs, lift me from the trolley and spin me around. When the blur of motion stops, I'm flat on my back, staring up at a distant rectangle of pale blue sky.

"Alice" leans into view, and tosses in a clod of soil. I ache to comfort her, but I can't move or speak. How can I care so much about her, if I didn't love her, if she was never real? Other mourners throw in dirt; none of it seems to touch me, but the sky vanishes in pieces.

Who am I? What do I know for sure about the man who'll wake inside the robot? I struggle to pin down a single certain fact about him, but under scrutiny everything dissolves into confusion and doubt.

Someone chants, "Ashes to ashes, coma to coma."

I wait in the darkness, colder than ever.

There's a flickering of light and motion around me. The rainbow vortices, the eddies of transition dreams, weave through the soil like luminous worms -- as if even parts of my decomposing brain might be confusing their decay with the chemistry of thought, reinterpreting their disintegration from within, undistracted by the senses, or memory, or truth.

Spinning themselves beautiful delusions, and mistaking death for something else entirely.