

# QUAGMIRE

a lit mag where pigs fly



2023

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LITERARY  
MAGAZINE

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# LIFE 2.0

by DW Ardern

They were putting their brains into robots. This was the latest trend. Cute pint-sized robots. The animatronic surrogates resembled electric kettles on wheels. Their iridescent eyes were especially lifelike and creepy.

“Isn’t it marvelous?” Richard tapped the holographic page, rotating the phantom model. Phoebe observed him while pretending to read her newspaper. Her husband was getting worse. Same response, same breakfast revelation, three days in a row. Every morning he’d press the blue button on the console and browse the latest issue of Gentle Living magazine which bloomed to lustrous 3D life in the center of the chrome tabletop. Every morning he’d flip through until he found the colorful advertorial.

“Aren’t we marvelous?” Richard browsed through different shades and styles of robot skins. Stainless steel, burnished copper, titanium. Puce, mauve, aquamarine. Khaki pants and argyle sweaters. Bird ties and polka-dot shirts.

Phoebe sipped her tea and spread a goopy layer of margarine on her impeccably crisp and utterly bland buckwheat toast, hoping to ruin its perfection and, in the process, make it somewhat edible. She braved a small bite—something, anything to soak up the radioactive pills in her stomach that raged like atomic wildfire and promised miracles.

She was sick to death of marvels. The virtual Good Day sunrise. The gentle lullaby prodding of their Sweet Dreams alarm clock. The automatic sconce lighting and 24-hour climate-control at a perfect 68.5 degrees. World Broadcast & Weather Report updated round the clock with its

talking head ghosts floating on walls in ubiquitous touchscreens. Living out their golden years in an idiot-proof bubble. She couldn't even burn her toast if she wanted too.

Outside in the real world, everything was in an accelerated state of deterioration, which half the people ignored as gleeful amnesiacs while the other half waited in anxious limbo for the next storm, the next pandemic, the next solar flare.

She missed the flowers most of all. Before his spinal problems and her corrupted hands, they used to dig their fingernails deep in the chemical dirt every Sunday and tend to the tulips, irises, and daffodils in the domed community garden of the Auburn Retirement Co-Op. After the serenity drones had swooped by on patrol, Richard would wag his brows with a big goofy grin and they'd steal a handful of flowers, stuffing them under their shirts like teenagers. He would kiss her when they got home, out of breath and laughing, and she would arrange them in a curved-glass vase on the table. When the petals curled, they were just as beautiful in a wilted still life.

Now the flowers in the vase had been replaced by this holographic intruder, an EZR 360° that blasted forth its spectral whirlwind every morning like a magic genie eager to please, ripping a hole to the digital metaverse before she even had a chance to settle into the real world over a cup of tea, bleary eyed from last night's dream.

Richard moved on from his first obsession to the next, scrolling through his personal feed of photos, messages, announcements, slapstick videos and inspiration memes posted by friends and family, miles away, connected by the orbital constellation, satellites of ever-loving grace.

"There was another tidal wave in southern California." Phoebe turned the page of her newspaper. "34 dead, hundreds missing..."

Richard doused his flax-seed and bran cereal in oat milk. “Oh why do you bother with the news? You know it’s gonna be awful.”

“To stay informed,” Phoebe said. Her husband often teased her about her subscription to the International Herald, one of the last broadsheet newspapers still in circulation. She liked the musty smell of newsprint, the roughness of its thin crinkly paper. It was familiar, it was real, a touchstone to the past.

“Look, isn’t that sweet? Connor posted an old picture of himself in a cowboy outfit,” Richard said.

Phoebe glanced up. “That’s little Addison.”

“Who?” Richard asked.

Their grandson was three years old now, growing up fast on the other side of the screen. She could count the number of times she’d held the child, his soft squirmy warmth in her arms, the powdery scent of him. Once when he was born, once when they came for Christmas at the condo on Elmhurst Street, once the day her son and daughter-in-law helped put their life into boxes and moved them into the Auburn Retirement Co-Op.

No one came to visit. She couldn’t blame them. Why would anyone want to come here? For all its automated cheerfulness, the retirement home was a floral-wallpapered asylum where the old, batty, and infirmed were deposited for slow decay in relative comfort.

“Addison... Addie,” Phoebe said as if by repeating the name she could jog his memory. Richard stared at the picture for a long time.

“Of course, Addie,” he said. “He looks just like Connor did at his age.”

Richard drank his nootropic juice pulp and opened up the Gentle Living catalogue again. He swiped through the holographic pages until he arrived at the phantom model of

the pint-sized robot. "Oooh, isn't that marvelous?" he smiled. "Did you see this? People are putting their brains into robots. Aren't we marvelous?"

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Perhaps it was the flu. Perhaps it was the questionable Tuesday fish. Richard suffered an intestinal rupture at quarter to two, followed by a minor stroke from sudden trauma at half-past three in the afternoon. So said the electronic monitor on his wrist. So it was reported to the nurses and emergency medical staff that rushed to his aid. He sat rather unaffected, comfortably drooling toward death in a cushy lounge, watching reruns of Happy Days on their slate-glass television. His face palsied in a permanent smile, his palms sweating, his fingers gripped on the remote control, clicking as if it could reboot his brain.

"I wish I had better news for you, Mrs. Fournier," the doctor said after Richard had been ferried away by the gurney men to the Blankford House. "He's bleeding internally and I fear there's not much we can do at his age."

The Blankford House was the medical center at the Auburn Retirement Co-Op, professionally staffed and outfitted with intensive care units, surgery bays, and all the necessary equipment for delaying death. A bright light waystation en route to heaven. A chief source of diningroom gossip for the residents. Bridget Landris is having heart trouble again, Lewis Kinsley broke his hip, Joanne Higgins sick with leukemia. Gone to the Blankford House. Thoughts and prayers.

Phoebe didn't want any thoughts and prayers. She wanted a quick and silent death in bed with her husband by her side, slipping from a beautiful dream into the waters of oblivion. A peaceful surrender together. And now this,

Richard in a coma with a circus of tubes funneling fluid in and out of his frail body, hooked up to a series of winking monitors. It was difficult to tell where the medical apparatus and machinery ended and where her husband began.

“Now Phoebe, we should talk about end-of-life care. Your husband has requested that he undergo a cranial transplant in hopes of transference into a post-mortem simulacrum. It’s a risky procedure, but if it’s successful, he should have a 50/50 chance of living a satisfactory life in an animatronic proxy.”

“Excuse me? What is the surgery?”

“It’s not a surgery. It’s an end-of-life procedure. Your husband filed papers with us a couple months ago to authorize...”

The sterile quiet of the hospital corridor was disrupted by the click clack of dress shoes on checkered tiles. A young man in a navy blue suit walked briskly down the hall. He was huffing from the summer heat. He carried what looked like a teakettle under his arm.

“Sorry, I came as soon as I could,” he said. “Are you Phoebe, wife of Richard Fournier?” Phoebe wiped away her tears. “And you are?”

“I’m Terry Olsen from Standard International,” he shook her hand. “I’m so very happy for you.”

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In the dream, the Fonz was teaching Richard how to tune up a motorcycle. Oil the engine, crank up the RPMs, spark the ignition with one solid kick of the pedal. The motorcycle roared with a thunder so loud it made the roller-skating waitresses at the A&M root beer stand almost

lose their balance. That's how you get chicks, the Fonz said. Make yourself a man of mystery, a man of danger. Oh yeah? Richard asked. Yeah, the Fonz said. He popped the collar on his leather jacket and asked for an Allen wrench.

Richard glanced across the parking lot at the girl of his dreams. She was leaning on a sea blue Plymouth, fins gleaming in the midday sun. She was talking with her friends and flirting with a dolphin wearing a polo shirt. Why do girls always go for dolphins? he thought. She was so beautiful. The sparkle of her hazel eyes, her blonde hair tied back in a headscarf. Phoebe. If only he could tell her. If only he had the courage to ask her out.

The Fonz revved the engine again, the ground quaked from its thunder. Fissures snaked through the pavement, faultline cracks in the parking lot, splitting a giant chasm between Richard and his one true love. Parked cars flipped and cratered into the breach. Screams of terror, hamburgers and fries flying out windows into the abyss. Phoebe was unafraid. He reached out for her as the ground became wavy and he fell away.

Then came the jolt, and his eyes latched open with a stutter.

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The procedure had been going on for three hours. Phoebe couldn't see much through the porthole window into the dark room where the neuro-technician from Standard International and an attendant surgeon were operating on Richard. She only had the torture of her imagination, listening to the buzzing, scraping, sawing that escaped out into the hospital corridor. Although she'd argued fiercely to be with him during the surgery, she was grateful the doctor had refused. And so she waited in the alcove, chewing her cuticles and imploring the night nurses for updates while a

terrible reality TV show about medical oddities played on the hanging monitors.

She was devastated, and yet every measured breath delivered some bizarre sense of relief. He was getting worse and she was struggling to care for him, especially on those awful nights when he'd wake with little memory of who he was, where he was, screaming like a lost child. Had she secretly wanted this? And if so, for how long? Then she heard the EKG monitor flat-line with an underwater hum. She rushed past the nurses and pushed through the door into the operating room.

A mechanical sinew of wires and tubes streamed from her husband, prone on the hospital bed under a solitary lamp. The surgeon checked his vitals.

"That was your last chance," he said, pulling off his latex gloves. "I hope you got it right this time."

"Yeah, yeah, stop busting my balls," the technician said. "You know this is the fifth one I've done today, right? I've been up since 6am."

Phoebe rushed to her husband's side. She could see the crude stitchwork from where they'd cut open his skull and sewn it back together. The expression on his face was blank, almost joyful.

"Alright, that should do it." The technician punched out a final sequence on the computer. He looked over at the dead body once called Richard and then at the pint-sized robot in suspenders. A flicker of light stuttered from the ocular lenses in its smooth steel shell.

"Welcome to the future." He grinned at the robot, and then turned aside. "What color do you want his eyes?"

Phoebe didn't register the question. She hardly registered that she was there at all, in a hospital room, witnessing her husband's lifeless body. The technician asked the question again. He was smiling. A wave of panic



awakened her nerves, an electricity through her numbed flesh. Why on earth was he smiling? She held onto the cold hand of her husband, wishing never to let go. "His eyes were brown. The most gentle brown eyes."

"Nah, lady. His new eyes," he said. "Green is popular, so is blue. Sometimes people pick purple? Looks kind of weird in my opinion, but hey who am I to judge?"

She stared through her tears at the young man, wanting him to feel her pain, believing for a moment that if she concentrated hard enough, she could transmit her wrath somehow in a bolt of lightning that would send him crumpling to the floor.

"You don't want them brown. Trust me on this one. Makes it very difficult to tell if the robot is on or off, sleeping or on the fritz..."

Phoebe let go of her husband's hand. It fell limp, dangling off the bed, fingers outstretched in the empty space, reaching toward nothing.

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The voice was tremulous and uneven with a low static crackle from its internal speakers. Tin, hollow and compacted, an attenuated facsimile of his soft deep sonorous voice. It bothered her. Especially when the adorable robot spoke those words.

"I love you, Phoebe."

"You are a goddamn robot. Look what you've done to yourself, Richard."

"Would you rather me dead?"

Phoebe dried the dishes with a towel and stared down at the short cylindrical robot that barely reached her knees.

“That’s not fair,” she said. “You know that’s not fair.” She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, every day waking up to the bright green eyes of this cute idiotic robot that was once her husband, whirring on its wheels into their bedroom with a chipper good morning. To which the talk-show ghosts on the television would respond “Good Morning!” To which the toaster would say “Good Morning.” To which Good Day sunrise would say “Good Morning.” All these machines of loving grace heralding the new day with automatic salutations. Another day, same as every other, ad infinitum, the happy machines beyond death.

Her hands were shaking. She wanted to smash the china in the kitchen sink. She wanted to break the slate-of-glass television. She wanted to scream so loud and so long that all the screens would shatter, all the circuitry would blow its fuses and burn to molten metal in an electrical hellfire, consuming everything in its blaze.

It was so childlike. Richard had been reduced to a plaything, like the many electronic toys they called conveniences in the house. Perhaps this was a natural progression. He’d been losing his mind. And now his fractured psyche had been transplanted into a robot in suspenders. He’d become what he loved. A marvel of the modern world.

This robot with its blue-grey steel cylinder and roller wheels. Its inquisitive green lenses, flashing in a blind strobe. Its clumsy extendable arms and clamshell metal hands. Most of its functions were cosmetic. Richard couldn’t do much on his own, except spin in mindless circles and connect with the appliances and digital gadgetry in the apartment through the weird ant-like antennae on its curved head. Playing games with the dimmer lights, changing the illusionary landscapes out the windows, privately surfing the internet inside its computerized mind, reciting what it learned to Phoebe.

She racked the clean dishes. "It's just difficult, Richard. I miss you. I've missed you for a long time."

He had cheated death. It was a practical matter. His choice was self-preservation, the continuation of life at all costs, even if that meant relinquishing his humanity for a robot shell. They had known these were the sunset years of their lives. So unbelievable how fast they'd ended up here. From rebellious teenagers to sensible parents to senior citizens, holding onto the ever-fading illusion of their youth while death bided its time, a crow waiting at the window. Somehow life had been there, slipping through. She had been blessed with the time they'd spent together. She had been grateful and acceptant of the inevitable.

Now he had been reborn and she felt betrayed. His voice, a vestige of the soul, digitized and modulated through its speaker box, telling her: it's me, love me, hold me, know me. Time... everything takes time. Time takes everything.

"Forgive me?" the voice crackled.

Richard 2.0 wrapped his pincher arms around her ankle.

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Little Addie was excited by his new plaything grandfather. Connor and his wife Natalie watched their son chase Richard 2.0 under the coffee table and around the couch in a game of hide and seek.

"It's incredible," Natalie said. "He seems, you know, happy, considering..."

"I feel like I have a toddler on my hands again," Phoebe said.

"Does he understand what's happened to him?" Connor asked

There was no simple answer to the question. Phoebe

bore witness every day to the dissolution of his root memory, replaced by the rapid stream of information he absorbed through his sync with the virtual world. On some days, he was Richard 2.0, well-behaved but easily distracted by the intricate spiral of his own memory, recalling moments of his life in great detail with little context to what had happened before or after. On other days, he was Genghis Khan or Mozart or Einstein, depending on where his cybernetic mind had led him, leapfrogging through an endless vortex of information. His identity dependent on last recall.

“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” Richard 2.0 shouted at his grandson who was hiding behind a pillow fort.

“Some days are better than others,” Phoebe said.

The family attended dinner in the dining hall at their allotted hour, chosen with great frustration from the Assisted Living wall panel with its touchscreen buttons for daily matters – reservations for dining hours, laundry, house cleaning, emergency medical aid. Richard had somehow reprogrammed the buttons to make animal noises.

A meow, cluck, bark, and moo later, Connor and Natalie sat with little Addie on one side of the booth. Phoebe sat with Richard 2.0 on the other side. She advised them against the fish special. Richard’s robot shell barely reached the top of the table, only his antenna feelers peeked out. Phoebe was thankful of this. She felt ashamed that she wanted Richard to remain hidden from sight, but she was embarrassed to have him be seen out in the public.

The meal was eaten in relative silence with Connor and Natalie alternately responding to text messages on their smartphones while telling little Addie to stop playing with his mashed potatoes. Richard 2.0 ate nothing, of course, and complained about the service nonetheless, waving his cloth napkin with indignation and saying they had no right to treat the President of the United States this way.

Phoebe drank her tea. Her son and daughter-in-law hardly asked her any questions. They typed and responded with a minor symphony of buzzes and pings, absorbed in conversations elsewhere. She wished she could be elsewhere too. She looked around the teal dining room with its ugly turtle dove and laurel wallpaper. The elderly couples spooning clam chowder to their frowning lips. She didn't feel as old they looked, or as old as she surely looked. How on earth did she end up here? She noted the lonely widows sitting alone with carefully portioned meals in pink plastic trays. And then a wobbly pair of antennae, sprouting out from the booth of Donna Whittaker.

Connor, Natalie, and little Addie left shortly after dinner for the long drive home to Boston. Richard 2.0 chased them out the door, telling them to come back soon and watch out for communists on the road.

There were two video messages on the Assisted Living wall panel. She'd missed her appointment with Dr. Voss again. She picked up the phone and scrolled through the console directory for Donna Whittaker.

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The brown leather-padded gym was located behind a glass door underground in B-2 of the Auburn Retirement Co-Op. The linoleum floor was painted with bright rainbow stripes, almost cheerful if it weren't for the laboratory halogens overhead. The stylish robots zoomed, spun, and wheeled in circles, wild and free like kids in a roller-skate rink.

"They call it the Playpen," Donna said.

"I didn't realize there were so many," Phoebe said.

"It's an open secret," Donna said. "Not something the Auburn Co-Op advertises, but they are very accommodating

to the new residents.”

Richard 2.0 and Kevin 2.0, Donna’s simulant husband, raced each other around the pen, whirring with manic glee. Their antennae bobbed to the soft ambient soundtrack, the lights of the robots flashed in perfect sync to the pulse of the music. It was dizzying to watch. Phoebe felt sick to her stomach.

“Did you sign up with Richard?” Donna asked.

“No,” Phoebe said and then paused, thinking hard on this as a vague memory surfaced like a fish in a stream, imagined or just realized it was hard to tell. Richard had asked her to sign some papers when they’d updated their will to make sure that little Addie was included. She tried to dismiss the thought, but it kept pestering her.

“Did you?” she asked.

“I told him I did,” Donna said. “He was so excited about it. It was the only thing that cheered him up when he was going through chemo.”

Phoebe watched Richard 2.0 skate by and remembered a conversation they’d had the night after her brother finally succumbed to prostate cancer after a month in the hospital. What would you do if that happened to me? she’d asked. Books, puzzles, crosswords, he’d replied with a smile. I’d be there every day. I’d never leave your side. She turned over in bed and ran her fingers through his hair. Until I was gone, she’d said. Yes, he’d said, and then I’d throw myself off a bridge to join you. Because that would be rude. I’d never leave you behind.

Then it did happen. It didn’t matter how many times she told him, he never remembered, asking questions about the pills, the discoloration of her skin, her chronic fatigue. You’re losing weight, are you alright? he’d ask in alarm, as if for the first time. You need to eat more than toast, you know?

Richard 2.0 and Kevin 2.0 were playing chicken,

lining up on opposite sides of the pen and sprinting toward each other at full speed. Phoebe felt guilty for her anger. She wondered if Donna felt the same. He was still her husband, wasn't he? No matter how much he'd changed.

"Boys will be boys and, well, robots will be robots," Donna said. "I don't know what I'll do. I'm just trying to get through the day."

Richard 2.0 smashed into the plastic barrier and crashed down on his backside, wheels spinning in the air.

"As always," Phoebe said.

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The peonies were in bloom. A miracle in the chemical dirt. The roses, lilies, peonies, and tulips in the resident gardens. Under the dome, the flowers never withered or wilted in surrender, sprayed every morning with growth hormones and pesticides, protected by the temperature controlled enclosure. Phoebe could almost breathe easy out there. She could almost pretend the sweet smells and cool air that filled her lungs were from a natural breeze instead of oxygen pumped and filtered through tubes.

She'd stopped answering the phone. Invitations from her few friends to cribbage and gin rummy in the parlor, calls from Donna for robot playdates in the underground gym. There were more of them every day, robot husbands and wives skating down the hall, yapping in dining-room booths, stowed secretly in widowers' handbags. She'd deleted the backlog of video messages from her doctor that had collected over the past three months.

Richard 2.0 was blissfully unaware. He tooled around the stone paths of the gardens, tearing through trimmed hedges. She dug her fingers in the soil, feeling an arithmetic ache, sharp pains that shot from her fingertips down her

wrist. She shook loose dirt off the lower stalk of the peonies and gently massaged the root bulb.

Inside the apartment, she filled the curved vase with water and spread out the peonies. She sat at the table and poured herself a cup of tea, studying the flowers. They would die here alone. She was glad for that.

“It’s all hard work, baby. This life of ours,” Richard 2.0 said, spinning in his steel shell and shimmying on the carpet. Last Sunday had been the 75th anniversary of Elvis’s death and Richard had come out from the other side of an internet wormhole as The King reborn. “The studio wants me to fly out to Hawaii tomorrow. Another film, I’ll be away for a month or so. I know your heart is broken. But don’t worry, baby. I won’t be rocking the hula with no one but you.”

Phoebe finished her tea. She pinched some leaf silt from the cup and sprinkled it in the vase. She unplugged the electric kettle and cradled it in her arms.

“Who’s that, baby? Don’t tell me you got another lover.” Richard 2.0 pawed at her pant leg with his metal pinchers. “Give me some sugar. Listen to this little ditty I’ve been working on. I wrote it just for you.”

The robot vibrated, crooning “Can’t Help Falling in Love,” accompanied by tinny ukulele music. The song floated with Phoebe as she drifted out of the kitchen and through the living room. The World Broadcast & Weather Report muted on the touchscreen walls, talking to everyone and no one, everywhere at once.

Richard 2.0 followed her into the bathroom. The dials on the clawfoot bathtub were cranked, steam rising like sea fog. The electric kettle sat on a footstool, humming with a soft glow. Phoebe shed her clothes in a pile and slipped in, a slow submersion of her fragile body in hot water. Lockets of her grey hair floated up, dappled light flared on the water’s wavy surface as if reaching out to her. She closed her eyes, the thud



of her heartbeat flooding her ears. She welcomed the pounding silence, trying to escape the refrain of her guilty conscience. She was abandoning him. She was breaking her promise. Alone in the darkness with only memory, fragmented, untamable memory, rushing backward against her will to the moment they met. April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1991. A Sunday. She was reading a book in the grocery store, absently stocking her cart with canned tuna fish and garbanzo beans.

Must be a good book, that's what he said to her. That's what started the conversation that led him to her heart. And now 40 years later, all the memories dashed in strokes on life's messy canvas, layer mudded upon layer, except for the singular image that haunted her—the enduring light of his kind brown eyes, how they held her in captivity, how he never stopped gazing at her like a schoolboy. Wolfish, foolish, in the blush.

She gasped for air and reached out blindly from the tub but couldn't find the kettle. She refused to look. She refused to witness her betrayal in the glossy reflection of its steel shell. She submerged again. Calm, collected, until she heard the low tremolo of the robot voice echo underwater.

“You okay, baby?” His voice, so sweet and tender. It was the same.

She surfaced from the steam, cascade trickling from her wet hair, pearl drops on her bare shoulders. The robot blinked in confusion. She turned toward her husband, her dripping arm outstretched from the tub. Her aching hands beckoned him closer.

“Come to me, Richard,” she said. “Give me a kiss.”