

***Craig Cotter***

I have a stove

with a computer chip,  
digital clock and LED displays.

It's a bottom-of-the-line stove  
with an oven.

\*

It's mostly an empty metal box.

The range has 5 burners:  
two in front are large,  
two in back smaller,  
then one oval burner in the middle for a pancake griddle.

There's a storage tray below the oven.

\*

The oven and burners are fueled by natural gas  
pumped into my unit from a pipe  
that attaches to the back of the stove.

There is electricity to the stove, obviously,  
to run the small computer chip, LED displays  
and electric starters that light the gas.

\*

When set, the oven maintains a steady temperature,  
has its own thermostat and thermometer as part of the LED  
display  
above the burners,

but I keep it checked with a small round metal and glass Taylor  
thermometer set on one of the oven racks.

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These bottom-of-the-line stoves  
eventually stop providing even baking temperatures.

Then an honest tech says the cost of the part and labor isn't worth  
it,  
suggests you buy a new stove.

\*

I've lived in my apartment 26 years. It came with an old stove  
from 1984 that I replaced a year after I moved in because it didn't  
work.

The new oven died 20 years later.

\*

I'm good using the gas burners.  
Pretty good with the oven too.

\*

I'm amazed I have an oven:  
privilege, luxury, convenience.

\*

I've worked hard since leaving college 40 years ago —  
a full-time job since I was 21 —

no one gave me the oven.

\*

In the kitchen I marvel at a double stainless-steel sink,  
an original from 1984.

The apartment was built with the most current earthquake  
standards  
and is bolted to the foundation.

I've been in a Big One —

know when the Big One hits  
this place is a pile of sticks.

\*

I own other modern conveniences,  
have a refrigerator, garbage disposal, dishwasher,

washing machine, dryer, hot water heater  
and an HVAC unit on the roof.

I've got a radio, TV and light fixtures.  
I'm writing this poem on a computer that has a monitor,

speakers, modem and wireless router. (I rent the modem  
from a cable company called Spectrum that is a heartless  
monopoly.)

\*

A man who reads my poems in the Philippines  
lives in a shack in a shantytown,

washes his clothes in a bucket.

He was raising two pigs for money  
in a small rectangle of concrete

at the back his brother's shack.

When his brother was thrown out  
Martin had no place for his pigs,

asked if I could send him \$300 to buy a small piece of land  
for his brother and the pigs.

\*

A Muslim man who reads my poetry in Gambia  
wants to move to the United States but can't get a VISA.

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He sometimes works on a peanut farm  
planted and weeded with hoes,  
  
watered by carrying buckets from a stream.

\*

In Drayton Plains, Michigan,  
as a young boy

I would build forts with my friends  
out of whatever we'd find,  
  
pieces of abandoned and stolen wood.

We'd dream of having all the things  
I now have in my apartment.

\*

Almost every day I see my apartment  
as the tree fort I wanted as a kid.

This place is 3 levels,  
the first a garage

for my 19-year-old Civic  
with 243,000 miles, original

engine and transmission.

I'm curious how long it will run  
and will keep driving it until the transmission

or engine fails.

If either fails when I'm cruising down an LA freeway  
I'll have no angst about it dying,

it will have been a great car.

\*

My dresser I bought from a residential treatment center for children,  
it was surplus, for \$5.

They bought it as army surplus  
and it's solid oak and weighs about 200 pounds empty.

A brilliant piece of rough cabinetry.

About every 4 years  
after tossing my keys and other stuff on top

I bang-up the finish.  
So I get a block and sand it down, re-stain it,

then put a few coats of polyurethane over it.

I've been trying to remember if my dad  
had a piece of tempered glass on the top of his dresser.

I could have one cut —  
but I like the feel of the oak.

Eventually, after about 400 years of sanding,  
the top will be worn through.

\*

George's Meat Market,  
which has been on my block since 1924,

is being torn down.

I was walking down the street picking up garbage  
and saw a couple guys in the attic

taking shingles off the rafters with crowbars.

I yelled over to a guy on the lot, and he walked over.

"If you're tearing down the building with a crane,

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why are they taking off shingles by hand?"

"The city requires us to recycle a certain amount of wood with every demolition."

This seems like a reasonable  
government reach,

but how could those rafters be reused?  
George's has not been taken care of for decades,

is termite- and rat-infested, and has been abandoned  
for the past 6 years.

The foreman said there were 6 people living in the boarded-up  
building when they started the tear-down.

\*

That corner — the large live-oak —  
the way the store sat and the line of the road

reminded me of Jacobson's Market  
on Watkins Lake Road in Drayton Plains, Michigan.

It had a glass case as part of the front counter  
with candy and toys, and I loved the little

2-inch by 2-inch plastic planes, primary colors.

I found them again at the PCC Flea Market a couple years ago  
and bought 3 for \$8 each.

I wish I'd bought the fourth but, when I went back, it was gone.  
I have the yellow, green and red ones but wish I had bought the  
blue one.

\*

Now, driving east on Villa,  
it no longer reminds me of Drayton Plains, Michigan.

Now I have views of buildings I've never seen from those angles.

It's not disorienting. It's "progress."

It is I am 61 not 5 looking at toy airplanes through a glass candy counter.

\*

My 3-level house is quite similar in design  
to Whitman's 2-level house on Mickle Street in Camden, New  
Jersey.

We are in row houses and there is an apartment attached to each  
side of my place like Walt's.

I've looked at his floor plan, and his place is bigger.  
Each of my floors is 525 square feet.

Those last years he had a hot male nurse to give him massages  
and help with his paralysis,

and a live-in woman for cooking and cleaning.  
I think her husband had died at sea.

I only have room for the hot male nurse, hope he can cook and  
clean.

\*

Those services were paid for by friends who loved Walt's poetry.  
I'm glad he had that support as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was wrapping.

\*

About 1967 John Lennon was sitting in a chair  
and realized all of his material desires had been satisfied.

There was nothing further he wanted to own or buy.

He said this was disorienting.

\*

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It's 2022 and I haven't wanted to buy anything in years.

I have what I want and need.

I continue to buy consumables like food and paper,  
and replace luxury appliances when they die —

I suppose I'm a hedonist —  
work hard to enjoy the comforts and privileges

of being born into this flawed but improving  
and into a family that cared. great democracy,

\*

I was baking tater tots the other day  
and thinking of my relations in Ireland,

County Cork and County Claire,  
wondering how much potatoes are part of their lives.

\*

In a Pyrex ramekin three inches in diameter  
I made a provocative sauce of mayo and ketchup

for dipping the tots into while watching the Warriors game  
(my Warriors got beat-up by the Sixers tonight).

\*

What I want now is intellectual, spiritual —  
I want more love,

art,

peace.

And maybe that blue plastic toy airplane from 1965.