

MAKING DINNER FOR W. H. AUDEN

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I don't think Auden likes my cooking,
the way he drags his spoon around
the surface of the stew, the way
his lips have barely moved an inch.
I've read his essays, but I haven't
any clue about his tastes.

I question every choice I made
(Should I have added extra salt
or thrown the shaker in the trash?
Would pepper flakes have raised the dish,
or made it taste of sprinkled soot?)
and wonder why I let him in.

At first, he seemed the perfect man
to share a Sunday dinner with.
He's fond of lists, which lend themselves
to recipes, and likes to see
the cutting-edge of kitchen gear.
I figured I was well prepared:
my microwave and Ginsu knife
would blow his antiquated mind,
and even novice cooks like me
can make a supper step-by-step.

But then he made a small request
for certain spices, meats, and stocks--
and didn't say what dish he wanted.
I should have known he'd pose a riddle
to any man who'd serve his food.
I thought the answer should be simple
and so I filled a pot of broth
with everything my guest demanded
and let them stew like aphorisms.
I said: "The best ingredients
will make an even better stew."

But Auden clearly disagrees.
He doesn't even try to hide
the lack of pleasure on his lips,
the disappointment in his mouth,
and at this moment I would love
to smear the stew across his vest.
I ask him what he wants from me.
"You're the chef," he says, "and you're
the one who needs to know, not me."