Let me concede a point to the reader. You no doubt feel that, whatever else may be forthcoming in this book, I owe you at least an attempt to make good on the obviously pretentious and apparently ordinary recipe with which I began. You are right; I intend to address myself to it immediately. I must ask, however, that you permit me to do it at my own rate. These things take time.

For the moment, therefore, set aside the leg of lamb. If you are a hardy soul, and do not mind getting cold fingers cutting up meat, return it to the refrigerator; alternatively, if comfort is a consideration with you, let it warm up a bit on the kitchen counter. In any case, we do not need it yet. I must teach you first how to deal with onions.

Select three or four medium-size onions—I have in mind the common, or yellow, onion normally available in the supermarket. The first movement 1(A) of my recipe is simply a stew; small white onions, while more delicate as a vegetable in their own right, are a nuisance to cut up for inclusion in something else. The labor of peeling is enlarged beyond reason, and the attempt to slice up the small slippery balls you are left with can be painful.

Next take one of the onions (preferably the best-looking), a paring knife, and a cutting board and sit down at the kitchen table. Do not attempt to stand at a counter through these opening measures. In fact, to do it justice, you should arrange to have sixty minutes or so free for this part of the exercise. Admittedly, spending an hour in the society of an onion may be something you have never done before. You feel, perhaps, a certain resistance to the project. Please don’t. As I shall show later, a number of highly profitable members of the race have undertaken it before you. Onions are excellent company.

Once you are seated, the first order of business is to address yourself to the onion at hand. (You must firmly resist the temptation to feel silly. If necessary, close the doors so no one will see you; but do not give up out of embarrassment.) You will note, to begin with, that the onion is a thing, a being, just as you are. Savor that for a moment. The two of you sit here in mutual confrontation. Together with knife, board, table, and chair, you are the constituents of a place in the highest sense of the word. This is a Session, a meeting, a society of things.

You have, you see, already discovered something: The uniqueness, the placiness, of places derives not from abstractions like location, but from confrontations like man-onion. Erring theologians have strayed to their graves without learning what you have come upon. They have insisted, for example, that heaven is no place because it could not be defined in terms of spatial co-ordinates. They have written off man’s eternal habitation as a “state of mind.” But look what your onion has done for you: It has given you back the possibility of heaven as a place without encumbering you with the irrelevancy of location.

This meeting between the two of you could be moved to
a thousand different latitudes and longitudes and still remain the session it started out to be. Indeed, by the motions of the earth, the solar system, the galaxy, and the universe (if that can be defined), every place—every meeting of matter—becomes a kind of cosmic floating crap game: Location is accidental to its deepest meaning. What really matters is not where we are, but who—what real beings—are with us. In that sense, heaven, where we see God face to face through the risen flesh of Jesus, may well be the placiest of all places, as it is the most gloriously material of all meetings. Here, perhaps, we do indeed see only through a glass darkly; we mistake one of the earthly husks of place for the heart of its mattering.

But back to the onion itself. As nearly as possible now, try to look at it as if you had never seen an onion before. Try, in other words, to meet it on its own terms, not to dictate yours to it. You are convinced, of course, that you know what an onion is. You think perhaps that it is a brownish yellow vegetable, basically spherical in shape, composed of fundamentally similar layers. All such prejudices should be abandoned. It is what it is, and your work here is to find it out.

For a start, therefore, notice that your onion has two ends: a lower, now marked only by the blackish gray spot from which the root filaments descended into the earth; and an upper, which terminates (unless your onions are over the hill, or have begun to sprout because you store them under a leaky sink trap) in a withered peak of onion paper. Note once again what you have discovered: an onion is not a sphere in repose. It is a linear thing, a bloom of vectors thrusting upward from base to tip. Stand your onion, therefore, root end down upon the board and see it as the paradigm of life that it is—as one member of the vast living, gravity-defying troop that, across the face of the earth, moves light- and airward as long as the world lasts.

Only now have you the perspective needed to enter the onion itself. Begin with the outermost layer of paper, or onion-skin. Be careful. In the ordinary processes of cooking, the outer skin of a sound onion is removed by peeling away the immediately underlying layers of flesh with it. It is a legitimate short cut; the working cook cannot afford the time it takes to loosen only the paper. Here, however, it is not time that matters, but the onion. Work gently then, lifting the skin with the point of your knife so as not to cut or puncture the flesh beneath. It is harder than you may have thought.

Old onion skins give up easily, but new ones can be stubborn.

Look now at the fall of stripped and flaked skin before you. It is dry. It is, all things considered, one of the driest things in the world. Not dusty dry like potatoes, but smoothly and thinly dry, suggesting not accidental dessication, not the withering due to age or external circumstance, but a fresh and essential dryness. Dryness as an achievement, not as a failure. Elegant dryness. Deliberate dryness. More than that, onion paper is, like the onion itself, directional, vectored, ribbed. (It will, oddly, split as easily across its striations as with them; Its grain has been reduced by dryness to a merely visual quality.) Best of all, though, it is of two colors: the outside, a brownish yellow of no particular brightness; but the inside a soft, burnished, coppery gold, ribbed—especially near the upper end—with an exquisiteness only hinted at on the outside. Accordingly, when you have removed all the paper, turn the fragments inside-up on the board. They are elegant company.

For with their understated display of wealth, they bring you to one of the oldest and most secret things of the world: the sight of what no one but you has ever seen. This quiet gold, and the subtly flattened sheen of greenish yellow white onion that now stands exposed, are virgin land. Like the incredible fit of twin almonds in a shell, they present themselves to you as the animals to Adam: as nameless till seen
by man, to be met, known and christened into the city of being. They come as deputies of all the hiddennesses of the world, of all the silent competencies endlessly at work deep down things. And they come to you—to you as their priest and voice, for oblation by your heart's astonishment at their great glory.

Only now are you ready for the first cut. Holding the onion vertically, slice it cleanly in half right down the center line, and look at what you have done. You have opened the floodgates of being. First, as to the innards. The mental diagram of sphere within sphere is abolished immediately. Structurally, the onion is not a ball, but a nested set of fingers within fingers, each thrust up from the base through the center of the one before it. The outer digits are indeed swollen to roundness by the pressure of the inner, but their sphericity is incidental to the linear motion of flame inthrusting flame.

Next, the colors. The cross-section of each several flame follows a rule: On its inner edge it is white, on its outer, pigmented; the color varying from the palest greenish yellow in the middle flames, to more recognizable onion shades as you proceed outward. The centermost flames of all are frankly and startlingly green; it is they which will finally thrust upward into light. Thus the spectrum of the onion: green through white to green again, and ending all in the brown skin you have peeled away. Life inside death. The forces of being storming the walls of the void. Freshness in the face of the burning, oxidizing world which maderizes all life at last to the color of cut apples and old Sherry.

Next, pressure. Look at the cut surface: moisture. The incredible, utter wetness of onions, of course, you cannot know yet: This is only the first hinted pressing of juice. But the sea within all life has tipped its hand. You have cut open no inanimate thing, but a living tumeiscent being—a whole that is, as all life is, smaller, simpler than its parts; which holds, as all life does, the pieces of its being in compression.

To prove it, try to fit the two halves of the onion back together. It cannot be done. The faces which began as two plane surfaces drawn by a straight blade are now mutually convex, and rock against each other. Put them together on one side and the opposite shows a gap of more than two minutes on a clock face.

Again, pressure. But now pressure toward you. The smell of onion, released by the flowing of its juices. Hardly a discovery, of course—even the boor knows his onions to that degree. But pause still. Reflect how little smell there is to a whole onion—how well the noble reek was contained till now by the encompassing dryness. Reflect, too, how it is the humors and sauce of being that give the world flavor, how all life came from the sea, and how, without water, nothing can hold a soul. Reflect finally what a soul the onion must have, if it boasts such juices. Your eyes will not yet have begun to water, nor the membranes of your nose to recoil. The onion has only, if you will, whispered to you. Yet you have not mistaken a syllable of its voice, not strained after a single word. How will you stop your senses when it raises this stage whisper to a shout?

Now, however, the two halves of the onion lie, cut face up, before you. With the point of your paring knife, carefully remove the base, or bottom (or heart) much as you would do to free the leaves of an artichoke or of a head of lettuce. Take away only as much as will make it possible to lift out, one by one, the several layers. Then gently pry them out in order, working from the center to the outside. Arrange them in a line as you do, with matching parts from the separate halves laid next to each other, making them ascend thus by twos from the smallest green fingers, through white flames, up to the outer shells which sit like paired Russian church spires.

Then look. The myth of sphericity is finally dead. The onion, as now displayed, is plainly all vectors, risers and thrusts. 
Tongues of fire. But the pentecost they mark is that of nature, not grace: the Spirit's first brooding on the face of the waters. Lift one of the flames; feel its lightness and rigidity, its crispness and strength. Make proof of its membranes. The inner: thin, translucent, easily removed; the outer, however, thinner, almost transparent—and so tightly bonded to the flesh that it protests audibly against separation. (You will probably have to break the flesh to free even a small piece.) The membranes, when in place, give the onion its fire, its sheen, soft within and brighter without. But when they are removed, the flesh is revealed in a new light. Given a minute to dry, it acquires a pale crystalline flatness like nothing on earth. Eggshell is the only word for it; but by comparison to the stripped flesh of an onion, an eggshell is only as delicate as poured concrete.

Set aside your broken flame now and pick up a fresh one. Clear a little space on the board. Lay it down on its cut face and slice it lengthwise into several strips. (You will want to tap it lightly with the edge of the knife first. There is a hollow crisp sound to be gotten that way—something between a tock and a tink. It is the sound of health and youth, the audible response of cellularity when it is properly addressed. Neither solid nor soft, it is the voice of life itself.)

Next take one of the slivers and press it. Here you will need firmness. If you have strong nails, use the back of the one on your middle finger; if not, steamroller the slice with a round pencil. Press and roll it until it yields all the water it will. You have reached the deepest revelation of all.

First, and obviously, the onion is now part of you. It will be for days. For the next two mornings at least, when you wash your hands and face, your meeting with it will be reconvened in more than memory. It has spoken a word with power, and even the echo is not in vain.

But, second, the onion itself is all but gone. The flesh, so crisp and solid, turns out to have been an aqueous house of cards. If you have done your pressing well, the little scraps of membrane and cell wall are nearly nonexistent. The whole infolded nest of flames was a blaze of water, a burning bush grown from the soil of the primeval oceans. All life is from the sea.

And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly. And God saw that it was good. This juice, this liquor, this rough-and-ready cordial, runs freely now on board and hands and knife. Salt, sweet, and yet so much itself as to speak for no other, it enters the city of being. What you have seen, to be sure, is only the smallest part of its singularity, the merest hint of the stunning act of being that it is, but it is enough perhaps to enable you to proceed, if not with safety, then with caution.

For somehow, beneath this gorgeous paradigm of unnecessary being, lies the Act by which it exists. You have just now reduced it to its parts, shivered it into echoes, and pressed it to a memory, but you have also caught the hint that a thing is more than the sum of all the insubstantialities that comprise it. Hopefully, you will never again argue that the solidities of the world are mere matters of accident, creatures of air and darkness, temporary and meaningless shapes out of nothing. Perhaps now you have seen at least dimly that the uniquenesses of creation are the result of continuous creative support, of effective regard by no mean lover. He likes onions, therefore they are. The fit, the colors, the smell, the tensions, the tastes, the textures, the lines, the shapes are a response, not to some forgotten decree that there may as well be onions as turnips, but to His present delight—His intimate and immediate joy in all you have seen, and in the thousand other wonders you do not even suspect. With Peter, the onion says, Lord, it is good for us to be here. Yes, says God. Too. Very good.
Fair enough then. All life is from the sea. It takes water to hold a soul. Living beings are full of juices.

But watch out.

I once gave a dinner party at which I conned my wife (then hardly more than a bride) into garnishing a main dish (I think it was a mixed grill) with fried parsley. *Persil frit* is one of the traps that is laid to teach humility to men beset by culinary presumption. I had spent the better part of a morning off devising a way of making attractive bunches of parsley for frying, and I had finally come up with what I still consider (apart from the disaster that followed) the perfect presentation of persil frit. I took bread sticks and, with a coping saw, carefully cut them into three-quarter-inch lengths. Then, ever so gently, I bored out the centers with a small twist drill. This provided me with a number of neckerchief slides, as it were, into each of which I thrust a sufficient number of parsley sprigs to make a snug fit. Since my wife had bought excellent parsley, they made magnificent little sheaves of green.

Unfortunately, however, I neglected to tell my wife that, in spite of all this artsy-crafty ingenuity, I had never prepared, cooked, eaten, or even seen fried parsley before. What she trustingly accepted from me as a manageable fact was nothing but a conceit. We sowed, on bright, clear days, the seeds of our own destruction.

For a young thing she had done more than well. Hors d'oeuvres, soup, and fish had come off beautifully—but at an expense of spirit to which I was blind. The working cook of a major meal operates under pressure, and the ivory-tower gourmet should never forget it. The mixed grill was in the broiler, the french fryer was heating on the stove, and my wife, tense but still game, picked up my little parsley masterpieces and dropped them into the fat.

What followed was the nearest thing we have ever had to a kitchen fire, and one of the nearest to a marital disaster.

Parsley: freshness; water. All life is from the sea. Water: heat; steam. When the bouquets hit the fat, the whole business blew up. Steam: sound: fury. And grease all over the kitchen. Fury: wife: tears. All waters return to the sea.

I spent the fish course in the kitchen mending my fences, trying to bluff my way out. To this day, I remember nothing about the rest of the meal. Except one thing. The parsley was glorious. It fries in ten seconds or so and turns the most stunning green you can imagine. It was parsley transfigured, and I shall never forget it. It is just as well. My wife has never cooked it again.

Between the onion and the parsley, therefore, I shall give the summation of my case for paying attention. Man's real work is to look at the things of the world and to love them for what they are. That is, after all, what God does, and man was not made in God's image for nothing. The fruits of his attention can be seen in all the arts, crafts, and sciences. It can cost him time and effort, but it pays handsomely. If an hour can be spent on one onion, think how much regarding it took on the part of that old Russian who looked at onions and church spires long enough to come up with St. Basil's Cathedral. Or how much curious and loving attention was expended by the first man who looked hard enough at the insides of trees, the entrails of cats, the hind ends of horses and the juice of pine trees to realize he could turn them all into the first fiddle. No doubt his wife urged him to get up and do something useful. I am sure that he was a stalwart enough lover of things to pay no attention at all to her nagging; but how wonderful it would have been if he had known what we know now about his dawdling. He could have silenced her with the greatest riposte of all time: Don't bother me; I am creating the possibility of the Bach unaccompanied sonatas.

But if man's attention is repaid so handsomely, his inat-
tention costs him dearly. Every time he diagrams something instead of looking at it, every time he regards not what a thing is but what it can be made to mean to him—every time he substitutes a conceit for a fact—he gets grease all over the kitchen of the world. Reality slips away from him; and he is left with nothing but the oldest monstrosity in the world: an idol. Things must be met for themselves. To take them only for their meaning is to convert them into gods—to make them too important, and therefore to make them unimportant altogether. Idolatry has two faults. It is not only a slur on the true God; it is also an insult to true things.

They made a calf in Horeb; thus they turned their Glory into the similitude of a calf that eateth hay. Bad enough, you say. Ah, but it was worse than that. Whatever good may have resided in the Golden Calf—whatever loveliness of gold or beauty of line—went begging the minute the Israelites got the idea that it was their savior out of the bondage of Egypt. In making the statue a matter of the greatest point, they missed the point of its matter altogether.

Berate me not therefore for carrying on about slicing onions in a world under the sentence of nuclear overkill. The heaviest weight on the shoulders of the earth is still the age-old idolatry by which man has cheated himself of both Creator and creation. And this age is no exception. If you prefer to address yourself to graver matters, well and good: Idolatry needs all the enemies it can get. But if I choose to break images in the kitchen, I cannot be faulted. We are both good men, in a day when good men are hard to find. Let us join hands and get on with our iconoclasm.

There is a Russian story about an old woman whose vices were so numerous that no one could name even one of her virtues. She was slothful, spiteful, envious, deceitful, greedy, foul-mouthed, and proud. She lived by herself and in herself; she loved no one and no thing. One day a beggar came to her door. She upbraided him, abused him, and sent him away.

As he left, however, she unaccountably threw an onion after him. He picked it up and ran away. In time the woman died and was dragged down to her due reward in hell. But just as she was about to slip over the edge of the bottomless pit, she looked up. Above her, descending from the infinite distances of heaven, was a great archangel, and in his hand was an onion. “Grasp this,” he said. “If you hold it, it will lift you up to heaven.”

One real thing is closer to God than all the diagrams in the world.