Onions

By William Matthews

How easily happiness begins by dicing onions. A lump of sweet butter slithers and swirls across the floor of the sauté pan, especially if its errant path crosses a tiny slick of olive oil. Then a tumble of onions.

This could mean soup or risotto or chutney (from the Sanskrit chatni, to lick). Slowly the onions go limp and then nacreous and then what cookbooks call clear, though if they were eyes you could see clearly the cataracts in them.

It’s true it can make you weep to peel them, to unfurl and to tease from the taut ball first the brittle, caramel-colored and decrepit papery outside layer, the least recent the reticent onion wrapped around its growing body, for there’s nothing to an onion but skin, and it’s true you can go on weeping as you go on in, through the moist middle skins, the sweetest and thickest, and you can go on in to the core, to the bud-like, acrid, fibrous skins densely clustered there, stalky and incomplete, and these are the most pungent, like the nuggets of nightmare and rage and murmury animal comfort that infant humans secrete. This is the best domestic perfume.

You sit down to eat with a rumor of onions still on your twice-washed hands and lift to your mouth a hint of a story about loam and usual endurance. It’s there when you clean up and rinse the wine glasses and make a joke, and you leave the minutest whiff of it on the light switch, later, when you climb the stairs.