

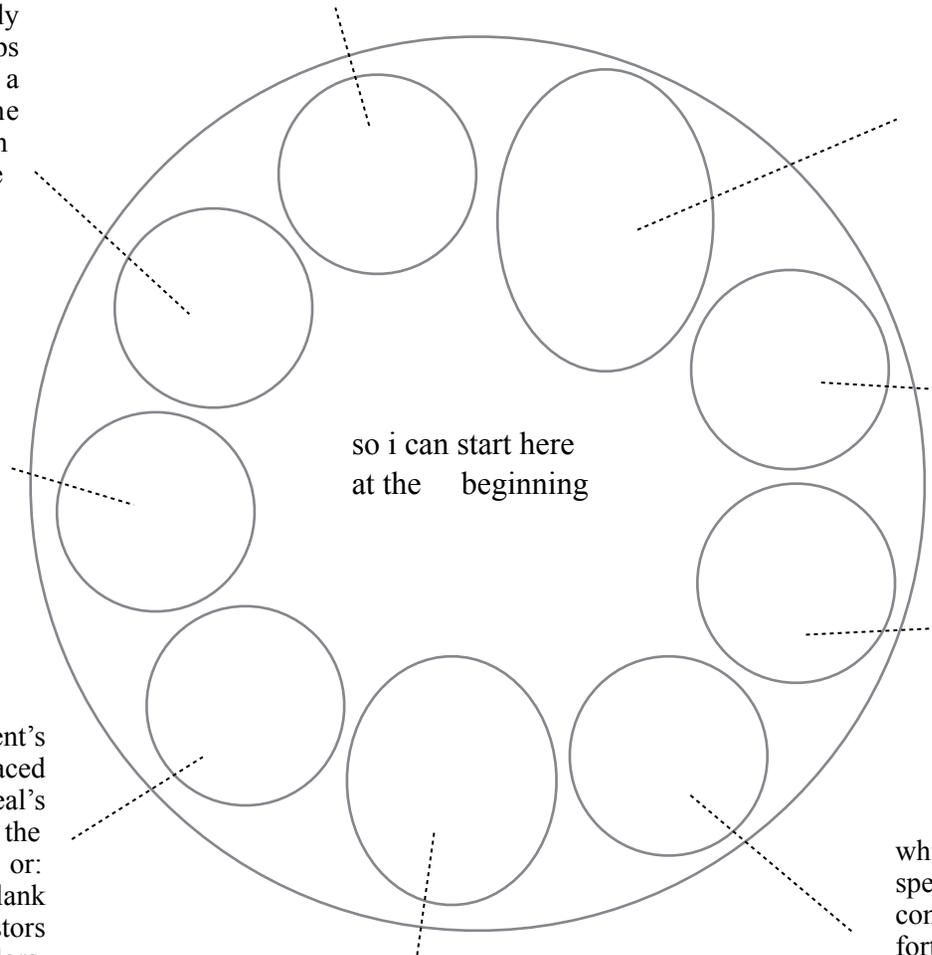
AT THE SOUTH INDIAN RESTAURANT, I ORDER THE THALI AGAIN

for instance, scooping a dollop of yogurt to accompany my first & every subsequent bite; a habit cultivated in childhood, though curd cools the stomach and therefore must be eaten always last; i teared up too many times when a chili bit my tongue & it may be said my family began to think me soft; or perhaps because my mother thinks anger a male & patrilineal blood-borne disease, she does not know i can breathe fire, that i wish to be capable of extinguishing this flame

though there is, of course, an internal logic, every taste & texture eventually blooms, from a different technique, on the tongue; dry-bitter fried & soft-sweet baked & wet-salty steamed & thick-sour pressure-cooked; the variations such that i can no longer follow the ancient prescribed progression, i take a path that wends by reckless weaving & then doubles back

& i am drawn to this arrangement's aesthetics, plate as placid, steel-faced clock; katoris portioning the meal's increments, passage marked by the slight clinking of steel on steel; or: plate as palette, mound of rice as blank canvas, for imagining the ancestors once dreamed in these earthen colors, knew them from a nature i have never seen; or: plate as a vessel, ready means of conveyance, transportation across an uncharted stretch of distance; or: plate as anchor, link to this table & the faces around it, accomplishment to be wrought by the lingering

& how many memories hold the directions for these dishes in the space where i keep solely their names? i live in the space just before forgetting, i live because my parents chose a place where i might be fed first. have i earned yet the right to be greedy? would it be ungrateful to ask now for more?



so i can start here
at the beginning

where the nested circles bring to mind kundalini, coiled serpent living tail in mouth at the base of my spine; root of a neuron-song that says endings cannot be distinguished from beginnings, the subtle body, unseen, seeks in secret to nourish itself beyond the chewed-up morsels that pass through without pausing; says meanwhile i begin when & where i begin

in the epic, the warrior family's never-emptying pot sweetened the blood for the body to better carry the means of its own demise; & the brothers & husband could feed & feed so long as the mother's hands touched the pot's mouth only thereafter. & the moral of this story is about plenitude, deity-sanctioned offerings that multiply, but the ending comes after the moral; and it says: as always, the woman ate dead last

in other domains, it may be said, i do not follow the established order of things, & this makes a woman dangerous, she shows her teeth every time she opens her mouth; but when i say dangerous i mean the man who owned the place we used to go to, that bone-craven chairman of a meatless empire, & i mean in some men's hard-edged hands, silverware always glints like an unsheathed weapon; so now i crush rice carefully between my fingers, mix until each grain wears its coat of borrowed armor; & they come around asking are you done madam, are you done, & each time i revel in telling them no

while my companions order dosas, wanting the spectacle of a paper-thin crepe that cannot be contained by a human-sized plate; this sight calls forth my grandmother's turned back, us eating while she sweats alone swirling batter over the stove; & i see her face only after we have all finished, when she sits down with a stack of imperfect or half-charred versions set aside for herself; but what is the logic of a meal like this, that requires this kind of sacrifice?