

**Are you the master of  
dead animals?**



### Saved Jowar

When your husband  
leaves for work,  
call your sons.  
With their help,  
take out all the saved jowar  
kept for the rainy season  
from the big cane container.

Quietly sell it  
to a merchant.  
The money might  
just be  
adequate  
for paying your sons'  
school fees.

When your husband  
comes to know  
of this  
he might thrash you.  
You will  
all  
have to starve  
throughout the rainy season.

But do not allow  
your sons' education  
to suffer.

### Bhakri

When you first arrive  
at your in-laws' home  
Your sasu  
might ask you  
to make  
two baskets full  
of bhakris.

Sit down  
to make them,  
even if  
you are not able  
to pat the balls  
of dough  
into proper round shapes.  
They might remain  
thick and small,  
no bigger than your  
palms.  
When you put them  
on the hot tawa  
they might get burnt  
in some places,  
remain uncooked in some.

Your sasu might call  
all her friends and neighbours.  
She might hold an open  
exhibition  
of the tiny burnt bhakris.  
"Look at the bhakris  
this slut  
has prepared."

When your  
house work is over,  
by half-past one  
in the afternoon,  
eat the half-burnt  
half-baked bhakris.

If you have nothing  
to eat them with,  
steal some salt  
when your sasu  
isn't looking.  
Hide it in your sari.





### Cactus Pods

If your children  
haven't eaten  
for three days  
and look like  
living corpses,  
go to the stream.

Pull cactus pods down  
with a stick.  
Roll them in the soil  
to remove the thorns.  
Fill them in your cane basket.

No other fruit  
might ever appear  
so delicious.

Carry the basket home.  
Remove the skin  
of the pods  
and pop the flesh  
into your mouth.

Ravenously  
gobble them up,  
not for fun  
but to stay alive.

When your pangs of hunger  
are extinguished,  
go to sleep

without giving a thought  
to the punishment  
awaiting you.

The seeds  
of the cactus fruit  
are so hard  
they cannot  
be broken open  
even with pliers.  
Tiny as jawar grains,  
they go down the throat  
and then  
through the stomach,  
slide into the intestines,  
where they become  
slabs of concrete.

Life next day  
might be hell.  
You might be terrified  
to attend nature's call.  
Your eyes might pop out  
but your stomachs  
might not empty.  
You might push  
as hard as you can  
but to no avail.

But for that one night,  
sleep peacefully.

### Begging Round

When you set off  
in the evening  
on your begging round,  
feel great pride  
in the ghongadi,  
the sheep-wool blanket  
on your shoulder,  
and your stick  
fitted at one end  
with a small bell.

Twirl your moustache.  
Clear our throat  
as if you are  
a very important man.  
Stride forward  
beating your stick  
on the ground  
with great flourish.  
Like a royal staff  
and the blanket,  
a black coat  
of a barrister.

The moment you enter  
the village,  
your swollen chest  
might deflate  
like a balloon.  
You might shuffle around  
inconspicuously

so as not to offend  
anyone  
from the higher castes.

Stand at the chest-high platform  
in front of the Patil's house.  
Do not call out  
for your voice might pollute  
their dinner.  
Sound the bell  
on your stick  
thrice.  
Spread your blanket  
like a makeshift bag.  
Collect the bhakris  
and leftover food  
paid to you for the labour  
of your family.

When your ghongadi bag  
is almost half full  
stride home joyfully  
as if you are carrying  
not leftovers  
but some great catch.  
Dine on this food  
with your entire family.

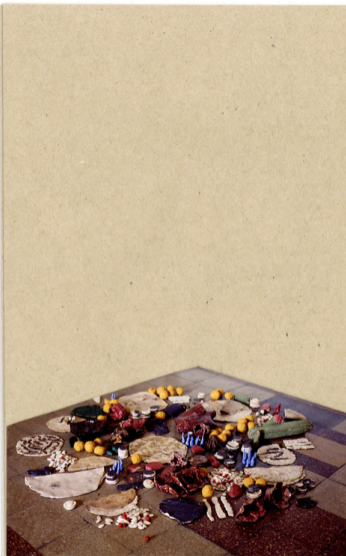
Proceed to the chawdi  
with a sense of achievement.  
Chat with the others  
in the community  
well into the night.

### Garbage Pits

While bullocks  
who slog for their masters  
are given grass to eat,  
you might merely be given  
leftovers.  
Eat them without complaining.

The beasts eat a bellyful.  
They stay in their master's courtyards.  
Your place is in the garbage pits  
outside the village  
where everyone throws  
their waste.

You are the master  
of dead animals  
thrown into these garbage pits.  
Fight with cats and dogs,  
kites and vultures,  
to establish your right  
over the carcasses.  
Tear off the flesh  
from the dead bodies.



### Ukadala

Go to the town to beg  
with a cloth bag  
on your shoulder,  
a tin pot in your hand.  
Return home  
with our booty  
of decaying food  
overflowing the tin pot  
and stale dry jowar roti  
in the bag.

Put all the rotting food  
into your big clay pot  
along with the pieces  
of dry roti.

Collect twigs and sticks  
from the garbage heap  
to light the chulha.  
Bring the mixture to the boil.

The spoilt food  
with a sour taste  
is called ambada.  
Once it is cooked  
it becomes ukadala.

Pour it into a mud bowl  
with a spoon made from  
a cracked coconut shell  
and a piece of wood  
nailed to it.

Let everybody feast.

from Babytai Kamble's 'The Prisons We Broke'  
(2009)