Bread Revisited: Homage to Jessica

“Give us this day our daily bread…”

Andrea looks at me throughout the presentation.  
No offense intended; we just live in another reality.  
Bread? No,  
we do not do bread,  
cannot do bread.  
It is too painful.  
Bread is the substance that sickens in 187 different ways,  
MS and lupus are on that list;  
bread maims, putting people not diagnosed in time in wheelchairs, permanently;  
and yes, bread is even the substance  
that given long enough  
will eventually kill.  
Actually, the body destroys itself;  
dying of celiac is slow suicide.

Bread? No,  
I grew up in a world warped,  
densely crowded with daily headaches  
among the freshly baked bagels and challa toast;  
no diagnosis, no cure.  
Bread? No,  
I eventually chose another path:  
In college it was a cup of basmati for breakfast  
And vegetable rice stir fry for dinner.

ielding දියට මෙන්නේ? the woman asks.  
මැදකු, I answer.  
දියට විශේෂත්තකම් කිරීම? She squints her eyes, watching me warily.  
මැදකු, I respond, මැදකු.  
Her eyes now widen, and her smile spreads:  
දියට මෙන්නේ, විශේෂත්තකම් කිරීම, මැදකු විශේෂත්තකම්!  
I have been accepted;  
I eat like a villager,  
the plain red rice of clay earth.  
My husband calls me his Lankan wife;  
so be it, me with my saris and Sinhala.

My home is a culture set apart.  
And my “bread”? Well…  
My sourdough is the sharp tang of garlic, warm in the pan,  
followed by the sting of your throat,  
hot chilis burning in oil.  
Soothing the itch  
is the smooth milk of coconut,  
my egg-rich challa,  
cracked and husked  
fresh from the tree.  
Curries? My favorite is cornbread:  
the sweetness of milk  
sinking deep in the starch.
My hefty pumpernickel
soaks it all up,
the wonderful dark heaviness of rice.
I lovingly sift and separate
the stones, the wheat from the chaff,
before cooking with care
and a bit of fennel for flavor.
My flatbread follows, the crispy
mild spiced crunch
of papadam, a special fried treat.

And for dessert?
My cranberry orange comes
in the sticky sweetness of mellow mango,
and my honey bread is
the ripe juicy acid of fresh pineapple, picked that morning.
My cinnamon raisin rises as
the succulent flesh of spiky red rambutan
and the refreshing zest of papaya
sprinkled with tart, puckering lime—
absolute ambrosia!

Bread? No,
I do not do bread,
cannot do bread.
I live in some sense
still six degrees north of the equator,
a parallel universe, for
as with all cultures’ food metaphors,
my culture of rice,
constant heat of sun and wet of earth,
like the soft, cozy warmth of bread
trickling with melted butter,
is a culture of love.

Sinhala Transliteration
24 – oo-day cam-uh-tuh moe-nuh-wah-duh kahn-nay?
25 – baath (“th” is pronounced dentally, your tongue stuck between your teeth as you say it)
26 – moe-nuh jah-tee-duh?
27 – ra-thoo baath; ham-uh-dah-muh

29 – sha! soo-doo no-nah gah-muh ek-ken-neck wah-gay ra-thoo baath kah-nuh-wah

46 – ah-luh hoe-dthkee (“dth” is pronounced dentally, your tongue stuck between your teeth as you say it)