

Malak by Jenny Sadre-Orafai
Platypus Press, 2017

Reviewed by Anna Sandy

Named for and inspired by her grandmother, Jenny Sadre-Orafai's second full-length poetry collection, *Malak*, immediately unseats us from our framework of the known and places us in a world where magic is as real as blood. This collection is a landscape of spells and genealogy, dreamlike imagery and clear language.

Broken into three sections, the collection begins with "Burning in a Hot Moon," a poem that renders *Malak* into existence, saying:

... What moons do
before we're alive is up to them. This moon is seven days
old. Malak draws a house on a house wall. *Here's you...*

From then on, *Malak* inhabits the pages as a constant, living presence. These initial poems are knit together with fortunes seen in coffee grounds, cups flipped over for prophecy, and the speaker as a child learning the secrets of her grandmother, including her own origin.

The first section of poems tugs at the future, destabilizing time with its stories of the past and hints at what hasn't yet come but will. In these poems, Sadre-Orafai truly is "readying your ears for the blast."

Yet in the midst of preparation for disaster, of looking for what losses will be, grows the family, the tight bonds of blood and shared knowledge. For the first time, we are shown the circles of maternity, the budding of life and the shadows it

creates. In these circles, the poet gives us a deep mix of love, grief, and the kind of honor offered only to someone who has shaped you completely.

The book's middle section, its solid core, is the shortest of the trinity and composed entirely of prose poems. In it, the speaker ruminates on her own sense of magic, writing "I like to think it came from Malak." Over and over, the speaker compares herself to her beloved grandmother, spelling out similarities in their bodies and in their unnameable spirits. She, too, is powerful, creating the bodies of these prose poems that work like a hand of cards, each divining an event in the speaker's life: meeting a stranger, meeting a man, family, love, divorce, power. In this section, the speaker not only knows what is coming, but is, perhaps, conjuring it.

This place is not our place. It doesn't belong to us, as readers; we are simply suspended, allowed to visit a world that the speaker was once told not to speak of, warned early on by her father that we:

won't believe how your grandmother sees
patterns divide, gold fields in coffee, a foxtail
twitching in the seam where the handle
meets the cup.

Bravely, she is turning over her own cup, sharing her secrets with us, trusting us to look down and in and believe them. And we do.

The third and final section of this collection resists closure; instead, it practices resurrection, bringing back what was gone. The poems open up, making room for a third person, a new daughter to round out the trio, to exist after Malak and the speaker, to, she says, "draw my face on the wall and tell it everything."

We are never on sure footing with this daughter, never sure if she is real or imagined or if she has been spoken into existence already or will be arriving soon. Perhaps she is Malak. For, even when looking towards the daughter, the speaker (and the reader) thinks over and over of Malak, “waiting for [her] to turn gold, gold, gold, gold.” Gold, the representation of abundance and prosperity, glints brightly from these poems, in coins and color and what Sadre-Orafai calls “our whole gold life.” It promises that there is more to come.

This last section is woven with carefully-crafted, enchanting lines, some of the strongest and most poignant in the collection. We are immediately pricked by the opening lines of the first poem in section III, “When I’m Just Dead,” when the poet writes:

I’ll send a fox to my daughter. It will nest in her hair,
my heaviest sleeping girl—largest heart outside my body.

Later, we are told that this fox is suspected responsible for the missing grandmother, that the speaker, if she finds the fox again, “will tell her where to put the grandmother she took.”

The final poems run over with such talismans: birds who work as omens, falling at their feet; children born and unborn, lingering invisible in the air; creation past, present, and future. Here, in this rendering of language and belief, Malak is resurrected, created anew, and made powerful.