

Time Bent, Warped, and Vertical

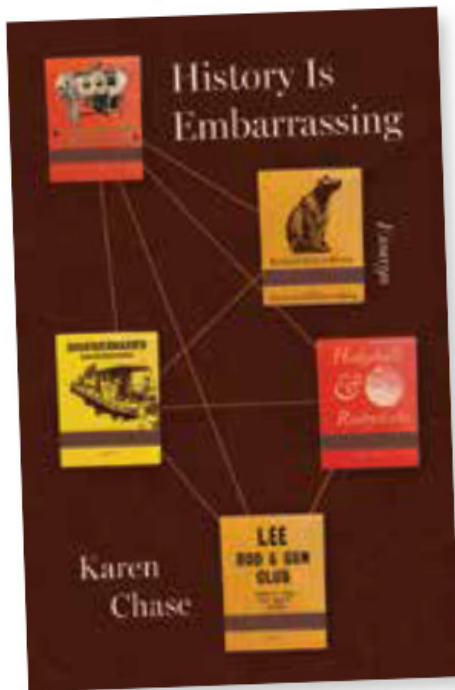
Karen Chase's poetry of the past and future

By Albert Stern / BJV Editor

Best-selling author Michael Crichton once described a pervasive type of cognitive bias he labeled “Gell-Mann Amnesia,” a phenomenon that even the most discerning consumers of news should bear in mind. “Briefly stated, the effect is as follows,” he wrote. “You open the newspaper to an article on some subject you know well. You read the article and see the journalist has absolutely no understanding of either the facts or the issues...In any case, you read with exasperation or amusement the

multiple errors in a story, and then turn the page to national or international affairs, and read as if the rest of the newspaper was somehow more accurate... than the baloney you just read. You turn the page, and forget what you know.” The Gell-Mann Amnesia effect is perhaps even more important to keep in mind when approaching the discipline of History. No matter how rigorous historians’ approach might be to documenting the past, their perspectives are bound to be occluded by information gaps, present bias, past bias, inaccurate records, dogmas, agendas, politics, culture, wishful thinking, and out-and-out invention. Recording History is an ongoing process. Inevitable inaccuracies – that may or may never come to light – do not necessarily render a historian’s work valueless or even ‘untrue,’ and only suggest that the closer you care to look at the nature of inquiry, the more you come to realize that,

well, History is embarrassing. Which was the title of Karen Chase’s seventh book, a sparkling collection of personal essays published in 2023. In *History is Embarrassing*, the Lenox poet, author, and visual artist recounts her strange contribution to the story of Jamali (a Sufi court poet and saint) and Kamali, who lived in Mughal India in the 16th century. Chase first learned of their story while participating in a writing residency in Delhi in 2004, when she had the chance to visit the Jamali and Kamali Mosque and Tomb, said to hold the remains of the two men – or would it be accurate to write “the couple”? Because during Chase’s visit their tomb, the site curator told her that “It



is believed, through our oral tradition in Delhi that Kamali was Jamali's homosexual lover."

In her essay "Jamali Kamali Airborne in History," Chase recounts how this notion captured her imagination; she commenced writing a narrative poem about Jamali and Kamali while still in Delhi. Chase writes that even in the earliest stages, a reader of her drafts shared that he thought she was "inhabited by Jamali, channeling him." She thought the man "misguided," but nevertheless spent the next year and a half possessed by her characters – writing of their torrid passion for each other in their voices, coloring the narrative with research and period details provided by an English scholar of Persian history.



When a book version of the poem was published in India in 2011, Chase was accused of "distorting history" by the moderator of a reading of her work in Delhi, sparking a lively debate among the audience. Chase, for her part, felt as if she had created a work of the imagination based on a snippet of fact, and that: "It's not as if my fiction would alter the historical record."

Somehow, however, it did. While searching the internet to see how the book was doing, Chase noticed that a line she had written was sourced as having come from Jamali's own poetic works. While that error was corrected, eleven years later, an article appeared in an Indian web publication titled "How the tomb of Jamali-Kamali enabled the Queer Community to claim their spaces." Moreover, it portrayed Karen Chase as having "cited" Jamali's poetry from the 16th century, lines

that she had, in fact, written herself. Later, she found other examples of her "poem polluting history, cited as fact." This led her to conclude that, "History is not a factual record. Rather it is a messy conglomeration of fact, fiction, and truth." She determined to stop trying to correct the record and to allow whatever will happen to happen – an experience of the Gell-Mann Amnesia effect in the most firsthand way possible.

Chase's just-released eighth book, *Two Tales: Jamali Kamali and ZundelState*, republishes her Mughal-era love poem and pairs it with new novella in verse set in a dystopic future society. The two works could not be more different in form – the poetry of the Jamali-Kamali poem is limpid and direct, while that of *ZundelState* is dreamlike

and discursive. Both are animated by outsiders seeking experiences of love and meaning in societies not constructed to accommodate their desires or individuality.

Encountering Jamali Kamali without knowing its backstory, a reader might plausibly think that it is a work from the past. It is somewhat reminiscent in both theme and composition to Song of Songs – a frank poem about carnal desire in the voices of two ardent lovers whose passion is both overwhelming and forbidden. The way modern queer readers in India have co-opted Jamali Kamali as a genuine, centuries-old affirmation of same-sex identity reminded me of the way that the pshat (literal) verses of Song of Songs have been transmogrified by drash (homiletic) interpreters into a religious allegory for the love between God and Israel. Whatever exegesis the poems may now be freighted with, it remains plainly true that Song of Songs is about the passion of a young woman and a young man, and Jamali Kamali was composed by someone who is not a male gay Indian Muslim, but rather, as Chase describes herself, “a straight, white, American, Jewish, 21st-century woman. And I’m not even young!” But if the drash allow both poems to endure and touch future readers, as we say in Yiddish, “zeyer gu’t.”

ZundelState is set in the year 3090, when “time is bent, warped, and vertical, as opposed to the horizontalness of a timeline,” as Chase writes in her introductions. Human beings have lost their ability to dream or love after both were outlawed by the state, although the biological capacity to do so remains within them in a vestigial form. Unstuck in time, the protagonists Joe and Marianna set forth into the world searching for answers and connections.

When I interviewed Chase in her Lenox studio in March, she said this about her writing process: “What was similar with Jamali Kamali is that it felt very given and very like there was no doubt I was going to stick with it till it was finished, whatever it was. I would come out here every day and I would write whatever I wanted; and it was all related, but there was no through line at all. There was no plot, there was no nothing. And I figured when it was finished I would know. It’s actually took almost the exact same amount of time as Jamali Kamali, a little over a year and a half. I ended up with a stack of paper and I knew I was finished. I took this big roll of white paper going all the way around the whole studio, and I started just tacking papers in place. And I did that for a couple of months, moving things around until there was the story. It was then that I read the whole thing for the first time. Then, I started weaving



Karen Chase

it together.”

The best way to move through ZundelState is to just go with it, letting the imagery wash over you without bringing with you too many expectations of how stories are supposed to work. Rather than plot, what holds the verse novella together (both poetically and narratively) are Chase’s explorations of dreaming: dreams in the sense of aspirations; dreams as phantasmagorical inner journeys in which familiar things might make no sense; and the type of dreaming where suddenly things do make sense, allowing you to apprehend an aspect of reality in a way you could not have while awake. “Dreams,” writes Chase, “are the sap that runs through time.”

Who knows? Maybe someone in the year 4090 will rediscover ZundelState and believe it to be an accurate testament of how humans lived a thousand years earlier. I enjoyed reading Jamali Kumali and ZundelState together, because while the former is set in an imagined 16th century India and the latter in a sci-fi landscape, Karen Chase finds the immutable human nature of her characters in these disparate worlds. And she has faith in their humanity, and that a good human story will always feel fresh and meaningful. As she puts it in ZundelState:

You think, Reader, there is nothing new under the sun?

Well, you are mistaken.

We all are.

Karen Chase will be talking about her work in the months ahead at the following venues:

Congregation Ahavath Sholom – Sunday, April 27 at 2 p.m.

The Bookstore in Lenox – Sunday, May 4 at 4 p.m.

The Mount – Wednesday, June 18 at 5:30 p.m.

Dream Away Lodge – June TBA