

# The Lakeville Journal

By Laurie Fendrich

Apr 23, 2025

BOOKS

## Love, dreams and dystopia: Karen Chase's 'Two Tales'



The writer Karen Chase was born in New York City but spent a lot of time living in and around Salisbury, Connecticut.

Chase is the author of several poems, stories, essays and books including a memoir about having polio when she was ten years old. Her new book, "Two Tales: Jamali Kamali and ZundelState," consists of two narrative poems. The first is a long, free-verse poem about an imagined homoerotic love between two men who are historical figures from 16th century India, and the second is what one could call a "science fiction poem," written mostly in free verse, and centered on a man and woman living in a dystopian techno-state a thousand years from now. Because Chase's free-flowing poems align with "automatic" or "free association" writing, with a few forays into Dada-like absurdities, the best approach to reading them is to go with the flow.

Despite the fact that "Jamali Kamali" was written several years ago, and "ZundelState" completed only recently, the author considers them to be of a piece. Her free-verse structure offers a cornucopia of love, longing, sexual passion, dreams, art, history and science. The two stories are riveting, but absorbing the full impact of the artistry requires a big-time "suspension of disbelief." Passages range from the lovely and loving to the jolting and violent. Sometimes things feel incomprehensible, sometimes perfectly logical, and sometimes we're simply struck by beautiful phrases

— "stinging sky," "butterfly laugh," or "the past shivering alive into now."

Centuries after their death, Jamali and Kamali, whose names form the eponymous title of the first story, lie side by side in a tourist-destination tomb in Delhi that Chase visited while on a month-long residency in the city. Little is known about Jamali other than that he was a court poet and Sufi Muslim in the Mughal Empire; nothing is known about Kamali, or about the nature of the relationship between the two men. After visiting the tomb, without having any plan, Chase set about writing her story of their forbidden love, finishing the poem a few years later, after returning home.

"Jamali Kamali" is filled with details about 16th century India that Chase discovered through extensive correspondence with Bruce Wannell, a British scholar who specialized in the history of the period. What's intriguing is the way Chase weaves these factual details together with her own details taken from direct observations of whatever happened to be in front of her while she was writing. While working on the poem in Nova Scotia, for example, she would look out her window and, noting the fog, sky, or flocks of birds, directly drop descriptions of them into her poem.

Chase writes compellingly about the deep love and intense sexual bond between two men and doesn't hesitate to go deep into their super-charged sex lives. Chase says her fiction relies solely on her imagination, and she's not interested in writing about herself. That imagination is enriched by a broad range of cultural and historical references, which is why "Jamali Kamali," which isn't written in the dactylic hexameter of classical poetry, recalls nothing so much as Homeric poetry — indeed, the name Homer appears early on in her poem.

In "ZundelState," the second story, we again focus on two lovers who are "outsiders" in their society. Instead of being set in the past, we're in a dystopian state a thousand years in the future, one where time is not linear, and a human being can even

go talk directly with Socrates. A mysterious autocratic State that bans history and dreaming controls everything. Human beings divide their lives between the “Agora” — the public realm — and “Home,” where they are private. Home is where “people are like snowflakes, each one unique. Elsewhere [the Agora], they all match.”

A dutiful State apparatchik named Marianna feels stirrings of dreaming — and more dangerously, love — after meeting Joe, a rebellious sort. Against the rules of the State, Joe has discovered this thing called history, and walks long distances to reach “Junkyards” located deep inside forbidden territory where he forages for abandoned fragments of it.

“ZundelState” recalls the psychological TV thriller “Severance.” Both concern the “form and pressure,” to use Shakespeare’s phrase, of our times, where the techno-state, and the rise of the techno-state human being, threaten to obliterate freedom. An anxiety that human beings will eventually be emptied of their humanity hovers over both. Reading the “Two Tales: Jamali Kamali and ZundelState” drives home that our beloved humanity rests not in our capacity to reason, but in our wild, imaginative spiritedness that lives in our dreams and loves. Should these fall away, we are finished.

**The author will be giving a talk on Thursday, June 26, at the David M. Hunt Library in Falls Village at 5:30 p.m.**

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