

BOOK REVIEW

Karen Chase's "Two Tales: Jamali Kamali and ZundelState"

Chase's message is clear and chilling: the fragility and preciousness of freedom, the finiteness of life, the importance of love and taking responsibility.

Written by Marisa Labozzetta
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A stunningly beautiful tomb in a large Delhi park and an oral tradition were the inspiration for Karen Chase's epic poem about two supposedly homosexual lovers: Jamali, a sixteenth-century Sufi court poet and saint about whom very little is known, and Kamali, a complete unknown. The poem is the first of two vastly different yet interconnected works in "Two Tales: Jamali Kamali and ZundelState," from the award-winning author of "Land of Stone," and the memoir, "Polio Boulevard."



Ceiling of a tomb. Photo by Karen Chase

"Jamali-Kamali: A Tale of Passion in Mughal India" was first published in India in 2011. At the time, Chase was accused of distorting history by having fictionalized an undocumented story of these two men. Chase rejected the notion, claiming that fact and fiction were two separate entities. Or so she thought, until she discovered that an online search for her book led to a travel portal to Delhi. There, an historical description of the Jamali Kamali Mosque and Tomb included the quoted words of her own imagined work of art, now attributed to Jamali's description of his forlorn love: *"On the map of your body, there is nowhere I would not travel."*



Chase's imagined homoerotic love story demonstrates a keen understanding of the culture about which she writes and the impositions of societal constraints and cruelties. A glossary of foreign terms and places used is even provided. One need not be an aficionado of poetry to become engaged in this epic tale in four parts of dialogue between the lovers of the 1500's. Parts I, II, and III are in Jamali's voice as he divulges his carnal desires and in so describes the court in which he belongs and where Kamali and he meet in secret. Chase's language is raw emotion, visceral and at times even humorous, making no attempts to camouflage the intensity of the erotic desires and sexual behavior of the lovers, which, whether for class or gender mores we are not sure, must be kept secret.

Tonight you must do
as I say.
Dress as my bride.
I will walk
through Delhi's streets
with you unafraid.

Then I will regale you
with rubies.
Camphor, aloe wood
will perfume our tent.
No amount of liquor
could make us so drunk.
I promise.

And

Turn over.
I will take you now.
Our love calls will
inflammé god and goddess alike.

You said you told
that girl in the red sari
go home to your mother.
Please tell the one in turquoise too.

Part II recounts Jamali's longing for Kamali as he, writing poems to honor King Babur, is forced to travel to far-off lands like Ceylon, through jungles, and in the unfamiliar courts of "alien lands," where he gagged on "alien food." He sees Kamali in everything everywhere, and dreams about their tempestuous past trysts.

The teasing strapping boy of long ago
bound my limbs to posts,
loved me from behind.
The rain roared...
it was monsoon time.

Part III finds the lovers together again for a short while when Jamali is sent back home, but they appear to soon be apart again, and Jamali likens Kamali to the lion he encounters in the wild, and to impending doom—danger.

Kamali, love equals life, as man's and lion's heart do.
I knew then, you are my life, my love, my lion, my wife.

It's not until Part IV when, in 1536, after Jamali has gone west to Gujarat with the Mughal ruler Humayaun and other warriors to conquer territory, that we hear Kamali speak, as he mourns Jamali's death and longs, in vain, for him to return in Kamali's dreams.

You, released

from your body's
jail, villagers feast.
Your spirit, free.

A pubic hair
of yours,
found
in your
bed—this
is my wealth now.

Your tomb—no, our tomb—gleams,
polished red and blue tiles,
white marble graves
buffed to a shine.

In the new prose poem, “ZundelState,” Chase thrusts us out of an exotic, colorful primal world into the stark and bleak landscape of a futuristic, dystopian society in the year 3090. It's a society run by the ZundelState government. A blanched world where two colors are assigned to Elsewhere and Home, Home being brown and Elsewhere being white. Home has become private, personal, secluded and cave-like; whereas Elsewhere is everywhere else—Agora—where all life is lived in public. It is where “Proper and particular behavior is dictated in public. There is no such thing as the self. No such thing as private... Home is where members of ZundelState retreat from the Agora...where people are like snowflakes, each one unique. Elsewhere, they all match.”

The most severe punishment meted out by the State
is Homelessness—not execution, not electricity, like in ancient times.
All life is lived in public, everywhere else but Home.

Homeless, there you are, outside fighting the massive snowstorm.
Everything intrudes and it is loud and raucous.
Homesick, your punishment.

And in this world the reader encounters another love story, that of outsiders Joe and Marianna, who, like Jamali, in conversation wrestle over societal threats dictated by the State, while background information comes from Kern, the story's principal narrator. It's a world where Chase again plays with fact and fiction, time, and dreams . Marianna and Joe are descendants of Albert Einstein, who, according to our narrator, invented a gene that contained the ability to dream. This is of paramount importance because in the era of ZundelState, the ability to dream has all but disappeared.

Joe, also a wolverine descendant, a curious lover of history, and an opposer of the ZundelState, takes it upon himself to discover how everything associated with our world came to be before becoming obsolete. He roams the earth in search of relics that give clues about the past. From Junkyards to Everything Fields, to Shoefields, to Shtetlfields, to ArtFields, he tries to ascertain the origin and usage of things from jelly doughnuts to concepts like the boy and girl next door. In an amusing passage he addresses the reader directly, as he pieces together how oral tradition and the automat may have led to our holding an actual book. In doing so, he interprets the act of reading, or devouring, a book to mean the actual eating of one. (An illustration included.)

But for hundreds of years before that, people had books,
stories written on paper that was abundant as emeralds.
Books, like food, were in libraries, and automats.

Which came first, the library or the automat?
Or were they actually the same thing?
People have never solved this conundrum.

Automats had walls with glass and steel compartments
and slots for coins, the wampum of the day.
There were sections with titles like Hot Dishes, Pies.

Standing there, you'd choose what you liked:
For example, the Fruit section had glass-enclosed compartments which displayed books:
Rubyfruit Jungle
Grapes of Wrath
A Clockwork Orange
James and the Giant Peach
A Raisin in the Sun

You insert your wampum and the door pops open,
you pull the book out, put it on your tray,
and go sit down at the cafeteria-style table.

You sit alone. No one can sit near anyone else.
That is required for digesting the pages.

On a visit to the Brain-O-Mat where, upon licking a slice of Einstein's
brain, one might crave a doughnut, invent a refrigerator, smell Nagasaki
after the bomb, or fall to one's knees and pray, Joe tells us that it's no
accident the Brain-O-Mat is next to the Doughnut Museum, attached by
an underground passage. After all, he conjectures, Einstein is responsible
for the doughnut's creation.

Perhaps the most creative and disturbing characteristic of ZundelState is
the concept of a society where dreams—from which scientific theories,
poetry, music, and visual art have often been born—are forbidden. This
is most apparent in the section, Duo Dreaming, where Kern laments the
nothingness that occurs during sleep and his desire for something to
appear:

This is what it's like not to dream.
Nothing is what it's like.
No fancy flights, no scary heights,
no slanty buildings, no sex.
No cute dark-haired guy saying, "I like your tits."
No nothing.
A grey screen
A black screen
A white one.

A promising Deus ex machina character, Pavel, appears to Marianna and Joe from his former life 500 years earlier, a
time just before dreaming had died out on the earth, the voice box was beginning to vanish, and the quiet world was
anticipated:



Karen Chase. Photo by Paul Graubard

The world quiet.
No more tongues.
No eating.
No chewing.
No voice box.
No talking.

Are the characters in this modern-day Greek tragedy doomed to remain victims of their fate, or, on an unbridled avian flight, can Marianne and Pavel regain the freedom to dream and have sex?

Chase's writing is evocative, entertaining, and at the same time complex and occasionally demanding a second or third reading to gain understanding of what may be ultimately left up to the reader's interpretation. Her message, however, is clear and chilling: the fragility and preciousness of freedom, the finiteness of life, the importance of love and taking responsibility—a warning, especially in the ever-threatening times we are living in. In Joe's words:

There is no straight line between things.
It's all a human fabrication to make sense.
Call it history if you want.
Or call it fiction.

Karen Chase will be reading from her books at the following local events:

April 27, 2025 – Sunday at 2:00 p.m. at Congregation Ahavath Sholom, Great Barrington, MA. Karen will be in conversation with Jayne Benjulian about "Two Tales: Jamali Kamali and ZundelState."

May 4, 2025 – Sunday at 4:00 p.m. Book Launch for "Two Tales" at The Bookstore in Lenox, Mass.

June 8, 2025 – Sunday at 5:00 at the Dream Away Lodge in Becket, Mass., co-sponsored by QMoB (Queer Men of the Berkshires)

June 18, 2025 – Wednesday at 5:30 at Edith Wharton's The Mount in Lenox, Mass. Karen will be reading with the poet Michelle Blake.

June 26, 2025 – Thursday at 5:30 p.m. at the Hunt Library, Falls Village, Conn.

July 13, 2025 – Sunday from 5:30-6:30 p.m. at Bascom Lodge, Adams, Mass. Karen will be reading with the poet Patrick Donnelly.

Editor's note: Reviewer Marisa Labozzetta is an author who lives in Northampton, Mass. Her most recent collection of short stories is called "Men Who Walk in Dreams."