

The Lion, the Pig and the Wolf and other Thoughts about New York

O leão, o porco e o lobo e outros pensamentos sobre Nova York

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Abstract: Karen Bender, being both a novelist and creative writing professor, explores the idea of travel and relocation as engines for ideas and lives. Moving from Los Angeles to New York, and later to North Carolina, as well as her education as a writer for almost two decades, act as the background and the reason for such reflection in search of new thought processes and ideas.

Keywords: Creative writing, Travel, Testimonial.

Resumo: Karen Bender propõe um ensaio bastante pessoal, no qual, na qualidade de romancista e professora de escrita criativa, reflete em tom de testemunho e com um olhar literário sobre um tema sempre caro para os escritores: o recurso da viagem e das mudanças como motores de ideias e de vidas. Suas mudanças de Los Angeles para Nova York e sua formação como escritora ao longo de quase duas décadas, bem como as modificações sofridas pela cidade ao longo deste tempo e a mudança de Karen Bender e sua família para North Caroline, são o pano de fundo e o motivo para as reflexões em busca de novos pensamentos, estranhamento e ideias.

Palavras-chave: Escrita criativa, Viagem, Testemunho.

I first went to New York because I wanted to be able to think. I visited the city first when I was 22 years old, a junior at UCLA. Los Angeles, with its hard white light and its big skies felt like a windowless box to me. It was the city where I had grown up, which meant that some thoughts felt unthinkable, merely because of the proximity of my loved ones. I wanted to

get across the country because there, I felt, my mind would somehow be free.

I was interested in magazine writing and the general consensus was that an internship to a magazine would open up doors. The UCLA summer internship program seemed to have no connections to any magazines I wanted to work at, but my boyfriend at the time was an L.A. correspondent for *Starlog*,

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a science fiction magazine, and convinced them to take me on for eight weeks. One June day in 1985, I flew with a handful of other interns from UCLA to my internship at *Starlog*.

I remember standing in front of the *Starlog* building on Park Avenue South my first day; it seemed unimaginable that I had made it to New York, as though I was, myself, on another planet. Even the light was different here, a heavier golden color than the bone-white brilliance in California. I went into the elevator and pressed the button; it shuddered and started to rise.

The *Starlog* office consisted of one long corridor with small rooms that served as the home base for several magazines. These included *Fangoria*, a magazine for horror movie fans, *Teen Idols Mania!*, *Black Hairstyles*, *Wrestling Scene*, and *Allure*, a knockoff of *Playgirl*. The *Starlog* office was one small room papered with posters of *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, *Star Trek*, and other science fiction characters I could not yet identify. I was not a reader of sci-fi, and was doing this internship just because no one else would have me. However, the other staffers could, with encyclopaedic expertise, catalogue every episode of *Star Trek*, and, happily, educated me.

My first task was to answer reader letters. One man wrote a letter declaring that he knew “the secret of the universe.” He added, “If it’s not right and you publish it, it won’t matter, because you’re a science fiction magazine, but if I am right, think of the prestige!” There were exclamations of outrage from all corners of the nation. One reader said that he found *Mad Max III* terribly disappointing, and to “please direct these following suggestions for *Mad Max IV* to George Miller because no one will give me his address.” There were suggestions

as to what C-Threepio should do in future episodes of *Star Wars*, impassioned pleas to bring Darth Vader back to life. There was one scandalous letter from a fan who claimed he had an “insider” photo of ET with his head cut off. After much discussion, it was decided that this photo should not be published, as it might cause too much distress to the readers.

I did not understand the mechanics of the dazzling world of editorial, but I hoped that these beginnings would be my entrée into the magazine world; this would somehow be my bridge into *The New Yorker* or *Atlantic* or *Glamour* and *Vogue* and *Newsweek* and *Time*. Promoted to writing short squibs on forthcoming movies, I tried to make my sentences shapely and perfect. Perhaps an editor from one of these magazines would leaf through a copy of *Starlog* on a writer-hunting mission, find my short article on *Red Sonja* and think: This is a writer to watch.

I lived in a state of great excitement and great fear, which made me utterly porous to everything in the city. I could not sleep in my tiny cell in the Barnard dorms. The noise was constant and unbelievable, and a bus screamed every five minutes outside my window; it felt as if the bus were parking in my ear. I slept a couple hours each night, listening to the bus, and then, head heavy but sort of calm, went into work. I missed my boyfriend back in LA. But I didn’t want to miss anyone, and so picked a fight when he came to visit. My short time in New York had made me understand this: at 22, I felt most whole when I was alone.

I also liked being surrounded by strangers. I loved the whole concept of *rush hour*, the idea that we were all rushing somewhere, the businessmen and women in their suits, the messengers hurtling

suicidally down the street, all of us heading somewhere important. I didn't know where this important place was, exactly, but that made it more seductive and even possible—it could be anywhere. It could be in the taxis rushing through the summer rain, the headlights bright through the city's pale mist. It could be in the grand buildings, in one of the offices on the 35th floor, or the 77th, it could be in the dark subway tunnel, which lit up as though god were approaching when the subway car grew close. I was in love with the city, though perhaps I was also in love with my sense of anticipation.

I returned to Los Angeles from my internship and realized that I had to get back to New York. I graduated from UCLA, saved some money, and heard that a friend I had met, Elisa, had a room available in her Park Slope apartment. With enough in my bank account for rent and deposit, I got on a plane. I gripped the arms of my seat as we lifted off and headed toward the East Coast.

In 1987, I moved in with Elisa in a third floor walkup on Third Street. The first three weeks she was out of town for work and I didn't know anyone in the city at all. This utter aloneness, in a city of millions, was disorienting. Each random thought echoed, like thunder, in my head. I wondered if I died suddenly, how long it would take for someone to find the body. I imagined it would take some time, and this realization was somehow focusing. I felt untethered, for the first time in my life. No one could tell me anything, and that was a sensation, that, while thrilling, chilled me.

I signed up at a job placement agency, and the long-golden-fingernailed placement rep sent me on interviews. Come in for your interview as an editorial assistant at McCall's... A fact checker for

Vanity Fair... An assistant at Viking. Each time I sat in the waiting room of a magazine or book publisher, I was surprised at the mere physical facts of the office, the husky swish of the elevators and the flat gray carpeting and the big posters of the covers on the walls. The magazines and books where I sought employment seemed like magic entities; it seemed miraculous that this was where they were actually made.

A few weeks later, some friends moved to the city for school, and I got a job at a Fairchild magazine called *Travel Today!* which was aimed at, as the publisher said, “yuppies who want to go on weekend travel at the last minute.” This was just weeks before the stock market crashed. The editor who hired me told me in hushed tones about the backgrounds of the people around me—“X used to be at the Washington Post. Y used to sell ads for Women's Wear Daily. Z worked at Newsday and is doing us a favor by coming here.” They all had a strained, cheerful demeanor, as though expecting the worst at any moment; none of them had planned their career arc to end up here. I sat on the subway each morning, my heart thrumming, and their wilted quality was perplexing to me. I watched them with a combination of interest and caution.

My first task was to learn how to successfully join the official work force. I had somehow missed (or decided to ignore) the memo that I was not supposed to dress like a college student; the art director called me aside and told me that I had to stop coming to work with jeans that had holes in my knees. Embarrassed, I cried, and then went out and bought suit-y clothes, with padded shoulders that made me look like a mushroom. They were not what I was used to wearing, but they helped me

imagine I was an adult. The worst defining characteristic of the job was that it paid \$14,000 a year, a fact that even the editor who hired me apologized for. The irony that the other editorial assistant and I were paid barely livable wages while we edited articles describing Bahamas hotels that cost \$600 a night was not lost on us.

This was 1987, our first full year in New York, and everything was new to us. I remember the first September day I walked down the street where I lived. There was a chill in the air, a change—yes, there were seasons here. And I remember walking down Broadway in November, looking up at a digital clock and thermometer at the top of a building and seeing the impossible number: 19. “Could it really be 19 degrees?” I asked my friend Margaret, walking with me. The cold made your mind blink; it was actually painful. I remember, too, when the sky was heavy and steely and it was the first time that I saw snow fall. None of us had any money, but we didn’t really need to spend much. We went out for Indian food on 6th street, sat in our apartments eating popcorn and making fun of the men we deigned to date. We sometimes placed articles in magazines we liked, but sometimes had them rejected. We juggled our bill-paying so the checks wouldn’t bounce. None of us cooked, except for my roommate, who was a gourmet cook before I could appreciate it. One day I came home to her carefully spreading homemade lasagna noodles on paper towels all over the floor. The rest of our family members lived on the other side of the continent, but my friends and I created our own family in this new world.

I didn’t know what it meant the day the stock market crashed in October, 1987, but the older staff members of *Travel Today!* did—they gathered around the newspaper

that day, blanched, shoulders hunched against a wind they had experienced before. The magazine staggered on for a few more months and then, in the spring, we were summoned into the publisher’s office; “There’s no more magazine,” the publisher said. We would get one more paycheck and that was that. It was my first experience in New York of change happening so quickly, with such an immense and overwhelming finality; I had not assumed permanence of any sort in my employment, but the suddenness of the group firing stunned me, and the casual way the publisher told us we would be earning no more money, filled me with fury. I did not want to feel helpless. My main thought was revenge, and I had just the thing—I kept meticulous records of my overtime, to the bemusement of my older colleagues. I went to Human Resources, protested in a sincere, tearful voice, and somehow they forked over my seven hundred dollars of overtime, probably to make me go away. I felt airy with power—I had, briefly, in a small way, overcome the whims of the city.

I found a new position at Fairchild, at a magazine called *Travel Agent*, which was the industry newsletter for travel agents—I would work part-time, no benefits, but I would have time to work on my fiction writing. Now when I walked through the city, I looked at the glowing lights in the offices and did not think as much about how I might be invited in there—I thought, more bitterly, about how I didn’t know how to get in. I was trying to “freelance,” which all of us who were underemployed called ourselves. But calling up magazine editors was proving harder than I had anticipated; getting assignments was hard and then actually getting paid for them was even harder. This was the era before the Internet,

before Facebook, Linked-in, before texts—you had to call an editor on the phone or talk to one in person to introduce yourself.

After Black Monday, the city plunged into recession; it was a good time to head out of town. I had been accepted to the program at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, and I headed there to work on my fiction writing. The night before I flew to Iowa, I walked with my friend Margaret around Chelsea, from one subway entrance to another, reluctant to go down the stairs to the train to leave her, to leave the city. It took a couple hours, and then I went down the stairs to meet the train.

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For three years, I lived in Iowa City, a city of stories and writers and cornfields and big sky. I thought I'd be back in New York, but didn't know when or how. The New Yorkers who had come to the workshop stood out in the Midwest like loud, chatty birds. Robert was one of them, and I fell in love with him.

Robert had grown up in the city, and his New Yorker-ness was one reason I was first drawn to him. When he started to talk, he spoke so fast I sometimes had no idea what he was saying. He gestured, beautifully, with his hands. He wore a navy fedora to parties that made him look like he lived in New York in the forties. There were a hundred other reasons why I chose him, that had nothing to do with New York but with something wonderful and unique about his essence; basically, I wanted to inhale him, and I wanted him to inhale me.

The second time I moved back to New York, after Iowa, I went, again, for an apartment. A friend of Robert's was moving out of an apartment in Williamsburg and wanted someone to take it over; it was a

not-quite-to-code floor-through and it was, astoundingly, \$300 a month. Robert and I had started dating, but he was going to Provincetown on a fellowship for the year, and I was going back to New York to find a job. The apartment was, essentially, a grant; it allowed me to work part-time while I wrote my first novel, which was a good setup as a writer but possibly not good in terms of general adulthood. I got a job as an adjunct, teaching remedial English at the College of Staten Island, where I rode the ferry twice a week, a ninety-minute commute each way. I tried, with great earnestness, to teach comma rules to my students, one of whom wore a T-shirt to class that said, "Professional Muffdiver" with complete seriousness.

I loved Robert's family's New Yorker-ness, their confidence driving the highways that circled the city and that seemed to me like the Indy 500, the way takeout somehow appeared on his family's dining room table, his mother's knowledge of Century 21, their easy eloquence. I loved my apartment, the flimsy shower stall that was beside the stove in the kitchen, the five Italian sisters in their seventies who lived on the other floors. I worked on my novel, adjunct taught, fact checked, did other freelance stuff, and then, two years later, moved in with Robert into a subsidized apartment building, one that he had been on a list on for twenty years—a one-bedroom apartment called Independence Plaza in Tribeca, in 1994.

Moving in with Robert was a big decision, and when I did, I knew somehow that we would be married, even though we didn't talk about it—it seemed our future just rose up on our horizon, like a large boat. We now lived in a one-bedroom apartment that was, insanely, \$650 a month, adjusted for your income. (You might see a crucial

theme here about low rents enabling our lives in New York, which they did.) I had a card table in the bedroom and Robert had a desk in the living room, and we worked on our novels in our “offices” day after day.

Our long journeys writing our novels—mine took three more years—were limned with fear. We were trying to become “novelists,” which meant that we were marching, breathless, determined, into, it seemed, nothing. It meant we lived in this peculiar floating, frantic, month to month state that was the freelance, temporary, part-time job. We made a little money, we stared at our computers, and at night, we went on long walks. These walks comprised our main entertainment, as we strolled through Tribeca, Soho, the Village, or down through the Financial district, Tribeca, a wild land then, empty buildings with rats scurrying down the streets. On bad days, when the concept of finishing a book seemed remote, impossible even, Robert suggested walking by one building on Wall Street that had three concrete faces molded into the side: there was a lion, a pig and a wolf. The animal renderings were both absurd and oddly dignified. Why were these animals profiles carved into this building? What did they mean? Robert had an elaborate story about each animal, and what we could learn from it, which neither of us remember anymore, but seemed very significant at the time; the invisible, dark forces—both inside ourselves, and outside—that could keep us from writing our novels, seemed crushing. The sheer weirdness of those animals, the question of why they sat on the face of a financial institution, cheered us up. Those animal faces were why I loved New York, the strange beauty that could emerge at any moment. They stared out, blankly, at the street.

“Look at them,” he said, “and be brave.”

We stood in the dark, silent caverns of Wall Street, and tried to imagine what that would be like.

We needed a little luck, and then some came. Robert sold his novel, and then I did; they came out into the world. We had a little money. We had published novels—could we call ourselves novelists? We got married and had our son, Jonah. We were still teaching adjunct and working part time, but, suddenly we were this new entity in the city—a family. Now our lives revolved around a small, loud person who floated through the world first strapped to our chests in the Baby Bjorn, then pushed through the streets like a little rajah. It was 1999; we pushed our stroller through the neighborhood, trying to figure out how to be part of the city in this new way.

But the city was moving on without us. The neighborhood began to change. The old refrigerator building was transformed into multimillion dollar condos under the elegant name: *The Ice House*. Empty storefronts became stores that sold huge, antique furniture to fill up the fancy lofts. You walked down the street and there might be Harvey Keitel, sitting on a bench, chatting with someone, or David Letterman, or Robert de Niro. Celebrities were an exotic species whose presence began to ensure the end of our tenure here. Jonah was invited to birthday parties for toddlers, which were catered. We applied for teaching positions, got some interviews, but no job. Then I got a month-long Visiting Writer position at a university in Wilmington, North Carolina—a month teaching fiction writing to graduate students. It seemed a great piece of luck. We did not understand how great a piece of luck it was.

This was in September, 2001.

September 11th would have been Jonah's first day of preschool, which was about five blocks from the World Trade Center. At nine o'clock that morning, I think I would have been standing with the other parents, watching Jonah with the other children, hoping he would feel comfortable enough for me to leave. The first plane would have hit the World Trade Center right when I was heading back to our apartment. Would I have turned around then and taken my son out of school? Would I have thought it a bizarre accident and headed home?

Instead, at nine in the morning on September 11th, I was on the corner of Eastwood Road and Market Street in Wilmington, taking Jonah to a preschool play center called Fit for Fun. The first reports, from Howard Stern, were startling but puzzled. It wasn't until we came out of Fit for Fun around 11:30 that I heard that the World Trade Center had fallen.

There was a terrible disconnect those first slow days—to be somewhere not home, to feel so far from our family and friends in New York, to not be able to reach them because the phones were out, to want to be there with them, to be in this sunny, unfamiliar place. “You would have been a couple blocks away,” people told us, when we mentioned where we would have been that morning, and my mind shut against that fact—what would that have meant? We watched our city, our neighborhood, on the news, stunned, the unbelievable footage of this place that was our home.

The airline we had flown down here went bankrupt and we drove a rental car back to New York two weeks later, American flags hanging off the overpasses. We headed toward the Holland Tunnel and saw the smoke billowing from downtown.

We dropped off our rental car, got a taxi to Canal Street, and were stopped. The area was blocked from everyone but those who lived here. We looked at the smoke, the police, the blockades. Suddenly, we lived in a war zone.

“Do you live here or do you have reservations?” a policeman asked.

We stared at him.

“For the restaurants,” said the policeman. “You can cross the blockade if you have a reservation.”

This was not a joke.

“We live here,” we said, and I had never felt so strongly that I was home.

What I remember, those first weeks in Fall, 2001, was the politeness. You did not know who in the neighborhood would be alive. You went to the corner deli and you were glad to see the man behind the counter, the man you did not know the name of; you were just glad that he was here. “Hello,” I said, and he brightened and said, “Hello.” He was glad that you were here as you bought your tuna melt or Cubano or seltzer or whatever you bought there. My hand trembled as I received the change.

There were so many people who were not here. They were The Missing. Their pictures were on the flyers that covered the lampposts, fences, any spaces they could fill in the neighborhood. I walked by them as I walked my son to preschool. The preschool was still open, near the rubble, the burning buildings, the police. The World Trade Center sat, a pile. I stared right at it and could not believe it was what it was. But it was there, every day.

I had gone to New York to be able to think and now, my mind was full of thoughts I both wanted to have and wanted

to beat down. They were the unanswerable thoughts, the clichéd thoughts: the thoughts of how had this happened, how could someone do this, how could this person, gazing innocently from the Missing poster, be gone, and this one and this one. How did one go about a life, how did you value each day, what was the best thing to do next, how did you live without fear?

It was a surprisingly warm fall, and the fires didn't go out. They kept burning. We kept waiting for rain. The Health Authorities assured us that the air was fine, but remember to keep the windows closed and don't run the air conditioners. Some people wore paper masks as they walked down the street, making the neighborhood look like the province of surgeons. One day I saw a business man walking down the street in a gas mask. I was alarmed. Where did he get the gas mask? Should we have one, too? What did it mean when that police car flew wildly down the street, sirens whirring?

We moved uptown the last two weeks of October because of the taste of the air. It was a bitter, unreal taste, of fallen buildings, computers, chemicals, and it was making my tongue numb. We moved in temporarily with Robert's parents on 23rd street, and watched Aaron Brown on CNN tell us about the anthrax letters that had been sent out and the person who had received one at the eye clinic on 14th street, just a few blocks away.

It seemed that, during that terrible anxious, autumn, when no one knew what was going to happen, everyone was pretending—to work, to go about your day. One night during that time stands out to me. Traditionally at Halloween, a group from Tribeca hosted an annual costume party in Washington Market Park—but

it was still closed because of the toxic dust. So this year, some local parents and children gathered on a side street in the neighborhood. The World Trade Center was still a smoking pile. The children filled the street, dressed as lions or tigers or fairies or skeletons or zombies or princesses or dogs. A parent with connections had gotten the real Steve from Blue's Clues to sit at a table and shake hands. We were rather dazzled by Steve, who we watched, with Jonah, on "Blue's Clues," not quite believing we were watching this show. We stood in a long line and Jonah, who was, in fact, dressed as Blue, stared at him with awe. The real Steve looked at him with a kind of tenderness and sadness. He shook hands with Jonah and perhaps even gave him a sticker. We stood, the parents and children, as the children ran, grabbing candy from whoever would offer it. We had our lives, these odd, precious things. We had to figure out how to best live the rest of them. There was no need to think anything else. We stood, watching the costumed children, running with their beautiful, galling innocence. A few blocks south, the buildings burned, quietly, under the dark October sky.

September 11th didn't send us out of the city. The neighborhood slowly returned to a different sort of life—the hazardous waste team vacuumed the toxic dust out of the park, the rubble was slowly carted to the barges on the Hudson River, the residents who had left briefly returned; but there was that terrible glaring space on Chambers street, that enormous loss, that was there every time you looked down the street.

What sent us out of New York City was the fact that the owners of Independence Plaza, where we lived, realized that their

contract with the city ended; they weren't legally obligated to offer subsidized housing anymore, and were looking forward to hiking our rents to five thousand dollars a month. The tenants organized, they tried to push it back, but we knew that our lives here were built on a fragile economy. We had to construct another sort of life. Jonah was growing, our daughter Maia was on the way—we looked for more teaching all over the country. We interviewed at different schools and finally Robert was offered a job—back in Wilmington, North Carolina.

And so we left. It happened quickly, almost despite us, the way all of this had happened. I don't remember much from

our last days in New York City. I didn't want to think about our many years here, because I didn't want there to be a past. There was the U-Haul that held all our boxes, our couches, our dishes. There was the way I looked back at the city skyline as we drove through New Jersey, heading South. There was the house we rented when we first got to Wilmington, and the porch that I sat on our first night. It was a warm July night, the air heavy and scented with honey. I sat on our porch and waited for a car to drive by. I sat on the porch for a long time and waited to hear that sweet sound.

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