

"I am a long-standing, passionate fan of Aimee Bender's stories. Her images explode, her words ignite. Watching her imagination catch fire provides a sustaining joy in my readerly life."

—Alice Sebold, author of *THE LOVELY BONES*

A man in a dark shirt and pants is inside a large, ornate, black metal cage. He is reaching up and holding onto one of the vertical bars. The cage has a domed top and decorative scrollwork on the sides. The background is a plain, light blue wall.

Willful Creatures
STORIES

AIMEE BENDER

author of THE GIRL IN THE FLAMMABLE SKIRT

Fruit and Words

So there we were, Steve and I, smack in the middle of the same fight we'd had a million times before, a fight I knew so well I could graph it. We were halfway down the second slope of resignation, the place where we usually went to different rooms and despaired quietly on our own, and right at the moment that I thought, for the first time in seven years, that maybe things were just not going to work out after all, that was the moment he suggested we drive to Vegas right then and tie the knot. "Now?" I said and he nodded, with gravity. "Now." We packed as fast as we could, hoping we could pack faster than those winged feet of doubt, driving 100 miles per hour in silence, from sand to trees to mountains to dry plains to that tall, electric glitter. Parked. Checked in. Changed clothes. Held hands. Together we walked up to the casino chapel but as soon as Steve put his nose in the room, well, that's when those winged feet fluttered to rest on his shoulder. Reeling, he said he had a migraine and needed to lie down. An hour later he told me, washcloth on forehead, that he had to fly home that instant and could I drive back by myself? I stood at the doorway and watched him pack his nicest suit, folding it into corners and angles, his chest and legs and back and butt in squares and triangles, shut and carried.

"Goodbye," we said to each other, and the kiss was an old dead sock.

I spent the day there floating in the glowing blue swimming pool in my brand-new black swimming suit, cocooning myself in a huge white towel that smelled of sunshine, walking past tigers and dolphins. I slept diagonal on the king bed. After checking out, I went to the car, which was boiling hot, and put my bag in the trunk and geared up the engine and turned on the air conditioner and pulled out of the parking structure. The road extended through the desert, a long dry tongue. I didn't feel like listening to music and was speeding along, wondering if to all people the idea of marrying felt so much like being buried alive, as in particular the idea of marrying this

man did. Anticipating the talks we were going to have, to get to the point where we both admitted we were only in it out of loyalty and fear, my mouth dried up and I had a sudden and very intense craving for a mango.

I'd never eaten a mango in my life. But the craving was vast, sweeping, feverish.

Great, I thought. It is not mango season and it is not mango country. And I knew those bright flavored gums would not cut it.

After half an hour, the craving was so bad I stopped at a gas station and tried anyway, bought a pack of orange-pink candy-Mango Tango!-but the taste of each flat circle, so sugary and similar to all other sugar flavors, made me long for the real one even more. I stopped at every market I saw but the fruit they had was pathetic: soft mealy apples, gray bananas, the occasional hard green plum.

The road was quiet and empty of cars. I sped past gas stations and fast food.

I was thinking, seriously, of driving straight to the airport and emptying my savings to fly myself to Africa so I could find one there, easy off the tree, the gentle give at the touch of my thumb, when far ahead, several miles up the road, I caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a shack. It was part of a tiny commercial strip facing a doughnut store and an oil lube filter station. From a distance it looked colorful and lively and as I got closer and closer, I thought I might be hallucinating from the heat because as far as I could tell, the front of the shack was full of trays and tables and shelves and piles of ripe beautiful fruit. My mouth started to water and I pulled over and parked my car on the shoulder of the road.

The highway was still empty of cars and the fast food doughnut chain was empty of cars and the oil lube filter was closed, so crossing the street was a breeze. The awning of the store was a sweet blue-and-white gingham and sure enough, there were huge tables burgeoning with fruit: vivid clementines, golden apples, dark plums, swollen peaches, three patterns of yellow and brown pears.

The awning said fruit and words.

I went inside. I found a tan woman behind the counter perched on a stool, dusting a deep red apple with her sleeve.

"Hello," I said. "Wow, you have such beautiful fruit here!"

She had a flat face, so flat I was scared to see her in profile.

"Hello," she said mildly.

My hopes were swelling as I walked by a luscious stack of papayas, surging as I passed a group of star fruit and then, indeed, next to a humble pile of four, I found the small sign that said what I wanted to hear. And there they were, gentle and orange, the smell emanating from their skin, so rich I could pick up a whiff from a distance.

She nodded at me. “They’re very good,” she said. “Those mangoes are excellent quality.”

She placed the polished apple in front of herself like she was teacher and student all at once. I scooped up all four and took them to the counter. I felt a wave of utter unearned competence. Ha ha to everyone else. Finding fresh mangoes fifty miles out of Las Vegas seemed to me, in no uncertain terms, like some kind of miracle.

“You have no idea how wonderful this is,” I told her, beaming. “I have been having the most powerful mango craving. And here we are, in the desert of all places!”

She shrugged, agreeable. She’d heard this before.

“Where do you get them?” I asked.

She picked at the point of her eye.

“I get the fruit as a trade,” she said. “There’s a buyer who likes the salt here so he brings me fruit as payment.”

“What a deal for you,” I said, “getting all this gorgeous fruit for just a little salt.”

I brought a mango up to my nose and smelled the sweetness inside its skin.

The woman sniffed. “It’s not regular salt,” she said. She indicated behind me with her chin.

“Ah,” I said. “What’s all that?”

“Those are the words,” she said.

I kept my arms full of mangoes and took a step nearer. As far as I could tell, the entire back wall of the shop was covered, floor to ceiling, with cutout letters. They were piled high on shelves, making big words and small words, crammed close together, letters overlapping.

“Go closer,” she said. “You can’t see as well from here.” She gave me a shove on my shoulder blade.

As I approached, I could see that the words weren’t just cut from cardboard. Each word was different. I first saw the word NUT; it was a large capitalized word NUT and it was made out of something beige. I

couldn't really tell what it was but then I saw the word GRASS which was woven from tall blades, green and thready, and LEMON, cleverly twisted into cursive with peels and pulp, letting off a wonderful smell, so I went right up to NUT and discovered that it was in fact crumbled pieces of nuts all mixed together into a tan gluey paste.

"Isn't this interesting," I said to the woman.

I found PAPER, cut clean with an X-Acto knife, and a calligraphied ORGANDY, fluffing out so frothy I could hardly read it, and HAIR which was strawberry blond and curled up at the edge of the H and the leg of the R. The man who'd left Las Vegas had strawberry blond hair so I ignored that one and picked up PEARL instead.

"This is pricey, I bet," I said, and she gave me an anxious look, like I was going to drop it. It was stunning, not made of tiny pearls, but somehow of one solid piece of pearl, rippling out rainbow colors across its capitals. I put it back carefully on the shelf next to BARNACLE, prickly and dry looking.

"Why do you make these?" I said. "They're so beautiful!"

And they were. They were beautiful on their own and they were beautiful all together. I thought of her in her desert studio, hands dusty, apron splattered, sweat pouring, hammering down the final O in RADIO. She was making the world simple. She made the world steady somehow.

"People like the words," she told me, picking up her apple to shine some more. "I made them for fun and then I got rich."

"Well, I'd definitely like to buy these four mangoes," I said.

She pressed the register. "Ten dollars."

"And just curiously, how much are the words?" I kept my eyes on that wall, wanting to lean my head on PILLOW.

"Depends," she said. "They vary. Plus, you see, those are just the solids."

"What?" I stroked the petals that made up ROSE.

"I mean those are just the solids. I put the solids on display first because they're easiest to understand."

"Solid colors?" I said, staring at PLAID.

"Solid solids," she said. "Liquids are in the back. Gases are in the back of the back. Both are very pricey," she said, "but I'll charge you just three dollars to look. Three dollars for the tour."

"Liquid words?" I said, and I brought out my wallet. She rang up my mangoes and the tour. I moved closer to the register. "I think I'd like to buy a solid too," I said.

I was feeling, suddenly, more liberated than I had in seven years. I wanted to take over the store. I wanted to bathe in plum juice, rediscover my body and adorn it in kiwi circles. I bit into a mango. The skin broke quick, and the flesh, meaty and wet, slid inside my mouth, the nearly embarrassing free-for-all lusciousness of ripe fruit.

“Oh!” I said. “Incredible!”

She gave me two dollars in change. I licked mango juice off my wrist and turned back to the words.

“Can I buy a solid?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Of course,” she said. “Which one?”

I wanted them all so I just pointed to the first I’d seen. “How much for NUT?”

“Interesting choice,” she said, walking over and pulling it off the shelf. “NUT. There are seven different kinds of nuts in here. Macademia, peanut, walnut, pecan, cashew, garbanzo, and almond.”

I raised my eyebrows, impressed.

“Wow,” I said.

She just stood there.

“Isn’t garbanzo a bean?” I asked.

She held it out to me. “I’ll give it to you for fourteen,” she said. “Two dollars a nut.”

There was a ten in my wallet between four ones and I lifted them all out. I had another drippy bite of mango.

“I won’t eat it,” I told her, indicating NUT.

She gave me a lip smile and took my money. “You can eat it,” she said. “I don’t care.”

Scooping all my purchases into a brown bag, she lifted a simple silver key off the wall behind her and beckoned for me to follow. We stopped at a gray door. Before she inserted the key, the woman put a hand on my sleeve.

“Be careful,” she said. “These are very delicate words. Don’t drip mango on anything.”

I had almost finished that first mango by now, the most incredible piece of food I had ever eaten in my life, and I held the remains of the pit away from me. My lips were sticky with juice. I felt the horror of Vegas dissipating, clarity descending like a window wrapped around my heart. She turned the knob, and I followed her in.

The back room was a square with a glass door at the far wall. This room was full of shelves too but the words were even harder to read from far away. I walked quietly up to them.

“Don’t touch,” she hissed.

The liquid words were set up in two ways. Most of them were shooting through glass pipes that shaped the letters. This looked really neat but I felt a little bit like it was cheating. Some of the others were liquids spilled onto a glass board, forming the letters. This was less cheating but looked cheaper. I walked down the row. I was not thrilled by WATER or COKE. I was drawn to RUBBING ALCOHOL, which was done with the piping and took up almost a whole shelf. It was a good one because it looked just like the water but I trusted that it wasn’t. There was one called POISON, no specification, and the liquid was dark brown. The letters were fancy on that one, like an old-fashioned theater brochure. I found BLOOD.

“Real blood?” I whispered, and brought the mango back close to me. Licked its pulpy pit.

She nodded. “Of course.”

“From what?” I asked, voice a little higher, and she didn’t answer. It shot bright through the pipe as if in a huge loose vein.

I didn’t like that blood one. I was recording all of this in a monologue in my head and I wondered then who I would tell the story to, and for the moment I couldn’t think of anyone. This made me feel bad, so I went over to LAKE and held that and it had little tiny ferns floating in it and I thought it was pretty. It was next to OCEAN which was looking more or less exactly like LAKE and that’s when I wondered if the woman was really truthful and how would anyone know? I wanted to buy OCEAN too, I wanted to have the word OCEAN with me all the time, it was way better than NUT, but I didn’t really trust it. It seemed likely that it was, deep down, TAP.

I paused by MILK. The sole white liquid. Soothing, just to look at.

“Gases?” she said.

“Okay,” I said. “Sure. I’d like to see the gases, why not.”

My hands were now hardening with stickiness, each finger gluing slightly to its neighbor. I wanted to wash them, but instead I dropped the gooey pit into my purse near my wallet. The woman gave me a disapproving look and brought out another silver key, this one from her pocket. She turned and clicked and we went through the glass door in the back of the back room.

The gas room was empty.

“Oh,” I said, “hmm.” I worried for a second that she’d been robbed and was just now finding out.

“Be very very careful,” she whispered then. “This is expensive.” She looked tense beneath her tan, each of her features tight in its place.

“More expensive than PEARL?” I said.

“Much more,” she said. “This takes very difficult concentration. This is my most challenging work. Look here,” she said, “come here and look.”

She walked over to one of the shelves on the wall and close up I could see there was more glass tubing-not much, but one word’s worth. It spelled SMOKE. Soft granules of ash floated through the M.

“It’s a good one,” I said. “I like it.”

“Most of them,” she said, still whispering, “in this room, don’t have the tubing.”

“Oh.” I bobbed my head, not understanding.

“See,” she continued, “there are many many gas words in this room but you might not be able to read them.”

I looked to the shelves and saw nothing, saw shelves that were empty, saw how my apartment would look in a month when Steve had cleared out his books and his bookends.

“Top shelf: XENON,” the woman said. “It’s there, it’s just very hard to see. I can see it because I have very good eyes for it, because it is my medium.”

I looked to the top shelf. “There’s no XENON there,” I said. “There’s nothing.”

“Trust me,” she said. “There’s XENON.”

I shook my head. I shifted my feet a few times. There was POISON in the room before, dark and available, and a thin wire of fear started to cut and coil in my stomach.

“ARGON,” she said, “is on shelf four, below XENON.”

“Noble gas number two,” I said.

She nodded. “I prefer the noble gases.”

“I bet,” I said. “There’s no ARGON there,” I said.

“It’s there,” she said. “Be extremely careful.”

I spoke slowly, coated now in a very mild shellac of panic. “How,” I said, “how can it be there, it would dissipate. I took chemistry. It can’t just sit there. Argon,” I said, “can’t just *sit* there.”

“I put guidelines in the air,” she said.

“I make a formation in the air.”

I turned toward the entrance.

“I think it’s time for me to go,” I said.

“NEON,” she said, “is on shelf number three.”

But right before I walked to the door, I reached out a hand which was so hard and gluey from the mango juice, reached out just to wipe it slightly on the very tip of the shelf. The coil in my stomach took my fingers there. I barely even noticed what I was doing.

The woman drew in her breath in agony.

“Aagh!” she choked as I got in my little wipe wipe. “You broke it!”

“I broke what?” I said. “Broke what?”

“You broke AIR,” she said. “You need to pay for it, you broke it, you broke AIR.”

Then she pointed to a sign I hadn’t seen before, tucked half behind a shelf, a half-hidden laminated sign that said: VISITORS MUST PAY FOR BROKEN MERCHANDISE.

“There’s air there still,” I said, “that’s no special air.”

“It was air in the shape of AIR,” she said. “It took me a while to train that space, it was AIR. That’s three hundred dollars.”

“What?” I said. “I won’t pay that,” I said, speaking louder. “I didn’t even break it, look, there’s tons of air around, there’s air everywhere.”

I waved my hand in the space, indicating air, and she let out another, louder, shriek.

“That was HOPE,” she said, “you just broke HOPE!”

“HOPE?” I said, and now I went straight to the glass door, “Broke hope? Hope is not a gas, you can’t form hope!”

The door, thank God, was unlocked, and I swung it open and stalked into the liquid room. The woman was right on my heels.

“I caught hope,” she said. “I made it into a gas.”

“I want to go now,” I said. “There’s no possible way to catch hope, please.”

My voice was gaining height. I didn’t believe her but still. Of all things to wreck.

“Well,” she said. “I went to wedding after wedding after wedding in Las Vegas. And I capped the bottle each time right when they said ‘I do.’”

This made me laugh for a second but then I had to stop because I thought I might choke. I could just see those couples now, perched at opposite ends of a living-room couch, book-ending the air between them, the thickest, most formed air around, that uncrossable, unbreakable, impossible air, finally signing the papers that would send them to different addresses.

I thought of the seven years I'd spent with Steve, and how at first when we'd kissed his lips had been a boat made of roses and how now they were a freight train of lead.

So that I wouldn't cry, I put my hand near my face and made a pushing motion, moved some wind toward her. "I'm Queen of Hope," I said. "Here. Have some of mine."

She grabbed BLOOD from the liquid room shelves.

"Give me my money for AIR!" she said, waving the BLOOD in my face.

I opened the door to the solid room and ran through it. I kept my back arched so she wouldn't touch me. I couldn't pay the money and I wouldn't pay it, it was air, for God's sake, but I didn't want that blood on me, didn't want that blood anywhere close to me.

"I'm sorry," I yelled as I edged out the front, "sorry!"

I looked past the fruit to locate my car and as I did, my eye grazed over the solid words, familiar now, but on the bottom shelf I suddenly saw CAT and DOG in big brown capitals which I hadn't seen before and my stomach balked. The woman kept yelling "You Owe Me Money!" and I hit the dead warmth of the outside air.

Everything was still. My car sat across the street, waiting for me, placid.

The woman was right behind me, yelling, "You owe me three hundred dollars!" and I took NUT out of my bag and threw it behind me where it broke on the street into a million shavings. "Nut!" I yelled. I got into my car, key shaking.

"Vandal!" she yelled back, and she didn't even try to cross the street but just stood at the front of the blue-awned store with BLOOD in her arms and then she reached back and pelted my car with a tangelo and a pineapple and one huge hard cantaloupe. I locked my doors and right when I put my key into the ignition, she took BLOOD and threw that too; it hit the car square on the passenger-side window, cracking on the top and opening up like an egg, dripping red down the window until the letters ran clear. Maybe it was just juice, but that one I trusted, that one seemed real to me.

Hands trembling, I put my foot on the accelerator and the car started quickly, warmed from the sunlight, the desert spreading out hot and fruitless. The window to my right was streaking with red now. I kept a hand on the car lock, making sure it was down. Across the street, the woman pulled back her arm, which was an awfully good arm, by the way, she was some kind of baseball superstar, and she let fly a few guavas, which splatted blue against my rear window.

I drove away fast as I could. The shack and the woman, still throwing, grew small in my rearview mirror. I drove and drove for eighty miles without pausing, just getting away, just speeding away as the blood dried on the window, away from the piles of tangerines, from the star fruit clumped in stolen constellations, from the seven different mutations of apple.

In an hour I desperately needed to go to the bathroom, so I pulled into a gas station. I still had the brown bag of mangoes with me. When I opened it up, they were all black and rotten, with flies crawling over them. I dumped the whole bag. The one I'd eaten was just a pit, which I removed from my purse and kept on the passenger seat, but by the time I got home and pulled into the empty driveway, it too had rotted away into a soft, weak ball.