

## “Fruit and Words” by Aimee Bender

Aimee Bender wrote the essay “What Writers Can Learn from *Goodnight Moon*.” We talked about that a bit previously, but you may want to look at it again. It is in Course Documents/Articles.

The story is told in first person. The first paragraph is the story of an almost-marriage that doesn’t happen because of fear of commitment, or incompatibility, or perhaps chapel phobia. They say goodbye and exchange a kiss “like an old dead sock.” There is a bit of gender stereotype switching. In this story it is the man who feels faint and has to lie down.

Driving alone back from Las Vegas, the narrator has a sudden craving for mangoes, a fruit she has never eaten. Does this sudden craving make the reader fear that she is pregnant? If so, that possibility is not operationalized in the story. But it is certainly a possible reader reaction.

The narrator does encounter a fruit stand with mangoes. However, this stand is called “Fruit and Words,” as is the story. The proprietor sells fruit that she gets mysteriously in exchange for salt that is “not regular salt.” And she also makes signs that display words that are made of what the words refer to. In structuralist linguistics, there are signifiers and signifieds, but these word signifiers are made out of what they signify. The narrator buys the one that “nuts” that is made of nut paste.

The ones in the front of the store are “solids.” In the back are “liquids” in tubes bent in the shape of words. The narrator is creeped out by the one that says “blood.” The farthest room contains “gases” such as “argon” and “xenon” and “air.” However, the narrator cannot see anything on the shelves. She touches a shelf accidentally and the proprietor claims that she has broken “air.” Then another misstep causes her to break “hope,” made out of the vows of hundreds of brides and grooms in Las Vegas wedding chapters.

So the story is framed by the hope of wedding vows, a hope that at least for the narrator has been dashed prematurely.

The proprietor wants \$300 for the damage. The narrator escapes into her car and drives away, while the proprietor throws fruit and even the word sculpture of “blood” at her car. The mangoes she bought mysteriously rot in the bag.

So, what is this all about? First, many stores that sell souvenirs and other tourist merchandise have a “You break it you pay for it” policy. I have heard of stores in China that supposedly have cheaply made and very breakable sculptures that just happen to fall over and break into a million pieces when a foreign tourist is in the store. Is the “Fruit and Words” store really an elaborate con game? Are the “gaseous” sculptures really just empty shelves?

If that is the case, is “Fruit and Words” actually a fantasy story at all?

If it is a fantasy story, where does the fantastic begin? And does the fantastic include the ability to “put guidelines in the air” to make argon or xenon stay in patterns that form the words of their signifiers, even if ordinary people can’t see them?

Or is there some combination of fantasy and con game?

Because this story is framed by the relationship gone stale and bad and the marriage that didn't happen, which is referenced at key points in the story, is the story really about marriage, both the hope and the disappointment? Did our narrator really break hope in more ways than one?