



They All Are Eating Light

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Introduction

"They All Are Eating Light" is a collection of poems exploring family, and memory, and hope. It is about what it means to remember, and to be remembered.

Following each poem is a unique artwork generated by painting with words: for each image, a part of its paired poem was used as a prompt in Midjourney. The result is an exploration of AI as both inspiration and creative partner.

Below each artwork is the exact prompt used to generate it in Midjourney, in support of your own creative explorations.

They All Are Eating Light



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Plonk

- for Peter Chan, at Herons Bonsai -

Watching bonsai clips on YouTube,
what stood out was not the bonsai.
Not the refinement of the brooms

and uprights, not the maples
or wisteria, the larch, the junipers,
the crowns of azaleas just coming

into buds. Not the seedlings finding sun
that spring, between the nursery's pavers
and pea gravel. Instead it was this: *plonk*.

As he shared how to pot small maples
he drew in the camera, and filled
a pot half full of medium and said *now*

*you just take
the little seedling, and plonk
it in there.*

In went the tree, slightly
askew. No pomp. In
went another two

with the rustling of his hands
in the soil, his narration so distinct
with an accent here British

and there Chinese, his passion trees
with names like Hinoki and Deshojo—
the kinds of words one savors, as though

the seventh sense were mouthfeel.
And then this *plonk* to draw it all down
from altitude, as though to remind

that you too could do this—you
could plonk. That even your
small acts could take root

and branch out
into forms in which anyone
might one day see grace.



his passion trees with names like hinoki and deshojo, bonsai, red maple, pop art, line art

Watching a Friend's 1985 Home Movie

After the static and tracking lines,
an empty beach. Then a girl, his niece,
peers into the lens and back at us

through two decades. She is seven,
and breathless from being seven
and chasing her brother on the cold sand,

and doesn't know that when she asks
whatcha doin', camera?
the murmur of wind in the mic,

the whirr of that old tape, its reels
spinning away in their cassette,
they all will answer

obsolescing. It was after Christmas,
and the camera a new toy to try
on his brother's family

and their diamond kite, gone beyond them
on twine unspooling out, and up toward
nothing – the flying line lifting away,

to near its breaking strain with a snap
still clear, even now. And their faces –
their faces like the backs of sails

in that once-winter sun, their kite a dream
beyond all color and shape, so distant
it could have been anyone's.



their diamond kite gone beyond them on twine unspooling out, colorful
minimalist art in oil wash --seed 3812148022

Lunch With Grandparents

Scattered among the familiar
and retold stories of my youth
is the news of friends dead,
or dying. Word of the infirmities
that take them one by one

leaves us staring at our plates,
as though the politest posture
is to appear to search for reason
there, in the scraps. In relief
to the cancers and arrhythmias,

the neighbor at hospice,
our centerpiece is a pair of daylilies
from the black soil of the backyard.
In dozens they grow, outflanking
a garden in retreat each year –

the few tended rows of okra
and beans, the far corner
where spring onions once grew.
Our visits always seem to precede
or follow the best blooms, to fall just

out of season, so my grandfather
relates their beauty between telling
of friends they have lost, he
and my grandmother, of the ills
so common he can't help but laugh,

chuckling until his eyes water.
He dabs them with a Dixie napkin,
the line between levity and regret
uncertain as the shifting sand
a few miles down the road.



our centerpiece is a pair of daylilies, colorful minimalist art in oil wash --
seed 3812148022

Dredging

Dredging sends the waves harder
these days, along the shore

where I was born. The news
calls it maintenance: reclamation

of land displaced from beaches,
from barrier islands that shift,

swallowing themselves as they drift
inland. But this borrowed shore

has only raised the swells,
and they crush the shells my mother

says she once found, whole,
along the sand some early mornings.

At the tide lines now, jellyfish
and the frayed veins of seaweed.

Bands of broken Coquina clams.
Sometimes, though, after a storm,

in that tessellation the surprise
of an entire shell or two –

familiar as old photos with faces
we didn't know we'd forgotten.



Sometimes though after a storm in that tessellation the surprise of an entire shell or two, beach scene, seashell, monochrome, grey, blue, orange, Japanese woodblock printing style

When I Worked At the Camera Shop

We'd stand by the two-eyed cameras
in the case, Mr. Butcher and I,
those twin lenses looking back

in parallax – the Rolleis and Yashicas,
a Seagull or two – their frames of view
like little Venn diagrams. I would start

to find myself alone on the sales floor,
the others having slipped away at the sight
of his senescent Buick outside, his white shirt

and brown trousers. He always made
for the bargain bins of mismatched straps
and cases, and those oldest

of our used cameras – like buddies
he'd come to see. He said he'd carried
cameras like them in the Army, and later

with his wife, on the Queen Mary
to Europe. Mechanical and modest,
made to be cradled at the waist

and looked down into, with viewfinders
of ground glass, with cranks and winders
and soft-spoken shutters

that, winking, in the colors
and contrast of Kodachrome,
had once told him a heck of a thing.



in the colors and contrast of kodachrome, 35mm film, Europe, cityscape,
vintage

Fourth of July

The call and response
of the neighbors' fireworks is jazz
percussion, staccato notes

like soloists – erratic, bursting
in the cloudy sky. I never cared
for jazz. Those odd breaks

and hanging phrases
like conversations with my father,
when neither of us knew

what to make of my growing up.
Like a storm on the Fourth of July,
when the menace of a heavy horizon

hurries revelers inside,
carrying plates of interrupted dinner
and forgetting what it was

they might have said,
their words running too
in the fluent rain.



Like a storm on the Fourth of July when the menace of a heavy horizon
hurries revelers inside, abstract, picasso

Negative Space

When I saw pictures last year of Pope Francis
at Auschwitz, I wondered: who keeps

the place up? Who freshens the paint on the gate's
guard arms, or dispels rust from whatever metal

wants to decay? If a barrack roof falls, or walls give out
with the shifting seasons and sod, are they left as they lie

among the thin chimneys still standing?
Does someone mow the grass, does someone weed

beneath the killing wall? What led me to wonder
I couldn't say. Perhaps it was reading Frankl.

Perhaps it was the Pope – how the way he sat
upon the crooked flagstones or walked

through prison yards in dappled sunlight set off
the impossible neatness of it all: his white cassock,

composing the negative space. Perhaps
I've reached an age that tells me time is the only

freeing thing. That even dichotomies need tending.
The museum-keepers there restore single shoes two hours

at a time, with an eye to hidden notes or paper.
They x-ray effects like the little mug with the false bottom

that let go after seven decades, giving up the gold ring
and necklace someone loved enough to save.

Their luster irrecoverable, their stones unset
in those long years, wrapped in fragile canvas and yet

saved, still – a reverence in the uses they weren't put to,
in the light they did not catch, in all that missing story.



time is the only freeing thing, dreamlight, surreal negative space

Author's Note: this poem begins with "found" poems, from letters home by my great uncle Gene Hatley. Gene was killed, age 19, in April 1945 in the South Pacific.

Vanishing Point

- found letter: from Texas, 1944 -

I haven't seen any ham
since I left for the Army.
I'll make myself sick. I can see
a big, fried, country ham
sandwich right now,
O-boy. I guess you know

I got seven days of labor details.
I shoveled coal. At times
I got mad and in a terrible humor,
but I never have been sorry

of getting in the Army.
How does Cletus like
the Navy? I probably
already know. Where
is Harold Smith now?

- found letter: from Washington, 1944 -

We are really working
here. Flying about seven
hours a day, on air guns
for two hours, and ground school
for four. That flying really
knocks a fellow out.

We drop bombs and I
have to take pictures
to see how close they come
to the target. I'm in charge
of the other gunners.

Don't mention it to Mother
but a few of my buddies
have been killed
on this field.

The mountains are so close
at night, flying.

- found letter: from Washington, 1944 -

Hello

Thanks a million
for the peanuts. You should see
the fellows stuffing their pockets
with them. We're leaving

tomorrow morning
for California. We should
be somewhere in the Pacific
or Europe by Christmas.

Walla Walla is a swell town,
I've met quite a few "babes."

Won't I miss all these women
overseas.

We will only fly fifty missions
over enemy territory
and we will get back.

- found letter: from California, 1944 -

We went to San Francisco
one night. It's really a swell
place, but Old Stonewall's

pay roll made quite
a decrease. I can save
a few hundred in the next year

so I didn't care. I fear
money hasn't any value
where we are going.

- found letter: from the South Pacific, 1945 -

We were on the way to Hawaii
at Christmas, and ate peanut
butter sandwiches,

and when we got to Hawaii
they'd saved us all
a piece of turkey.

I'd hate to be in the infantry
and have to fight
for these islands.

When I get home
I'm going to eat all
of your chickens.

Everything's swell,
the whole crew is still together
and is fine.

- found letter: returned to sender, 1945 -

Hello, Gene,

I thought of you
this morning.
I have seen so

many planes, I just
thought of you
sitting in one of those things.

How are you
anyway? The weather
is getting plenty hot

here. I went to Concord
this morning to buy me
a hat. Wish you could see

what a thing I got. The church
made up money to buy flowers
for the soldier boys from Salem.

What a pleasure it would be
to have the boys home
instead of having flowers.

– Albemarle, NC: summer, 1945 –

It was summer
when that last letter came
back. Cicadas. His sister

home from college. Thick days,
small-town eulogies
and then his name

in the papers,
on the Gold Star Honor Roll.
The Army Air Force

sent condolences
and gratitude.
His father, absent

a son, began
spending evenings
in the porch light,

telling quiet stories
of his boy
to the dog.

- *Wilmington, NC: summer, 2011* -

When my grandmother asked
if I was pregnant, it was just a week
before I offered to drive her
to see the marker of her brother,
missing in action in 1945, his bomber bound
for Formosa; to see at Salem Church
the modest plot by his name
that she said she'd chosen
for herself. So before I visit her
now, in her room at hospice, I take
one more test, wait for the dye
like the slow ghosts of a Polaroid,
and look for two lines, parallel.
But just a single finger of pink
in the window, that small view
an admonishment: *can't get there
from here*

And she is not awake
anyway, her last words hours old
and something about a squirrel
outside the window, her gaze
so distant my father doubts
the squirrel. Bones we never knew
declare themselves to the sheet
across her shoulders, and my parents
stand at either side of the bed, parallel
under the only light, like lines
on a runway. My mother bends

to smooth her hair, and calls
her name, soft and slow
as a memory of summer,
as a breeze in the azaleas
outside, that favorite
Formosa pink.



soft and slow as a memory of summer, as a breeze in the azaleas outside,
pink, warm light, prewar style

Leaving Ireland

High and westward now,
the days resign behind us
the way our own tracks

to the surf had, one afternoon,
the way everything that is
agrees to be weathered.

Over miles of pitted lime
and scree, the wind and rain
have ushered earth

to the in-betweens: the only soil
in cracks and patches
for the orchids and bell heather,

the bones of the dolmen
picked clean – immodest
as the old stones of that one pier

almost as west as we could be
without heading home, exposed
at low tide, and mottled

to the water's edge with jellyfish,
the soft drops of their bodies
washing away, iridescent.



high and westward now the days resign behind us, ireland, oil painting

Estate Sale

She is not here for a deal
on the 1944 Farmall,
on the blue eighties Ford
or the rifles, the wheat print dishes
for nine, or the stoic

pot-bellied stove
in the shade. Without fuss
she flashes her number
to the auctioneer, to collect a beaten
stand mixer, a pair

of glass measuring cups –
worn and reflecting little
of the fickle November sun.
It is the estate sale
of her father, and she buys back

only the small things she'd loaned,
those that perhaps he had not
meant to keep. As the last items are sold
and the loaded trucks of buyers
pull away, a friend who bid

for a lot of old chairs – twenty, perhaps –
sets before her a child's
rocking chair, its wood worn
to a dark patina. Her face
crumples at his gift

and she weeps in his embrace
while a man nearby, family,
looks at me and points
to the tiny chair, and mouths
the words *her childhood*



as the last items are sold and the loaded trucks of buyers pull away,
modern, memory colors, style of john singer sargent, farmhouse 1980's

Etch-A-Sketch

On the distant granite of the Atlantic,
the shadows of clouds. In the early sun

the barrier islands and tidal flats are black
and white, and the view from this flight

is like one through to another sky,
from below, in contrast like my father's negatives,

his favorite medium black and white –
a misnomer when so much is just grey.

Grey as the ocean canvas
where a container ship draws a long arrow

of wake, precise as the stylus on the Etch-A-Sketch
that bored me as a child –

before I knew it was the darkness inside
that made those clumsy lines so clear.



Grey as the ocean canvas where a container ship draws a long arrow of wake, gouache, monotone, from above looking down

Beside My Sleeping Son

In dark times we light matches.

-- Nelba Márquez-Greene

Beside my sleeping son in a time
of pandemic, I worry about the fever

he's brought home, how we who have not traveled
might have had it carried to us. About what this night

will hold besides we two—besides my irrational
fear—and when he might break into the sweat

that tells me it's passing, this fever I'm sure
I'm sure

is not newsworthy, is not those other
knots of RNA unfurling across the world

like party streamers, microscopic
celebrations of arrival. Nothing I do

is so efficient as a virus. How would it be
to have a shape with so clear an intent:

existence a recursive unrolling, with being
and doing much the same? The machine

of my own body is less perfected, inexpert
in ways I wish it weren't, though I did manage

in the catalogue of my attempts
this boy beside me, this splay of limbs

and heat I face in the dark,
this marvel.



unfurling across the world like party streamers, microscopic celebrations
of arrival, comic strip style, lofi colors

Apples and Honey

So strange to be eating these apples and honey with this sadness.

--Mandy Patinkin: September 18, 2020

If I let my eyes look through them
they are breathing, the non-bearing
old pecans behind the house, the tulip trees,
their greens deepening the further back

and up they go. Out here it's dusk
on my three acres, and I stare, unfocused,
toward the sky as a slow upwelling comes
upon the limbs and leaves

of my old trees—this evening
an inhalation, my yard an alveolus, swelling
the way we might bear ourselves up
before challenge, say, before bad news.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg has died.

Not knowing what to do I came outside—out
where only the Earth's curvature separates me
from others looking out in this distanced
year, the small universe of it racing away

from itself, from us, in all directions. And even
with the tension of all that leaving—all the lives

and faces—it's picturing apples and honey
that will wake me through this night:

apples and honey and the strange solace,
each time, of a tradition not my own.
Those apples, that honey, the others
sitting down with their sadness.



as a slow upwelling comes upon the limbs and leaves of my old trees,
backyard, oaks, nighttime, ink wash, duotone

Eating Light

Late botanist Tim Plowman wasn't interested in comparing plants to people. He appreciated them as plants. 'They can eat light,' he said. 'Isn't that enough?'

-- Beyond Words, Carl Safina

The commercial came on as I waited
for an oil change and brake service. It was a pitch
for home facials – for doing in six steps

what the pros overcharge you for.
The women (and of course they all were) each
came on as a name and imperfection: Denise

(Wrinkles), then Shannon (Freckles
and Sunspots), and others, and their testimonials
of the skin they'd once had, or had always

wished for. It went on, the list of names
and nagging flaws, until I wondered if this
is the cringey kind of thing future folks

will laugh at, the way we marvel
at our ancestors' lead and ammonia,
their arsenic and vinegar, and further back

the dung, the mercury, the white wigs set
with lard. All those ghastly applications—reminders
how we've always sold ourselves the snake oil.

I read once that what makes humans unique
is we're the ones who should know better.
And yet I watch Denise and Shannon

and ponder—nearing forty, myself—
what my own parenthetical would be. What flaw
would I hope to shed? Meanwhile the continent

below me is drifting. All around, the grass,
the trees, the patch of daffodils in my yard
that comes back every year, unasked-for—they all

are eating light. And how come
it's not the same for us? My skin in the mirror
says I, too, have eaten light. More, at times,

than was advised. It is enough
that I, too, hoard energy for burning,
the way the car I'll drive away in burns

the light of ancient things—
the algae and plankton,
their long-ago days in the sun.



the grass, the trees, the patch of daffodils in my yard that comes back every year, unasked for, they all are eating light, style of van gogh

Zenith

The three of us on the couch,
the lamp off and the glow of TV
past my bedtime. My mother
in the middle, between
my father and me, his arm
across us both and one of them –
with soft snores –
falling asleep first.

I am an only child. No one
will remember this

for me, the intimate
ordinariness now in soft focus
like the console TV back then,
its screen always bright
for a moment after
the turning off, its picture tube
still warm with the memory
of some old story.



still warm with the memory of some old story, smooth, duotone, sketch

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Lunch With Grandparents	Main Street Rag: Kakalak, 2017
Dredging	Main Street Rag: Kakalak, 2018
When I Worked At the Camera Shop	The Light Ekphrastic, 2016
Fourth of July	CT River Review, 2019
Negative Space	Poetry Society of Vermont, 2019
Vanishing Point	Reed Magazine, 2017
Leaving Ireland	Briar Cliff Review, 2019
Estate Sale	Charlotte Viewpoint, 2011
Etch-A-Sketch	Heart Poetry Journal, 2016
Beside My Sleeping Son	Bracken Magazine, 2020
Apples and Honey	Jabberwock, 2021
Eating Light	Nimrod, 2020
Zenith	Southern Poetry Review, 2016

They All Are Eating Light



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