I have eaten the plums adorned in a featherweight parchment. Cigarette crescents on aged silk. I spell it out in amber, beige & caramel. In climbing scents of burnt sugar, the malting houses churn out an autumn. A dry-run mock-up of blood systems for mottled skins. At the slightest gust, green leaves curl into tan.

I have eaten the plums but they don't stop coming. The icebox, emptied cans, extended family members. All I touch is turned to plums. At first, an epidermal curse is a crumble-top blessing. My boss didn't think so & with shortest shrift the man became plums. Daytime telly is tiresome with the remote juicily stewing.

I have eaten the plums &
made them reappear. My
gangly assistant lopes into
the audience & selects you
as my next volunteer. The
stage-lights dazzle & the
odour is intense. Blindfold
yourself as I sharpen this.

I have eaten the plums, re-
creating your most visited
memes. The penguins, the
cats & armfuls of plums.
Some say a superpowered
robot is too much. I'm ok
with it. Suggesting hobbies
from your porn algorithm.

I have eaten the plums &
carved the bark. My words
remain to nourish roots.
He looks at me absurdly.
The dead cannot return.
But I eat seeds & leaves,
shed the dry ballast. I grow
fresh & cold in every bite.

Synopsis

These short texts are extracted from a pamphlet-length work called "More on the Plums". The sequence began as an idle experiment, in which I fed a single line of a famous poem ("This is Just to Say" by William Carlos Williams) into a text-generating neural network. As expected, the AI's extrapolation differed wildly from the original poem. I repeated the same process many times, resulting in a huge number of sprawling texts with varying degrees of incoherence.

There is no limit to the number of things a neural network might have to say about the humble plums from Williams's poem. Their original context is a functional statement transformed playfully into an imagist poem. But for a language model that already ate much of the internet, the plums could be regurgitated in any number of meaningful or meaningless ways.

I became interested in placing formal and aesthetic limits on the disorganised mass of outputted text. Inspired by the "black block" of text in Ian Hamilton Finlay's "Homage to Malevich" (1963), and his idea of concrete poetry as a "model of order", I used text boxes of varying sizes to place an arbitrary limit on the size and shape of each output. I then ruthlessly revised and rewrote each piece to fit my own unmathematical sense of how a poem functions. Many of the AI's texts contained a small "spark", whether lyrical or dissonant, insightful or surreal, which a poem could be built around.

As my work on this sequence continued, developers of the neural network and its language model also honed their craft. The AI improved its ability to produce human-sounding text. This technological progress snuffed out much of the illusive "spark". The outputs started to resemble online recipes for fruit cobbler, rather than the manifestoes of cyberpunk greengrocers. In many of the later additions to the sequence, I cut the neural network out of the process. While its deep learning enabled it to sound more human, I had done enough surface learning to recreate its cyborg poetry.