

This too, like all things

I sat there after he had finished speaking. My hands rested against my lap, anchoring the silence that now stretched between us. It was not a restful silence. It held sharp edges—regrets unspoken, confessions still-born, and questions neither of us knew how to answer. A pause before parting. A knowing without action. Light bled weakly through the curtains, held in suspension, motionless—the breath of those who dared not disturb the stillness. The room had grown smaller. Or perhaps we had grown larger—our thoughts too expansive for the walls that contained us. Outside, a branch tapped against the window in the screeching wind. Steady, rhythmic. The world itself had grown impatient. It knocked gently. Reminding us that there was more than this room, more than this moment we had carved from time like a shallow grave.

“Nebbia. Vincenzino. My father.” He paused, his voice caught on the final word – it weighed heavier than the others. “All of them.” He didn’t look at me. He let the silence swallow his words, the edges of his voice, as if ashamed of their sound. He exhaled then, sharp and shallow. He wanted me to know the act of speaking had drained him of something precious, something scarce. His voice was flat now, thin around the edges. “I think sometimes I arrived too late. They took it all—everything that was meant for us. Wasted it. Squandered it before we had the chance to touch it. And now there’s nothing left.”

I looked at him then, at the way his shoulders curved inward, as though he was bracing against a blow that would never land. His hands opened and closed against his knees, palms empty, restless, like they were expecting something to fill them. They were asking, praying, begging, for a substance that he could not wield. I thought of how long he must have carried that belief, how often he must have looked at his life and seen only absence. The dark threads of his hair curled into his eyes, obscuring the place where his gaze anchored itself—downward, fixed on the floorboards, in case their grain might explain the emptiness he carried. A thing too heavy to name. I had heard this before, he carried it like an heirloom, the weight of those who had come before him pressing down as they had hollowed him out, leaving only shadow in their wake. But I knew what he could not yet see. Shadows are born only where light exists. Vitality cannot be stolen, nor can it be buried in the dust of another’s footsteps. It grows—relentless, stubborn—out of absence. I did not say it, not yet. I was not certain he could bear it.

“What would you have me do?”

His words broke through soft, uneven. It broke him apart to send ripples through the stillness like that.

“Look.”

His eyes finally lifted to meet mine.

“Look at what?”

His brow furrowed slightly. The word itself resisted understanding.

“All of it. The shadow you think you are. The hunger that gnaws at you. Look at the room, this house, this moment—look as though you are seeing it for the first time.”

I gestured to the empty space before us, to the dust caught in streaks of this light. He laughed then, low and bitter—a laughter that held no malice, only surrender. A sound that fell inward and disappeared.

“And then what?”

“Then you decide.”

Something shifted behind his eyes. Small, fragile, but unmistakable—a flicker of recognition. A crack along the surface. It was not enough to pull him from the sadness that had become his only companion, but I saw it: the faintest stirring of someone who, for the first time, understood his life was his own. He straightened—just a fraction—and I rose to my feet. The floorboards creaked beneath me, a sound that rang brittle in the quiet, though the very stillness might shatter beneath its weight. I turned toward the door, even as the weight of his presence pressed against my back.

“Where are you going?”

“Outside.”

“To do what?”

“To look.”

He stayed where he was. I could feel it—his hesitation clinging smoke-like to the air between us. There was something about thresholds that had always held him. He feared stepping through would tear him from everything he had ever known. He had made a dwelling of his sorrow, and in its agony, he found constancy—a cradle and a coffin.

I turned the old brass handle, cool and smooth beneath my palm, worn down by the hands of those who had passed through before me. The wind met me, sharp and alive, tugging at the edges of my coat. It moved through the trees, their branches reaching like ghostly hands. The scent of rain mingled with the green leaves, the air washed clear of everything but itself. I drew a breath—sharp, clean. My lungs had forgotten the shape of air this fresh. I did not look back. I let the wind guide me, let the trees rise dark and tall around me. The sky stretched vast above, its clouds heavy and gray, shifting like life, life-like.

At the edge of the path, I turned.

He stood in the doorway, one hand against the frame, his body suspended between light and shadow. He could never decide which belonged to him. He stood frozen at the precipice, the weight of it holding him still. I felt it—the weight of his words, his belief in his own emptiness.

*I hear you speak of shadows, of ghosts who have consumed the pulse
before you even felt its beat.*

But I will not mourn what was given to them, what they devoured.

Let them have their feast of years, their inheritance of dust.

I watched him a moment longer as I drew breath in the cold. My eyes held his, held his pain, before I turned back to the path and walked on, my steps slow and deliberate, each one an act of reclamation. The wind followed me. It caught the hem of my coat and wrapped it around me—a second skin. He stood there still, his hand braced against the doorframe, his body drawn against the light. He was watching.

You speak of calm, as though calm is absence, as though it is death—

But I tell you, calm is the gathering of storms,

The sharpened breath before thunder rolls through bone and sky.

It is the certainty of the serpent's gaze when it meets mine,

Knowing what comes is neither curse nor doom,

But the shattering of quiet, gilded prisons.

I stopped at the edge, where the stones lay half-buried in the garden, the weeds thick around them. I crouched low, my knees sinking into the damp earth, and pressed my fingers to its surface. I felt the soil beneath my palms, its weight, its wetness, its quiet truth. I knelt then—whether in mourning or prayer, I could not say. Was there ever a difference between the two? My palm brushed against the cool face of one stone, its edges worn smooth by time. The earth here was heavy with silence, but it was not empty.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking.”

“Looking for what?”

“For what’s still here.”

Still, he did not move. Not toward me, not back into the house. He was waiting, I think—waiting for something he could not yet name. I knew he believed what he said: that nothing was left for him. That life had been spent before he arrived to claim it.

*Do not tell me that nothing was left for you.
I have seen the fruit, I have chewed the pulp of crimson and light,
And it showed me this:
What you call shadow is the edge of becoming.*

I stood, brushing dirt from my palms, and turned to face him. His eyes were wide, searching. Something in them had sharpened—like he had glimpsed a truth too vast to name. I did not smile. I only met his gaze and held it.

“Do you see it?”

He said nothing, but I saw the answer in his lingering.

*It is the rippling of something deeper, the whisper of roots
that will not be stilled.*

He looked past me, toward the path, the trees, the horizon that stretched wide and waiting beyond us. His mouth opened slightly. I thought he might speak, but no words came.

“You don’t have to answer.”

The ground softened beneath me, each step a quiet give, earth learning to yield. Each breath I drew felt heavier, fuller—it carried not only my weight but his, the weight of all he could not yet bear.

*You were not made to languish in the dust of your father’s name,
Nor to shrink beneath the hollow echoes of your village walls.
I will not soothe you with soft lies.
I will not say that I am calm because I do not grieve—
I grieve, but with eyes wide open,
For the ones who cannot see what lies beyond the garden’s edge.*

I did not know if he would follow. I did not know if he could.

*You speak of life consumed before it could be yours.
Do you not see? Vitality is not a gift bestowed,*

*It is claimed. It is earned. It is grown, stubborn as roots
that split stone in their hunger for the earth's depths.*

The road stretched before me, unmarked and infinite. The light pooled, soft where the trees opened to the horizon, streaks of pale gold beneath heavy clouds.

*I am not calm because I lack feeling.
I am calm because I have seen.
I have tasted.
And I walk, unafraid.*

Somewhere behind me, I thought I heard footsteps—his, or the earth shifting itself awake. It did not matter.

*Rise with me, or linger—
I will not wait.
This is the gift: not a book handed down through history's hands,
But the breath we draw for ourselves,
Out of nothing but our want,
Our shuddering refusal to be only shadows.*

I felt something there, following—close enough to be heard, distant enough to choose.

*Come, taste with me.
The world is vast, and it is waiting.
It does not matter what vitality they drained,
What depths they hollowed in their time.
This breath is ours now, unshackled.
Do not shrink from it.*

I felt the earth pulse beneath my feet, humming an ancient song. I stepped forward into it. I knew he would join me past the threshold when he was ready.

*Together, we rise—
And though the shadows remain,
We walk through them,
Unchained, unafraid,
Knowing all that was hidden,
And loving it still.*

And so we passed on, like all things, too, shall pass.