

My Duck Valentinu

He is beautiful, and all who see him would agree, I'm sure. He even knows it himself.

He looks as though he knows it, too, except when he slips on the mossy rocks into the pool. Perhaps the trout is sceptical, but everyone else is embarrassed when this happens to him. His green shiny velveteen head and neck with the white collar round the Adam's apple give no sign and, once on the water his composure is regained instantly. Maybe just a quick wiggle of the little tightly curled white tail tip gives me the sign and we both look away.

I live alone in the old olive mill. I worry about the fox that I used to love, pre-Valentinu. He comes often at night and I hear him paddle and drink at the pond. Is he foxy enough to know that Valentinu is my friend, too? Probably not. I know that the pine marten, who lives in the bank, would gladly steal the eggs if Valentinu still had a mate. Valentinu has made it clear that he wants to stay with me. I assume that it is because he feels safe in the enclosed little valley where the mill lies and has correctly guessed that I have no gun.

Our men neighbours round about would shoot at anything and frequently do, normally before either of us is up and busy, but the new pallet gate that I have made at the end of the oak tree enclosed lane makes it clear that our land is not abandoned. The fruit trees are pruned, the land is cleaned, the terrace walls are being rebuilt, but the oasis in the middle of derelict vines, groves and orchards could otherwise be easily penetrated by a hunter intent on quarry.

Valentinu got his name naturally enough when he first arrived a few weeks back. His impeccable appearance, the lacquered look and the sharp roving eyes looking out sideways from the swagger were the image of his namesake. The 'u' at the end in the place of the 'o' accords with the Corsican ending. He is local and would not wish to be thought either Italian or French. No first name? He surely has, but I still feel such an intimacy would be presumptuous. He'll let me know by some sign or other. It is not indicative of lack of warmth or friendship. Just Corsican reserve, since we have no family connection.

The mill leat has long since dried up. The two hundred yard stone gully has cracked open. The water level in the stream has fallen several feet in the last few years because the fires up on the terraced mountains have burned all the trees and the soil no longer retains the moisture. The land is depopulated and unworked through wars having taken the men and the cities luring the young. The lack of tending gives fires every opportunity to get hold in the winds of late summer and so the cycle will continue until the world transforms. It is even accelerated by shepherds wanting to add to the meagre amount of grass for their sheep, by firing the land. Short-term gain makes for long term loss.

The stream, the Centu Mezzini, though, still flows winter and summer. Our rock pools have some depth and the ripples keep it oxygenated, even though

the village butcher washes the blood of slaughtering into it. Some of the stone has taken on a reddish colour, but the water is clear again in an hour or so. The village revenues are not enough to allow the mayor to have the tiny sewage works cleaned. Perhaps these are two more factors for Valentinu's arrival. It does not seem to bother his intestines and doubtless helps produce his fodder.

On the day of his arrival, he had obviously been happily settled on the pool for some time before I had realised that he was there. It was easy to commiserate with him on his sadness of losing his mate, but though we share our isolation, it seems that he, like me, is not lonely. When we are together we are pleased to give up our solitary lives for a while. We both know that we can be together, even when we are not in approachable distance of each other. It is companionable complicity. He takes trips, just as I do. In a way, the bond is stronger with these interruptions and without any expectation of remeeting. Though it may not be the same for him, when I'm low I do find it tough, to walk round to the pond and find no Valentinu.

He listens a lot more than I do. He'll generally clamber to the bank and cock his head to one side when I start talking to him. In fact, now I think about it, I have never heard him speak, even when I quack at him. My gabbling attracts his attention, but I guess most of our communication is intuitive.

In the summer I had tried to clean the pool, as I had imagined myself basking in it to cool off from the hundred or so degrees of heat. There was an out of body picture of myself lying there looking up at the cloudless sky through the leaves of the figs, walnuts and chestnuts on the bank. A friend had been in July and had fallen asleep on a sun-lounger in the middle of the brook. It was that which had given me the idea.

Now though, it seemed best to disturb nothing and leave the domain to Valentinu. I must cause him enough irritation by the bonfires I keep lighting. Now winter's here, there are all the clearings of the summer to burn. Officially, I think fires are allowed in September, but I like to wait till later, to minimise the risk. No fireman would be able to reach us if the worst happened. In the summer we often need to keep vigil. When summer comes again, I wonder if Valentinu will have stayed. Perhaps it's enough that he gives me his winter and I give him the courage to venture forth again.

Though I have mentioned his name to a few people, on the whole, we both prefer to keep our relationship to ourselves. It seems stronger without observers. At the same time, there is a curious lack of intimacy, for he does not come into the mill building. It's a shame really. I'd like to show him the old process of pressing and milling the olives. Perhaps Vanentinu's forbears would have known them then.

When I relax at the end of the day by candle light in this memorial of work, I try to imagine what ducks do at night. It never occurs to me to ask Valentinu

in the daytime. Do they mill about on the pond? Do they roost? Perhaps they never sleep. The miller in his day would not have slept much while the pressing was in progress. In fact, the speed control of the mill wheels was crucial to the oil quality and was one of his greatest talents. There was an optimum rate for the wheel's turning. To avoid sleep, he sat on a special two-legged stool to ensure that if he inadvertently nodded off, he fell and woke instantly. It is from the 'control window', where the miller could see both the overshoot of water on to the wheel outside and the grinding of the mill wheel inside, that I can look out in the morning and see if my friend is up and about on the millpond. There's reassurance if he is and disappointment if I cannot see him, though it is possible that he is on a lower pool. To find that out, I would have to go out of doors.

This process of working out my mood through an inadvertent friend really helps me to recognise my own rhythm. It allows me to be as I am, up or down, without the interaction with someone else producing a cycle of emotion. Valentinu reacts in the same way, allowing himself to go about his own business, without my mood affecting him. If I directly ask for a response then I get one, but otherwise we act out our roles in parallel.

The land, the weather and the seasons are the primary stimuli. When the apricots mature it is time to make jam or experiment with fruit drying. When the leaves fall, it is time to prune. When the cress shoots are tender, then it is those that he eats. When the stream lowers, he can crop the bottom. The problem arises for both us when we want a mate and there is not one to hand! I hope that his imagination is as fertile as mine is.

For me, there is a semi-continuous battle in my mind for the bog of 'what's it all about?' and the high ground of 'it's all about just what we are doing and being, until it stops'. I guess he does not even need to get that far. Survival is enough, or perhaps, survival and learning. I have noticed that he learns new routes across the rocks to avoid slipping. Though there is one spot by the shoot of water into the top pool, where the slip is really a slide - into the pond. When he goes down it, he has the pleasure of submerging slightly after hitting the surface of the pond and having his buoyancy bob him back to his Plimsoll line.

Our seventy-year old neighbour thinks I have invented Valentinu. He has never seen such a drake on our river. He does not come to check. Boundaries could be seven-foot walls. Territory is respected here. Land defines the man. He tells me that in years gone by, he could fish from our level right down to the sea, without anything blocking his way. Then, there were no brambles, no maquis, no fallen trees and plenty of water. It is not like it was. Families do not hold together any more than the land. He looks back and complains. He has no explanation for his fruit trees dying and lets them rot. For him, old Corsica has gone. The old values have withered, he says. Yet the land cries out for growth.

Valentinu and I can glory in what is and do our own little bit in our own backyard. If we can tempt one extra persimmon to fruit, or our neighbour to

smile, it is almost enough. If we catch a tiddler trout, or avoid being shot we'll see another day. If we respect ourselves, or bask in the sun without conflict, then the ripple may spread.

Wanting more may be too much. Today, I looked to lure my duck, Valentinu nearer. Tempt him with a little bread, I thought. A fun game to start with. Where would the piece fall? Would it go onto the water or drop on land? Would he see it? Did he prefer it wet or dry? How much did he like at one go?

I wanted the answers all at once. Would I be able to get him to eat from my hand?

He did and was gone.

Corsican animals, both wild and domestic are used to freedom. Herds of pigs, goats, sheep, cattle and horses know where they are, so they have little need of enclosure. It is said that you should never buy animals singly, they will always return to their former owners, knowing the herds where they belong. If pigs choose to wander across the road in the shade of chestnut trees, it's because it's both cool and if not chestnuts, there's always something to rootle. When herds of goats or sheep block the road, it's because they carry a genetic imprint of time-honoured routes, far older than the roads, which are a late nineteenth century implantation. If cows sleep on the roads, it is because they're flat. Horses pay no particular attention to vehicular traffic, but they seem to be quicker at avoiding danger.

Fences are new, largely imposed by the new law, which makes the owner of beasts responsible for accidents involving them. The first action that is advised in case of accidents involving cows is to cut off the ear (with the identification tag), so as to be able to pursue the owner.

I wondered why the stream is called the Centu Mezzini. The answer is that I do not know - for sure. I have asked locals, who just accept that it takes its name from a small settlement downstream, but how it got its name, no one knows. I have asked Corsican linguists, who at first are flummoxed. On research the best that anyone has come up with is that a mezinu is a volume measure of six bushels or a liquid measure of 120 litres. It could therefore have had a connection with the weight of seeds needed for the land concerned, or the harvest to be expected. As a verb, mizà means to cut in half, so perhaps it could have been to do with a divided area of land.

However, meza can be attached to many other words to produce quite different measures - mezzetta meaning a carafe, mezinaghja meaning six decilitres. Mezu in general means half, or middle, as in meziornu meaning midday or mezanotte meaning midnight, equally mezacansa - halfway, or mezaluna - a half moon. If you are asked how you are, you may reply mezu

mezu, so-so; a half-baked idea is 'una meza' idea; half each is 'meza per omu'.

Centu is clearly a hundred, but why do I bother saying all this? To show some aspects of how Corsican is a living, oral language. It is one that often varies in spelling, pronunciation and meaning according to which side of the mountain you are. For example, a meza or mizetta is a 'chopine', about equivalent to an English pint, but varying in volume, depending upon where you are, viz 0.78 of a litre in Ajaccio, 0.77 in Calvi, 1.18 in Sartène and 1.39 in Corte!

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