

“*Chì tu sè
falsu
è buciardu !...*”

That meant, quite simply, “liar...” Yet these words were at the end of a banal verse. A simple *chjama è rispondi* – call and response – in a bistrot where, even before you’ve heard the call, you’re already concocting a response, waiting only for the hook offered by the end of the other’s verse. All you have to do is grasp onto it: a word or a rhyme that will start you off when the audience’s attention shifts to you.

And then: a slap knocks the breath out of you. Words that strike with the force of a blow. Still stunned, you look around you. What has happened? Why? Now you have to deal with the insult... Good grief!

The patron wipes glasses as if in slow motion. Around the tables, card players are frozen like statues. Even the flippers on the pinball machine are silent. The air is thick. The emptiness around you suddenly expands; the people in the room grow distant, hover on the margins. Their lives pull away from yours. They’re here to watch. To wait. It’s your turn.

“*Un parlemu, o Petru Mè, di falzi nè buciardi...*”: ‘Let’s not speak, oh Petru Memmu, of tricksters and liars...’ Gerard took up the terms of the *cuntrastu* – the previous line because, in any case, those are the rules. The only other option would be retreat, with the humiliation that everyone is waiting for, the humiliation the Other was after with his ridiculous insult. The pedigree dog just showed his fangs. All that remained for this noble animal was to go and show himself somewhere else. Everyone knew this was a dog which had tasted blood, had killed before and would kill again... To rhyme.

“*Cardi*”? “*Tardi*”? “*Sardi*”? – “Thistles”? “Late”? “Sardinians”? – It wasn’t easy to choose a rhyme for *buciardi* – liars – when your name wasn’t Pampasgiolu or Minellu d’Ascu.⁽¹⁾

1. Famous Corsican oral poets.

"Thistles" might allow him to get out of this one with a flourish connoisseurs would appreciate. Gerard could say he had been "pricked by a thistle;" songs could also be "prickly". But then what? With all of his education, Gerard was wary of an over-intellectual response. "He'll think that I'm responding from a position of weakness, or that I'm being evasive". Given a choice between being the butcher or the calf, no one wants to be the calf.

Of course, he could say, "*ùn v'aghju vulsutu offende, or firmemu ci chì hè tardi!*" (I didn't mean to offend, let's stop now, it's getting late.) The rhyme would act as a cover for a pitiful retreat. No, no, you can't run away! If you couldn't come up with the required three verses, two would suffice. You don't run away.

Escape... getting around the problem. Gerard was a long-time specialist when it came to avoiding conflict. When other people quarreled, he was always the first to intervene with a "Hey, lighten up guys..." but he never let himself get entangled in affairs of the heart, of business, of life. He was one of those people who always seemed detached, to be on another planet. People said, "he's a strange one – a real number – an odd bird." Gerard, Gerard, who is he? "He's alright, Gerard. A good guy." "Yes, a good guy, but..."

A good guy. Thirty years of living life in the margins, on the surface of things. Every time fate called out to him, he managed to disengage, defer to "later" when there would be "plenty of time." Carried along in the slipstream of life, his motto was always "Oh, well, it will do for now."

"Do you know, Gerard, that these days are as ephemeral as sea foam, destined to dissolve one day in the distant future? But up to this moment, the present had always been smooth and subject to skilful manipulation..."

"*Sappiate chì semu corsi, noi altri, è micca sardi...*": (Listen: we are Corsicans, not Sardinians...) Now was he feeling hemmed in by the way the ready-made rhyme pulled him along inexorably in its wake. Or was it anger that was gnawing away at him? Who could say? Instead of an original rhyme that would have made people laugh and defused tension, this was the verse that Gerard offered up.

"*À sente lu to discorsu, noi altri sariam u sardi?...*" (To hear you speak, then we are Sardinians?) The other man's verse rebounded, fast and sharp.

Sometimes, even an expert tightrope walker takes a false step and misses the line... sometimes it happens that even a virtuoso

pilot... as a veteran in the skies of songs and humor; Gerard knew that once the words veered off course, nothing could pull them back. Every second brought disaster closer, and he was on a long downward spiral.

Sardinians? His father had been Sardinian. True to Corsican tradition, his whole family had been very touchy about the fact. Hadn't he killed a man once, and served time in jail?

Now they were beyond that point in an argument where someone could step in and say, "Okay, guys." Poetry – poetry had its own rules. So did honour. Tonight, blame the pastis – or perhaps a vague memory of a quarrel between families, or a desire to play the heavy, to remind everyone of the loyalty they owed you. On the street, a man with a reputation to maintain cannot let just anything go by without reacting, particularly from pretentious little people who think they are slick just because they have a little education. Dirty little dogs. A good kick in the ass from time to time – that would teach them how to behave. Oh! you want to take the challenge? Good. Petru Memmu is waiting for you, on his own territory. Slowly, with simple rhymes, he'll draw the noose ever tighter. The other guy won't have a chance: "sit, little one!"

"Sardi... Chì tù ti vardi... Diu ne guardi...": (Sardinians... you'd better watch out... God is looking on...) The meter is about right, but to what end? The goal is to dominate, intimidate, to frighten. And Gerard responds. His is another strategy: to craft his verses as precisely as possible. He moves forward, with the sharp fine cruelty of a needle. Who can say what has come over him. Gerard, ripped from the tranquil flanks of his easy life and projected abruptly into someone else's, continues his advance, determined to do whatever it takes to deliver the death blow.

The rhyme grips you; heavy with melodrama, its bursts of intermingled sound and meaning are in constant dialogue and you, you step from one rhyme to another as if they were stones in a river you were crossing. The path is all laid out, all you have to do is follow it. The words are like kindling to a flame. Take *"zitellu"*: (child). Someone says, *"Sè un zitellu"*: (you're a child). Avoiding the obvious rhyme – *purcellu*: (pig) in your response is an act of cowardice. And in any case, in an amicable poetic joust, children are always called *"acelli"*: (birds), or *"chjucarelli"*: (little ones). But that would be like saying, *"Sintite, o amicu, ùn vi vogliu micca offende è a vostra l'offesa, a pigliu à contu meu!"*: (Listen, friend, I do not wish to offend you, let us forget the whole thing'. No, no, the words are a slope, and we are slipping down it.

"*Allons, allons, on ferme*": (Alright everyone, it's closing time). It's the owner, his voice so strangled that no one seems to have heard him. Or perhaps he never really spoke at all – maybe he just imagined he heard him say that. The owner, who continues to polish the same glass with the same deliberate movement. Cards strewn across the table. Players who no longer seem to be breathing. Except Petru Santu, who inflated his left cheek in a minimal gesture that meant "Okay, things are going badly!" But no one looked at him, and there he sat, with his foolish bubble gradually deflating. Up at the counter, a huge guy stood looking completely emptied – a massive, uninhabited shell. Yes, it is up to me, a lone living thing here with the Other, who is also alive and waiting for me.

Rhyme is a faithful guide. It links, it decouples, it imposes its own rules. The verses hold you in the grip of the duelling verses of the *chjama è rispondi*. The Other is there, with the wild eyes of a bull that is about to charge. The eyes of brute force that nothing can stop, not even a butcher. Animal agonies of childhood. The Christmas pigs had that look in their eyes when they writhed in an endless scream, their skulls crushed in by the sledgehammer. Eyes of the cows and calves, rendered insane by the smell of blood outside the slaughterhouse. It's the look of someone that is about to die, or is preparing to kill. Anyone who grew up in the countryside knows this. At the final moment, the calf becomes a lion. Look at its eyes! At the precise moment when the blow of the sledgehammer crumples its little hooves beneath its white belly, it's a lion that dies! Its final murmur is not a bleat, it's the smothered roar of a lion. Tied up, vanquished – calves at the slaughterhouse die... lions! But nothing is standing in Gerard's way. He's a man, not a calf. A man who is just now cutting his teeth – see!

Hooked fast to the verse, held by the rhyme, there are no limits to how far you can go. As the proverb says, every call demands a response, and the search for the cleanest and most perfect response keeps your wits sharp as a razor's edge, and leaves no room for fear.

Fear – blood frozen in the veins – this is around you, but you advance, alone, cutting your path through a circle of light.

And the anger also carries you forward...

Each sense on high alert like a wild cat, Gerard had anticipated everything except the next disconcerting shot. A hearty backslap – the caress of a bear, face split in a colossal smile, trying to buddy up. The bestial leer had disappeared. The eyes smiled, the lips smiled, even his paunch rose and fell in a tremor of friendship.



AN HARIXÇALDE

Another slap of the paw. A hug. We're pals!

"Alright, pour some drinks. Ah! What do you say, guys!"
With a thick, wild smile, Petru Memmu said "guys," never letting Gerard out of his embrace.

"He's something, eh?... a hell of a little guy! Serve a round on me, eh Antò!"

A wink over in the card player's corner. "Well, pretty good fight, eh? That's poetry by God!"

"Yes, but it's foolish to argue" offered Petru Santu timidly. What was he talking about? Petru Memmu looked at him wide-eyed. "What argument? In poetry, there are no arguments!"

Finger raised like a drunken schoolmaster, he says "*In puesia, à tola è à lettu, nissun rispettu!*"⁽²⁾. (All's fair in love, poetry and war.) He had added poetry to the proverb.

"Ok friends, everyone together: '*Dà mi un colpu à beia o Anna'Mari...*'"⁽³⁾: (Give me a drink, oh Anna Maria).

Was he sincere? Is he taking me for a fool? Is this drama all in my head, or is our lion running away like a little dog? In the end, does it matter? Gerard was infused with the sweet joy of being alive in a world restored to peace you get after lovemaking or after a brush with death. Still a bit dazed, he took up the chorus of the famous drinking song:

*"Dà mi, dà mi, dà mi, dà mi prestu qui!
Aghju a ghjarganella asciutta..."*

Bring me, bring me, bring me, right now here!

My throat is parched...

2. Literally "in poetry, at the table and in the bedroom anything goes".

3. First line of a drinking song.



ANNA DE TAVERA, *L'envol.*