Winter 1957

Twenty Miles

Terry Caszatt

Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Caszatt, Terry (1957) "Twenty Miles," Calliope: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 48.
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol4/iss1/48
Tony knew the muck bottom was on the other side of the sand dune. He began to climb and the dune was big and steep. His tennis shoes filled as he climbed and the sand shifted down on his feet and it irritated him. Then near the top with the sun and the dizziness and his whole body throbbing with pulse, he stopped and looked down at the beach and then at the water and he didn't care about his shoes.

Then he was on the top, into some low scraggly vegetation and he tried to see back up the beach where he had come from. But his tracks were gone, swallowed up in the sand and he smiled. Twenty miles and it had been that easy. Then he was on the back slope going down and the sand was cool because of some pine trees. He stopped under a big pine tree, took his shirt off and kicked off his shoes and dropped heavily to the ground. He didn't think about anything and he lay there his body still pulsepounding. He liked the feel of his throbbing whole body; feeling of physical awareness of his life, his body on the ground and smelling the pine needles and being close to life.

An ant crawled rapidly over his arm and the pine needles were making their mark and he liked this feeling. He stretched comfortably and a light breeze from the water came in over the dune and dried his sweaty body. Then he felt a need for more comfort and he rolled up his shirt and put it under his head.

He lay that way a while, then he sat up and looked down the slope of the dune—down the slightly winding pine needled path and there was some yellow showing at the base—yellow of the onion weeder's shacks which looked bright and clean from the sun and height. Then he looked up and the muck bottom stretched out big, heavy black above the trees on the lower slope of the dune; and the onions, hair-like, showing, and he could see human forms on their knees along the rows and they didn't move because of the distance.

Tony got up and put his tennis shoes on and started down the dune path. He trotted lightly downwinding; and he got closer and the yellow shacks lost their bright clean look and they were dirty. He stopped by a shack which had no screen door. It said office and Tony laughed silently as he looked at the shack and thought of the word. He looked inside and there was a table and chair and a bed with no mattress. There were flies and they flew around the room, but they liked the blanket which hung half open over the door of a little bathroom, which was empty. Tony stood at the doorway and the flies moved and the pieces of cloth which hung over the windows blew in and out and there was a crude smell in the air, but he liked it.

“What the hell do you want?"

Tony turned and the man was in back of him.
“I’m looking for a job.”
The man moved superior toward Tony slowly, and his red shirt was dirty and his stomach was hanging; yet he moved superior. His eyes were yellow with some brown and there was matter in the corners and they looked expressionless.
“A job doing what?”
“Weeding.”
“You’re lying.”
“No,” said Tony. He laughed. “I’m here to weed onions.” And then the sun had found him again and he began to sweat.
“I’m Kaminko, the foreman here; and I never hire people like you.”
“What is the matter with me?” Tony held back the laugh.
The foreman began picking his nose with a broad dirty grained finger.
“You don’t belong here on the muck bottom.”
“I came twenty miles up the beach for a job.”
“Who is after you?”
“Nobody, nothing,” said Tony.
“If something is after you, twenty miles isn’t enough.”
“It’s enough if you will give me a job.” Tony’s eyes showed his laugh.
“You won’t be happy like that if you work here.”
“I would try.”
Kaminko turned and looked out over the muck “Everybody will hate you then.”
“I’m not hard to get along with,” said Tony.
“I am,” said Kaminko. “But if you want a job, then you work on your knees like us.”
“Sure.”
I would like to see you on your knees,” said Kaminko and his eyes tried for an expression, but there was none.
“You will if you give me a job,” said Tony.
“Down on your knees and you are the same as the muck. You are nothing then,” said Kaminko.
“I was nothing where I came from,” said Tony.
“You’re lying,” said Kaminko, “because I saw you come over the dune and you came from town. You came out here to laugh at us.”
“I came here to weed onions,” said Tony.
“It’s hard for you to lie to me, isn’t it?”
“I’m sweating from the sun.” Tony laughed.
“You people from town give me cramps,” said Kaminko. “You never work and yet you have money and you laugh at things which aren’t funny and you’re happy. But you’re not going to be happy here because I’m going to hate you and the Mexicans will later.” Kaminko stopped and then he thought of something else.
“I have been to town only once,” he said proudly. “My father died a year ago and the funeral was to be in town. It rained and there were only a few of us there and I hated the people from town because they were happy and nothing ever happens to them and I
wouldn’t pay for the funeral because of the rain.” He stopped and he seemed confused. “That’s why I hate you,” he said. He turned and began walking away.

“You won’t be here long,” he said.

“Where do you want me to start?” Tony yelled at Kaminko.

“I don’t give a damn,” he said; “anyplace.” Kaminko kept walking and went into the office and Tony heard the bed springs.

Tony walked and a breeze fanned his chest and the muck was spongy. He found a row of onions nobody was working on. He got down on his knees and the muck was hot and burned through his light summer slacks and he thought about them and he hoped they would get dirty quickly.

There was a Mexican working the next row and his clothes were dark and colorless and said nothing. His hair was long and black and his arms, brown, hung big-veined from the heat. He had stopped to rest and he was on one knee and his head rested on the other. Tony moved out the weeds from around the onions and caught up to the Mexican.

“Is it always as hot as this?” asked Tony and he blew some sweat off the end of his nose. The Mexican moved heavyweary and brushed his bare arm across his eyes and began weeding. He didn’t speak.

“Hey, I just made one enemy. Wait a minute.” The Mexican stopped but he didn’t look around. Tony weeded and laughed and caught up to the Mexican.

“Who was your first enemy?” asked the Mexican.

“Kaminko,” said Tony.

“Kaminko is first enemy of everybody.” The Mexican began weeding again.

“You didn’t answer my first question,” said Tony.

The Mexican turned and looked at Tony. He was handsome, but he was scowling.

“Why don’t you bother someone else?”

“Because I want to talk to you.”

“Well, I don’t want to talk to you.” The Mexican began weeding faster and Tony worked hard to keep up.

“My name’s Tony. What’s yours?”

The Mexican stopped again and sighed and wiped his right hand on his pants.

“My name is Andean Roca.” He reached over and they shook hands.

“Now let us work or Kaminko will come out here.”

They began weeding again.

“How long have you been working here?” asked Tony.

“Too long.”

“I think I’m going to like it.”

Roca turned and he was scowling again. “You won’t like it here,” he said. “Not you . . .”

“Why won’t I like it here?” asked Tony.

“Because you are what you are.”
“I agree,” said Tony, “and that is the reason I left my old life and came here.”

“You may have left your old life but you have the stench of it on you and even I can notice it. You will never escape that.”

“It’s my clothes,” said Tony, “and they’ll get dirty.”

“It’s more than that. It’s something that will drag you back.”

“No, I have gotten away from a life that I hated and people whose values were warped and I’m here and I know it will take time, but the true values of life are here in this simple life and I will know them.”

“You have a great illusion,” said Roca.

“What about you?” said Tony. “What is your illusion? You don’t talk like an onion weeder. Why are you here?”

“Because I like the atmosphere and all my good friends are here,” said Roca sarcastically.

“You are a cynic then.”

“I am like many people who have lived and worked in this life and who die very bitter—cynics if you like.” Roca spoke quickly and sharply and he put his irritation into his hands and tore at the weeds.

“They died bitter because they were blind,” said Tony.

“Blind of what?” Roca spoke louder.

“The values that are here.”

“There is nothing of value to this life to be blind about,” said Roca.

“I will learn more about life here in two days than I did in the twenty years of my old life.” Tony spoke quietly and he stopped weeding and then the sun went under.

“If there is anything of value here, then you must be able to weed it from the unpleasant and this is a very unpleasant way to live.” Roca still sounded stubborn, but he had stopped weeding.

“And since you have lived this life, you have found no values?”

“None,” said Roca. “This life—my life, to me has no value.”

“That is a dangerous way to think,” said Tony.

“I don’t think so,” said Roca. “This life has a way of beating you to your knees. I have been beaten for twenty years and I feel no danger about anything.”

“Why don’t you run away from it?” asked Tony. “I did it.”

“Because I don’t think you have really gotten away. I don’t think it is that easy,” said Roca—“to just walk a few miles up the beach. I couldn’t get away even if I wanted to because I’m a part of this muck bottom—this life.”

“Then you’re blind too,” said Tony.

Roca turned and looked at Tony and then the sun came out and it was hot.

“I could hate you for that,” said Roca.

“Hey you!” It was Kaminko and he was shouting at them. He moved toward them quickly for a short distance, then stopped.

“Get going damnit!” Kaminko yelled and he stood there looking at them.
“Bastard!” Roca said this softly and he kept on weeding. “He yells just like that to his wife.”

“You mean Kaminko makes his wife weed?”

“Sure and his grandmother too.”

“What’s wrong with him anyway?” asked Tony and he laughed.

“He’s a bastard,” said Roca and they both laughed.

They weeded and Tony’s knees were beginning to hurt from the harsh, dry muck.

“You have gone to college, haven’t you?” asked Roca.

“Yes, I went for a while.”

“It’s funny,” said Roca, “that I wanted to go to college so badly and then my mother got sick.”

“What about your father?”

“People said that my father was a man of great ability and drive but that when he was frustrated in his efforts he tried to escape through the bottle. He did not escape and he died very bitter and very hard. He was an idealist and his world collapsed on him and he nearly killed my mother too.”

“Your mother is still alive then?”

“Yes, she is still alive, but she will die soon probably, because she is very sick. I’m working my way north to see her and be able to pay the hospital. No, I did not want to become cynical,” said Roca, “but so many things . . . so many and I couldn’t help it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Tony, “about what I said. You have a right to be cynical.”

“I guess nobody should have that right,” said Roca, “and I used to try to fight it. My father always said to look at tomorrow and a better day. I have looked and there never is a tomorrow.”

They stopped weeding and sat and stretched and the sun wasn’t so hot now.

“No, I should be sorry,” said Roca, “to depress you like this.”

“You’re not depressing me,” said Tony.

“I know,” said Roca, “it’s because you find me interesting. You are probably finding one of your so-called values in me. I shouldn’t talk so much,” said Roca and he tried to laugh.

“Hey, Roca!” It was Kaminko again and he was running toward them and he ran as if he were mad.

“Watch him,” said Roca, and they both stood up. Kaminko stopped a few feet away and stood looking at them and his yellow eyes said nothing and then he laughed.

“Roca, them Juniga boys are back and they’re parked over the dune.” Kaminko quit smiling and moved big toward Roca and spoke again. “I don’t want none of your troubles, Roca, not any of them. Understand?”

“No trouble,” said Roca, and he didn’t look at Kaminko, but at the ground.

“Now I mean it, damnit.”

“No trouble,” said Roca. “I’m going to Mother Arderius’ as soon as I’m done.

“Well, get the hell going then.” Kaminko walked away and his
shirt didn’t look dirty now because the sun was going down.

“He’s a great man,” said Roca and he didn’t look up and then he laughed.

“Yes, I admire him greatly,” said Tony and they both laughed.
They began weeding again and it was cool towards the end of the row, but the mosquitoes were there and then it began to rain—suddenly, pecking the muck, cratering it, and it cooled Tony’s knees. They both stood up and the Mexicans were running and laughing across the muck towards their huts.

Tony began running for a pine tree.

“Come on,” yelled Roca. “Come on with me.” They began running and the rain came down harder.

They ran to the last shack in the row at the base of the dune. Some dogs began barking and they were under the shack which had cement blocks under each corner and they stayed there because they didn’t like the rain. Roca spoke to the dogs and they stopped barking. Then the rain stopped and everything was quiet and the muck was blacker and then a sudden breeze went through the pines and some voices floated down from the line of shacks.

“It was quitting time anyway,” said Roca and he was laughing and out of breath.

Tony turned and looked at the shack and a large woman stood behind the screen door watching them.

“Juniga boys are back,” she said and her voice was deep.

“Kaminko told me,” said Roca. “I have so many friends who want to visit me,” he said and he began laughing again.

“You better stay inside,” said the woman.

“I’m not worried,” said Roca.
The large woman disappeared from the screen door.

“That is Mother Arderius,” said Roca. “She has been very good to me.”

“Who are these Junigas?” asked Tony.

“Some of my close friends,” said Roca and they both laughed.

“A nice atmosphere and good friends,” said Tony and they laughed harder and then they sat down on the homemade steps which were worn and wet.
The large woman who was Mother Arderius brought them plates of food.

They ate in silence and the water dripped off the edge of the roof into little puddles around the shack. The line of huts were lit up now and a cool wind for August came in from the lake and Tony shivered, but he liked it. The dogs came out from under the shack and lay at their feet.
The large woman who was Mother Arderius, came to the door again.

“My boy says they’re on top of the dune now.”

“How many?” asked Roca.

“Three.”

“Maybe we better tell Kaminko,” said Tony and he looked up at the dune which was dark.
"No, he wouldn't care anyway. These Juniga boys have bothered me before and they are nothing." Roca laughed.

The water had stopped dripping off the roof of the shack and there was going to be a moon. They handed their plates back to Mother Arderius and the dogs went back under the shack.

"You know," said Roca, "I have been thinking about what you said. You know, about running away from this life." Roca stopped and it seemed to be hard for him to speak.

"When we were running across the muck through the rain . . ."

"Yes? . . ."

"And then the rain began coming down harder and we ran faster, I felt very strong," said Roca, "and I felt bold and I think I could have run over the dunes and away from here. I even felt like I would never die and I know that sounds foolish, but don't laugh."

"I know what you mean, because I have felt the same way before," said Tony.

Mother Arderius was at the door again.

"They are coming down the dune," she said. "You better come inside."

"They won't come down here," said Roca and he laughed.

"What are they mad at?" asked Tony.

"They are mad because I have better pants." They laughed and the air was cool clean and Tony kept watching the dune path.

"You know," said Roca, "I haven't laughed so much in a long time."

"That's good," said Tony and he thought he could hear some movement on the dune path.

"It must be good to be able to laugh at life."

"It's easy for me," said Tony, "because I have had an easy life."

"I think I could learn to laugh," said Roca.

"I know you could," said Tony and then he saw them and there were three of them and they moved out into the open and stood by the edge of the pines at the first rise of the dune.

Roca saw them.

"I guess I should go and talk to them so they will go home to bed," he said. He laughed. "I have so many friends." Roca moved suddenly and began walking toward the three men.

"I'll go with you," said Tony.

Roca stopped and turned.

"You wait here. I don't want you to see what kind of people are my friends."

"Are they that bad?"

"They're rotten," said Roca, "and they probably want forgiveness."

He laughed and he began walking toward the three men.

The three dark forms at the edge of the pines stood waiting and then Roca had reached them and they were talking.

Mother Arderius came outside.

"You better go up and help him," she said.

"He said to wait here."

"He has too much pride," said the woman.
Tony started toward the group of men and then he saw the arm, fast swing arc into Roca and then the cry.

Tony was running and he saw the three men as they ran off across the dark muck.

Roca lay on his back and his hand was on his stomach.

“In the stomach,” he said. “The worst place and I couldn’t get out of the way.” His voice was weak.

“I’ll get you back to Mother Arderius.”

“I would not make it,” said Roca. “You better leave me and get away. They are not far away and if they know you saw them . . .”

“I’ll get you back to Mother Arderius.” Tony was on his knees.

Roca didn’t hear him.

“I couldn’t have gotten away,” He twisted violently on his side.

“My beautiful life,” he said and then he died.

Tony stood up and then he heard them and then he saw them and they were running at him from the blackness of the muck.

Tony began running and he thought about it and he did not want to run. He wanted to turn and shout and ask them why they were chasing him, but he ran hard up the dune path and his chest began to hurt. He ran and stumbled and ran and then he was on top of the dune into the scruggly vegetation and it tried to trip him. He could see them now and there were three of them. Then he was going down the dune and the sand shifted and carried him down. He nearly fell when he hit the beach and he knew they were closer.

Tony nearly fell when he hit the beach and he knew they were closer. The heavy sand on the beach held him, gripped him and he ran awkwardly and wildly. One of them was getting closer and Tony could hear him grunting with each step. It was almost time and Tony knew the man had a knife. He would die here on the beach, he thought, and he couldn’t get away. Suddenly Tony dodged to the right toward the water. The man ran blindly, arm out and then stumbled and fell.

Tony was on the hardpacked sand near the water now and he was running hard. He knew he had gotten away, but he ran wildly on and then he began to cry and it hurt him and it was hard for him because he had forgotten how. He ran and cried and the dunes and the water and the moon swam. The he stopped running and looked back and he saw them standing on the beach looking at him. He looked at them and he wanted to turn and run at them, but he knew he couldn’t.

Then Tony yelled.

“I’ll be back,” he said and it echoed down the beach and the three men stood motionless watching Tony.

“I’ll be back,” Tony yelled again and then he turned and started trotting down the beach and he thought of the twenty miles, but he knew he could make it.