

Tsalagi: Trail of Tears

by

Wayne Ray

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**Electronic Books In Print / Books On Disk
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London Ontario Chapter**

literarynewscpa@yahoo.ca

Trail of Tears

By Wayne Ray

**a stream of thought play after learning
that his grandfather was a Cherokee Indian,
performed for CD 2005**

Trail of Tears

A date in time with little or no significance in the overall scheme of things. Clear blue cold sky all around a breezeless day. FM 96 in the background. Sounds carried from a stereo donated to the cause of low income, enters my ears. The cat is listless and can't seem to sit still. He goes from cushion to table to the rug in ten second intervals intended to bewilder only the simple minded..

There are no ghosts here. Well only a few ghosts; present and past loves, children not yet children, parents. Some friends and in the mirror, FM 96 . . . *Janie s gotta gun. Run away from the pain. Dog days just begun . . .* Sun warms the sky and decreases the white on the window sill. Heats up the cat so that he has to move again. Transcend time and space. He thinks of food. I haven't moved from this metal chair and in front of the computer screen. Arms of flesh on arms of metal. The outline of my torso firmly meshed with the leather lined contour. My eyes follow the movement of paws and whiskers. Sunshine creeps across my middle-aged skin. A leafless dream catcher tree outside my window wipes away its frost. Shines glossy brown on a robin's egg sky. Remembers. FM 96: *I close my eyes . . .* Crossing my legs, I stretch my toes. The phone light flashes from its location on the black desk. Arm reaches out to the receiver and finds its way to my ear.

The day has come for the restitution of our forgotten past. Time to close all the hurt and anger. Retell stories forgotten in the time of ash, turn the soil over with the plow and sow the seeds in the rows of our history. These are not peaceful times upon which one can calmly count on events to shape us with our fear. You have become more silent now, inside. Let the sun beat down on your face. Make it push back the corners of this very shadowed room. We have a history, you and me. It goes back into the past of our footsteps.

Hello? Hello? Who is this?

I had a dream. In the dream I was in a room. The room was yellow brick. There was a table covered in maize and in the middle of the table was a naked child. I got down on my knees to pray and you were there. You gathered all the kernels in a basket. The child smiled at both of us. He held a broken arrow in his hand. The edge of the arrow cut me on the wrist and when you reached for me, it cut you on the wrist as well. Our blood ran together into a small bowl and the bleeding stopped. The dream stopped. The sound of one cat sleeping. Are you there?

I am . . . I'm here, I said between my lips and the telephone. The sun warmed down on me through the window and the phone was still there, wedged between my ear and my shoulder.

. . . and on this hot summer day I walk down the long dirt road between the farm and the center of town William has his hands in his pockets, shirt tail hanging out. There is a sense of purpose in my walk. I stare forward . . .

Today I am walking with my older brother on our way into town. We don't go in town that often because of the work we have to do on the farm and going to school. Mostly cotton and a few chickens. He has his best coveralls on and his go-to-meetin' shoes. I just stride beside him with my hands in my pockets. I'm hot from the sun and a little bit thirsty.

. . . and I've been troubled by fears of somethin' I can't really explain. William doesn't seem to be troubled by anything. He's four years younger and hasn't experienced life that much. As we walk down the road, I kick a small stone near the curve where the road crosses the railway tracks where the steam train comes by on Tuesdays. I can't hear it splash 'cause I lost the hearing in my right ear due to catarrh . . .

There they go Pa. Off into town. I lean back in my wicker chair and pick a piece of snuff like my mother used to do before breakfast when she'd take out her corn cob pipe for a smoke. Blind she is now. William and his older brother Cecil are shuffling off down the old dusty road into town. And don't that boy ever tuck in his shirt in those baggy trousers and Lawd-a-Mighty, his feet must be hard as rock, he ain't worn shoes all his life. Pa. There's something I been meanin' ta tell ya.

Been keepin' my eye on a large bird hangin' in the air overhead when my brother kicks a stone in the creek as we pass the old log bridge that Prosser Carr had built. A fly on my shoulder makes me turn my head and look back. I see Ma and Pa sittin' on the front porch in the shade, in the corn husk chairs Ma made last winter when we lost the big field to the flood. I like to walk into town with my big brother. Usually on a hot day we go for a soda or a swim in the creek. He walks faster than me. I speed up.

. . . and then I heard free land was being offered and given away up state in Clay County. I gotta get a place of my own, away from cotton. Corn and chickens are the future. Why can't my little brother keep up with me? It ain't his bare feet. They're as hard as rock. He most likely wants to stop for a swim. The sweat on my face is cooled by my straw hat. I reach over and grab a blade of grass and stick it in my mouth and chew on the end like I always do. Town Line is coming up. . . .

Town Line is comin' up and he's still chewing on that blade of grass like an old milch cow. That big bird is still flying up above and he ain't told me where we're goin'. He seems different today. Can't place it, but then he's almost 19.

They must be at the Town Line by now, Ma. It's been nigh on half an hour by my watch. I slip it back in my trousers while I sit on the front porch. Still in love with my second wife beside me. Cotton's 'bout half picked and the Negroes that help out are over at a funeral in Millerville and Cecil wanted to go into town with his little brother. I reach over and pat the hound dog on the rump and scratch his old yeller head. What was that you wanted to tell me, Ma? I look over at her and she has her eyes closed to the sun. Just like when I came to help her daddy in 1881, topping the cotton and fell in love and married her in 1891. Then fell in love with her three-year-old son and then we had a son of our own. It's a big farm, one-hundred and twenty acres and I'm usually up early fixin' this or doin' that and all the while, Sarina's up there looking after the house, raisin' the boys and doin' her cookin'.

. . . I pull my little brother up off the road and onto the sidewalk as we make our way the five miles into town. I been to school, not like Ma and Pa. While he's a good farmer, cotton is on the way out and chickens are on the way in. I read the paper when I came here last and saw an article by Guin Miller, about registering for land before August 31st, 1907. Next month that is . . .

Right up off the road and right onto the sidewalk. He practically picked me right up in the air. Then he put his arm around my shoulder and he smiled at me. He don't do that much. Usually he just pushes me around. Trees are shady and it's cool where we walk. We walk right past the house of my cousin Lecta. Right past the soda shop. We don't stop. We just walk right up to the center of town and right up the steps of the court house. High above the town, the long pitched scree of an eagle as it comes into view. I said it was just a bird but he said it was an eagle. Clear blue cloudless sky all around a breezeless day. Eagle dips in front of the sun, coming closer into town. Huge wings. The door is shut on my view.

. . . and my heart beats faster as I drag William up the steps to the court house to find the

Registry Office. He s just standing and looking out over the town. His body is relaxed and he lifts himself up on his heels, searching for something. I close the door behind us and we walk down a long dark hall. William is not interested in this place so I send him over to his cousin s house. They re the same age so they can go for a soda. I walk up to the Registry Office . . .

I gotta tell Pa. When he came by the farm to help daddy and we fell in love and married down the road at Litra Church and I had a son from my first husband, and I love him dearly. I gotta tell him that I love him still. I got to thinkin that both he and Cecil . . . that Cecil should know that he was dropped off one mornin for me to care for so I adopted him. He wasn t my dead husband s son. But Pa s asleep in his chair and the boys are still gone and it s still hot, and I m tired.

I was up in the hall at the top of the stairs with my sister, Leta, when I saw a big bird flying over the houses and the trees and the school. Off down the road I see my cousins coming into town again and Cecil and William walk right in front of my house. I am happy and I have a smile on my face when I have my cousin to play with. But when I get to the front porch, they just walk on by. They walk on by the soda shop. It is hot. The bird overhead is coming closer to the tree tops. I go out onto the sidewalk and follow them on down the street in my new shoes. I cross the town square. Cecil goes into the Courthouse and I am standing on the corner. I see people pass by. Grownups mostly, some minding their own business and some not. All of a sudden, William comes out of the Courthouse and he sees me. I could go for a soda.

. . . and on the wall of the Registry Office there is a note that is strange to me and yet familiar. There are some boys my age in the room and I think they look like me and they talk to me as if they know me. I don t know them but I see me in their eyes and their hair and skin. The note reads:

Land claims. On May 18th, 1905, the US Court of Claims ruled in favor of the Eastern and Cherokee and directed by the Secretary of the Interior, to identify persons entitled to a portion of the money appropriated by the US Congress on June 30th, 1906, to be used for payment of these claims. Special Agent Guin Miller, Department of the Interior, began his work as appointed by the US Court of Claims as a Court Special Commissioner. The Court decrees that the money or land is to be distributed to all Eastern and Western Cherokee alive, after May 28th, 1906 who could establish that they are a member of the Eastern Cherokee Tribe or descendants of such members. They could not be members of any other Tribe. All claims must be found prior August 31st, 1907.

Pa has to know that the woman who dropped off my Cecil was an Indian from these parts. I feel anxious and my mouth is dry. Pa! Wake up! There s somethin I gotta tell ya. Cherokee she was.

. . . and do you affirm by your signature that you are a Cherokee? Mr. Miller said this to me and I want this so bad and in my heart and through my mouth I say . . . Yes. Outside I hear the eagle scream . . .scree . . . scree.

I m here, I said in the air between my lips and the telephone. The sun warmed down on me and the phone was still there, wedged between my ear and my shoulder. Scree . . . No one on the other end. Was I talking or listening? Dreaming or awake? The high pitched scream of the phone was quieted when I place it back on the receiver and get out of this chair. I flick off the computer and turn off the screen. The sky is still clear but the sun has just moved around to the other side of the apartment building. As I look out the window, a feather falls from some bird passing overhead calling in the cold afternoon sun.