



Elk Water

By Nona Schrader

My name is Wetyetmes, which means swan in Nez Perce, the language of my people. My strength comes from the Trumpeter Swan.

Before my people began our flight from the white man, life was good. We migrated with the seasons, moving from high mountain meadows in the summer to broad valleys in the early fall, and everywhere, we hunted elk, deer, and moose. We found sweet grass for our prized Appaloosas and camped next to familiar rivers and lakes as we traveled. Our band of people was prosperous because our horses were strong and numerous. Life was peaceful.

When I was fifteen, the white soldiers told Chief Joseph that we must sell our land to them and move to the reservation where other bands of Nez Perce lived. Our leaders argued, and some said they would sign a treaty, but Chief Joseph refused. When a few of our young warriors killed white men, the soldiers came after us, so we took flight, along with other bands of Nez Perce.

My father said they called us the nontreaty Indians because we wouldn't make peace and sell our land to them. But after our warriors killed white people, they called us hostiles. Instead of migrating through valleys between the mountains as we normally did in the warm summer months, we headed north and then south, taking our people and our two thousand horses away from the white soldiers.

We eventually made camp on the banks of the South Fork of the Clearwater River, but the soldiers found us, and their big guns boomed through the night. Our warriors fought back, and the chiefs said we must leave. As we rode away, I looked for my father but didn't see him. My mother called for help with my baby brother, so I urged my horse forward. Later in the day, my mother's tears fell as she told me what happened. My strong warrior father died in that battle with the soldiers. Too shocked to cry, I clutched my baby brother close.

We crossed over the mountains through Lolo Pass, but I was too numb to worry about the narrow and steep trail as we headed south. We were all stunned after so many died in the battle. Tucking the memories of my father

deep inside a corner of my heart, I refused to let them surface during the long hours on the trail.

The soldiers still followed, so we couldn't stay when we came down the mountain trail and passed through the Bitterroot Valley. We camped one night at the sacred Medicine Tree at the southern end of the valley, but I couldn't even pray at its base because my feelings were frozen. We stopped here many times in the past on our migrations, but this time, the sacred tree offered me no comfort. Instead, it brought painful memories of being here with my father last year, and I quickly shoved them back into the corner of my heart.

We moved up the Sapphire Mountains. After brief rests each night, we kept going, trotting through lands we relished when we migrated to follow the seasons. Finally, our scouts reported that the soldiers no longer chased us.

The chiefs said we would stop and make camp so the horses could graze while our people rested. My mother was silent as we set up our tepee next to the North Fork of the Big Hole River in a broad valley filled with lush grass. That night, I cried in our tepee. My mother held me close, but she did not cry. We finally fell asleep with my baby brother between us. I helped raise him since his birth, and I loved his chubby cheeks and eager hands that reached for me when I came near. His almost-black eyes sparkled when he giggled. Now, I reached out to touch his warm arm while he slept.

Later that night, I woke in the dark. The soft snores of my mother and the heat of my brother lying between us almost lulled me back to sleep. I didn't know why I was nervous, but I slipped from the tepee, seeking the comfort of the horses. Now that my father was dead, I wanted to keep our prized Appaloosas safe for the day when my little brother would assume his role as the warrior of our family.

Leaving the tepee, I hurried to the lush meadow where the boys guarded the horses. Approaching, I heard their soft nickers as they grazed. The boys protecting the horses knew me, so they did not become alarmed as I came closer. In fact, since my father died, everyone gave me a deference I did not expect, as if his death elevated my status in our tribe.

I found my horse on the edge of the herd and huddled next to her warmth, inhaling her familiar smell. Suddenly, a gunshot cracked in the night, startling my horse and me. Soldiers! I heard the screams of women and children and the voices of our warriors as they raced from our tepees to fight the white men. My mother and brother were in the tepee. I turned to run back, but a strong hand gripped my elbow.

"You must not leave the horses," a deep voice said from behind. I turned to see Chief Joseph, the leader of our people. He held my gaze with the force of his and dropped his hand.

"But my mother and brother are back there," I said, hearing screams above the gunfire. The smell of smoke filled the air, and I knew they were burning our tepees. I had to leave.

He grabbed my upper arm again. "These horses are our spiritual and physical guides."

"I have to protect my brother," I said, pulling against his hand. With a quick movement, he pulled me closer.

"Your brother is dead, and your mother, too," he said fiercely. "I'm sending the warriors to regroup and fight the soldiers. You must stay with the horses."

I could think of nothing to say, so powerful was his energy, the force of his gaze challenging me to loyalty. The sounds of the battle continued. "You are a young woman," he said, raising his eyebrows. "Not a warrior."

I inhaled and spoke. "My warrior father died fighting the white soldiers. Now, you tell me they killed my mother and baby brother." I paused to breathe. "I must be the warrior of my family to help save what is left of our people." I straightened my shoulders. Rage gave me the power to speak.

Chief Joseph nodded. "Very well," he said. "Stay with the boys who guard the horses. I'm gathering our band together to leave. The warriors will fight to keep the soldiers here while we leave with our people and the horses. The warriors will catch up later."

It seemed I had been in a daze since my father was killed, but now I snapped to attention, eager for a new purpose. "I will avenge the death of my family," I said, vowing to do just that.

"You will help the boys guard our horses," Chief Joseph said, his brow furrowing.

I nodded but repeated the vow in my head as he strode away to gather our people for flight.

As soon as he strode away, I ran to check on my mother and brother. Sprinting through the camp, I smelled

smoke coming from tepees that wouldn't burn. The soldiers had tried to set them on fire, but the dew kept them from burning. I ran through the horror of families screaming and clutching their dead and wounded loved ones while the guns boomed a short distance away. Our warriors were drawing the soldiers away from our camp.

I reached our tepee and stepped inside, shock taking the scream from my mouth. My mother was on her side, blood covering her back. Next to her, my brother looked like he was sleeping soundly, but the blood on his stomach and his closed eyes told me he was gone, too.

"I am here," she said. "I will take care of you." She pulled me close and the warmth of her skin made me realize I was cold. "We must quickly gather what we can and move on. Chief Joseph came through already and told us we're leaving."

His small hand reached out toward my mother, and I fell to my knees between them, feeling the still-warm touch of their bodies.

From behind, somebody grabbed my shoulder, and I turned to fight, only to see that it was my mother's sister, Timina.

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"I want to stay and help," I said. "But Chief Joseph said I can help with the horses. I want to save our family horses." The sounds of screams outside and the smell of death in the tent faded to the background.

"Then you must go," she said, pushing me away. "I will bury my sister and your brother, if I have time." Her deep brown eyes looked fiercely into mine. "You must leave. The horses need you."

I nodded, not trusting my voice. I refused to cry. Squaring my shoulders, I leaned down to stroke my brother's face and touch my mother's hair. Timina grabbed me in fierce hug and then pushed me from the tepee. "Go!" Her voice followed me as I ran from the smell of blood and back to the horses.

How did we move two thousand horses through mountain passes to avoid death at the hands of the white soldiers? We kept them at a trot, so they knew we meant business. From there, we let the herd mentality take over. The power of two thousand hooved animals pounding the trail and puffing up dust was only silenced when the horses sailed through pine forests where the trail bisected trees. Chief Joseph led the way, and we followed with the horses to avoid raising dust on the trail in front of our people.

Riding behind the horses, I refused to let the image of my mother and brother rise to the surface. Instead, I shoved them in the corner of my heart to join my father. I imagined that a hardened covering circled them all, until my family was safely encased in a circle of granite, enshrined in the cornerstone of my heart.

I protected the horses with grim determination, no longer helping the women and children as I did when my mother was alive. Timina was with the women, but my energy was focused on the Appaloosas.

Every day, we kept going, trotting through lands we used to relish when we migrated with the seasons. We crossed Targhee Pass and journeyed into territorial lands that we used to share with many other people. We raced by the riverbank where I met my animal spirit, the Trumpeter Swan. We could not stop in this place the whites named Yellowstone National Park.

We followed Trout Creek to Elk Water, which the whites called the Yellowstone River. At Buffalo Ford, we crossed. It was here that my father taught me the swan was my animal, but I wouldn't let those memories break free of their granite covering.

How did we keep going? The fear of death at the hands of the soldiers spurred us on, and we eluded them throughout the early fall. We stopped to eat only at night and rarely stayed in one place for long. The aspen leaves were turning yellow when we passed through the Bear Paw Mountains and rode closer to Canada, where our chiefs said we could find safety. Out of sheer exhaustion, we camped less than a hard day's ride from Canada. It was then that the soldiers circled our camp, holding us in a siege. I was reunited with Timina. She was thin and weak but determined to protect her children and me.

That night the snow began, piling up almost to my knees. We huddled together in the cold without shelter, having left our tepees behind long ago. The old and young died along the way, and we were forced to abandon weak horses as we fled.

After meeting with the soldiers, Chief Joseph told our ragged band of people that he would surrender the next day because we could no longer escape the soldiers. We

had no shelter and no food. I looked around at my people, cold and hungry in the snow. So many had died and the rest of us were exhausted.

One chief, White Bird, said he would not surrender. That night in the dark, he gathered his people to flee north to Canada. My first thought was of our horses. I couldn't let the soldiers capture our animals, so I slipped from the warmth of the bodies huddled near me and walked through the cold snow to follow the chief and his band. As they began to ride away, I hurried through the dark until I reached our horses.

"Run, run, run," I said, slapping rumps to get them moving as I set them free. They followed the shadows of White Bird's people and disappeared in the snowy night, leaving me behind.

The next day, Chief Joseph and the warriors surrendered their weapons, and the soldiers marched our people away. I heard gunshots and squeals of pain from the remaining horses. I tried to turn back and save them, but Timina was nearby and grabbed my arm. She held me firmly, forcing me forward. I walked with the women and helped the small children who still lived, clinging to their mothers in the cold. My days as a horse warrior were over.

The soldiers took us on a long journey to another place, but I was so horrified at the killing of our horses that I didn't resist. I just went along.

The next spring, after the long winter of starvation in the prison camp, I helped the women who gave birth. Babies were born dead because their mothers had little food to eat over the winter. No babies survived birth except one small, sickly boy with big dark eyes full of sad wisdom, as if he understood he was going to die. I held him close until the end because his mother was too weak to do that.

It was then, in my heart, that I sealed a promise of hatred against the soldiers, vowing to carry it there for the rest of my life. It surrounded the memories of my family that I protected inside a stone in the corner of my heart. Hatred pressed down around the stone, carrying the weight of a granite mountain, compressing my family into a metamorphic rock that seemingly nothing could penetrate.

I decided that revenge for my people would come from my body. I would find a strong warrior and bear his children, replacing our people the soldiers killed and the babies who were born without taking one breath.

I survived to pass on the legend of the horses and my people. No babies lived that spring, but some horses escaped because I set them free in the night. Later, after

the whites returned us to our homeland in what is now Washington State, I married a warrior and gave birth to five children. Those children had more children, and on down the line, it continued. With every new baby, I squelched the image of my brother.

By continuing our family line, I fulfilled my desire for revenge against the whites, but it did not break the stone in my heart. With every baby I brought into the world, I refused to acknowledge the memories of my brother's chubby arms reaching out for me. I loved my children, but the hatred I kept locked inside prevented me from fully enjoying their laughter as they grew. I survived to achieve revenge, but it brought me no lasting peace.

The whites told us to never tell the story of the battles, but we did this in the quiet of our tepees, keeping the memories alive.

Years later, as an old woman, I longed to see Elk Water again. My grandson took me on the long journey there. In my childhood, we rode into Yellowstone National Park on horseback when migrating through in the summertime. Now, my grandson took me in a car. How much had changed! We drove along a road, going with the flow of many other automobiles. My grandson, now a grown man, took me to the place on Elk Water where I went with my father as a child, the same ford we later crossed when running from the soldiers.

I sat on the bank and absorbed the murmur of the river. Taking off my shoes and rolling up my pants, I slipped my feet into the river, finding comfort in the sensation. My grandson sat with me and put his feet in the water, too. I watched our brown feet side by side under the flow. He wrapped his hand around mine, and I closed my eyes, letting the peace of the water enter my body through my feet.

A familiar scent filled my nostrils, and I realized it was the smell of my father's skin, sweat mixed with the bear grease we used to keep away mosquitoes. I experienced the warmth of his touch as if his large hand covered mine now. Looking down, I opened my eyes and saw the sun shining on smooth brown skin; my grandson's hand looked like my father's, and I remembered the feel of his strong arms pulling me close when I was young.

Since the day when the white soldiers killed him, I blocked out memories of my father. They came flooding back as I sat with my grandson on the banks of Elk Water. Years ago, when I sat at this same place with my father, a pair of Trumpeter Swans swam toward us.

"The swan is your animal," my father said. "That is why we named you Wetyetmes. It means swan. You will have the strength and beauty of the Trumpeter Swan. Your

heart will always be as courageous as this magnificent bird."

I reached my hand toward the swans, and one of the immense birds glided closer, allowing me to stroke its gracefully arched neck.

"That is a good sign," my father said back then.

Now, as I sat with my grandson, a strange feeling took hold, moving from my feet to my heart, which opened to receive the powerful healing of Elk Water. My heart lightened. It was as if the river flowed into my heart, eroding the stone embedded in the corner, where I protected the childhood memories of my father, mother, and brother.

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"Grandma?" My grandson's voice was close to my ear, his warm breath caressing my cheek. "Are you okay?"

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The water did as it does with all granite, wearing away the surface to create a path of its own, and the outer layer of the stone in my heart dissolved, washed away like sand in a river, exposing the metamorphic rock inside. My memories of our horses broke free, running across my brain as if they were in a mountain meadow.

Then, I felt the river take my hatred away, pulling it from my body. I gasped at the sensation.

Floating down the river was a pair of Trumpeter Swans. They glided to the bank where I sat with my grandson, and we watched in silence as they drew closer. I reached out my hand to stroke the nearest swan, which bowed its head, rubbing against me. At the touch of the swan, I inhaled, so powerful was my connection to this bird and the river.

I released my breath as the swans moved away. The metamorphic rock created by the weight of the hatred in my heart dissolved, and memories filled the space, memories of my father, my mother, and my baby brother reaching for me with his sturdy brown arms. I allowed the river to fill me with peace.

"Grandma?" My grandson's voice was close to my ear, his warm breath caressing my cheek. "Are you okay?"

I turned to meet his brown eyes. "Yes, grandson." I smiled. "My heart is light. I always thought that I survived the flight of our people to gain revenge on the white soldiers. My whole life was dedicated to having children and watching them carry on our family line. Now, I realize

that revenge was eating at my soul. My real purpose is to tell the story of how this river healed me.”

He smiled slowly. “Good, grandma. That is good. Let’s go home and tell our family.”

As we left the river and returned to the car, I smiled, knowing that I was now free of the hatred in my heart. The solid stone inside me broke open when the water disintegrated the granite covering, and out poured my hatred. The water replaced it with images of my father, mother, and baby brother. Memories now filled my heart, flowing like water.

Years later, nearing the end of my life, I looked at the eager young faces of my great-grandchildren as they waited in a circle at my feet, anticipating a story from the past. Even though they heard it often, I told it again, knowing I must pass on the lesson so that others could learn from me.

“Tell your children to tell their children and all our descendants from here on that water heals our bodies and minds. Never forget the flight of Nez Perce, but do not let your soul become as bitter as mine once was, for it haunts you for life until you let it go.” I looked around the circle. “Raising my children healed me somewhat, but I held onto my hatred of the white man.” I paused to take in their faces, some understanding, some confused, with brows furrowed over their dark brown eyes.

“If this bitterness consumes you, go to the healing waters of the Yellowstone, the river our people call Elk Water. Let its current wash over your body, seep into your soul, and cleanse your spirit of any hatred that dwells within. Only then will your heart be at peace.” I exhaled and looked around at the children sitting in front of me, their little legs crossed and their eager eyes waiting for more.

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“Tell your children to tell their children and all our descendants from here on that water heals our bodies and minds. Never forget the flight of Nez Perce, but do not let your soul become as bitter as mine once was, for it haunts you for life until you let it go.”

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“Is this the only place we can go?” The innocent voice came from the warm body snuggled next to me.

I looked down to the left where my youngest great-grandchild sat, White Bird, named after the great Nez Perce warrior I once knew.

“Healing waters exist all over the planet,” I said. “We must remind people to seek the physical and mental power of water, whether it be in streams, rivers, ponds, lakes, or oceans. Let your mind and body be as one with water, wherever you find it.”

“Should we tell our friends?” White Bird asked.

“Yes,” I said. “My bitterness was so severe that it ate away at my ability to completely love my family. I learned that I must forgive everyone, even descendants of the white soldiers who killed my brother and our horses. The river healed me, and it will heal any human, so we must share our knowledge of its great power.” I looked around the circle of hopeful brown eyes of my great-grandchildren. “We must never stop the flow of Elk Water.”

“I will go there one day,” White Bird said. “I will tell everyone.”

The promise in his earnest eyes told me that he would pass my message on to the children of the future.



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Nona Schrader lives at the base of the Wind River Mountains in Lander, Wyoming. Her experiences in the mountains inspired her environmental writing. Her published works include *Aqua* and *Aqua II Waves of Sage*. Nona is currently writing the third novel in the series, *Aqua III Sweet Water*.