



TACOMA: One Woman's Impressions of Mt. Rainier Celeste Newbrough

The traveler, trapped in ocean gloom, passes you in all ignorance until, with a turn of the road or an incline's bend, the iron mantle of cloud opens, the sun breaks out upon a giant apparition, and the discover invariably exclaims, *Oh my god, it's the mountain!*

The old world explorer, Vancouver, first chronicled you as, a *very remarkable high round mountain, covered with snow*. After his fellow seafarer, he named you Mt. Rainier. A later explorer, Winthrop, wrote, *of all the peaks from California to Fraser's River, this one before me is royalist*. Tolmie, who first attempted, unsuccessfully, to reach your peak, described you as, *Stupendous...of pyramidal form...embosomed in cloud*.

To the Chehalis, the Puyallup, the Nisqually, you were a sacred mountain, named *Tab-(c)ho-bad, Tab-(c)ho-bud, Turwouk*— meaning variously: Mountain of Snow, Sky Mountain, Mother of Waters, Full Breast, The Mountain that Is God, or they called you *Tab-(c)bob-mab*, meaning simply: The Mountain.

A sleeping volcano with glaciers nested in your peaks, you became a magnet, drawing to your hillsides the rugged pioneers. The city that grew up beneath you awarded itself your Indian name, *Tacoma*.

Carving out tracks across your valleys all the way to Puget Sound, the Northern Pacific Railroad declared: *of this mountain the Indian name, Tacoma, will hereafter be used*.

But Seattle wanted to claim you too, didn't want that other city to bask in your celebrity, so it advocated that you be named by the tamer label of *Rainer*. Seattle newspapers shouted this was historical robbery, and launched a campaign to preserve the European name. Pro-Tacoma forces pointed out that Admiral Ranier was plump, myopic, and opposed America in the Revolutionary War. Chief Seattle's daughter, Princess Angeline, pointed out that the Indian name preceded the colonial name.

The federal bureaucracy was concerned about reissuing all those maps. So the U.S. Board of Geographic Names declared Mt.

Ranier your official title. The city of Tacoma fought on for thirty-five more years. The U.S. Senate joined the fight, and in its wisdom voted that, *The mountain is heretofore to be named Tacoma*. The House of Representatives refused to consider the Senate bill.

Winthrop had already noted, *Mount Regnier, Christians have dubbed it, in stupid nomenclature, perpetuating the name of somebody, or nobody*.

Tacoma. You are no virgin like Mt. Jüngfrau of the Alps. The gods of Olympus enjoyed a thousand names, but those born of your harsh wilderness are nameless. Mt. Whitney or, the gate to heaven, Everest, each might, if standing side-by-side, eclipse you. Yet here, far from the planet's roof or the saw-toothed range, you hold no equal.

Like mystical Shasta, you are a white witch, yet unlike Shasta, you are no sylph enchantress beckoning the new age. Beyond the cannons exploding at Fort Lewis, the relentless tanks, the war rehearsals, jets from the McCord air force base, your silent mass has loomed.

From the highways and byways of the cities, I have seen your image framed by factories, pulp mills, coupled with the stench of sulfurous smoke. I have seen you rise up

behind expressways, trucks, petroleum soaked streets. I have seen your face pockmarked by insipid prefabricated constructions of drab uniform hue, vacant offices, condominiums, born yesterday suburbs.

I have seen you through a quandary of shopping malls, car lots, junkyards. I have seen you distant but gigantic, branded: EXXON, BIG MAC, SEARS, DENNYS, and I wonder how to distill from these expletives of capital, your spirit.

Do these unholy visions of you reflect in some way, your essence? Are you the mascot of the logger's obscene rape, of the rush to ugliness, to comfort, progressing untiringly beneath your macrodome?

Or do my eyes betray me? I want to say: This is an optical illusion, this urban sprawl that litters your penumbra. It speaks nothing of your alabaster slopes. But I am hostage to sensate evidence— each profane snapshot becomes a comment on you, Tacoma.

Are you the modern Gomorrah, the great harlot of progress?, shrine of what once was the northwest, preserved alone, while in your wake the lowly hills splay out: soiled, bald, sacrificed for their lesser beauty?

Tacoma. I will call you as you were known to the tribes who spent centuries on your

forested slopes. From Lake Waughup at Steilacoom park, I stand on ground once chaste dominion of the natives, once citadel of the colonial conquest. From these wild banks, the lens of nature restores you: white whale, spiraling above the curved land, unyielding, seemingly unconquered by forces above or below.

Solitary, massive, your opaque planes fold into colossal slabs, spherical like the earth's brow, or breast.

In the mild seasons dusky golds shimmer, ascending to your swirling mists. In autumn sunset, you are awash in crimson rays, in winter, you are a ghostlike titan sketched in manifold shades of charcoal and bleak pastels. Now, through green arms of the spruce and pine you abide. In the foreground, wild geese beat their collective wings.

To those who have climbed your perilous peak it is clear that beauty is only the shadow you cast, Tacoma. Your essence is power. You are, as the tribal peoples called you, the mountain that is God, who, hidden or revealed, is simply there.

Where does your power come from? Perhaps your power flows deep from the lava, blood of the planetary wound inflicted by the ancient welding of tectonic plates thrusting upward the land.

Perhaps your power flows from the myriad wild creatures, the manna of countless lives that once inhabited your slopes—the predators, the prey, plants, herbs once harvested for healing.

Perhaps your power is of the God imported from Europe, the lord of lords, whose people now populate your foothills and valleys.

Perhaps your power is the power of earth, her fist upraised from fire to ice to impale the clouds in a gesture of mutiny.



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