

**Newsweek Magazine** recently published and highlighted my rebuttal to Pulitzer Prize winning poet Rae Armantrout's unseemly (and undeserved) attack on San Diego. See both articles below.

**In Newsweek Magazine**

## The City: San Diego

By George Mullen Sep 24, 2012 1:00 AM EDT

San Diegans and the majority of the 31 million people who visit our city each year would happily and vigorously refute the lion's share of what Rae Armantrout has written. San Diego affords us the ability to do almost anything, any time of the year. Unlike almost any other city in the world, we have unlimited opportunities to embrace life and what it has to offer, which is why so many have come to recognize San Diego as "The City of Life" or "La Ciudad de Vida."

**In Newsweek Magazine**

## Rae Armantrout reflects on San Diego

By Rae Armantrout Sep 3, 2012 1:00 AM EDT

**Rae Armantrout ponders a place with silence at its center.**

It's well known, I think, that San Diego has an inferiority complex. The fact that it officially refers to itself as "America's Finest City" doesn't help. For one thing, that phrase itself has no appeal. It can't hold a candle to "The Big Easy" or "The Big Apple" or, most significantly, "The City of Angels." To many people, San Diego looks like a fat comma hanging down below Los Angeles. Don't get me wrong. A lot of people like San Diego. They must since more and more of them move here each year. But I don't think teenagers anywhere are saying to themselves, as they try to fall asleep, "Someday I'll be in San -Diego, you just wait!" It's a city without charisma—which is a bit surprising given that it's a metropolis of more than 1.3 million people in an attractive natural setting, located in California, a state with plenty of charisma.

I might even be able to give San Diego a kind of backhanded compliment by calling its lack of charisma "mysterious." Let's just say it's easy to "keep it real" here. For example, I've been hearing that there's a lively indie-music scene in San Diego for some time. I heard the same rumor back in the '90s. San Diego was the next Seattle, they said. Nothing ever came of

it; that is, it didn't "blow up big." But then, if it had, it wouldn't have been "indie," would it? Maybe I shouldn't say San Diego has an inferiority complex; maybe I should say it refuses to be grandiose. When I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, I found out that I have a self-deprecating sense of humor. At least I had a sense of humor. I loved it there, though. It was the perfect antidote to my suburban childhood. I grew up in a San Diego subdivision called Allied Gardens, built on the Levittown model for returning World War II vets. It's fair to say that I was bored out of my mind. When I was 18 or 19, before I transferred to the University of California at Berkeley, my friends and I would go downtown to stare shyly at the sailors, the tattoo parlors, the whores and trannies. They call that slumming, I know. But we were just looking for color, movement.

When I was in my 20s, my husband and I lived in San Francisco. It was the perfect place to be a young poet, or perhaps I should say, to become a poet. It was a poet-friendly environment (and there aren't many of those). There were bookstores everywhere (those were the days) and reading series in every bookstore, bar, and café. Half the people I knew edited small magazines. In San Francisco it was (and is) easy to believe that what you were doing was serious, important, real; though, if you were from San Diego, like me, there was also a small voice in your head warning that "the baseless fabric of this vision" would sooner or later "melt into air." Perhaps living in San Diego prepares you to become a Buddhist.

While I lived in San Francisco, there were things about San Diego I missed. I missed the warmth of the sun. I also missed the sky. In San Diego, you can generally see a lot of it. I wouldn't call us the "big-sky city," but it is possible to gaze into the distance. I think, in an odd way, I also missed silence. Not that San Diego is quiet. There is the constant roar of engines in the background, but, beneath that roar, there is a kind of silence.

Our city "fathers" (do we still say that?) started trying to cover the silence over by hanging big signs with the names of neighborhoods across our major streets. For instance, in my neighborhood, a sign reading "Normal Heights" has been stationed over Adams Avenue. It reminds me of that scene in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in which a plague of amnesia sweeps through the village so that the villagers affix pieces of paper with nouns to every object. I find all these signs rather amusing actually. The funniest one is the sign across El Cajon Boulevard that reads "The Boulevard," as if we call it that. We don't. I have never actually heard anyone say, "The Boulevard." It's a piece of ersatz familiarity. It's as if this city has decided there's "no here here," to adapt a saying (about Oakland) by Gertrude Stein, and is trying to remedy the situation. Leave it alone, I say. In my mature years I have come to appreciate the blankness of this town. When I step on the street in San Diego, I am not stepping onto a set; I am not stepping into a play, my own or anyone else's.

*About the Author:* Rae Armantrout's collection, *Versed*, won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. A new book of poems, *Just Saying*, is forthcoming from Wesleyan University Press in February 2013.