

# The Vegetable Air

BY CATHY SONG

You're clean shaven in this country  
where trees grow beards of moss,  
where even bank tellers  
look a little like banditos  
in vests as pungent as sweatsuits.  
Still, you prefer the vegetable air  
to almost any other place on the  
map.

After the heart attack,  
you considered Paris—  
the flying buttresses,  
the fractured light of its  
cathedrals;  
the entire city refined and  
otherworldly,  
ascending on its architectural

*"The Vegetable  
Air" from  
Frameless  
Windows,  
Squares of  
Light.  
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POEM

wings—  
but decided you had no use for  
glory,  
boulevards fur-lined  
with statues and expensive trees.

You admit, on the whole,  
the towns in this country are  
ugly.

One summer you drove toward  
Nicoya  
(a beautiful name that became  
your destination),  
expecting a fragrant town of  
mango trees  
but found cattle grazing in the  
plaza,  
rattling the tin plates  
in the ubiquitous Chinese  
restaurant.

A Coca-Cola sign hung weathered  
and askew.

That's perhaps why you like it,  
it's a country you can't count on,  
a country of misfits.

Unable to take root in the mud,  
the twentieth century has failed  
miserably,  
creating neither factory nor  
industry  
but a thirst for soda pop;  
like cosmetic surgery,  
it is skin deep.

The clock is stuck in the rain  
and the mud of four o'clock.

There's nothing to do but wait as  
if

in a dry cave, a room with a view  
of the waterfall,  
pinned as you are beneath the  
downpour.

The waiter bends over your cup  
without filling it,  
the storekeeper holds your  
change  
until the rain, hypnotic and  
dramatic,  
leaves the streets and the gutters,  
the balcony and the air greener,  
heavier—  
mildew blooming in the closet  
where your shoes,  
powdered with a sea-green  
lichen,  
resembles old bronze,  
a pair of ancient goblets.

While iguanas lounge in the attic  
(a prehistoric version of the  
domestic rat),  
the Office of the Ministry  
(a pink and crumbling building  
surrounded by dusty rose trees)  
prints more money to prop  
the flimsy flowered currency.  
You can't predict what your  
American  
dollars will bring by morning.  
In the hotel restaurant  
you meet the Undesirable  
American.  
He learns just enough of the local  
lingo  
to swing by, living on a dwindling

account  
and, here and there, a real estate  
swindle.  
Or the pensionado who buys two  
cigars,  
offering you one the day  
his Social Security arrives.  
Like the cockroach, the displaced  
have crawled through the cracks  
and selected for themselves  
an agreeable niche.  
A place to start from scratch.  
They thrive in the vegetable air.  
You wonder how you'll survive,  
unfit, unable to work.  
Lacking the predatory skills,  
you've stayed in the trees,  
a dreamer, all your life,  
even now wanting to believe  
a change of scenery  
will get you back on your feet.  
A brief hiatus in the vegetable air.

Tonight, you walk along the  
damp streets,  
an average steak, a glass of wine  
swishing in your belly,  
to your small room wedged  
between  
a jukebox and a dance hall.  
There are so many things you  
can't change—  
like the dull thrashing music.  
You draw the blinds, switch on  
the tiny cassette.  
Silence. The click of the tape.  
And then the familiar aria,

rising like the moon,  
lifts you out of yourself,  
transporting you to another  
country  
where, for a moment, you travel  
light.

## To Fill Your Belly and Your Cup: Poems that Nourish

Good poems, like good  
food, excite the senses  
and nourish the soul.  
From the dinner party  
to the picnic, food is at

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