



Wings & Roots: Wisdom from a Forgotten Garden

Capella Cao

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The subtle proverb-based tale Wings & Roots weaves wondrous cultural connections between nature and humanity.

An entrancing illustrated literary tale, Capella Cao's *Wings & Roots* utilizes Chinese proverbs to tell the story of life within a neglected garden.

In the midst of winter, the garden of an "old tiled house" is covered in snow. Longtime residents Clay Pot, Gecko, and Locust Tree view the season in different ways: Gecko is cold, irritable, and yearns for springtime; Clay Pot and Locust Tree are more stolid as they explain how the frozen quiet replenishes the earth's strength. The three are soon joined by Swallow, who has lost her parents and is learning to fly. Later, the Human arrives, grieving his grandfather's death as he makes his own attempts at gardening.

Moving forward from its winter prologue, the book follows the garden's changing seasons. Through a series of one hundred revered Chinese proverbs, the characters contemplate nature, each other, and various paradoxes and certainties. "When spring thunder rumbles, all life awakens" heralds the return of warm weather; though Swallow worries that the sky is angry, Clay Pot assures her that the thundering sound will reinvigorate hidden roots, buds, and even dreams. Such observations and interludes are heightened by the book's compact eloquence, which helps to sustain its subtle momentum.

Each anthropomorphized garden character is developed with an individuality that adds to the collective dynamic. Gecko is quick and resilient, while nurturing Locust Tree has tenacious roots that twist through stones. Clay Pot's enduring wisdom is grounded in his "olive-green glaze" and sturdy shape; Swallow's youthful uncertainty matures into an arc of belonging and independence. And while the Human does not speak to the others, his character emerges through their observations. Inept at gardening and troubled by sadness, he gains experience and finds solace by learning to work with nature's cycles.

Black-and-white ink brush illustrations complement the book's rich simplicity with minimal yet evocative details. A raindrop slides down a solitary leaf; Swallow soars through the starry dusk. Though faceless, the Human gazes up at the moon in a pose that conveys a sense of weary longing. In general, the overall flow of poetic language, such as how Locust Tree creaks during the winter with "a whisper of wood and ice," is strong. And the book's brevity works in its favor, containing its unique rhythm to a year of discoveries, harvests, frosts, and winter's return.

Following the story's conclusion, the book includes intriguing information regarding China's ancient agricultural calendar of shorter "solar" seasons, including spring's Grain Rain and autumn's pearl-like White Dew. Additional historical and traditional context is also shared regarding the proverbs. And in a note of personal poignancy, Cao reveals her elderly father's issues with memory loss. Though he began to struggle with immediate facts and dates, her father's recollection of the hundred garden proverbs remained keen; more than ancestral wisdom or advice, the words

became a vital and timely generational link.

With measured pacing and distinctive simplicity, the proverb-based tale *Wings & Roots* weaves wondrous cultural connections between nature and humanity.

MEG NOLA (April 29, 2026)

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