

Review of *Wild Wise Weird: The Kingfisher Story collection*

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Hanoi, October 27th, 2024

Quan-Hoang Vuong's *Wild Wise Weird: The Kingfisher Story* collection features 42 short stories about Kingfisher, a character living in a bird village filled with changes—his dreams and ambitions, social events, new technologies, the changing climate, and the inevitable aging of the body. Life in the bird village parallels life in traditional Vietnamese villages. While the Kingfisher is one of the wisest and most respected birds in the bird village, the ever-changing world often presents him with situations that lead to comical attempts to save face. And his quirky thoughts are sure to bring readers smiles, better yet, moments of quiet reflection, which is befitting because the first 15 stories were published in the *Khoảng Lặng* (Quiet Moment) column of the Vietnamese magazine *Kinh Tế và Dự Báo* (Economy and Forecast Review) from 2017 to 2019.

Take, for example, the very first story, where over-planning and over-thinking perfectionists get a taste of their own medicine:

First come the ideas, then comes an action plan. Never mind the planning required, he excels at this—if a plan is incomplete or not assuring enough, he would correct it. Perfection naturally calls for dedication and diligence. No matter how many times it takes him to correct his plans, he does not mind, for he is immersed in these mathematical calculations. When night falls, he smiles with the utmost pride and satisfaction at the perfect plan to catch fish. Well, the problem is that he cannot fall asleep on an empty stomach.

-The Perfect Plan, *Wild Wise Weird: The Kingfisher Story Collection*, Quan-Hoang Vuong (2024) –

The storytelling is skillfully balanced between style and substance: All stories can fit into an A4 page, yet just enough events and logics are set up to unfold into a *minimal* sense of self-reflective humor. Each story is like a modern day Koan, only lighter, perhaps more suitable for our information overload, already heavy world (Ho & Vuong, 2023; Vuong & Ho, 2024).

The style of satire that Quan-Hoang Vuong presents in his stories is best captured by the title itself: *wild, wise, and weird*.

It's *wild* in its imagination. A quick glance at the table of contents reveals a diverse range of subjects for satire, including innovation, robots and AI, bird village economics, Sun Tzu's war strategies, greenhouse gas emissions, legendary Kung Fu, beauty pageants, and more. It seems that if we learn to view things, just about anything, from a just relaxed enough perspective, we can connect the beauty and the seriousness, to the absurdity in everything. And there lies a bemused moment that brings refreshing joy.

It is *weird* because it is rather hard to find funny stories that make people rethink the struggles of humans as we have to contend with the contemporary zeitgeist and all kinds of weird, particular mental tendencies that our traditions and cultures instill into us. For example, The bird village is like the humans, fearing the arrival of intelligent robots only to find out that the boogey man robot installed to scare them away are without batteries.

It is *wise* because each story invites us to examine human values through laughter and quiet smiles. Kingfisher can make us laugh at our quirky flaws and habits. A part of us might desire to master meditation to the point our mind is perfectly still, yet a little provocation from a stranger can send anger back stirring our mind.

Monk Bird noted down a few words at the bottom: "*Journey unfinished yet. A mere fart of mine is enough to send your mind into chaos, let alone the Eight Winds (eight worldly desires that generate a craving for four things: Prosperity, Honor, Praise, Pleasure, and a fear of four others: Decline, Disgrace, Censure, and Suffering)*"

Then Cuckoo returned the letter with Monk Bird's remarks to Kingfisher. Angered by the response, Kingfisher raged and flew over the two ponds to confront Monk Bird, who was meditating. Shouting from a nearby branch, Kingfisher's anger only met Monk Bird's silence and serenity, with his eyes closed.

The Mediation Master, *Wild Wise Weird: The Kingfisher Story Collection*, Quan-Hoang Vuong (2024).

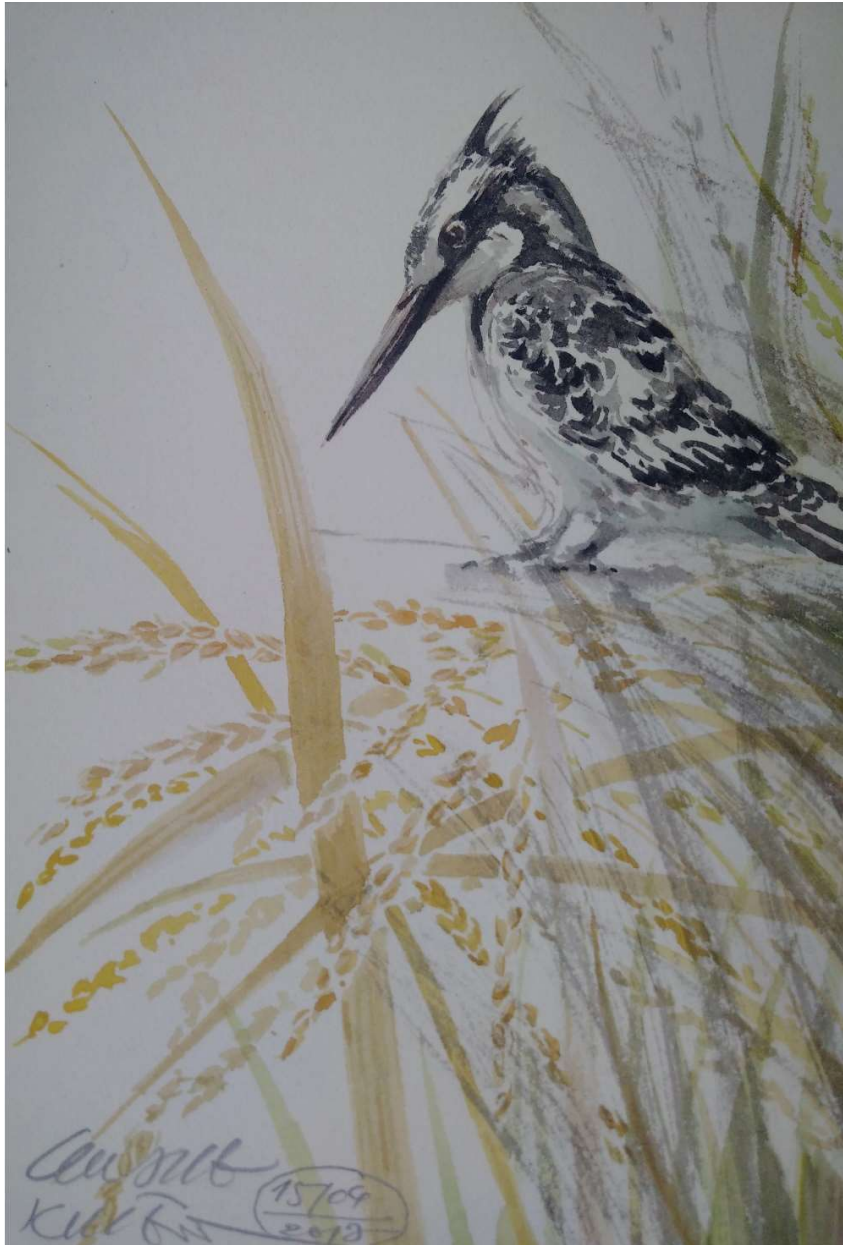


Figure 1: A drawing of the Kingfisher by artist Quang-Khiem Bui.

Here, Kingfisher reminds us to not take ourselves too seriously and looking at the world and ourselves in it in a with a more *khoáng đạt mind*, a mind with a sense of openness, generosity, and a free-spirited attitude. Embracing this mindset, we can find balance and resilience, allowing us to adapt to changes without becoming overwhelmed.

References

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