

Wander and Wither

an Unsounded fanwork by Corundum Bleu



Wandering Root doesn't remember.

Or rather, remembering is not an adequate word for the way in which Wandering Root beholds the past. For how can a beast formed so entirely of emotion bear a memory in completeness? Yet echoes of its past still linger within its twisted limbs, millenia of passion, hope, and despair throb through its ligneous arteries.

As Wandering Root drinks water from the earth with its shoots, so too does it probe the khert with timid fingers, sipping upon wayward sentiments of the world around it. Wandering Root flourishes on the burbling emotional life force of the world, each drop of joy and anguish mingling and persisting in the great vascular network of its body. It is a living vault of the woes of the world. Perhaps no beast, Senet or mundane, is so like the Khert in body or function—after all, Wandering Root was the first, and what else was there for the Gods to base their designs upon?

Somewhere, deep inside Wandering Root, remains a shred of the day it came into being. At that time the world was vast and empty. Wandering Root was small and empty, for there was nothing in the world for it to feed upon. That is, nothing but it's own creator, vast and ephemeral with eyes like the stars and skin like midnight. Wandering Root raised its sapling head to stare into the twinkling depths of its creator and there it tasted its first emotion. Pride, warm and orange like the crown of a flame, blazed through its slender frame which groaned as new boughs sprouted along its length and fresh leaves unfurled. Wandering Root would not learn of fire until later, but the comparison is apt, for pride too may have devastating effects.

With the hot fuel of its creator's hubris within it, Wandering Root let forth a tremendous roar—the first to shake young Kasslyne. The starlight god was rattled too, perturbed perhaps by the power he had unleashed through his creation. Thus the second emotion Wandering Root felt was fear, so strong and palpable that it turned at once to flee from its master into the wide, young world.

Very little of those early days remain within Wandering Root. For a long time, Kasslyne was so vast and empty that one could wander for centuries without meeting another soul. Wandering Root often put down roots to absorb nutrients from the dirt and so its body grew large and strong, though without the presence of other creatures it was an empty husk. It could author no feeling or thought of its own, so an unpopulated world was to it as barren as a desert without an oasis. In time, however, more beasts appeared. The waterwomen with their jealousy and mirth, the curiosity of young mountain ogres, the wrath of the typhoon whales, even the meek contentedness of the spindleworms—Wandering Root drank from these founts of emotion as a

parched man from a mountain spring. For the first time since its creation, remembrance of these moments of passion and sentiment pulsed through its veins.

There is little record in Wandering Root's heartwood of what was perhaps the strangest encounter of its young existence. Given enough time, it seems inevitable that it should happen upon another of its own kind. It had never occurred to Wandering Root that it may not be unique in the world, yet the encounter created no sense of surprise from either creature. Neither was capable of originating an emotion, and thus they regarded each other without fear, without wonder, without even the warm glow of kinship. There in the green woods of young earth, these two great beasts were no more than empty vessels, two mirrors reflecting each other in a dark room.

More life sprung up as Wandering Root roamed the budding countryside. Lesser animals, not nearly so fantastical as the first generations of Senet beasts, began to appear. Wandering Root found these beings uninteresting, their emotional auras dull and tasteless in comparison. Among them was a hairless bipedal creature, which Wandering Root also took little note of for many years. They moved in groups, driven by the uncomplex desire for food and shelter and occasionally clashing in brief but fierce skirmishes. It was these confrontations that drew Wandering Root's attention—the vicious lust for enemy blood and zealous protectiveness of one's own were a new spice it had not tasted yet on earth. It began to lurk around the margins of battlefields, bearing witness to pain and elation inflicted by others on others.

Eventually, the humans took notice of Wandering Root. One day they woke it from its slumber with great shouts, rushing to surround it and snapping off branches and boughs. Though it could not generate its own pain, all the hurt and suffering it had absorbed from others pulsed through it and it bellowed in anguish and lashed out at its attackers. They beat it back with torches until it fled, then returned triumphantly to their families with prized bundles of First Wood. For the first, Wandering Root could not stand entirely aloof from the sufferings of the world.

For long after that, Wandering Root eschewed the company of man. Fortunately, the diversity of creatures in Kasslyne was ever growing. Along the salty coastal caves, it happened upon a small reptilian race who were well suited to dark subterranean spaces. These creatures revered Wandering Root as a symbol of the bright, sunlit world above and showered it with veneration and welcome. In the glow of their adoration, it nursed its wounds and thus passed many happy years. However, it never could stay for long in their unlit caverns and in time the two-toes began to migrate deeper underground and worship other gods. The visits to the Root on the surface world became less and less frequent. Eventually, it commenced its peregrinations once more.

Wandering Root traveled north. Man had become more sophisticated in the intervening years, advancing in both technology and war. Along its journey it skirted towns and small cities. The weather grew colder and the soil poorer, but the Wandering Root pressed on. Where it could not find adequate nutrition in the rocky mountain sod, it fed instead on the pain and fear emanating from destroyed villages in its path. If you could ask it would not be able to tell you why stayed its

course through inhospitable lands, but when it traveled so far that frost clung its branches and the weak sunlight could barely sustain it, it crested a final mountain pass to find a horrifying sight below.

A vast procession of humans wound through the valley before it, laden with their worldly possessions and the sorrows of lives uprooted. Never before had Wandering Root encountered such monumental suffering—a crowd twenty thousand strong aching for a home they had been driven out of. An yet, among the despair and fear, an undercurrent of hope pervaded the sad parade. Wandering Root had tasted belief first among the two-toes, yet these people projected their faith, faith in a future life and in their own exceptionality, with a bright, bitter clarity. It was an intoxicating mixture. For weeks, Wandering Root crept along behind, following the gleam of the sunlight on their golden hair and the trail of sorrow they left behind.

Eventually, however, the towheaded exodus dispersed and settled into new lands and Wandering root was once left aimless. The world, however, was changing. Man had claimed Kasslyne as his sandbox. The Senet Beasts were retreating or disappearing, and Wandering Root began to encounter constructs and other fabulous assemblages of technology in their stead. Of course, the chief purpose of these was war, and by this time Wandering Root had developed a wariness of man's propensity for violence. At this time, there was still adequate space for a large beast such as itself to remain lost in the midland forests, and so it did. It traveled south, keeping to the fringes of wild lands where it could and avoiding the tantalizing chaos of the battlefield.

As it traveled and the terrain grew rocky, the ferocity of the war waxed and waned around it. Wandering Root recognized the hills and ravines as the bodies of the mountain ogres it had once roamed beside. How flat and empty their remains felt now! Instead, the air was sharp and sweet with the courage and panic of men killing and being killed. Wandering Root drank it in warily.

One day, Wandering Root stopped dead in its tracks at the edge of barren rock field. The presence of warring men had been dwindling for days, but now a stranger feeling arose. The khert—a constant presence from the moment of its creation—was...*twisted*. Confusion bubbled within the Root. It retreated, searched for another path, and advanced again, only to be repelled by the fundamental feeling of *wrongness*. The khert here was sharp, it plucked at the Wandering Root, attempting to scramble its body and scatter its carefully hoarded emotions. How could this be? What crimes had Man wrought to so agitate the nursery which cradled the world? Wandering Root was not equipped to answer this, and could only skirt the damaged areas by careful trial and error and it made its way across the scarred landscape.

It was perhaps this experience above all others that finally drove Wandering Root into hiding. The sheer extent of damage Man was capable of dealing to the very fabric of the universe disturbed it more than all the pain and suffering it had absorbed over the years. True, humans had brought delight to the world with the never-ending entanglements of their inner lives, but

what right had they to destroy the gods' creations? No, it was better to retreat altogether. Leaving the desecrated expanses behind it, Wandering Root sought a quiet place to rest. It found a lake, surrounded by greenery more than several weeks' travel from even the most modest settlement. Here, at last, it could rest. The world was quiet except for the soft hum of forest creatures. Wandering Root extended its tap roots into the moist soil and sank into deep hibernation.

It could not say how long it slumbered there. What finally awoke it was indignation. As the Root stirred it felt a creature's temper—like a man's, but somehow less—at being led astray morph into its own resentment for having been roused. Pesky—it ate the creature, which usually put an end to these things. However, in this case it didn't. Wandering Root became aware of a second creature—this one almost like a human child, but also something more—bathing the Root in feelings of awe. This seemed harmless enough. The Root directed its attention instead to taking a long drink from the lake.

The second creature didn't subside. Awe turned to indignation, and the Root was once again agitated. Very well, it would eat this child creature as well. But the creature bobbed and weaved through the Root's attempts to grasp at her, audacity growing within them both. And what was this rumbling within its belly? Was the eaten man-creature not dead? Certainly he was, and yet roiling mass of emotions poured forth as the man-creature exploded from its mouth—anguish over the past, protectiveness over the future.

The two strange creatures retreated. The Wandering Root watched warily and nursed the burning in its throat from the man's egress. It had been so long since it had tasted the emotions of humans as individuals. Had they always been this vibrant? It could feel the tension between the two acutely. From the man-creature—indignation, frustration, and overwhelming protectiveness. From the girl-beast—pity, respect, a desire to prove herself, and the guilt of betrayal.

Now, however, rage was taking over. It was the girl-creature's rage, which became the Wandering Root's rage, which became the dead-man's rage, which became fire, fire hot and burning, fire consuming all, fire as terrifying and unfathomable as the burning pride which had first brought the life of Wandering Root into the world and now would steal it back.

The dead-man and the girl-beast awoke, recovered, and moved on. Perhaps they felt some remorse over their part in the destruction of the oldest creature of Kasslyne which kept within its boughs the loves and losses of the world. Perhaps they felt some guilt over their hapless treatment of each other.

The smoldering remains of Wandering Root couldn't say. But perhaps... perhaps the pale green sprout taking root among the ashes would remember.