



Reaction Wood

I'll start with the memory part, leaving the science part for later. When I was a boy I had, in lieu of a dog, in lieu of a grandfather, a tree.

It was a towering old black walnut that stood near the south edge of our yard in suburban Cincinnati, with a pair of stout lower limbs sticking out horizontally like the arms on a giant scarecrow. If my memory can be trusted, those limbs emerged from the trunk about eight feet up. Possibly they were lower and only the parallax of time and nostalgia has raised them. Anyway, one held a swing. Supporting my weight, or mine and my big sister's together, would have been trifling to a limb of such girth—it was thick as a telephone pole. In the fog of my earliest recollections, dating back forty-some years, I can see myself gazing up at those two horizontal limbs, where they hung far beyond my little-boy reach, far beyond even my best jump. I can recall vowing that someday I'd manage to lay hold of one, somehow, and then I'd climb this wonderful tree.

Reaching the horizontal limbs, the first rung, would be the least of the problems. Just above, the tree divided into three major stalks, each nearly vertical, the easternmost of which rose to a precarious crow's nest of small branches about sixty feet in the air. Getting to the crow's nest would present dangers and difficulties

whose solution, when I was six or seven, I couldn't even imagine. But several years later, with a little more size and agility, I solved them. And then, over and over again throughout boyhood, I did climb the tree. I went everywhere in it that my weight would allow. I learned all its knobs and its crotches. I discovered that although the crow's nest seemed unattainably high on its limbless stalk, I could reach it indirectly: ascending the westernmost stalk instead, then stepping over to a high notch in the middle stalk, and from there to the eastern one. I wore a path, along that route, into the tree's black corduroy bark. Once, on a stupid show-offish whim of the sort that occasionally gets a boy killed, I climbed to the crow's nest and down again blindfolded. I had memorized every requisite move. But the tree represented more to me than a gymnastic challenge. It was a place I enjoyed visiting; it was a living creature I respected. It had become almost personified to me, a valued companion and mentor.

—Quammen, David, *Wild Thoughts From Wild Places*.
New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999