

THE SOLITUDE OF ALTITUDE

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



My childhood was a happy one, although as I grew up within a household of 10, solitude was hard to find. One way to be alone

was up a tree – hidden for a while among fragrant folds of magnolia, obscured from the life of the family until, after what seemed a luxurious interlude, my mother called me to supper.

A loft above our garage, outfitted with an old hammock slung from the rafters, was a secret, solitary place, too. The loft was our version of a family attic, used mostly for castoff relics – the rusty handsaw, the broken rocker, the radio, full of vacuum tubes, that had gone mute long before I was born. Alone among these odd things, I came to understand that solitude itself was an oddity, something the world tolerated like the village eccentric. Alone wasn't how *normal* people were supposed to be, or so it appeared, though solitude might be allowed, forgiven, excused as long as one didn't indulge in it too deeply.

In a big family, solitude can be a rare thing. I sometimes found it by climbing to places others might not go.

Occasionally secluded on a high branch or in the garage's top story, I came to link solitude with altitude, a connection I still make. A few years ago, addled by the noise of a church fair, I climbed some nearby bleachers, sitting on the top bench for a spell to clear my head. From that grand perch, I could see the church fair whole, as if it were encased in a snow globe. What I felt was a kind of intimacy, my solitude a part of, not apart from, the scene below me. Only in stepping away from my life for a moment could I see how I truly fit in.

History speaks of others who have sought solitude in high places. The lone yogi atop a snowy mountain has become a kind of visual shorthand for wisdom fulfilled. The 16th-century Frenchman Michel de Montaigne famously invented the personal essay while scribbling away in his tower library.

All of this came to mind some months ago when I began another chapter of my career in a new office. I was ushered upstairs, where a lovely workspace had been reclaimed from what had once been an attic. It's here that I do my own scribbling, the roof right above bringing me the first news of rain when showers come. Because of my work shift, there are often pleasant afternoon hours alone.

To be alone all the time wouldn't be a healthy thing. But by myself in an office that feels like a loft I once knew, I sometimes tell myself, with a sense of deep thanks, that I've come home again.

DANNY HEITMAN (Southeastern Louisiana University) is editor of *Forum*. He is also the author of *A Summer of Birds: John James Audubon at Oakley House*, and frequently writes about literature and culture for national publications, including *Humanities* magazine and *The Wall Street Journal*.