

Highwire Act: & Other Tales of Survival

JoeAnn Hart

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In the inventive short stories of JoeAnn Hart's Hudson Prize-winning collection *Highwire Act*, people face catastrophes and discover connections with animals.

Some of the stories are set in the real world; others occupy a speculative future. In "Reef of Plagues," Caribbean citizen scientists decry American tourists' ignorance. A college student argues over ethical eating with her parents in "Organic, Local, and Cruelty-Free." In "Huldufólk," a divorcee wonders how to revolutionize her life while on an Icelandic tour. "Good Job, Robin" depicts a nourishing relationship on a futuristic cricket farm. The chilling title story, set in a hologram circus, imagines a repressive, mindfulness-based society that sends its dead down a chute—to audience gasps.

The striking metaphors draw on nature imagery, as in "worries began to bloom like algae in a stagnant pond." Animals' helpless situations (there's a stranded cow and an injured seal) sometimes mirror humans'. In "Float," both Duncan, whose business and marriage alike are failing, and the gull he rescues are wounded specimens. Self-sufficiency often contrasts with carelessness. The prospect of progress is called into question in "Woodbine & Asters," in which a fierce grandmother resists road improvements that will displace her vegetable stand.

The collection has thematic breadth: there is a touch of domestic horror to "Sunk" and the haunted-house narrative "Piece of History." Recent events enter into "Flying Home," in which a woman dying of COVID-19 watches birds from her hospital window. Attempted suicide links "Thirteen Minutes" and "When You Are Done Being Happy."

The varied tales in *Highwire Act* are clear-eyed in their outlooks on current and future calamities. Whether they're earthbound or science fiction, there's no escaping the severity of these tales—or the realism of their visions: "There was nothing to be gained by looking back in nostalgia, and everything to be lost by looking forward with dread."

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