

Native Air

Jonathan Howland

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In Jonathan Howland's soul-searching novel *Native Air*, Pete and Joe are kindred spirits whose relationship is fascinating and complex, almost like a marriage. Together, they face the stress of climbing hundreds of feet into the air with the potential of meeting their deaths. Theirs is a partnership that people—even Pete's love interest, Nor, whose presence upsets the complicated balance of the men's relationship—envy. Then Joe decides to attend seminary; he leaves before tragedy strikes.

Years later, Joe is jolted out of his ill-fitting clerical calling by a letter from Pete's son asking to join in on another adventure. Before going, he remembers the events of his and Pete's ten-year climbing career across the US Southwest. Though grief tinges these memories, they're also laced with wonder over life in the mountains and the requirements of his former bohemian lifestyle. Then, scaling a cliff meant going into the unknown, and climbers were rare beings on the hunt for the next great challenge. He and Pete were trailblazers, crafting routes for others to follow.

Written with poetic grace, the novel turns its complex climbing terminology, with terms like arete, nut, and cam, into beats that propel the pair onward and upwards. And Joe's eventual return to the West portends a spiritual crisis: "faith is a many-legged structure. Doubt is molten. Until it's not." His doubts, he declares, had "hardened all at once into some dense, cutting crystalline form." His return to climbing leads to self-discovery and surprises from the past.

Native Air is a novel about how the art of climbing changes how people understand life—both on the ground, and high on the mountain.

JEREMIAH ROOD (March / April 2022)

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