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AT THE GATES OF THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

By Amy Hempel

Alfred A. Knopf. 135 pp. \$17.95.

When her auspicious 1985 debut volume, *Reasons to Live*, appeared, Amy Hempel credited Dr. Christian Barnard, who like Hempel knows his way around the human heart, with a fitting motto for her stories: "Suffering isn't ennobling, recovery is." That motto fits this powerful new collection as well.

Hempel can chronicle angst as well as anyone—"If you are like me, you know that some of us are not the world, some of us are not the children, some of us will not help make a brighter day. Some of us are silent sufferers of a noisy disease"—but her gaze looks past the disease to how we endure.

Hempel studies those who, in Eliot's words, remain undefeated because they have gone on trying. This never sentimentalized attraction to courage and tenacity, like her spicy wit and liquid voice, provides substance and quality far exceeding the trendy minimalists with whom Hempel has occasionally been linked. Reading her, you feel in the company of a wise and interesting mind. But Hempel veils her depth by foiling traditional expectations of fiction, working more like a lyric poet or visual artist. These tightly compressed stories—average length five and a half pages—are less narrative than descriptive, less linear than spatial, freezing time rather than recording its movement.

At her best, Hempel captures what photographer Cartier-Bresson called "the decisive moment." Typically, that moment verges on the ineffable, when emptiness and loss touch us with such power that we are numbed, not knowing whether to laugh or scream and the choice is beyond our control.

"I leave a lot out when I tell the truth. The same when I write a story," says the narrator of "The Harvest," a dextrous blend of art and artifice. She tells a four-page story framed by Barthian commentary detailing what she falsified and left out. Yet the frame itself becomes the tale of how we keep reaching for what we need, getting mauled in the process; if we didn't, we might merely sit on a couch vicariously watching actresses on t.v. threaten to maul each other.

In "The Harvest" the narrator screams not from pain but from "the fear of pain." In other stories, the pain is real enough, and, like Lorrie Moore, another of the most gifted thirtysomething writers around, Hempel employs wry humor both to cope with and to balance the horror. Amid masterfully employed heat and cold imagery, the fatherless narrator of "The Most Girl Part of You" and her friend "Big Guy" Fitch, whose mother had hung herself eight days before, become lovers who slowly bring each other back to

life. Together, they try to understand what can retain meaning in their world, bluffing that great losses and prolonged voids cannot devastate them. "Look here," they console each other, "it's not as if the Cubs lost."

But if love can be the mode through which we triumph, usually it is the fastest route to anguish. To Freud's perpetual question "What does a woman want?" Hempel often responds: love she can count on in a world that makes sense—is that too much to ask? Yes, many of these stories answer sadly, most of the time it is.

In the lyrical "Daylight Come," even in the throes of passion on a tropical island the narrator sees that love, like a hibiscus, like everything that grows, holds in perfection but a little moment and then can slip away like a wedding ring lost at sea. In "Murder," a story Hempel donated to the recent *Louder Than Words* anthology to benefit the homeless, women search for love and security in a world of interchangeable partners (one woman "had five boyfriends, all named Jim") while their hearts "drop through the floor." Men hear the word "home" and think of rent. Macho types in a strip joint leer at motorcycles instead of strippers. "Men," the Jim-woman laments, "they hate you at first. But all you have to do is be funny and sad and tall and thin and short and fat and wear them down, wear them down."

A fiancée abandoned because she faces a mastectomy is one of a group of women who meet to discuss losses and disappointments, mostly men, in the poignant "The Day I Had Everything." One woman describes her "inappropriate" fiancé: "We don't speak the same language, so we *assume* we like each other. Cuts out a lot of the 'What did you mean by that?'s." Another tells of a man she would have married, the point of her story seeming "that things get worse before they get really terrible." She still hopes he'll call but knows her hope is "like the praying you do after the bowling ball has left your hand." The women meet to support each other, not revel in each others' despair. When one says she is in love and the man *did* call, another coaxes her to tell everything, "Start from ring-ring-ring." In this group, her happiness is precious for its rarity.

Unflinchingly honest, Hempel's elegant collection staves wounds with humor and tempers hope with experience. One of its characters wears a T-shirt whose letters form another apt motto for Amy Hempel: "Life is uncertain—eat dessert first."