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TUMBLE HOME: A novella and stories

By Amy Hempel

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Some writers--Joyce Carol Oates serves as the perfect example--write torrentially: a world forms in their heads, then floods onto the page. At the other end of the spectrum stands Amy Hempel, with a Flaubert-like deliberateness crafting exquisite miniatures as artfully as a Florentine goldsmith.

Hempel's deliberateness may account for the seven year silence since her last book. Like Katherine Anne Porter, Hempel has carved out an acclaimed niche in literature on the basis of only two slim collections of stories.

With stories averaging barely five pages, slender of narrative and characterization, her third volume reads like a series of lyric poems, rich in subtly descriptive lines that, like lightning, flash and cease to be before we're certain what they have illuminated, yet we're struck by their emotional tension and offbeat ways of viewing the world.

In the two-page "Weekend," for example, Hempel offers the distilled essence of a leisurely weekend among friends and extended family, complete with picnic, baseball, children playing and adults relaxing. As the women chat on the porch, the men briefly join them, "And when the men kissed the women good night, and their weekend whiskers scratched the women's cheeks, the women did not think *shave*, they thought: *stay*." But whether that "stay" evokes love or loneliness will depend on who reads it.

Similarly Rorschach-like, "Church Cancels Cow," one of two stories set by a graveyard, begins with a woman complaining that the narrator's dog has desecrated her mother's grave, stirring memories in the narrator of a child's game she played with her brother but which she remembers far more benignly than he does.

Other stories also create a taut balance of warm and cold, innocent and sinister. "The Children's Party" presents an engaging mix of play, wit and sexual tension among children and adults in some nameless edenic spot where there's a moose named "Moosifer." "The Annex" is a haunting monologue by a woman obsessed with the grave of an unborn baby in front of her house.

To bend a line of Hortense Calisher's, a Hempel story provides an apocalypse in a thimble, shaping large issues in the tiniest space. Her debut collection's title, *Reasons to Live*, indicated what has remained the theme of her strongest stories: the courageous sifting of our lives for inspiration to struggle on in a world of alienation, pain and loss.

Her most realized characters balm heartbreak with humor and find a way to endure, often searingly wounded, but unvanquished because they go on trying.

Abandoned by his wife, the protagonist of "Sportsman" personifies the classic Hempel subject. He drives cross-country to visit friends who say things like, "We put up a detached garage. It doesn't care if you park in it or not," and whom he tells, "I had a out-of-body experience before I left. And it was good, 'cause I could help myself pack." But beyond the banter, he takes clear peeks at his immediate lonely future and summons the hope and resolve to enter and perhaps move past it.

Other characters, however, may prove less likely to transcend their isolation. In "The New Lodger," a young woman returns to a remote beach house she'd visited three times before, twice with short-term men, once almost drowning in dangerous current. Like a whirlpool, images of danger and impermanence swirl around the lonely, insular core of a woman so little able to get by on her own that she can't even drive home without help.

Hempel is at her most enigmatic and most lyrical in the title novella. Twice as long as the other seven stories combined, it is also twice as elusive, despite showcasing the keenest eye for detail this side of Ann Beattie. In a reflective epistle to a male painter, a woman in a mental institution free associates about her past and present. Her stray impressionistic musings reveal a fragmented consciousness far more attuned to its inner reality than to any outer one. But being attuned to it does not enable her to harmonize with it. In her words, "I would try to become the woman you wanted without even knowing I was trying. As it is, I am barely the woman I am."

That is typical Hempel. Persons attempting to find a plot in her fiction will be shocked. Even those attempting to find fiction in it will discover themselves in an exquisite but mysterious territory where, although the lines extend to the right margin, we sense ourselves in the presence of a poet.