

# New Fiction by Nancy Ford Dugan: "Flow"

☒ So, Abe, the pleasant guy who buzzes you in every week at the bubbled-roof tennis facility, takes your thick wad of cash (he appreciates exact change) and makes the usual small talk: weather, recent professional tennis matches, how he's doing fixing up the fixer-upper he just bought in Queens, etc.

Lately, you've also been discussing updates on when the tennis club is scheduled to permanently close. The date keeps shifting, but it's imminent.

He'll lose his job. You'll lose your precious hour of weekly tennis.

Today, you notice for the first time a large swelling at Abe's neck. Behind the plexiglass, you suppress a gasp and try not to gawk. You glimpse. It's protruding like an Adam's apple, but halfway down his neck and on the side.

Is it new? Is it painful?

Should you tell him?

Is he blithely unaware?

Or is he fully aware and ignoring it?

Or is he aware and already undergoing medical treatment to deal with it, to keep it from growing, to keep it from consuming all of his neck and possibly his friendly, dark-eyebrowed face and even his shaved head?

Your long-time tennis partner would know what to do, and whether you should bring it up with Abe. She was raised down south and has impeccable manners.

But she's in Egypt for a climate change conference and to see the pyramids. Or so she says. You imagine she is a perfect spy or a radical activist. She is tiny, nondescript, unassuming, and so soft-spoken no one has a clue what she is saying. She is traveling despite all the warnings and articulated dangers associated with travel for someone her age during what is hoped to be a waning phase of the pandemic.

If you wait for your tennis partner to return (in a few weeks) to consult on how to handle Abe's situation, it may be too late for Abe. And it will be solely on you if Abe dies before her return from her high-risk trip because you neglected to mention the large swelling attacking his neck.

Abe is functioning fine. He's busy juggling multiple phone lines, multiple demands for coveted weekend court time. Not knowing what to do, you wave at him through the plexiglass, he smiles back, and you wander to your court, fully masked for action.

You and your tennis partner have been playing with face masks on for several months now; they fog up eyeglasses, pinch behind ears, cut visual perspective horizontally and vertically, and muffle attempts at conversation. On the other hand, there is the possibility that wearing masks while exerting and running could improve lung capacity.

After ten minutes on the court with the young local pro, you are huffing and exhausted. So much for lung capacity. Fifty more minutes to go. During the expensive lesson, you want to make every costly minute count. But you are distracted. You hit the ball wide or long or inaccurately into the sloping net.

Is the distraction due to concerns about your partner's long, potentially dangerous trip? The amount of extra money you have to pay for a lesson while she's away?

Or is it all due to thoughts of Abe's neck growth? To

wondering if it will intensify or expand to the size of a yellow tennis ball, while you are selfishly hitting one instead of helping him? What will Abe's neck look like when your lesson is over?

Will the growth turn yellow? Will that mean it is full of pus?

Why aren't you racing off the court to beg Abe for the love of God to go immediately to an urgent care center (there's one only a few blocks away) to address his neck issue?

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You are unaccustomed to the steady onslaught of briskly and accurately placed balls the pro provides. He plucks the balls nonstop from a jam-packed grocery cart and smacks them at you.

You are accustomed to a sluggish weekly pace with your tennis partner, filled with rambling delays between points as she collects loose balls and places them in odd arrangements at the back of the court. You imagine she is plotting to overthrow a government on a continent oceans away, beyond this smooth, immovable, and bright blue deco surface. You impatiently pace, wait, and sometimes perform jumping jacks until she is finally ready to successfully hit her serve with the intensity of ten thousand suns. Or she hits it directly into the net.

From his side of the court, the agile-legged pro speaks liltingly about flow. "Where is your flow?" he asks. "Don't rush your shots. Get your arm back early. Get it! I like that one. Pivot! Run up to the net. Keep your wrist steady."

You have heard these commands, especially about wrist and flow, nearly every time you take a lesson when your tennis partner is unavailable and your back-up options (a sturdy friend from college, a hard-hitting former work colleague) don't pan out.

Your wrist is the size of a pencil, so what's a woman to do? It doesn't wobble on return of serve since you have time to prepare. But impromptu, at the net, it dips. Some might say it collapses. You start mumbling your "Grip!" mantra to yourself under your multiple masks. It helps you focus and slightly improves the wrist flailing.

As for flow, some days you have it and some days you don't. But honestly, how can you flow when a young man's neck might now be the size of a Buick while you, a masked idiot, gambol all over your side of the court and contend with an unreliable wrist?

You associate the word "flow" with menstruation, something you have not had to worry about for quite some time. Years ago, at a Long Island party where everyone discussed furniture, you were introduced to a much older, wizened man. Over the course of your very brief conversation, he chose for some reason to confide in you that he only dated women who still "flowed."

At the time, you silently wondered:

- Who invited this guy to the party and why? And who uses the word flow in this manner, much less in party patter with a stranger?
- How does he screen for flow status upfront, before dating anyone? Does he require a doctor's note? Does he check out bathroom cabinets? Does he ask women directly? Do they punch him in the nose as he deserves and as the woebegone look of his nose implies?
- Has he incorrectly assumed you no longer flowed, or God forbid that you were interested in dating him?
- You have a gorgeous and smart friend, a mother of twins, who went through early menopause in her thirties. If he had met her "post-flow" would this presumed Viagra user find her lacking? Chopped liver?

Now you wonder why couldn't that guy have a tennis ball

affixed to the side of his creased neck instead of poor, young Abe? Abe, who hasn't even finished fixing up his house.

In fury, you use your two-handed backhand to nail a deep, perfect shot down the line past your lilting-voiced pro. He's unable to return it. He smiles broadly at you and says, "Nice!"

Flow or no flow, for a moment, you've still got it. And it feels so good to hit something.

Maybe Abe just needs some drainage.

Maybe your tennis partner will return safely and virus-free from Egypt.

Maybe the tennis club will stay open.

All unlikely.

But, maybe, and it's a long shot, a very long shot, maybe you will learn *finally* to go with the flow.

But, then again, why start now?

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## **New Poetry from D.A. Gray: "Our Backyard Apocalypse"**

We set small bowls of sugar water  
on the garden's edge. Bees were scarce  
since the freeze which had almost finished  
what the pesticides had started. Still,  
some survived.

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# Poetry from Eric Chandler: “Hetch Hetchy”



THERE'S A DROUGHT / *image by*  
*Amalie Flynn*

## Hetch Hetchy

There are two signs on  
The towel rack.  
One says, “cozy” and explains that  
The towel rack  
Heats your towels.

It's next to the switch  
That fires up  
The electricity to the towel rack.  
That fires up  
The coal fired power plant.

The power plant  
Sends up the gas.  
Is the drought because the power plant  
Sends up the gas?  
Either way, there's a drought.

I looked down through that gas at the  
Hetch Hetchy reservoir.  
White bathtub rings surround the low  
Hetch Hetchy reservoir  
Because of the drought.

The second sign on

The towel rack  
Says they won't launder what's on  
The towel rack.  
Only what they find on the floor.

All the water in the city comes from  
The Hetch Hetchy.  
They're conserving water from  
The Hetch Hetchy.  
They hope you won't mind.

Enjoy your hot towels.

*"Hetch Hetchy" previously appeared in Eric Chandler's book  
Hugging This Rock*

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## **New Poetry from Lisa Stice: "Water Cycle"**

No matter where we are, the oceans  
meet us in some form.  
I am small  
and my daughter (who is only eight) –  
is even smaller  
and still, our dog is smaller  
yet, then there are those microscopic zoe-  
and phytoplankton  
and the not so micro  
fish that eat them and so on

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# New Poetry from Ben Weakley: “Beatitudes I,” Beatitudes II,” “Beatitudes III,” “Beatitudes IV”



THE BROKEN SKIN / *image by Amalie Flynn*

## Beatitudes I.

The Lord blessed us with knowledge. Twin curses, good and evil.

Why else plant the luscious tree there, where we were bound to find the fruit? The purple and shivering flesh never lacks in spirit. The ache and growl of our naked bellies are the price

for the moment's delight. So, we gorge and the juice drips sticky down our chins. Let angels have the eternal heaviness of paradise; ours is the moment. The act, willful and with intent.

Advised of the penalties. Done poorly. Knowing this kingdom cannot last. Looking beyond the gardens for a more convincing view of heaven.

## Beatitudes II.

Are we not also blessed, we who praise  
the clear night and its silence?

Betrayed by the absence of stars, we mourn  
a billion-years' light no longer burning.

We whimper at the withered grass burning,  
the breathing forest burning, the one  
great and living ocean boiling and burning.

You who created time, who is before all things, who will  
remain after the ruin,  
will you be waiting for us in the cool garden?

Will we lie down with you in the dew-damp grass?  
Will we be comforted?

### **Beatitudes III.**

Are the meek blessed tonight in their bundled and stinking  
shelters  
beneath frozen bridges? Are they blessed with patience in  
their waiting  
for the Lord of compassion? For the Lord that *suffers with?*

They suffer together. Their children will inherit the  
suffering  
of generations,  
the split lip of submission, the broken skin of the earth.

### **Beatitudes IV.**

*Blessed.* From a word that meant *blood*.  
Latin for *praise*. Blood and praise to the hungry; they are  
weak.

Blood and praise for the thirsty. For those who bathe  
in fetid water.

What are words  
to those who hunger in a gluttonous world?

To those who thirst beside the brackish rivers,  
choking on garbage? We say, wait for righteousness  
to come from above. But they have starved  
in their flesh so that our spirits could be filled.

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**Poetry by Amalie Flynn +  
Images by Pamela Flynn:  
"#150," "#151," "#152,"  
"#153"**



Flow #150

**SPIDER / 150**

Thick in Louisiana swamps

Atchafalaya Basin

Hot cypress shooting out

Stretching in that bayou

Where pipelines

Pumping black gold oil

Cross across the swamp

Like spider veins.



Flow #151

**TRACKS / 151**

How I find tiny cuts

The skin of my inner

Thighs outer lip my

Labia

Cuts from his finger

Nails small bloody

Crescents

Like beetle tracks.



Flow #152

**SPOIL / 152**

Or deep in a swamp

How oil companies

Create canals

Push earth into piles

Push mud into banks

These spoil banks or  
Dams  
That block blocking  
Water so it cannot  
Flow.



Flow #153

### **CLAM / 153**

The sky is full of trees  
Now after  
After he hits me over  
The head  
With a pipe metal pipe  
Hard on  
The crown of my skull  
Bone and  
Suture cracking like a  
Clam shell.

*[Pattern of Consumption](#) is a year long project featuring 365 poems by Amalie Flynn and 365 images by Pamela Flynn. The*

*poetry and images focus on the assault on women and water.*