

WHERE HIS LINES RUN

Adam Tavel

SUICIDE IN DORCHESTER COUNTY.—Mr. Thomas Esgate, a respectable citizen of Dorchester county, Md., committed suicide on Sunday. The Cambridge Chronicle says:

“About a year or two ago his wife, laboring under a despondency of mind, committed an act similar and equally as rash as the present painful instance we are now called upon to record. Mr. Esgate married a second time, and we learn was very unhappy—seemingly at times insane—declaring his dead wife had appeared to him on several occasions—again, that he would starve before spring, &c. A few days before his death he went in the woods and marked the trees where his lines run—declaring that he should die soon. On last Sunday morning he was found in his horse stable with his throat cut from ear to ear.”

ENGAGEMENT: KITTURAH: 1 SEPTEMBER 1833

Dearest Tom, father says that my demand
to write myself with news that he accepts
(& I of course) your proposal, so standing,
is sure influence of his precepts.
How bold I am indeed, that preacher's fire! It is
so then, a full unransomed YES. Set
the date soon, for I will no doubt tire
of waiting now that we shall both be blessed.
& vows! Gray haired forever
seems hardly real! How

late. Curtains yawning wide I write
drowsed at midnight: only eager stars & one
dim wick light my tableside. So
goodnight, my love, this chirping
world fades to dream
my fingers tangled, your raven curls—

WELCOME: H.R. MONROE FARM SUPPLY & GENERAL STORE: 16 MAY 1834

It is rare for us to extend
credit to our customers regardless
of occupation or community
status but given your recent nuptials, Mr. Thomas,
& your father's esteem in this great
Dorchester County know seed

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& handcraft implements from our shelves
have, for generations, helped hearty
fortunes sprout. This month flaying spades,
cart jacks, steel froes & corn flails straight
from London by way of Baltimore; southern
raids on lingering Nanticoke
brought surplus beads & arrowheads
fashioned from femurs of wild
Assateague ponies; cut petunias freshly
bundled for the Missus make
a splendid housewarming & our raspberries
sweetest on the Shore. Eager are we
to be your general for life & pray
to have the courtesy of your commerce
but for Saturday eventide—we proudly
observe Sabbath at sundown as the good
Lord intended.

ARRIVAL: KITTURAH TO CANDICE IN WYE WILLS: 21 MARCH 1840

Twins, dear sister, twins! Two & forty weeks'
labored waiting, fears a second child
at thirty-five & then this week *two*

arrive! Of course we chose good Gospel
names, our John all banshee
wail & James
his manner meek
even napping
when his brother thrashes wildly.

I tell myself I've done all this & thrived
before—
night cries & nursings, how like cold
morning fog the early
fond months fade—I try

to let cheer take its place at heart—but nagging
fears, the tiny toes
& hands, can I endure while Thomas
tends log, field & mare, another
season's start? I pray
this birth a part
of heaven's plan—:

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to you than another shrew among your stinking
barn that you could scoff & shoo away—
if you spared a single word of kindness
for my table instead of wasting breath
on these thoughtless mares you pet & praise,
brushing their silken coats long after
our youngest lay blissful dreaming—damn it all
Thomas if twenty years of vows could stand
to make you keep our bed—if I had strength
enough to do the Gospel's will—O Lord
if I had wings to brace against the dust—

LETTER TO THE UNDERTAKER: THOMAS: 25 JANUARY 1854

Fashion it from marble: crisp burnished dates
in serif script. Marble since wind & frost
wreck our fallow field even when weeds
fail to bury marks of beast & man. My sons

request a chiseled ichthys, that peasant
sign that saved the saved from the Coliseum,
a sign of ardent faith their hands may trace
these long & wearisome years when stark

new moons pass over. Minnows in a tide pool,
these wailing boys ripple muddy shallows
as if some wave will save them from the sun.
Stand it three foot high—cost is no concern

but know that even though my eldest whines
I'll not harbor a cross upon my land.

A BLESSING: ETHAN ESGATE: 1 FEBRUARY 1854

Dearest Thomas, my last
earthly wish is prolonged suffering
but grace bestowed a waking

miracle to our nightmare. Beloved Victoria
with child after lifelong seasons
barren & Doctor Burnett confirms

the handiwork of Providence. Only one
other such case—a piteous Occohannock
squaw—so this assuredly

an angelic anomaly. For the sake
of preservation we plead to christen the child

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Kitturah if indeed she be a girl. Your late

silence understood, brother, so only
respond if our asking strikes too hard
against the anvil. Our hearts

linger open should you want for any
small thing—plod the grim
march of weeks to stitch yourself

whole for your boys if nothing
else gets your hands upon an udder.
I pray these months sprint to bare

Kitturah beaming in our arms.

FIRST NOTE FOR THE GRAVESTONE: THOMAS: 7 FEBRUARY 1854

The river clots with ice.

Where
are your eyes?

Snowtracks—mine
& deer's—mark this wading out,
my stagger back to grief I've made
my Calvary.

Enough. Kitturah, I've hid a box behind

your marble stone that's lid

will never know the sting

of nails. Hewn shagbark,

your favorite, the one

whose leaves you read

beneath while James & John crawled themselves

to napping. A sound it was their weeping

when I laid it down.

May its hinges hold

this scrap & feeble

scrawl, this litany

of wilt beside

month-old ivies,

four wreaths browned

in snow above your hair

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A BESEECHING: JUDGE WHITNEY BROWN TO GEOFF WILLIAMS: 26 MAY 1854

Thomas, I said, find some means to bind
your tattered threads together—three sons
bereft, farm in disrepair, nothing

planted & summer looms! Kitturah's blood
was her father's—no forgiving
that nigger bitch in the hayloft. Rush,

Williams, the first ferry from Baltimore—
these words short of their mark
& our Thomas a jarred light-bug flitting

against the lid. Intrepid friend, he needs
more than this windbag judge
to ease his strain. Christ—how I signed

the death register! What lie
for their good name & progeny! Prayer,
hard as he pushes, a broken barrow!

ESGATE'S WEATHER DIARY: AUGUST 1854

Tuesday, the 1st

Williams' barn burnt
last night. Lost 2 plow, 9 spade
& axe, 5 barrel whiskey, countless
bushel apples & 3 good
horse. The roan still breathing
but wrecked—Tom
& I held while Williams
shot to end it. His Margo.
The child sobbed till dawn

Friday, the 4th

Berries, honeysuckle
picked with Tom. Light-
headed—after supper nurse
with brandy. Another suffocation
week. I took to Sarah while mending
stanchions but no she said
you stink always of horse
& still Kitturah
to Kitturah you go kneeling

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Sunday, the 13th

Church. Raining. Meadow
a damnable swamp. Tended
grave with loose straw. Sarah
upset another spoilt shirt.
Studios, twins reading
gospels & Tom pens his
doggerel. Why bother Tom
I said your verses can they sing
can they sing her back

Monday, the 22nd

Mrs. Williams—Evelyn—
borrowed plow glistening,
drenched gingham in the swelter,
arms rivering nectar she tilts
her straw brim
back to show a thin
equator of dirt. Bangs
like bean-shoots, their slick
tips out for air

Sunday, the 28th

3 a.m. Margo in nightgown
sat an oak stump
petting her sheltie.
Watched her gaze cloud-drifts
& stars before dreaming
she was my little thin one
nestled under blankets—
grain beneath my hands
her maize-yellow hair

PLEA FOR THE HANGOVER: SARAH ESGATE: 5 AUGUST 1854

Not your broke-back sparrow of need
all wing & helpless flail, I am your wife now
Thomas, a soul for which
you once took care before you drank
away each cast of stars. I'll not sit idle
while you turn this life of ours to some
bent trumpet of grief. You're not
the only man to lose a bride & lest
you lose another heartily I implore
you thaw beneath the sun. My face alone—
O how you healed those early weeks together,
our love a willow's trunk you knew by touch.
Thomas I swear I won't abide another dawn
your drunken shuffling in.

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These braying phantoms hungry now at dawn.

Our blade, one blood, forfeit
to frost & grass.
Note for the Suicide Casket: Thomas Junior: 23 January 1855

May the bright unfiltered rays
through winter maples
lead you homeward, no less mighty
than glaring snows that cloak
your final dream. Father

what hell you've known, lost
moon-pale nights some
bottle in your hand, soaked
mind awhirl with visions
that cooled the spreading
rash of pain. But
just until another
morrow swirled you back to us
& we invisible,
our farm brinked on failure. We

three young boys
grew lean each day you drooped
to drench her grave. I'm twenty
now, Father. No
small joy or smirking
pride at my likeness could save
your end. So greet her
ghost—for John and James

only I, my charring wick remains.

DICTION: JAMES ESGATE: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA STATE HOSPITAL: 20 FEBRUARY 1910

My dear nephew, this California gold
this light awash & trolley clang
sure wealth for any soul

who can hold his own & blister palms
till payday. These nights of fading

health I drift from dream to hapless
dream, puzzling
at the rust on what we've borne—
our farm blood

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 orphaned bleak, two souls
 slashed, days shuffling
their gruesome stairs
 & Cambridge gossip,
could I but forget. I mean all this to say

that soon my bones will fail.
 This state freed
father's ghost & haunting razor, 'Esgate' here

 as blank as 'Jones' or 'Smith.' In the lane below

no strident stallion clops or shakes its mane.

Adam Tavel recently won the 14th Annual Robert Frost Award and was also a finalist for Four Way Books' 2010 Intro Prize in Poetry, as well as the 2011 Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry. His latest poems appear or are forthcoming in *Indiana Review*, *Phoebe*, *Redivider*, *Ellipsis*, *New South*, *Cave Wall*, and *Folio*, among others. Tavel is the poetry editor for *Conte* and an assistant professor of English at Wor-Wic Community College on Maryland's Eastern Shore, where he directs the Echoes and Visions Reading Series.