

## 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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### AFTER THE INCIDENT: THOMAS: 7 JULY 1853

I won't deny the scene, out there, the barn—  
     won't dare claim you misread the moment's  
 lewdness. You saw it as it was, this farm's  
     damnable tryst & slender hoodoo bitch—  
 I've sown  
     my sin. These slaves savage bred  
 lack sense or faith, closer  
     to beast than man  
 & I the cur who stooped  
     to share their bed...but  
 excuseless! Stilled, that urge fanned  
     to flame—yours alone if fit you find  
 some spark to warm from this ash-  
     heap of grief. Fool,  
 scoundrel weak  
     in will, foul in mind & deed—let  
     grace redeem the rueful thief  
 who begged & bore  
     his cross beside our Lord's. Still  
     pledged, this rootless mustard seed  
     as yours:

### SELLING THE SLAVE: THOMAS TO JUDGE WHITNEY BROWN: 20 JULY 1853

Because my eldest lacks the goddamn spine  
 to heed my fierce command regarding  
 even this requisite affair, Whitney,  
 let this letter certify my request  
 that your chamber act on my behalf:  
 I want her gone the way I want the wind  
 my wife to ease her ceaseless rustling.  
 I want to torch the frigate sail that docked  
 the fiendish cargo of her umber skin  
 & the trade block gavel that clanged her mine.  
 Let's avoid the furrowed brows—wait upon  
 substantial bid before you sell her south.  
 & should her heifer's womb sag with calf  
 ram your pitchfork tines through the bulging sac.

### NOTE FOR THE BARN DOOR: KITTURAH: 21 JANUARY 1854

If you remained the husband father beamed you'd be—  
 if you had half his warmth & decent honor—  
 if that infernal sin of yours meant more

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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.