

Paul the horse is a criminal. He winks in his blinders and deals from the bottom of the deck. His hoof and his other hoof make a damn fine cocktail. A twisted equine smile. The two-armed man taking bets has his own flaws. His own disagreements. He sends my ticket on his breath. I squeeze it somewhere between my fingertips and squeaking shoes. Down they stretch they convert. Whether they like it. Paul the horse shows, wins.

One of my recurring dreams. I'm driving too fast on a spotty lighted freeway. When the lights do more blinding than good it seems. I drive along in complete control, but then I am separated from the car. We're both still moving - the car and me - but in parallel. I'm controlling the car somehow. The accelerator, brakes, steering, but far far away, off to the side. The car takes an exit off to the right. I continue on down the center lane, nearly out of sight. I precariously feather the car between other cars, people, lights off ramps, back down on ramps. In and out of sight, under bridges and through brief tunnels. Eventually it leaves my sight for good and I am steering nothing.

But in fact I'm wide awake at night tonight. I'm sitting at my desk. It seems both too small and a proper size. I could easily reach to the far end or corner, but I would have to reach. I see now that the open end of my pen has leaked some ink on the notebook page. The spot of ink has a flat straight edge and the rest bellies out asymmetrically. It looks like a backward D, but not really - only if I had to tell you what it looked like.

Let's get on with it. I'm telling you what I'm up to here. Does that seem right. Sure, now it does. I'm writing a book. It's a work in progress. Let's start there, ok?

In a long-past issue of the Paris Review, Charles Simic interviewed James Tate. The Art of Poetry #92, issue 177, from Summer 2006. It's good. The one with Woody Guthrie's list of bellys on the front. I bring it up because that's where the idea came from. In the interview transcription, Simic mentions that Tate tells stories of the famous Missouri outlaw Jesse James being pen pals with Arthur Rimbaud. Simic and Tate are old friends and playing around with the tape recorder. It's not clear from the text if he is serious, and to my

knowledge this relationship – James/Rimbaud - has never been documented by anyone, so it was likely all in jest.

But what if it weren't!

“We had had many conversations over the years, but never one so formal, so we kept shilly-shallying, testing the tape recorder, pretending in the meantime that I was there to record his stories of Jesse James, the famous Missouri outlaw, who according to Tate not only wrote haikus but used to correspond with the nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud.”

James Tate, *The Art of Poetry* No. 92, *Interviewed by Charles Simic*

So in the end, that's the idea. Or the spark of the idea – could it be true. A 19th century Missouri gang leader criminal and a French boy-poet pre-surrealist vagabond. Pen pals. How would it happen? What would the letters contain? How would it start or end? So many questions in a blip of history!

I have a guide to writing fiction. You may have seen a similar version. It's bright yellow. Can't miss it. I must tell you that it makes a convincing argument that writing a book is - to some degree at least - not impossible. Which is to say possible.

I'm using this book and taking notes, so bear with me here. First, characters with desires and contrasting traits. We're pursuing our desire here, characters. All the while we'll be displaying contrasting traits. Maybe that means appearance, background, things that appear in the background, things that disappear in the foreground, personality, primary, secondary, identity, call and response. It's a lot to take in, or put down.

Here and there we'll have protagonists and antagonists and extras. Extras! They'll be round and flat, oblong, long and some short. Their patterns of speech will be dead giveaways. That's what I'm thinking anyway.

There is an identity to each person, and a magnitude of celebrity. I am a central figure in many people's lives – friends, family, colleagues – one with a certain fondness but they are not in my thoughts. I am a character,

a caricature of those thoughts, my thoughts, my triggered instinctual belief system. Everything displayed for those outside of me is artifice. A creation.

Sun and water fall on all things living and dead.

“Would you like some Honey Nut Cheerios?”

He often offered cereal when I stopped by. I never accepted. Too familiar. The milk temperature changing, the texture of the bowl, the finish. We have our own ways of doing things.

In his large victorian home I explained the idea for the book. He nodded. Involuntarily.

“What I think is the key to the piece isn’t that it’s necessarily a historically accurate story, but that it capture some sort of feeling - two men far apart, maybe they both know they’ll never meet in person, yet something keeps them writing back and forth”

“I get it I think - I like it - where does the story go? Anywhere? I mean it’s fine if it doesn’t.”

“I could imagine it first being about the project, then I weave in some of my own stories along with these imagined letters. With some unifying theme at some point, in some way.”

“That makes sense - so you’re another character.”

“Yeah.”

“Who else could be in it - Tate and Simic?”

“Probably not, but maybe - what do you think?”

“Could get complicated.”

“Oh. Yes. True.”

“But maybe in a good way! What if Tate and Simic picked sides or characters? And they were writing the letters. One is writing Jesse James and one Rimbaud. A voice twice or three times removed.”

“Definitely complicated.”

“Well something to maybe think about.”

“Do you speak French.”

“No. You?”

“No. Would be nice though, to read Rimbaud in the original French.”

“Yeah. No, maybe. I think that’s right.”

Then the poet’s young daughter came in and without speaking took off my watch. We talked about different projects - mostly his - and caught up on life in general too, again mostly his. I had my answer. French or not there was something here. He didn’t confirm. I took my watch, tuned to 12:00, and I left.

Have you ever ridden a horse? I would think that at one point in American history most people in the states had. Now I wonder what the percentage of riders is. Ever rode? Ride frequently? Have ridden today? Will ride again? More people, fewer horses.

I've done it once. Or I should say we - me and my rental horse Paul. He was a fine animal, seemed gentle and kind. He did not mistake me for a cowboy. For most of the ride we trotted along, with brief commands from me to the wind and grass. I made suggestions with the reins and my feet, Paul humored me. As we rambled we became more comfortable with each other, but there was no real bond. Paul the broad mound of bone and hard meat. I was told to only feed horses with a flat hand, but I never fed Paul.

And I'm reading: When Rimbaud was nine, he wrote a 700-word essay objecting to his having to learn Latin in school. Vigorously condemning a classical education as a mere gateway to a salaried position, Rimbaud wrote repeatedly, "I will be a *rentier*."

There is more to understanding another man than putting words in his mouth, I'm finding. For all we know the irritants of his early life - poverty, abandonment, abuse, hunger, his Mother of Darkness, surely temperature fluctuations - all contributed to his self-worth and confidence as a writer. So do I, do we, dear reader, dwell on shortcomings or pursue quickly triumphs?

Biography tells us that Rimbaud was an excellent student, except for mathematics and science. He was a prolific letter writer.

My dearest calèche Jesse -

First. The heat here is beyond unbearable, a strain, a detestable burden and relentless crush. At once with that desperate state, the air here is a delight compared to Camden. There are times when, indeed, my breath and footfall seem equally light and without resistance. The work is as steady as ever, with the

foreman, Yguney both an adversary and host here in Cyprus. A bull man, dark and ignorant of dreams or the sea. His demeanor often shifts to rage, but on balance he is a fair employer. I cannot hope for much more calmness, which is severely needed. [real text] The nearest village is one hour away on foot. There is nothing here but a jumble of rocks, a river, and the sea. There are no houses. No soil, no gardens, no trees. [end real text]

My associates here are jovial but without strong bonds. I take them in small serene doses. Which makes my correspondence with you all the more precious and desired.

Your travels in the United States and collection of new allies seems to be well done! Happy to hear of it, and of the care in your pursuits. As you are coy to describe them in detail, my imagination bounces trying to complete the full view. Does your work involve government intervention, peacekeeping, war-making, or something altogether crimson terrored? No no, from your own writings I cannot feed the idea that your dealings are in any sort evil. I do someday wish to hear from mon frere gras from his own voice. I do sense we have more in common than uncommon.

Until that day, let us please continue letters - my sincere hope to receive the next from you soon.

A.Rimbaud - January 1879, Cyprus

March 24 2010 I was washing dishes in the sink. I had heard the day before my friend had died. He killed himself. I dropped a large drinking glass in the sink full of sudsy hot water. It broke into several large sharp pieces. I froze in place. It wasn't exactly a sensation of panic or wanting to do physical harm to myself, more a sense of not know what was possible. Or what kind of fragileness was right there, in the sink in front of me. It might be classified as a panic attack or some sort of stress-induced minor breakdown, but it shook me.

Now it's years later. That moment is still with me, and comes to mind. The pain has dulled of course, but the sense of before and after still exists. There's the time in between. What has happened since then? Jobs, relationships, location, weather patterns, regime change, possessions and dispossessions. I, we, spin around in space, leaving moments behind and hooks of memories to draw on.

Why not put something down in some sort of permanence. The idea rattling around in my head for years, has it's time come? What better time.

Once an idea takes hold – one that you think is worth something – it never leaves you. Why it never comes to be, well that can be more complicated. Laziness, embarrassment, uncertainty, lack of courage, prejudgment. All those can get in the way. But the idea itself, that's a binary snap decision: this is good. It will always be good. I will always know it is good. That view of an idea is the truth.

Dear the Writer Arthur,

Pleased to have received your letter. Presently I am moving from one place to another here in the prairie to stay a step ahead of those that mean me harm. It's September here, cooler seems everyday. I'm back to Missouri soon. Still by horse with my best men.

At night we camp. In the distance train whistles blow and sneak up from behind in the dark. I try to keep the fire lit for the heat, light and the noise it makes. Too quiet and too dark means I don't sleep deep.

These last few days we've had clear nights. Dark dark skies and flags of stars. When I was young I learned all the major constellations. Orion's belt, Aquarius, Gemini, Ursa Major, Perseus. Out here some nights I rename them, forming new figures and connections. At the bar top back in Kansas City we'd spill liquor and the droplets and streaks remind me of the skies out here. I run my two forefingers through the sky, like the droplets except in the air and call that formation the Greaseman, then cross myself above with my left hand and that's Joseph. I can see three bright bright stars lined up to the East and I call it The Tomcat.

All that's left now is to sleep, my constellations hold their place in the sky while the trains are all stopped.

I want you to know that your next letter should reach me at the Missouri address and that I look forward to that day.

Skylight,

J W James

21 September 1879

How, author, do you prefer to work?

We are plodding along, you and me. Together. You may be wondering how I do it? You the reader, me the writer: you know what you're doing. Reclined perhaps, or upright in a sturdy chair. On the porch, rocking to the pace of insect curves and curls? On the bus or train, locked elbow along your side to minimize the vectors of motion among eyes, book and head.

However you're getting down to it, you may indeed be wondering how this passage in its final length came to be composed. Of course many readers wonder if there is a particular time of day or set of instruments that aid in the writing process. As if a chemical reaction or bonding of molecules - covalent! - that produces either gold, fission, rust, a sentence.

Well for me, it's simple. The process, set up and likely the outcome too. I write by hand with a Uniball Vision fine tipped pen, on a wide ruled notebook. Spiral-bound, on the left. This particular notebook has a dark blue cover and three separate sections divided by two manila inserts, with a pocket on each side. The pockets are empty and once I finish one section I just skip over the divider and continue. Or, more truthfully, once I finish the first section I believe I will simply continue on. It's possible I'll break once I reach manila checkpoint #1 to bask in this achievement.

Once I have written something, maybe a few pages, I'll transfer that to the computer. Usually during the typing out process I'll find some typos or some lines that need changing, deleting, merging, dividing,

breaking, removing. I'm working toward draft one. But I figure that once the written-out word has made it to the typed-out word and then to the saved-typed-out word, well, I have already made it to draft two.

From there it's on to draft three. I do all of this seated at a desk with horizontal blinds. Usually in the early evening, although I feel I do my best thinking in the early morning. The blinds on the window are drawn down, but the slats are angled so that I have the most uninterrupted view of the outside sky as possible. In the evenings the sun doesn't cast shadows in the room, only outside. The stars between the buildings are broken glass.