

Arthur Rimbaud was a French poet known for his transgressive and surreal themes and for his influence on modern literature and arts, prefiguring surrealism. He composed *Illuminations*, an incomplete suite of prose poems, first published in *La Vogue*, a Paris literary review in May-June 1886.

Wikipedia

“A Chance Pack of Cards”

Convinced of my sister’s talent as a poet, Félix Fénéon took charge. He promptly persuaded the *Symboliste* publishers to include an occasional poem in their highly regarded journal. Fénéon, an astute critic, invented a nom de plume for her: “Our poetess shall be known as 'The Haiku Princess.'”

While conceding her poems did not strictly adhere to the 5/7/5 syllabic format of haiku, f.f. (as Fénéon was called by friends) believed their general brevity and subtle understatement possessed the sufficient Japanese flavor of haiku.

Astonishingly soon, readers of *le Symboliste* eagerly anticipated the appearance of the next poem from the Haiku Princess. The pseudonym now seemed to have always belonged to Sabine. She was acquiring—f.f. proudly noted— “a certain following.”

I could not have been happier for her success and relieved that her recognition remained among an esoteric circle of readers. While my sister’s five years at the Salpêtrière asylum stayed a carefully guarded secret.

f.f. envisioned a small, limited volume of Sabine’s poetry by year’s end. The importance of her poems for me was that they could be a channel to her subconscious, a ‘writing cure’ to replace the talking sessions Sigmund no longer provided. I held on to the hope that writing poetry would generate a free flow between her conscious and subconscious, would gently bring her to a state of mental equilibrium. Gently.

The worry was her strong attachment to Theo van Gogh. Sigmund repeatedly assured me that it was natural, even predictable, for someone who had been deprived of intimacy all of her

young adult life to rush headlong into a love affair. But a question nagged me. Had Theo the emotional capacity to absorb her nature, her intensity, passion, caprice?

I thought it wise and prudent to seek other outlets for my sister, to find other interests, other people to match her creative spirit. Then one day f.f. came with a surprising invitation. “Paul Verlaine wishes to meet the Haiku Princess. He’s positively beguiled by Sabine’s poems.”

Verlaine! Both Sabine and I, when adolescents, were enamored by his poetry. Paul Verlaine whom the literary world called the ‘Prince of Poets’.

“But f.f.,” I worried, “will meeting such a famous person push Sabine too far into the public spotlight?”

“I give you the sobering news,” he said. “Verlaine is barely remembered these days. He lives in relative obscurity and in rather impoverished circumstances, due in no small part to his alcoholism.

“That’s unfortunate.”

“The editors at *le Symboliste*, who huddle now as we speak, have plans to resurrect his career, dubbing him one of their own, a symbolist.”

Symbolism was a new literary movement, the word invented by the poet Jean Moréas, a close friend to f.f. The movement for me had exciting potential as it acknowledged unconscious forces at play in the creation of poetry. f.f. once told Sabine that she could be an important leader in the Symbolist School. She laughed, “When you talk of a school, I see a school of fish. And I’m neither fish nor fowl.”

f.f. then confided to me, “I think Verlaine is aware of our concern to keep Sabine’s identity confined to a privileged few, so he’s given us an added enticement. A most

extraordinary offer. If Sabine consents to a meeting, Verlaine will share a batch of Rimbaud poems, neither published nor seen by anyone.”

“That would be quite a literary coup.”

I was aware that f.f. ranked Arthur Rimbaud as one of the greatest modern poets, a Symbolist before Symbolism existed, yet strangely, no one knew of his whereabouts, whether he was alive or dead. He had left France years ago, to parts unknown, some said Africa. The young poet had been Verlaine's former paramour and often blamed for Verlaine abandoning his wife.

“Paul Verlaine purports that these poems in his possession were written sometime in 1873, when Rimbaud would have been nineteen,” f.f. said. “Yes, the literary find of the year, if I could lay my hands on them.”

f.f., known for his indifference to famine or feast, misfortune or favor, seemed perilously close to excitement.

* * *

The closer we walked toward Paul Verlaine’s address, the more unsavory the neighborhood grew—my sister far too happy for me to express concern. As she kept her arms locked into ours, Sabine entertained us with Verlaine's poetry:

We walk, arms interlaced
And the day's not so pure
As the depths of our thoughts
And our dreams azure

“Well, here we are.” f.f. stopped at the entrance to a courtyard.

“The time is near for the Princess to meet the Prince,” said Sabine in her merry mood.

f.f. checked his pocket watch. “He says that his drawing room is opened for visitors between two and three p.m.”

We traversed a yard of scattered junk, a depressing landscape of things broken and discarded, including a large clock without a pendulum, leaning against a bathtub filled inexplicably with black sand. As we passed amidst the jumble and odd rubbish, a deafening noise startled us. We stopped to watch an overhead train, a mere thirty yards away, roar thunderously across a trestle bridge, probably speeding from Bastille to Vincennes. We waited for the roar to die and the train to disappear, then approached a lengthy, low, rectangular building of nondescript concrete. At one end a poultry shop, outside piles of wooden cages with squawking chickens; at the other end of the bland, windowless building, a wholesale wine business.

f.f. showed no surprise. “He claims to live behind the wine shop.”

We turned the corner and found steps leading to a basement door. f.f. went down, knocked. No one answering, he rapped more loudly with his walking stick. The door, oddly, had neither a handle nor latch; he pushed and the door sluggishly creaked open. Inside it appeared to be nothing more than a storage cellar with scores of empty wine crates stacked against the stone walls.

“This is the correct site and we are in the parameters of visiting hours.” f.f. shrugged again. “Dear Verlaine remains reliably unreliable.”

“Could he conceivably live here?” I found it incomprehensible that a poet of his stature, whom I had once read so devoutly, would inhabit a wine storage room.

f.f. stepped inside. We followed him into a dank smelling, semi-dark cellar. An unlit kerosene lantern hung from a termite riddled beam.

Sabrine touched my arm. “I hear someone breathing.”

She followed a raspy noise to a burlap curtain—nothing more than two coal sacks sewn together and strung on a length of twine. Pulling the makeshift curtain aside revealed an alcove, an army cot, and someone or something heaving under a thread-bare blanket. f.f. peeled back the blanket. There he lay, fully clothed, delicate hands crossed over his chest. But for the soft snoring, he could have been mistaken for a corpse carefully put to rest. He was bearded, bald except for a ring of hair, and to judge by his rumpled clothing, unwashed. Here was my first glimpse of the poet a prior generation had venerated.

“How peaceful he sleeps,” said Sabrine.

Outside another train bound for somewhere rumbled overhead and countless bottles in the cellar began shaking, ringing and clanging.

“The Manchu joker, dead drunk,” observed f.f.

The poet’s straggly mustache was reminiscent of someone Oriental. Tucked and nestled in his arm, a bottle of *vin ordinaire*, half filled.

f.f. shook him gently. “Paul Verlaine.”

Opening his eyes, he began speaking as if in a hypnoid state. “We weep with mingled tears, mourn the vanished future, and put to rest our chivalric folly. Only a gallows pardon to our common cruelty shall put us on a higher path.” Unaware of our presence, his voice was pleasantly lyrical. “When charity be our creed, tis a heavenly certainty we shall be blessed.”

“His poem and prayer,” said Sabrine.

Suddenly he sat upright, like a corpse resurrected, with a firm grip on the neck of the wine bottle. He gazed wonderingly—we well might have been part of a strange dream. I eagerly wanted to coax and keep him in his altered state, but f.f. took charge.

“I do believe, Paul, that we have arrived promptly at the assigned hour for visitors.”

The poet smiled, recognizing Félix Fénéon. “Of course! My favorite editor of La Vogue. Let me collect my thoughts for a moment... a mere moment... yes... a sweet domain no more.”

“Dreams are sometimes hard to leave,” I ventured.

He eyed me suspiciously until Sabine caught his attention, resting his gaze happily on her. “Dear, you remind me of my darling Rimbaud.”

“Let us help you out of bed,” she said.

We each took an arm until he managed to stand in his stocking feet. He attempted dignity by adjusting his wine-stained foulard and spoke as if the gracious lord in his manor. “Allow me to offer you refreshment.” He walked, still slumberous, to an upturned wine barrel set in the middle of the room and set down his bottle. “Do seat yourselves around the table while I procure glasses.”

There was one chair, a chair occupied by a plate showing the remnants of a fish skeleton, which I set on the floor. f.f. found empty wine crates for us to use as chairs. We were seated when the poet returned with two empty preserve jars and a tin drinking cup.

f.f. removed his top hat and placed his gloves inside. “Paul, we are most eager to view the Rimbaud material.”

Pouring wine, Verlaine’s hand shook badly, occasionally missing their mark and forming small pools on the cask table. He managed to sit in the chair, but only to bow his head, ashamed of his alcoholic condition. No one spoke, until he dared to raise his eyes to Sabine. I was convinced that the Prince and Princess were communicating without words. She, inexplicably, dipped two fingers into the spilled pool of wine, commanding everyone’s attention, and touched her forehead, making the sign of the cross... as if with holy water,

The poet gave a crooked smile. “He, too, might have made the same gesture, both sacrilegious and devout.”

We knew ‘he’ was Rimbaud. Verlaine's former lover. All Paris had heard of their tumultuous affair—Verlaine, a middle-aged man, leaving his wife and child for the sixteen-year-old poet.

Verlaine only addressed Sabine. “I shot him, you know, in the left wrist. An argument. One too many. They gave me a prison term for it. Which I deserved. For all my past sins.” He drank from the bottle. “I'm now Catholic.” He looked at her with a hopeful smile. “Child, do you believe in God?”

“God?” Her eyes brightened. “Oh, I know God—He is the fire in my head.”

“My young Princess, we find Him in many places.” Verlaine cast a look at the pools of wasted wine. “He is in the wine, too.”

“Yes, the wine, too,” she readily agreed.

A sad Verlaine shook his head. “The worst sinners,” he said gravely, “are the lapsed Catholics.”

“Amen to that.” f.f. could not resist the dry remark.

Where was this situation going to lead, I wondered? Verlaine let his two fingers dip into spilled pool of wine and, quite absentmindedly, licked the wine from his fingers.

Sabine took out her writing pad. It seemed urgent for her to write, then tearing out the page she did something I had once seen her do when she was about eight-years-old: she folded the message into a little paper boat. *On a rainy day in Marseilles, on a curb on rue du Chateau, she sailed a little boat in the gutter.* Now she set the paper boat on the wine-puddled table. Un *petite bateau* prepared for a journey.

Verlaine picked it up dripping with wine and unraveled her origami boat. In his sonorous voice, he read her poem:

brothers have i none
save the sacred heart
ready am i
to play ghost-games
please hollow first
my fear
second,
spirit me holy

He looked at her and made his pronouncement— “I call you sister to Rimbaud.”

She smiled. “f.f. calls me the Haiku Princess; I am neither.”

Verlaine insisted, “You are a dear, great soul, like him. He is your brother, Rimbaud.”

“Both poets reject ready-made phrases,” put in f.f. He wanted the Rimbaud manuscript. If one existed.

My tin cup of wine was now in Verlaine's hand. He drank and explained to my sister, “When one of your poems appear in print, I find myself reaching out for your words as I once reached out as a child for snowflakes, to catch a glimpse of the mysterious, crystalline patterns even as they melt...” Suddenly some thought made him his eyes dart around the cellar room. I saw a heap of old clothing piled in one dark corner which gave off a bad smell. Other corners of the room had high stacks of books to prove a literate man lived here.

He sighed and spoke warmly to Sabine, “*Merci* for the privilege of meeting you face-to-face; I will now uphold my part of the bargain.”

He rose, staggered slightly, regained his balance, then went to his sleeping alcove. Underneath the cot, he retrieved a box, brought it back, and began rooting through its contents, many tattered pages filled with script, and several brown-aged newspaper articles. He seemed to have difficulty finding what he wanted. "Spectacles," he said. "I need my spectacles."

Sabrine went directly to the window ledge above his sleeping alcove and found them, one lens missing.

His happiness to see through just one lens made him suddenly heroic, yet so very sad to find the poet in such miserable surroundings. At last he pulled out a pile of pages tied together with the same butcher's twine that held up his coal-sack curtain.

f.f. brought out a very small, folding knife and cut the twine of what he hoped was Rimbaud's unpublished manuscript.

Verlaine became momentarily protective of the pages. "Compared to him, I am nothing."

"I will not dignify self-abasement with a reply." f.f. began perusing the pages. Soon I received a certain look from him to indicate he had material of importance.

Verlaine continued rummaging through the box, a fancy milliner's box so out of place in the squalor of Verlaine's cellar. He found a photograph and handed it to me.

"I had a professional photographer take it of him when we were living in London," he said full of pride and nostalgia. "During our honeymoon, so to speak." He smiled. "Don't you think he has the countenance of an angel?"

A tousled-haired youth stared out with either condescension or contempt. f.f. took it and contemplated the adolescent for a moment then without comment returned the picture to Verlaine, the poet now drinking from Sabine's preserve jar.

“He has such striking, pale blue eyes,” he murmured, showing the picture to Sabine.

“The colour of celadon, I should think.”

(During our carriage ride home, f.f. remarked, “It is the face of a murderous peasant.”)

Reading page after page, f.f. passed them to me. He asked Verlaine, “Do I have one epic poem here or a series of poems?”

“I liken them to coloured plates,” answered Verlaine. “As are the luminous illustrations one sees in old manuscripts.” He gulped down Sabine's wine, not that she would have drunk it.

Rimbaud's sentences startled me, as though he had waved away logic:

**No sooner had the Flood regained its composure
then a hare paused among the gorse and trembling bell flowers
to say its prayers to the rainbow through the spider's web**

But perhaps I had a bundle of prose poems with the subterranean logic of dreams, handing each finished page to Sabine.

Verlaine was extremely interested in her reaction. “Not another living soul has seen this divine inspiration, but now you, Haiku Princess, can absorb their mystery.”

f.f. read without raising his head for air. “When did you gain access to them?”

Pages passed around the table as our host, having quaffed everyone's wine, gazed with longing at the photograph of his former paramour. “When I visited him in Germany, the dear boy, at the ripe old age of twenty, placed the manuscript in my hands. He has, since that last rendezvous, made no effort to contact me. Sends me none of his writings.”

“Do you think he's still alive?” I asked. The Paris literati claimed Rimbaud as theirs, a bright comet who streaked briefly across the darkness, and was no more.

“He set sail long ago to the dark continent,” said Verlaine with regret.

“Africa,” said Sabine as if to acknowledge the fact.

“He must be dead,” said Verlaine.

f.f. began gathering the pages. “A manuscript, such as this, will suffice to bestow immortality. Here we have creativity which will catapult poetry to the next, necessary stage of evolution.” He touched Verlaine’s sleeve. “Paul, the publishers at La Vogue will want to carefully peruse these...”

“Illuminations,” said Sabine.

Her suggested title had Verlaine ecstatic. “Yes, yes! Take Arthur Rimbaud's ‘Illuminations.’ Let your journal publish the illuminations.” He rose. “Friends, I shall ask for no royalties, not a centime.”

As we took our leave, Verlaine insisted on affording us his personal protection from “hooligans and thugs in the neighborhood.” We were to be escorted as far as rue Vanneau where we would have no trouble finding a taxi, he taking control of the manuscript, hugging it close to his breast as though his child.

Leaving the dank cellar, breathing fresh air again, we crossed the courtyard. The poet noticeably staggered, thoroughly drunk, unable to walk straight. The moment of misfortune I shall not forget—Verlaine stumbled, the elevated train roaring and rumbling high across the bridge, he tottering forward, losing grip of the manuscript, and when he fell to the ground, the pages, the countless pages scattered, the rush of the passing train producing a wake of wind that swirled the pages high into the air. Everyone but Sabine watched with disbelief, the soaring pages flying in all directions.

“Catch them, catch them!” cried Verlaine, stretched out on the cobblestones before he lost consciousness.

Laughingly Sabine ran everywhere around the yard, reaching and jumping to catch which pages she could as they fluttered about like autumn leaves. I ran, trying to help, dismayed that the pages were all unnumbered. f.f. remained mysteriously calm, taking no action, absorbing what was occurring, for him, I thought, perhaps a captivating scene, picturesque, like a snowfall, page upon page of poetry drifting.

I managed to catch some in mid-air, Sabine many more; but most fell randomly around the courtyard, amidst the rubble and rubbish, hopelessly and devastatingly out of order. Rimbaud's newly discovered Illuminations disassembled—*literally destroyed*, so I thought.

f.f. soon lifted Verlaine into his arms like a baby. We followed back into the hovel. f.f. laid the unconscious poet on the cot.

I whispered my concern. “What are we to do about the pages? What we gathered can never be put back into their original order.”

“I'm quite sure that the pages have been shuffled many times over the years,” he replied. “Who would know their original order? Least of all Verlaine. A chance pack of cards is what we were given and a chance pack of cards is what we still have. *N'importe de quoi*,” he concluded. What difference? “We just gave them another good shuffle.”