

RIMBAUD'S MISSING STANZA: NOBODY KNOWS WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE 21-YEAR- OLD POET WENT AWOL IN JAVA. A NOVELIST AND FAN GOES LOOKING FOR CLUES.

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IN 1871, when Arthur Rimbaud was a 16-year-old schoolboy in the Ardennes, he announced his intention to become a *voyant*, a seer, "to arrive at the unknown by a disordering of *all the senses*." He succeeded: Before he turned 20, he had written visionary poetry that would revolutionize world literature. A recent biographer of Rimbaud credits him and his lover, the older poet Paul Verlaine, with creating what came to be known as the gay identity with their public carryings-on. Unquestionably, Rimbaud's scandalous lifestyle during his teens in Paris, Brussels, and London, soaked in absinthe and perfumed by hashish, was the prototype for the artist as bohemian rebel that dominated the 20th century. The writers, painters, and musicians who have claimed him as their >



patron saint—or tutelary demon—range from Picasso, Breton, and Cocteau to Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, and Kurt Cobain.

Rimbaud was never more prophetic than when he wrote about his own life in the extended prose poem *A Season in Hell*: “My day is done; I’m leaving Europe. The sea air will burn my lungs; lost climes will tan my skin. To swim, to trample the grass, to hunt, above all to smoke; to drink liquors strong as boiling metal—as my cherished ancestors did around their bonfires.” He was 19 when he wrote *A Season in Hell*. Soon afterward he stopped writing poetry altogether and never took it up again.

In 1876, after rambles in Germany, Switzerland, and Lombardy—and a disastrous interlude in Brussels, where Verlaine shot him in the wrist when he threatened to leave—Rimbaud joined the Dutch Colonial Army and left Europe. For 300 gold florins (nearly \$3,000), he enlisted for a six-year tour in the Dutch East Indies, modern Indonesia. On June 10th, he shipped out for Java—as lost a clime, as far from Europe, as he could go.

It’s hard to imagine anyone less suited to the soldiering life than Rimbaud at 21, a decadent misfit to the point of sociopathy. Anyway,

it didn’t last long. After a sea voyage of 40 days, skin tanned and lungs scorched, Rimbaud entered the Sunda Strait, between Sumatra and Java, cruised under smoking Krakatoa (seven years before its cataclysmic eruption), and arrived with his battalion in Batavia, modern Jakarta. A brief cruise in the Java Sea brought them to Semarang; from there they took a train to the village of Tuntang and marched through the jungle to their post, in the town of Salatiga. Twelve days later, Rimbaud went AWOL. From that point until he resurfaced at his mother’s house four months later, the record of Rimbaud’s life is an enigmatic lacuna.

Usually boastful about his exploits, he said nothing about his tropical sojourn that has survived. He had good reason to keep quiet: Desertion was a capital crime. The ex-poet on the lam tried to enlist in the American Navy but was rejected. In Hamburg he joined a French circus; after a

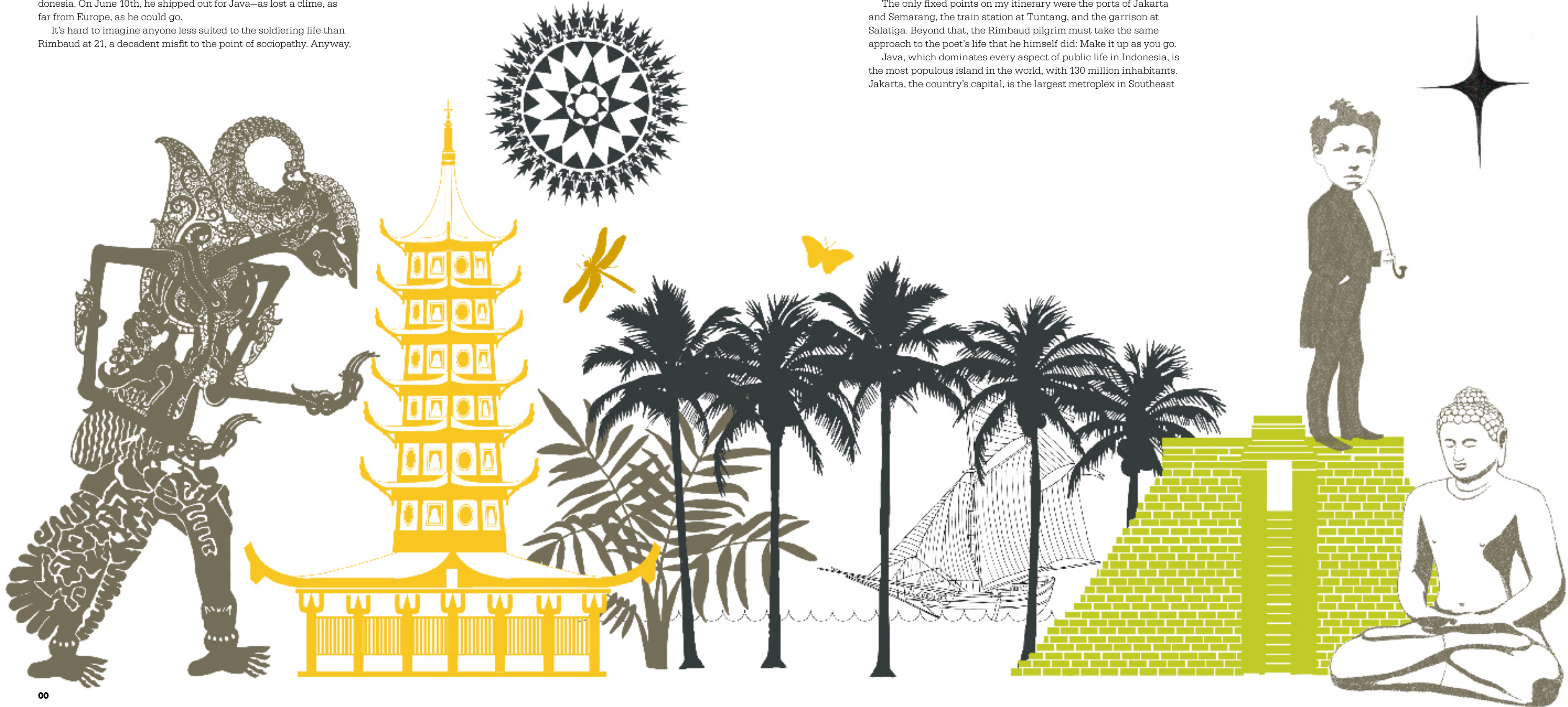
tour of Scandinavia he deserted the circus, too. In 1878 Rimbaud sailed to Alexandria and made his way to Abyssinia, where he led mercantile caravans deep into the interior of Africa and dabbled in photography until shortly before his death, in 1891, at 37.

LIKE MANY SERIOUSLY PRETENTIOUS adolescents, I started reading Rimbaud’s poetry when I was the same age he was when he wrote it. In the late ’60s, when sensory disordering was all the rage, Rimbaud occupied a high place in the hip literary pantheon with the likes of Hermann Hesse and Jack Kerouac. Hesse and Kerouac fell off my reading list, but there’s something addictive about Rimbaud. Nine years ago I moved to Indonesia, in what has proved to be a generally successful midlife crisis. Even before I arrived here to swim and trample the grass, I intended to make a pilgrimage, to track Rimbaud’s steps in Java. This spring the time had come.

The only fixed points on my itinerary were the ports of Jakarta and Semarang, the train station at Tuntang, and the garrison at Salatiga. Beyond that, the Rimbaud pilgrim must take the same approach to the poet’s life that he himself did: Make it up as you go.

Java, which dominates every aspect of public life in Indonesia, is the most populous island in the world, with 130 million inhabitants. Jakarta, the country’s capital, is the largest metroplex in Southeast

RIMBAUD WOULD HAVE FELT RIGHT AT HOME IN JAVA, WITH EASY ACCESS TO HIS SIGNATURE VICES. OPIUM WAS A MAJOR CASH CROP, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUGGERY WERE ABUNDANT.



Asia. The city's reputation as a teeming, smoggy ganglion of gleaming skyscrapers and squalid slums isn't far off the mark, but the place does have its charms, with chic restaurants and a club scene that rivals Bangkok's. The street life pulses with a soulful intensity that can imbue even squalor with a radiant allure.

Most people who buy old buildings do so with the intention of razing them and putting up new, grander ones in their place, but a few vestiges of old Batavia cling. Sunda Kelapa, the port where Rimbaud landed, has been eclipsed by a modern port that can accommodate today's monster container ships, but it still serves the regional fleet. Wooden schooners called *phinisi*, their jaunty profile almost unchanged for centuries, bring goods here from throughout the archipelago and deposit them in Dutch Baroque stone warehouses.

The wide plaza in the heart of old Batavia (where Rimbaud witnessed an execution of deserters by firing squad) is now a pedestrian mall called Fatahillah Square. The old city hall, based on the royal palace in Amsterdam, has been converted to a history museum with portraits of gloomy-looking governors general and old china. Facing it across the square is a long, bronze Portuguese cannon known as Si Jagur, brought to Batavia as a trophy of war in 1641. Ornamenting its butt is a sculpture of a man's fist, the thumb protruding between the index and middle fingers—in Indonesia, an unambiguous invitation to sex. When Rimbaud was here, Si Jagur was worshipped. Today women who want to get pregnant sit astride it to enhance their fertility.

Semarang preserves more of its colonial-era architecture than most Indonesian cities, if in a decrepit, mildewy state. It's no candidate for the World Heritage List, but a wander through the old town on a misty night offers the melancholy pleasures of a decaying Baltic port. The city's most venerable relic is Sam Poo Kong, a vermilion pagoda commemorating a visit in 1416 by the great admiral Zheng He. Pilgrims from throughout Asia come to pay their respects to the Muslim eunuch from Yunnan who established Chinese hegemony throughout the archipelago and across the Indian Ocean. On the morning I was there, the cobblestone plaza in front of the temple made a fine skateboarding park for schoolboys.

It was at the train station in Tuntang that I first sensed the sulfurous specter of Rimbaud at my side. The Semarang-Magelang train line, Java's first, had opened just a few years before his arrival. The station is still in operation as a part of a railway museum in the pleasant little town of Ambarawa. I climbed aboard old passenger cars, claustrophobic, wood-paneled carriages with the mellow reek of varnish and a century's worth of sweat. Then I rode a tiny toy train on a narrow-gauge track, which edged a swampy lake where bugs with papery golden wings fluttered among the reeds. Rice fields glowed emerald green on one side; on the other, little boys cast nets for fish no bigger than your thumb, to be fried and eaten whole. The ride terminated at Tuntang station, a charming Dutch cottage with a Beatrix Potter air. It's completely empty now, with nothing in it that wasn't there when Rimbaud passed through, except the silence.

The Dutch garrison at Salatiga, where Rimbaud's trail evaporates into tropical steam, survives as part of the modern city hall. Eleven years ago, the French ambassador to Indonesia dedicated a handsome granite plaque there to commemorate the poet's visit. Salatiga, a Muslim town with the Hindu god Ganesha as its municipal mascot, is now the home of a Christian university—making it a typical conspicuous of Indonesian religion. Java is more than 90 percent Muslim, but tolerance of other religions is a principle that all the Indonesian people I know take very seriously.

BEYOND SALATIGA, a Rimbaud tour becomes a speculative journey into the thorny thicket of the poet's mind. For his contemporaries, Java was a threatening, alien place. Eugène Sue captured the generally held view in his best-selling potboiler of 1844, *The Wandering Jew*: "Java! Magnificent and fatal country, where the most admirable flowers conceal hideous reptiles, where the brightest fruits contain subtle poisons, where grow splendid trees, whose very shadow is death"—exactly the way many bourgeois critics and readers would later characterize Rimbaud's poetry.

Young Arthur would have found himself feeling right at home in Java, with easy access to his signature vices. Opium was a major cash crop there until the early 20th century. When Rimbaud arrived in Batavia, the port was as well supplied with opium dens as grog shops. When I lived in Jakarta, I heard that there were still opium dens hidden in the old quarter that catered to elderly Chinese addicts, but the stories had the whiff of urban legend.

Opportunities for buggery would have been equally abundant. In the vicinity of Ponorogo, a town 50 miles southeast of Salatiga, powerful wizards called *warok* practiced an exceptionally soft form of asceticism, shunning the temptation of sex with women by keeping powdered, petted boys. The *warok* were like samurai, continuously waging vendettas in the countryside—sometimes over a pretty lad. Such bizarrerie would have appealed to Rimbaud more as spectacle than sexual titillation; the only love of his life was Verlaine, a man 10 years his elder whom he seduced into abandoning his wife and newborn first child to run away with him.

Java's most powerful affinity with the mind of Rimbaud was its intense, all-encompassing mysticism. As a boy, Rimbaud read widely in the literature of European magic and consciously cast himself in the role of a literary magus. In *A Season in Hell*, describing his growth as a poet, he wrote:

Poetic antiques played a large part in my alchemy of the word.

I became accustomed to pure hallucination: I saw quite frankly a mosque in place of a factory, a school of drummers led by angels, carriages on the highways of the sky, a drawing-room at the bottom of a lake; monsters, mysteries; the title of a vaudeville show raised up horrors before me.

Then I would explain my magic sophisms with the hallucination of words!

In 1876, there was no place on earth where magic played a more conspicuous part in everyday life than in central Java. The *warok* culture of Ponorogo was only one extreme expression of Malay magic; every aspect of life was controlled by mystic powers. Curses and love potions—*goona-goona*—were commonplace, as they still are today. Although Islam officially forbids such practices, Javanese religion has always accommodated heterodox beliefs—otherwise, no one would follow it. In Surakarta, the city usually called Solo, I discovered a private shrine created by a yogi that sheltered devotional images of a Hindu deity, the Buddha, the Virgin Mary, and Sukarno, Indonesia's flamboyant, adored first president. Incense burned before them all: Paths are many, truth is one.

The greatest of Java's temples, at the top of any tourist itinerary for 12 centuries, is Borobudur, a mountain of stone sculpture covered with exquisitely carved bas-reliefs depicting the life **[CONTINUED ON PAGE 1TK]**

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of the Buddha. When Rimbaud was in Java, Borobudur, 30 miles southwest of Salatiga, was dilapidated, a shattered wreck enveloped by jungle. Today, beautifully restored by Unesco, the monument occupies a secure position as one of the world's must-see wonders. It's spectacular, but its soul has fled.

Seeking the romance of Rimbaud's underground flight through Java, I visited Candi Sukuh, a bizarre, mysterious temple on the slopes of Lawu, a volcano 20 miles east of Solo. Sukuh (*candi* is Sanskrit for "temple") was Java's last major Hindu temple, built as a remote mountain refuge for a Sivaite cult in the mid-15th century after most of the island had converted to Islam. The main structure is a stepped stone pyramid that looks almost Mayan. On its summit stood a six-foot-tall phallus, now in the National Museum in Jakarta—an extravagant example of the inexplicable obsession with fertility in a country where life of every kind burgeons year-round.

Sukuh really is bizarre and mysterious, radiating the overrich, faintly poisonous atmosphere of libidinal irruption that soaks Rimbaud's hallucinatory poems. One remarkable relief shows Ganesha, the elephant-headed deity usually depicted in a contemplative seated pose, dancing with abandon, his sex organs flapping, as he swings a dog by the tail: No one knows why. A relationship between Sukuh and the tantric cult of Tibet has been proposed, but it's just a guess, for no record of the rituals enacted here have survived.

RIMBAUD NEVER ANNOUNCED that he was abandoning literature. He simply stopped producing it. A Malay word turned up in a late poem, fueling speculation that he may have written it after his visit to Java; more likely it's just an anomaly, like the Roman coins that inexplicably turn up in obscure places. It's maddening to think that the most original poet of his time lost the itch just as he experienced the lavish sensory disordering of a season in Java. Or perhaps a visit to a land ruled by magic disenchant-ed him as to the efficacy of the hallucination of words.

In *A Season in Hell*, Rimbaud prophesied the dominant trend in Western culture for a century to come with the dictum "It is necessary to be absolutely modern." Yet in Java he saw that, in fact, it isn't. ■