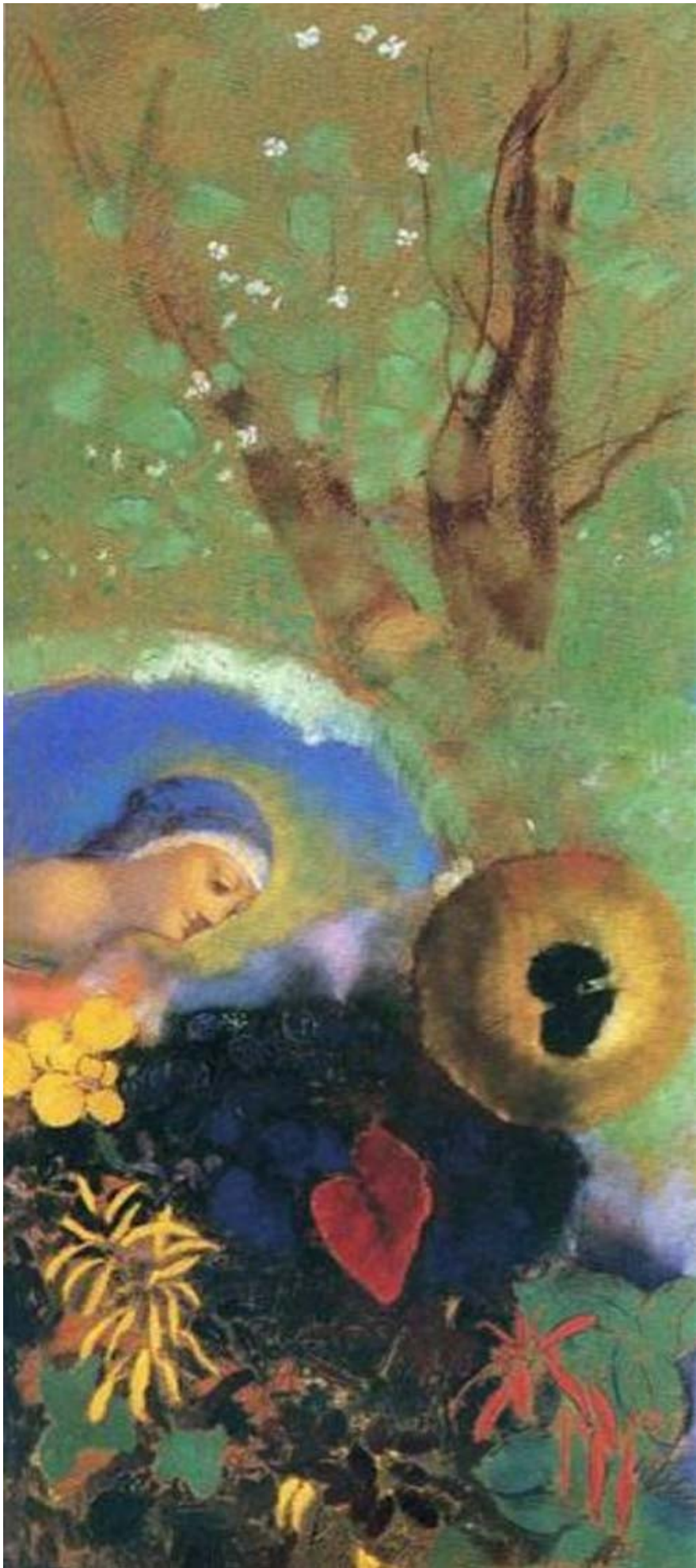


Three Poems

by [Rupert Rushbrooke](#) (March 2020)



The Hill

Birdsong awakes the hill. Unslumbering from
his nightclothes and discarded bits of dreams,
he races down the contours of the hill
to the familiar splashbucket of the stream.

Distracted by trees, clouds, he strides away,
scrambles over rocks he thinks he knows,
reaches for branches, dismantles flowers.
His kites dance as the wind blows.

Whittling scrap-wood as he walks, he whistles
a pipe, a flute. In the morning of his will
is an ocean of wild grass. He sees forever
and jumps with the clouds' shadows from hill to hill.

At noon everything sleeps. Nothing can move.
His vineyards' dreams float in the air.
His future is savage: wars, empires. Everything

he had not understood becomes clear.

His beard grows and the dandelions scatter.

The air is thick with their billets-doux.

Roots infiltrate the uncomfortable earth.

The sun moves and he lifts himself into view.

Deep in his woods, his flowers open up their hearts.

His trees stretch their limbs. Their sap runs.

His orchards are heavy with young, and in the fields
whisper the endless armies of his sons.

Kerduel

Through the gates, always open; the long avenue through the
wood,

Dark even in the afternoons; turning at the end to see the
chateau.

In the games-room, which had once been the library: sofas, a
billiard table,

Sometimes honky-tonk jazz piano from an old record-player.

Henry was there occasionally—I think they were his jazz records—

When he wasn't working on his carpentry. Baudouin often,

Smoking Gitanes, reading magazines and tossing them aside,

Chatting aimlessly with Dominic, his twelve-year-old brother.

And Bérangère, who was blonde and friendly, who smoked as well,

Who was sixteen and therefore older than me and quite beyond reach,

And who I adored. That first visit, after much effort on my part,

She let me kiss her on her cheek as I said goodbye at the airport.

That was when I first realised how deep a kiss might one day be,

How far you might fall, how soft you might land, and how far away.

I saw the others as much as I saw Bérangère, but of course

When any of the others weren't there it made no difference to the day.

1967

It was the year that Siegfried Sassoon died. I was ten.

While we punted leather footballs on half-holidays
and discovered swear-words and stirred jam like blood
into our rice-pudding,

the great poet was at home, writing letters in his study
or strolling round his garden, each flower scented
with summer and with each summer to come,
as they always will.

At home in Wimbledon we knew a Miss Tracy, whose
husband was killed at Ypres, or on the retreat from Mons,
or on Passchendaele Ridge, years before she'd had
a chance to meet him.

And I remember my godfather's watery eye, from a wound

he'd received at Antwerp. And his study, illicitly entered:
his desk inlaid with leather; everything severely
neat and masculine.

Now the boys at my old school just have history books
with revision points in boxes at the end of each chapter.
Their classrooms fill and empty, fill and empty,
as the terms wear on.

And the pages of their books turn idly in the mind:
the Schlieffen Plan; the Archduke; the main battles;
the movement of the front lines during 1918;
a chapter on Versailles.

Bells ring for tea, evening prep, bedtime, while outside
the night descends on empty playing-fields.
Across the darkness the lights come on in dormitories
and private rooms.

In France visitors walk quietly in groups,
As they might do in a cathedral.

In the distance a tractor lumbers across a field

and birds rise in the sun.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

Rupert Rushbrooke did English and Philosophy at Southampton University before working as a computer programmer. He has published articles about adoption and donor conception and has had poems in *Encounter*, *The Listener*, and *The Dark Horse*.

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