

William Plomer (1903-73)

6 *The Murder on the Downs*

Past a cow and past a cottage,
Past the sties and byres,
Past the equidistant poles
Holding taut the humming wires,

Past the inn and past the garage, 5
Past the hypodermic steeple
Ever ready to inject
The opium of the people,

In the fresh, the Sussex morning,
Up the Dangerous Corner lane 10
Bert and Jennifer were walking
Once again.

The spider's usual crochet
Was caught upon the thorns,
The skylark did its stuff, 15
The cows had horns.

'See,' said Bert, 'my hand is sweating.'
With her lips she touched his palm
As they took the path above the
Valley farm. 20

Over the downs the wind unveiled
That ancient monument the sun,
And a perfect morning
Had begun.

But summer lightning like an omen 25
Carried on a silent dance

On his heart's horizon, as he
Gave a glance

At the face beside him, and she turned
Dissolving in his frank blue eyes 30
All her hope, like aspirin.
On that breeding-place of lies

His forehead, too, she laid her lips.
'Let's find a place to sit,' he said.
'Past the gorse, down in the bracken 35
Like a bed.'

Oh the fresh, the laughing morning!
Warmth upon the bramble brake
Like a magnet draws from darkness
A reviving snake: 40

Just an adder, slowly gliding,
Sleepy curving idleness,
On the Sussex turf now writing
SOS.

Jennifer in sitting, touches 45
With her hand an agaric,
Like a bulb of rotten rubber
Soft and thick,

Screams, withdraws, and sees its colour
Like a leper's liver, 50
Leans on Bert so he can feel her
Shiver.

Over there the morning ocean,
Frayed around the edges, sighs,
At the same time gaily twinkles, 55
Conniving with a million eyes

At Bert whose free hand slowly pulls
A rayon stocking from his coat,
Twists it quickly, twists it neatly,
Round her throat.

60

'Ah, I knew that this would happen!'
Her last words: and not displeased
Jennifer relaxed, still smiling
While he squeezed.

Under a sky without a cloud
Lay the still unruffled sea,
And in the bracken like a bed
The murderee.

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