

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.

65

*1936*

(From *Collected Poems*. London, 1960)