

ON LOSING THE PLOT

"I came eating and drinking
and you called me names"

Jesus

How did it all become so miserable?
I mean to ask,
How did a joyous, liberating vision,
Get taken over by such misery?
Because drifting into last times,
'Ageing Process' times, that's
How it grips me or, with more dignity,
That how it seems to me.

I accept the Garden of Agony,
Gratefully in tune with the Hill of Sorrows,
But even the Garden of hope and happiness,
With all its eternal futurism
Becomes a hostage to misery.
Kids are forced to cry when
They should be falling about
And screaming with laughter and hope.

Thirteen men with a few women pals
Out to dinner for drinks, food and talk,
In comes a prostitute
And the divine guest embarrassingly
Suggests she's alright, even kingdom bound,
She washes his dust dirtied feet and again
He says she's alright.
She's certainly eternity bound.

Everyone goes glum-speechless,
Portents of oak polished benches
Occupied by bourgeois keepers
Of a mission shaped to their own comfort,
Frightened to death of prostitutes and,
Which is much worse, anyone that vaguely
Looks like one. Not a laugh to be heard
While God trebles up giggling uncontrollably.

Thus before that final Cross cry,
Even before the happy Garden greetings,
Here, there and, for that matter, everywhere,
God couldn't stop laughing
In the eternal heart of, I mean it,
A suffering seriousness,
Promising a future of liberty and justice.

The problem? Too many vocations.

I mean there was just one heaven-born call
Taking root in the ups and downs of everyday.
To get to grips with this mind-blowing venture
We created a million calls out of the One,
Came up with 'Ways of Perfection',
Got quite snobby about 'States of Life',
Condemned Elites and created Elitism,
And simply lost the plot, divine and human.

Austin cp

CONCERNING A FURTHER VISIT

Write it again in letters very bold
As you grow, we must face it, old,
And evenings and sunsets and dawns,
Apart from faded out theological yawns,
We are all still alive and striving
Into new days signed by God revealing,
The final statement born eternally above
Is about the clear admission we can love.

So speaks the Plato dropped in a City street
Or better abandoned to find a new home
Quite distinct from any millennium dome
Together day by day the whole world we greet.

One man arrives, Plato sees him, with paper
Clean white and empty reaching for deeper
Messages beyond present vacuous planning
So theories all fall apart and deep loving
Transcending the present passing experience
And all will come to some new world sense
About the abandoned powerless and hopeless
Who day by day in half-light live lifeless.

Don't be silly says Plato head sadly wagging
They've more sense of life than you have known
Even half-light of twilight they turn into dawn
And find their fullness in a life of loving.

Plato COLLECTED POEMS Vol. I, p. 3.

Austin cp

ON COMING IN

White, clean white, paper,
On the mat, a dirty mat,
And Plato a thinking cat,
Impatient for another supper,
Points out the hand-writing,
Familiar since that year
Of that silently shed tear
On my father life-departing.
"Plato", I said, "So long ago,
And still life's river flows
In spring suns and winter snows,
True love will always grow."
"Let's have a little meal",
Says Plato, "Just you and I,
As we watch the summer die,
And that love forever seal."

Austin

STARS AND BOXES

Who are you
And why do you keep on coming
To be locked
Into our institutional
Helplessness?

Dreams you bring
Of possible communion
And songs of peace
While our shells strain to shatter
Eastern stars.

Welcome, anyway, once more,
I've made up your cardboard box,
The least I could do,
Tomorrow we'll talk.
It's always tomorrow.

Austin

THE BEAN TIN

So once more another empty bean tin
Is dropped into the kitchen bin
To telly viewing they've gone
Happy and satisfied and full.
We can't change the whole world.

But, remember, tomorrow morning,
Just after the bird's song of dawning.
Tell them there are a billion kids
Without a bean to their names
We might start to change the world.

Bean tins, telly viewing and tummy filled
What's this to do with a Gospel distilled?
It's far better for them than vague prayers
About and for a world telly seen yet unfelt.
And so near to him who said, "You gave me food."

SURPRISED BY PEACE

Held in my arms a sleeping child,
heard a bird sing in a roofless house,
saw two strangers embrace on a windy street,
spotted a discarded gun in a city gutter,
watched a smile break on a tear-streaked face.

(All moments of deep tranquillity
born in some undefined eternity
free from any twisted complexity
glimpses of a surprised humanity)

The whole world from nowhere gathered
and a voice from somewhere whispered
Peace I give you, peace is now bequested

Austin Smith CP

THE BRAINWASHED CAT

The door bell rings with Big Ben chimes
The Mountjoy family takes 'The Times'.

The Burns who live next door but one
Are sexually starved and take 'The Sun'.

At number nine they've stuck with Labour
So there you'll find 'The Daily Mirror'.

The Bromleys boast a neat herb garden
Read nothing else except 'The Guardian'.

Number fifteen are smugly dissident
And so they flaunt 'The Independent'.

The Smiths have forgotten how to laugh
And gone quite sick on 'The Telegraph'.

While Bimley-Jones on a million bail
Gobbles up 'The Daily Mail'.

Now every household keeps a cat
Trained never to 'dum-dum' on the mat.

So every day they do their thing
In a plastic tray like a boxing ring.

And every tray is lined with paper
To save expense on scented litter.

The cats denied a political voice
Are forced to read their owner's choice.

Sitting they think the opinions they're viewing
Are just a load of what they're doing.

SHOPPING

Mushrooms the barrow lady said to me
Picked a.m. in dew and mountain mist
Fresh mushrooms this very day dawn kissed
In fields sloping to the restless sea.

Mushrooms Mr Tesco said to me in starched white coat
Packed and made clean in blue boxes bright
Fresh mushrooms to catch your culinary sight
Helping me to keep my life and cash afloat.

No mushrooms today they moaned with dying breath
For today one grew so tall to blacken all the world
From its midst we saw the shape of death unfurled
And in fall-out dust we picked our way to death.

Austin Smith cp

OBITUARY

After sixty three years of winter
Spent wandering the City centre

Fed by the Charity sisters
On left-overs from Marks & Spencers

Shrouded in a thrice owned mack
Seam splitting away up the back

You died on a bench on Friday
And there's little else to say.

Austin Smith cp

DESERT CHILD

Were there flies
In your eyes
That Friday afternoon?
Did you blink in the sun
That Friday afternoon?
Life's work nearly done
That Friday afternoon.

There are flies
In her eyes
Every afternoon
She shrivels in the heat
Every afternoon
Heart's weary dying beat
Every afternoon.

Paps dried up
Lift a cup
Friday afternoon
To the world's chapped lips
Friday afternoon
Careful now take gentle sips
Friday afternoon.

You are crying
We are trying
Every afternoon
Picking at our selfish locks
Every afternoon
Imprisoned by economic paradox
Every afternoon.

Moonrock imported
No grain exported
Any afternoon
Rockets to the skies
Any afternoon
No matter who dies
Any afternoon

AFTER DOMINIC DAY 1991

Austin Smith CP

So easy to walk into a booklined study,
even in sandled feet,
and talk of that Kingdom,
incarnated now in certain truths,
infallibility on the agenda, indeed,

to back up ancient creeds and
firm up contemporary
political convictions.
Then cry that mist-enshrouded axiom,
once uttered in an eastern desert,
"Tis time for conversion"
and so the water flowed on doubtful brows.

Not so easy to pilgrim into centres
and prisons,
in which truth is trapped, maybe frozen,
by inherited oppressions, and prejudice,
suspicious of your Kingdom presence,
so turned of mind ready to
crucify you
because revelation is wrapped up
in the fly-leaves of yesterday's theologies,
which have come down to a today
and seem to defy a tomorrow.

Still you keep Faith
and Littlemore is Granby
and so wonderful you are
as you ask for conversion
and conversion is given
by them
to you
and to them
by you.

It is the hour to witness
to faith
and reach out to others
in love and hope.

Austin Smith CP

STABAT MATER

What shall I be, he asked of me,
One day in Galilee,
A man, I said, with puzzlement,
A good man for all to see.

Where are you going, I asked of him,
One day in Jerusalem,
To be a man, he said solemnly,
His eyes became so dim.

So on we went with our private fears,
On the lake dripped-dropped our tears,
Till we came to a hill
And my heart stood still
As cheers turned to jeers.

Remember, he said, heart piercing me,
The days of Galilee,
Of course I do, I said tenderly,
Finger nails scratching the tree.

Well now I'm a man for the world to see,
As you suggested in Galilee,
But son, I said, through my sobbing heart,
Not hanging on a gallows tree.

Austin Smith CP

AN EVENING PRAYER

The first moment I had sight of you I loved you, I loved you
Not because I gazed mystically upon you,
Not because I felt the warmth of an eternal spirit,
But because you were given to me in a mutual act of loving,
Earthly binding me.

It was human loving which brought us together, did the introductions,
Mentioned your name, told me of your goodness and your gentleness
By reaching for me in their gentleness,
Telling me to have no fear because you were
Heavenly binding me.

A woman was the first intimation of your loving,
Gentling me in prayerful protective waves till the waters broke
And washed me up onto the dry daylight of theological definition,
So male in all its contrivances,
Culturally binding me.

But first encounterings never left me, pre-dawn whisperings remained,
Despite so many assaulting agencies besieging my mind and spirit
With careful, clear-cut, time-honoured, descriptions
Of your nature,
Theologically binding me.

Now well past half a century early morning melodies I hear again,
Primal lullabies of your loving pluck the strings of my consciousness
Calling me to burst the chains of too many categories,
To trample upon my own timidity,
Spiritually binding me.

Questions fruitfully flood my mind,
Driving me to an intense curiosity about your
Earthly binding,
If only to put back into due proportion your
Heavenly binding.

More and more I perceive you,
Refusing with mysterious resolution your necessary
Heavenly binding,
To accept tremblingly and not without pain your
Earthly binding.

Day by day I now find myself, with prayerful hope, standing
At the intersection of time and eternity,
Hitching lifts from the poor, the scholar and the saint,
Jew and Gentile alike, to travel awhile

And pose my questions and, without shame, admit my puzzlement.

Austin Smith CP

ON MISSING NEWSNIGHT

Fatigue eventually demanded its price.
I think you said, "Let's call it a day!",
Not reluctantly or resignedly
But with a stretch of satisfaction.
I remember the cat jumped,
And started on a ritual wash
Sensing the day was done.
There had been,
Argument,
Debate,
A little gossip,
A few jokes,
But all wrapped up in true conversation,
The central subject protected,
Never drifting into subjective prejudice.
We laid out our ideas,
Like laying the table,
And each idea was mutually taken up
With reverence,
With respect,
With sensitivity,
With care.
We rejected bald statements
And rather led each other down a road
Questing
Never preaching.
It was an oasis that night
In a contemporary political desert,
A stopping place discovered
In a conversationless barrenness,
Sand dunes of conviction piled up,
Whipped by the haranguing winds
Of too much certitude.
It doesn't happen often,
But when it does
You cannot fail to perceive and treasure it.
I left early the next morning,
Got into a train filled with men
In City battle-dress,
And over the rattle of wheels
One city mercenary said to another,
"That chappy was right,
Stiffer sentences
Real law and order,
Send them back,
That's what we need."

There'd been trouble in Broxteth last night
We'd missed 'Newsnight'
And that right chappy.

Austin Smith CP
EPISCOPAL ORDINATION

Daddy, what a funny hat!
It goes up and up and up,
Then nowhere.
It finishes in the clouds.
Maybe it comes down with the rain.
And all the time he talks to us
He puts on his funny hat,
Just like we do,
For dinner, the day Jesus was born,
For fun.
Daddy does he get it out of a cracker,
His funny hat?
With a paper joke
About, "At that time a man said to a man,
I'll give you shirts and trousers,
Not forgetting a hat,
You'll be the best-dressed man in town.
Then the rain came and the wind,
And the clothes, and the hat,
Were paper.

So naked he stood before the crowd
And they all laughed and laughed and laughed.
He laughed, too, that day,
Right through the jelly and trifle
Which melted away.
And they all loved him
Because he laughed,
Standing there with nothing on,
Except his own soul,
Which nobody had seen before
And it went awful quiet
Till he said,
'I love you'.
Then we pulled all our crackers,
Put on our funny hats,
Read the sick magisterial jokes,
And said,
'We love you!'
He asked for water,
But we gave him bread and wine".
Austin Smith CP

AT THE OCEAN

Like some mystic lighthouse, I find you,
Standing tall in night's darkness
Unsupported
Ungrounded
Blinking breaking into my blindness
To brighten
To heighten
My tossed about restless sceptical spirit
Drifting dangerously to the rough reef of common sense.

Through the long dawn willing night,
My hand on the rudder of mixed values,
Hopefully
Graciously
You wisely wink me home
Beckoning
Sirening
My careless craft through threatening seas
As in the relentless rain I scream, "Calm the storm."

Nature's neon lightening forks the skies,
Waves mercilessly mug my frail faith,
Sodden
Soaked
To the skin of my self-seeking soul
Abandoning
Leaving
My leaking rational coracle
Hypnotised by your beaming I walk upon the waters.

Austin Smith CP

INNER CITY

There are doubtful days,
When in mesmeric ways,
I'd like to write,
Very late at night,
A thought or two
About that few
Who live so powerless
And feel so hopeless.

I saw a flower,
One mystic hour,
Push its way
Through layers of clay,
Then through tarmac
With a power so cosmic,
Blushing golden
To gardener un beholden.

I saw a child out playing,
Night's mist invading
The daily misery
Of the Inner City,
So carefree careless,
Of the future fearless,
Skipping into a destiny
Of relentless poverty.

But I just can't do it,
They'll say I blew it,
Tell the tale
Of life up for sale,
Described in statistics
Of political logistics.
So off with the light
And call it a night.

Austin Smith CP

A SECOND REQUIEM

When I shared with you his dying I found life.
I could speak no comforting word,
Engage in nothing of consoling worth,
But listen to the sound of my own breathing
And hear the soundless cracking,
An earthquake's fissure opening,
On the surface of your heart,
Knowing this is the second tremor
To move the grounds of your existence.
Once more you'll have to rebuild
The township of your hopes.
Yet because of my linguistic helplessness
And my utter activist powerlessness
I was forced to listen to our heartbeats.
In that articulate silence I encountered life.
Now tears have broken the breakwater of shock,
One dawn soon you will rise from the ruins,
Dust down the ashes from your spirit,
Sort out the memories in the debris
And return to us sadly smiling
For the second time.
At that moment the birds of the air
Will burst into morning song
As we consider the lilies of the field
Sprouting from life's parched earth.

LITURGY

I asked the stars, "Where is he?"
But they laughed in the light of the moon
They tumbled, gyrated and chorused
"He'll come on a cloud very soon."

So I laughed and I danced in harmony
Till despair mists threatened my hope,
When, impatience driving my yearning,
I screamed from the depths of my soul:
"Please, tell me where he is hiding",
They laughingly jigged and danced on,
From our reeling bounced a baby star
Taking hold of my hesitant hand,
Together we floated o'er back streets
Coming down on a boarded up house,
It sheltered a one parent family,
Warmed up by a half-starved cat.
And there wide awake in the corner,
Wrapped up in yesterday's news,
He gurgled and kicked through the paper
As I lullabied through the night.

I called to the stars, "I've found him",
They laughed and sang, "We know,"
Then merrily danced and melted
Into the rays of the rising sun.

Come the following Friday,
After a lifetime of weary days,
A riot squad danced its drilling
'Neath a tree on a derelict site.
The stars were silently static,
Dark clouds picketed the moon,
As in half-light I tripped and stumbled
At the sight of a surging mob.
Singing discordant with curses,
Feet danceless in mundane mud,
We witnessed the one parent family
Broken up by the bailiff of death.

Wearily I made my way homewards,
Swearing things never change,
When the stars sent out a message
"Come back on Saturday night."

Austin Smith CP

FIRST COMMUNION

She ran at me,
Arms outstretched,
Paper primroses for a garland,
"Today," she squealed, "Is my
First Communion day".
Black garmented in white,
With happy face,
Brimming lungs,
Running to me,
The priest of yesterday,
And yesterday's symbols,
On the way,
For Sunday's papers
Which told a tale
Of no more communion,
Never mind a first,
In this wasteland of a spirit,
Struggling to respond
To Market forces
And past imperial hopes
Of one talent buried
For some new coming,
In which all communion
Is dead
Except the communion,
First or last,
Of self-determination.
I lifted her and kissed her,
And with end of century resignation said,
"Have a nice day!"
Then kicked the coke bottle away
And walked around the burnt out car.

Austin Smith CP

Indeed the first intimation I had of your loving was female
Gentling the waves of a protective sea with prayer till the waters broke
And washed me up onto dry daylight to find my screams drowned
In ideological slogans imposing maleness upon your loving,
Culturally binding me.

Though first encounterings are with me to this very moment,
Other agencies have assaulted my spirit, entered my life,
Squeezed into my tiny finite mind such mighty words as
Infinite, hypostatic, eternal, triune, transubstantiation,
Theologically binding me.

Now well past a half century primal lullabies pluck my soul strings,
(Councils, conferences, distinctions, debates, though of great importance,
Relegated with respect to footnotes in our love story),
Forcing me to burst the chains of so many categories,
Spiritually binding me.

Questions are fruitfully flooding my mind,
Driving me to intense curiosity about your
Earthly binding,
If only to put back in due proportion your
Heavenly binding.

More and more I think of you, ancient and modern lover,
Refusing with mysterious resolution your necessary
Heavenly binding
To immerse yourself tremblingly, not without pain, in your
Earthly binding.

Day by day I find myself, with prayerful hope, standing
At the intersection of time and eternity,
Hitching lifts with the simple, the scholar and the saint,
Jew and Gentile alike to travel awhile,
Posing my puzzlement about
Your thoughts as you climbed the hill behind your village
To look north to snow-capped Hermon,
Then west to Carmel Mount,
Gazing over Esdraelon's plain
Turning finally east to prophetic Tabor.

Did you think of your people's struggle for liberation?
Anticipate future days of personal and institutional alienation?
Go home perhaps to Galilean gossip about Zealot causes?
Weep silently in the night for a Father's love?
Painfully attempt to unravel
Your heavenly and earthly binding?

(2)

Indeed the first intimation continued

Were you even then with fearful anxiety preparing
For that Friday agenda more sufficient in itself
To rack your body and spirit to the pint of sweated blood?
Without the AOB of a whole world's betrayal,
Surely one close friend's defection was bad enough?

Now with new language,
New thought patterns,
Form criticism,
I still insist on
Heavenly binding you
To escape the hard reality of surrendering to
Earthly binding.

So the lame stumble on in their helplessness
The blind shed tears from sightless eyes
The Gospel of Liberation is held back from the poor
With promises of
Heavenly binding
The only escape from the oppressions of their
Earthly binding.

When will the powerless find your love in my loving
Translated now into a communal struggle
To free us all from toned down Gospel sounds
Mixed and made audible for respectable political philosophies
Which are the final blasphemy against all

Earthly and Heavenly binding?

Austin Smith CP

THE STEREOTYPED TURKEY

And so begins the Turkey game
For the old the sick and the lame
Fifteen days before Jesus came
Some have gone but the list's the same

Last year was it the City Methodists?
No I'm sure it was the Catholics
This year the Seventh Day Adventists
Though it might be the Charity Sisters

It finally doesn't really matter
All they want is some happy chatter
To talk of rich and holy latter
Days and things have got no better

Hope Jack and Wendy fail to come
Embarrassing last year says holy John
Who was annoying his girl at ten to one
Down at the bistro in the Odeon

Only six trips now to get through
Before we're finished says committed Sue
Then happily get back me and you
To kids and Christmas free from flu

It'll all be over by half past nine
Then safely I can say my time's mine
You'd think their folks could find time
God knows to be old is not some crime

As I see you I saw myself Frankie said
I helped him into his sheet crumpled bed
I was afraid to say I already dread
When others though alive see me as dead

There's little more that one can say
Says Mickey Mouse watch caring May
Unless we are ready in life's fray
To see in old Maggie our future day

Anyway the van and helpers are all outside
With the songs and hymns in the box inside
And the paper hats which last year survived
And keep it happy because a few have died

BERNARD

Bernard, Bernard, in a century long ago,
A forest patch in a valley of Burgundy
Called you to journey the road to eternity,
In sun and rain, in spring and winter snow.

Along Europe's roads you made your way
Praised and admired by kings and popes
Restoring visions and gospel hopes –
But that is now a tale of yesterday.

Bernard, Bernard, in this patch of time,
City streets are all about you now
Back streets not abbeys live and bow
With daily hope God's face will shine

On Kingsley Road's symbolic majesty
Equal to Clairvaux and Fountains wonder
Bricks and mortar in perfect grandeur
Telling the tale of the broken Jesus dignity

And, indeed, a glorious message of a hundred
Years of mutual love, suffering and caring,
Living for a new dawning of unique sharing
For which creation has always hungered

Austin cp