

Is this not Joseph's son?

In the shadows, silent, scarcely mentioned,
omitted from the first family pictures,
where are you?
who are you?
why have we lost you?

Old Doris Moon in Notting Hill,
gave me the print of Georges de La Tour's
Christ with Saint Joseph in the Carpenter's Shop:¹
no halos, no angels,
just your form, glimpsed in the darkness.
Your face and his face
lit through flickering light,
a candle in his hand.

Were you - as the painting shows -
thick in body frame,
arms like tree trunks,
hands strong yet gentle?
Your face bearded, weather-beaten,
radiant, grief-stained -
a well lived-in face,
forged through interiority?

Handler of wood, worker with nails,
trusted tradesman, master craftsman of Nazareth;
Mary's man, house builder,
home maker, love maker,
rough, tender, intimate man.

And what of your fathering
throughout those hidden years:
the hand holding,
the addressing of soul,
the standing in his tracks?

What of your fathering through the awakening:
his rising and falling and rising yet again,
his playfulness,
his stretching out,
his reaching deep...

the knowing and the unknowing,
the painful acquisition of life-wisdom,
the fearful learning of where faithfulness could lead?
Did you teach him to grow into calling God 'Abba'?
Did he learn from you the prayer, 'Father,
into your hands I commend my spirit'?

Whom do you see when you look
into the face of your child?
What of the son
who has grown beyond you?

Well-earthed Joseph,
can you help us with our rough animality?
Can you father us into being,
a birthing within our complex fragility,
born again into our own resilient humanity?

Dear old Doris Moon,
who never knew her father:
thank you for the gift of Joseph -
father Joseph.

¹ Georges de La Tour, *Christ with Saint Joseph in the carpenter's shop*, circa 1635-40. Now in *Musée du Louvre*, Paris.

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