

The Cave Painters

By Eamon Grennan

5 Holding only a handful of rushlight
they pressed deeper into the dark, at a crouch
until the great rock chamber
flowered around them and they stood
in an enormous womb of
flickering light and darklight, a place
10 to make a start. Raised hands cast flapping shadows
over the sleeker shapes of radiance.

15 They've left the world of weather and panic
behind them and gone on in, drawing the dark
in their wake, pushing as one pulse
to the core of stone. The pigments mixed in big shells
are crushed ore, petals and pollens, berries
and the binding juices oozed
out of chosen barks. The beasts

20 begin to take shape from hands and feather-tufts
(soaked in ochre, manganese, madder, mallow white)
stroking the live rock, letting slopes and contours
mould those forms from chance, coaxing
rigid dips and folds and bulges
25 to lend themselves to necks, bellies, swelling haunches,
a forehead or a twist of horn, tails and manes
curling to a crazy gallop.

30 Intent and human, they attach
the mineral, vegetable, animal
realms to themselves, inscribing
the one unbroken line
everything depends on, from that
impenetrable centre
35 to the outer intangibles of light and air, even
the speed of the horse, the bison's fear, the arc
of gentleness that this big-bellied cow
arches over its spindling calf, or the lancing
dance of death that
40 bristles out of the buck's
struck flank. On this one line they leave
a beak-headed human figure of sticks
and one small, chalky, human hand.

45 We'll never know if they worked in silence

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like people praying—the way our monks
illuminated their own dark ages
in cross-hatched rocky cloisters,
where they contrived a binding
5 labyrinth of lit affinities
to spell out in nature's lace and fable
their mindful, blinding sixth sense
of a god of shadows—or whether (like birds
tracing their great bloodlines over the globe)
10 they kept a constant gossip up
of praise, encouragement, complaint.

It doesn't matter: we know
they went with guttering rushlight
15 into the dark; came to terms
with the given world; must have had
—as their hands moved steadily
by spiderlight—one desire
we'd recognise: they would—before going on
20 beyond this border zone, this nowhere
that is now here—leave something
upright and bright behind them in the dark.