

# The Cave Painters

By Eamon Grennan

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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.