

From the Cityread writing workshop at Highgate Library
Story inspired by an etching by Pat Hulin
Written by SB Chinn



IN THE SACK

It appeared as a shadow on the wall –marked in soft-edged sooty marks on the whitewashed bricks.

At my table in the square, surrounded by a few villagers who muttered in a dialect I didn't catch, it became, for a short period, a sensation. Was it a message about hunting? A cave-art example? Who did it and when?

It almost moved in the gathering gloom.

What had been hunted, bagged and hung? Whatever it was meant to be, the final result was oddly peaceful, the bear's head neatly on top of a bulk of body. Bear? Or was it a dog? Or was it a decoy head with an entirely different body inside the bag?

Maybe it was not just a shadow on the wall, caught and copied like a silhouette portrait – or maybe it was copied from a real sack. Then who filled the sack? Who made the picture? And who had the strength to lift it and hang it where it could be drawn?

Then, perhaps, it was a small animal in the sack, with light behind it throwing a large shadow on the wall. Vermin? Weasel or stoat? a warning for moles? Not a bear at all.

I peered at the villagers from my table in the square, wondering –was it you? Or you? And them? And I speculated on why.

Whatever it was, it loomed over the square as the light faded. Murmurs grew into shouts, a group gathered and moved off into the open space towards the river where the encampment was. I heard them go, shouts fading.

Maybe a bear? You couldn't get even a trained bear such as they had in those parts to dance into a sack for a portrait. Unless it was dead. Killing animals for any or no reason was normal in this land where wolves roamed the forest. So were travellers and dancing bears. I had heard of mass shootings of migrating birds in the spring. If the contagion of war spread here there would be murders of collaborators, of spys, of strangers. And inside a sack, topped with an animal head, they could be buried silently.

It is only a picture on the wall, I thought, only a picture. Nothing to spin fantasies around. Come close, see how small it is, how insignificant. Just a picture.