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The Cave of Unknowing

Wamuwi Mbao

The week before the retreat begins, I'm trying to read up about geology. Sixteen of us will be arriving at Mont Fleur, a conference centre in the Blaauwklippen Valley that feels like it has seen many conferences. A bit of avoidance-browsing confirms: a group of scenario planners headed by a dodgy frontman for Shell International, held a series of meetings at there, to envision the future of South Africa. It is a venue that lends itself to strategic reflections, to breakaways and other things from the corporate playbook. How does our work fit with that history?

On the day the retreat begins, I fill a bag with socks, warm things, three or four pens. I've decided to try writing my notes by hand. I drive up the steep bumpy track that carries on an unfeasibly long time. The road is presumably kept this way to stop hasty wine-seekers from covering the grapes with dust—the sort of reason usually given for not improving the glorified goat-tracks that lead to interesting places. As the car climbs, you have time to look out at pretty chateaux and genteel farmhouses. There are never any people. The road dips under gothic trees and bobbles over a narrow stone bridge, and then you arrive, dramatically, at the threshold of Mont Fleur. There is enough time, before the writers arrive, to feel an impostor. Does one ever feel smart enough around a scientist, especially an award-winning one?

Our chosen scientist, then. He comes to us fresh from being decorated with the prestigious National Geographic Wayfinder Award. I remember that National Geographic is possibly the earliest instance I can recall being confronted with scientific endeavour. How will Dr Makhubela impart to us hapless, non-science types, his deep knowledge of fossils, of stone formations and of geological time? The question generates some anxiety in me: there is such a thing as not having the language for making sense of knowledge that is not your own. With each FicSci event, the engagement is both with the specific subject presented by the scientist, and with the task of writing towards science itself: it is an exercise in communicating thought.

Anxiety is always the mood on the first day. In the welcome hall, I chat with Fumani, the seeker, our ever-resourceful fixer, about the minutiae that always occupy us in the last few hours before everyone descends on Mont Fleur. Has everyone boarded their flights? Yes. Will the shuttle know to wait for this writer or that? Yes. I do this mostly to calm my nerves. The machinery runs smoothly. I've been assigned a cozy little chalet, and the temptation to lock oneself away for the duration of the event takes some resisting. As the writers arrive, their excitement, their curiosity and their nervousness remind me that we are, in fact, doing something unconventional.

The overarching goal of all FicSci installments is experimenting with how imagination can be used to turn inhospitably large scientific facts into ideas we can work with at a human scale. We are here, more specifically, to engage what is human about the geological. As I understand it, there is some sense in which geology intertwines with how we understand ourselves as historical beings, something to do with the study of the planet's changes over time, and how there are traces left behind of distant forms of living and dying. Nevertheless, there is something dauntingly immense about the numbers involved. Every edition of FicSci so far has dealt in extremes of body or distance or temperature. This year, it is our ability to comprehend the scale of our earthly history that is being tested. Time, as relayed by Dr Makhubela, is capacious and abyssal, and I feel that by the end of our four days together, we will know

a little about what it might mean to inhabit the geological gaze. Perhaps the closest we'll ever come to a god's-eye view.

Because the cohort of creatives who have arrived at Mont Fleur are all talented wordsmiths and story-makers, they each come accompanied by their work with words. They are writers of different and varied kinds, used to expressing themselves in different languages and registers. The talk over dinner reverberates with what we have absorbed throughout the day: the Cradle of Humankind, the places—16 in all—where fossils were unearthed by human activity. Some of the writers are confident in their ability to respond to what they have heard. Others press our scientist for more information. The structuring conditions of everyday life are such that few of them have had the opportunity to engage with a scientist at close quarters, and so the opportunity is seized with gusto.

At one point, Dr Makhubela is talking about uranium-based dating, which sounds frightening, but soon becomes a pathway to understanding the work of scientific interpretation. Some of what he is saying glances off concepts I'm vaguely familiar with, while at other moments understanding surfaces only briefly. Other elements leave me utterly clueless. Over lunch, we try to puzzle out what the different elements might mean. Some of the writers are happy with what they have captured. Others want to sit with their confusion a little longer. Some are already beginning to formulate what their responses will be. Others, like me, have only a hazy idea of what form our writing will take.

What I notice is that the mind finds it difficult to "stay with the science." The urge to extemporize is difficult to avoid. Throughout the day, I find that as I listen, I stray into questions of human/material relation, and thereby find ground where I am more comfortable. That there is a kind of creative possibility offered up by the geological knowledge being proffered to us is undoubted. The problem is that occupying the space of creative possibility feels unstructured and nebulous. And why is that a problem, exactly? It's a question that follows me around for the four days we are together at Mont Fleur.

Reflecting on my notes later, I come to the conclusion that because the scientific knowledge we are listening to in Dr Makhubela's sessions feels so rigorous and so dauntingly precise, my own thoughts, as I look at them on the page, can only ever feel unstructured and incoherent. But perhaps this is the wrong way to look at things. What I am certain of, as we listen and plot our contributions, is just how much uncertainty there actually is, where knowledge is concerned: for all that we do know about how caves formed and what people were around, there seems to be a sizeable portion of the past that is ultimately unknowable by us. What is beyond our comprehension, individually or collectively, often feels unhelpfully infinite.

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Are the arts more hospitable to the unknown? At the start of our workshop, I might have readily agreed, reinforcing the old binary. As must be obvious by now, I'm not so sure that the binary holds water. Being confronted with the chasm of what I don't understand seems especially apt given that we're discussing subterranean caves. It feels more truthful not to try and weave it all into some sort of neat narrative. But will it be readable?